

## PAYOUT PAYBACK

For a few days in early summer, Caroline Cooke thought she was a wealthy woman. Perhaps not Silicon Valley rich, but at least comfortably well-off, at the ripe young age of thirty-two.

Striking gold in Silicon Valley was tougher than high-tech mythology might lead many to believe. The layoff paperwork in her hands proved that.

She tilted her head back to savor the typical Silicon Valley summer day—not too hot, not too cold, not humid, not a cloud in the sky—and headed indoors to the year-round climate-controlled office of XIM, now her former employer.

A tall woman with long black hair was pounding her head against the window under the XIM logo in slow thuds. As she drew closer, Caroline recognized Mita Srinivasan, head of the testing group. Caroline was the lead engineer of the development team. They had been to hell and back on many projects.

“You’ll give yourself a concussion,” Caroline said.

Mita paused but didn’t turn. Her hands and forehead rested on the glass. Her breath fogged the window. “I won’t kill Daniel if I’m unconscious. What kind of CEO lays off over half the company, just before we’re acquired?”

“The kind of CEO who wants all the money for himself. And his cronies.”

“We’ve been…” Mita’s face crumpled into a scowl.

“Screwed. That’s the American term.”

Caroline stomped up the stairs from the lower lobby and made her way to Pat's office. Pat was XIM's Human Resources director. She had been meeting with other laid-off workers all morning and looked a bit frayed around the edges. Not that Caroline had any sympathy.

"Word is you aren't part of the layoff, Pat. Why do they need a Human Remains department if there are no remains left to manage?"

"Don't start with me, Cookie. You're better off than most," Pat said, as she smoothed her hair and adjusted her twin-set sweater.

"My name's Caroline, Patty. And there are about thirty people who are better off than me who are still employees of XIM."

"Well, here's a silver lining you might like. We want you to stay on as a contractor for approximately four months until the final payout goes through. There's a lot of work that needs to be coordinated with our new home, TDI."

Caroline suppressed a gag and picked up the papers. TDI had a terrible reputation as a place to work—a fact she would have been willing to overlook for ten or twenty million dollars.

"As you can see, we will pay you very good money. Much more than you earn now, and it's hourly, so you'll be fully compensated for all those long days," Pat said, tapping her fingers on the edge of her desk.

Caroline grunted. She didn't dare open her mouth for fear steam—or something worse—would come out.

"And at the end, you'll get a bonus. Twenty thousand dollars." Pat leaned forward and winked, as if she and Caroline shared some secret bond. "Don't forget that you may want a good recommendation for your next job."

"Do I have a choice?"

"Not if you want to maintain your reputation in Silicon Valley." Pat winked again. "Or maybe you could move back to Iowa."

"Central New York," Caroline said. She picked up a pen.

Caroline cornered Daniel in his office on her third day as a contractor. His admin, Zoe, was at lunch. Pat was in a meeting. Caroline didn't expect to achieve anything, except a bit of self-respect. If she slunk away with her tail between her legs, she would never be right in her soul.

She stepped inside his glass-walled sanctuary and slammed the door.

If Daniel was startled or nervous, he didn't show it. He leaned back in his big leather chair and put his feet up on the desk. Caroline ground her teeth at the insult.

A slow grin oozed across Daniel's face. "Cookie. Now, now, don't be mad. You remind me of my wife. She's mighty pissed I divorced her last year. Fifty percent of next to nothing wasn't much of a settlement."

"I never liked Amanda, but I'm beginning to sympathize."

"I warned you. I told you to play nice. Multiple times." Daniel paused to lick his lips. "You got on your high horse, and now you're a loser. Just like Amanda."

Caroline turned and left. So much for soul soothing. It was time for revenge.

#

The next day, Caroline arrived around 10 A.M. to find she had a new companion sitting in the big open bullpen—Mita.

"Welcome to the transition team," Caroline said.

"I had to think about it a couple of days." Mita slammed down her laptop and slumped into a chair. "I decided, if I wanted to kill Daniel, I'd need better access."

"You'll have to stand in line. Besides, he's always in meetings now with his new peeps. I do wonder if I would any better off if I had slept with him."

"Don't count on that. Barbara slept with him, and she was laid off."

Caroline stood and wandered around to make sure they were alone. "Any great ideas on how to extract our pound of flesh?"

"Run him over in the parking lot?"

Caroline stroked her chin. "The problem is, he can only die once. I'd prefer something more agonizing and protracted."

“How are you going to do that? Too complicated. We should take remote control of his Tesla and flatten him.”

“Daniel treasures money and status. We need to find a way to deprive him of one of those. Preferably both.”

#

Caroline pushed Mita out onto a small balcony overlooking the parking lot, climbing through one of the only windows that was not hermetically sealed. Mita took the opportunity to enjoy a smoke, far away from the eyes of tobacco usage enforcement.

“We shouldn’t talk inside,” Caroline said. “There are too many ways for people to eavesdrop— cell phones left lying around, laptops recording video, hidden cameras.”

“You don’t have to lecture me. I tried to figure out if I was on the layoff list doing all those things. Caroline stepped back to study her friend. “I’m impressed.”

Mita blew smoke over Caroline’s head. “Video surveillance stuff is highly overrated. Very inefficient. The only thing I learned was that Daniel and Pat are having an affair.”

“Everyone knew that. No video recording required.”

“Exactly my point.”

Caroline turned to face the parking lot and drew imaginary diagrams in the air. “I think our best bet is to execute a man-in-the-middle attack.” She wiggled the fingers of her right hand. “At some point, TDI has to send acquisition payout money to the incoming XIM people.” She pointed to the wiggling fingers of her left hand. “Where we need to be is right here.” She clapped her hands together in the middle. “We’ll nab the payout money in flight.”

Mita snapped her cigarette butt over the side of the balcony. It struck Daniel’s Tesla on the hood before bouncing into the parking lot. “No problem. Figure out the date and time of the payout. Create a fake account to receive the money. Slip that into the list somehow. Make sure Daniel doesn’t know, and live happily ever after. Did I miss anything?”

“Don’t get caught,” Caroline said. She stepped back through the window.

#

The strategy was clear: intercept Daniel’s payout. The tactics were not as apparent.

Caroline spent several fruitless hours each day hunched over her laptop, considering their options. Quick glances at Mita seemed to indicate no bright ideas were forthcoming from that direction, either.

Around them, the half-filled bullpen buzzed with former XIM contract employees like herself, as well as a handful of soon-to-be TDI workers. Caroline did her best to encourage professionalism and collegiality with team meetings and paid for a happy hour at the local Mexican hangout.

It was a lost cause. Within a week, only the contract workers came into the office. Within two weeks, Mita and Caroline were the only workers of any kind in the bullpen while everyone else worked from home.

The company Caroline had worked so hard to help establish was dead, and she was stuck propping up the corpse. She would have preferred to work from home as well, but the summer weather turned brutally hot, and she did not have air conditioning in her tiny apartment. She stayed in the arctic chill of the office until late at night, warmed by the fury in her blood.

#

Caroline's father was fond of saying, "You make your own luck."

By hanging out in the office, pretending to be content, keeping her head down, and paying attention, Caroline managed to be in the right place at the right time one afternoon in early August.

She was alone in the bullpen. Mita was in a project review. Pat, Daniel, and Zoe all had offices on the opposite side of the building.

Eventually, nature called, and she went to the Ladies Room, located off an internal corridor in the middle of the building. As she left, she caught a glimpse of Pat standing at the shared combination printer-copier with a hefty stack of papers.

Caroline stepped back into the bathroom alcove. The last thing she wanted was another round of fake cordiality with their HR stooge. She smiled a mirthless grin as she watched Pat struggle with the notoriously balky machine.

The problem was obvious—the original sheets of paper had been previously folded to fit in letter-sized envelopes, and they weren't feeding into the copier smoothly. Caroline could have stepped in to help, but there was no way she was going to reach out to the hapless Pat.

After several false starts and a lot of cursing on Pat's part, the copying job proceeded, stopped, and started again. A jazzy tuned jingled, barely audible over the grinding of the machine. Pat moved away from the copier to answer her cell phone.

"Hold on, hold on. I'm at the copier. It's too noisy in here." Pat walked away from the machine, phone to her ear, and headed for the second-floor lobby.

Caroline snaked in behind Pat's retreating form. She flipped through the copies as they popped out into the collator. Personal documents. Employee names. Social Security numbers. Birth dates. Amount of payout.

She grabbed the pile of finished copies, fed it back into the hopper, and pressed *Copy*. She prayed the copies would pass through faster than the originals.

Edging to the wall, she could see Pat's phone call was wrapping up. She snatched the new copies, swapped in the first copies onto the collator and made a dash back to the Ladies Room.

Safely locked in the large handicapped stall, Caroline sat and studied her acquisition. This was better than she had hoped. Every page contained critical information about each XIM employee eligible for a payout. She sorted the pile so that XIM executives were at the top. At the very top, she put Daniel's page.

#

Mita strolled in after her meeting. "Ugh. As if our XIM meetings weren't bad enough before. This transition work is torture." She stopped to study Caroline, who was slumped in her chair, her gaze fixed on the printer-copier. "Hey. What's with you?"

Caroline looked up and gestured toward the balcony. "Let's step outside for a smoke."

After Caroline had explained her close call with Pat, Mita lit a cigarette. "That is very cool but too risky. How can we possibly monitor that machine twenty-four/seven?"

Caroline leaned over the railing and hawked a wad of phlegm toward Daniel's Tesla, parked below. It fell short.

"We don't have to."

"Please explain."

"Here's a funny coincidence. As an undergrad, I wrote printer software as my summer job. I'll have you know I speak Printer."

“Okay. I’m impressed. So what?”

Caroline leaned back against the balcony rails. “These multi-function things are computers, just like our laptops. They sit on the network. They have operating systems. They have disk drives. They have USB ports.”

Judging by Mita’s squint and wrinkled forehead, Caroline could see the wheels in Mita’s brain were turning. She continued. “Every single job that you send to the printer from your computer or feed into the machine to copy is stored. Think of all the company secrets still on that piece of junk.”

Mita turned to look through the window at the printer-copier. “Wouldn’t that be a rather large security hole?”

“Agreed. There are a number of measures IT can take to make sure the data is encrypted, not retained, and so forth. But for many companies, investing in security is at the bottom of the list. I’m betting that unit has never been secured. Data is probably stored unencrypted, and copying jobs aren’t cleared. I can log in and pull off all that information. There will be a lot of junk, but there will also be nuggets of gold—personal information, schedules, dollar amounts, signatures—stuff we could use to figure out how to siphon off Daniel’s money. I’d bet my bonus on it.”

“You’ll need that bonus for bail if you get caught.” Mita stubbed out her cigarette. “So do it.”

“Patience. I have no intention of getting caught. It’s probably impossible not to leave a few footprints, but if we’re careful, we won’t be trackable.”

“Now that you mention it, they did gut IT.”

“It’s not IT I’m worried about.” Caroline grabbed Mita’s arm. “If we make off with millions, we’ll have every agency around looking for where it went and how. Each employee who was laid off will be top on their list. We need to make certain nothing can be traced back to us.”

#

After work, Caroline and Mita paid a visit to an obscure computer supply store and picked up the cheapest and smallest laptop they could find. At the public library, they set up the computer, including an anonymizing browser and related encryption tools.

“We need to figure out what kind of bank or brokerage account TDI needs to process Daniel’s payout money. There’s no way they will accept some sort of offshore or numbered account.” Mita tapped

her pen. “We will need a standard account to receive the money. We’ll transfer the money out right away to something like a numbered account and then split it up between us.”

“We have Daniel’s information from Pat’s documents. We can set up a dummy account, no problem.”

“I’ll figure out how to set up the anonymous accounts. It might require a bit of upfront money. A couple thousand? Can you do that?”

“I’ll come up with it somehow,” Caroline said. She closed the laptop. “The bigger issue is to figure out how to slip the bogus account information into what needs to go to TDI. And when.”

“I thought that was what hacking the printer was for.” Mita stood and stretched with a yawn.

“That should tell us what we need and when we need it, but not how to do the swap. One step at a time.”

“For now, that step is home to bed.”

#

In the morning, Caroline plugged the little laptop directly into a Local Area Network port in the small conference room near the lobby. She hoped this would be more anonymous than a wireless connection.

Once on the network, she connected to the printer-copier, now nicknamed “Junior,” using its IP address in her browser. Within minutes, the Junior was retaining all copy, fax, and print jobs, plus sending backups to the USB drive she plugged into the back of the device. She disconnected the laptop and turned it off.

She had a new routine. Every night she removed the current USB drive, handed it to Mita, and replaced it with a new one. Mita scoured the day’s data with the enthusiasm of a gold miner and reported back the next day.

#

“We need to come in earlier for Junior’s disks. I caught Pat prowling around, looking into drawers and lockers. She gets in really early,” Caroline said to Mita in the bathroom as they ran water in the sinks to mask their whispered conversation. “We don’t want to be the most obvious suspects.”

“Yes, I get that,” Mita said.



“I’m not sure we need much more information from the printer.” Caroline washed her hands for the third time. “We know the date TDI will direct Daniel’s payout to an account, and we want that to be ours. Time has come to insert our information into a list. That’s the last tough task to figure out. At least, the next part is easier. Pat will send an email to everyone when those go out. We need Daniel’s email login information to intercept and delete that message.”

Mita gawked. “And how is that easier? He always locks his laptop.”

“Simple. This is social engineering. Not the real stuff. If we need to intercept Daniel’s email, we need the weakest link.”

#

Sitting in her own cubicle around the corner from Daniel’s office, Zoe was Daniel’s admin and also assisted Pat. Zoe was cute, a bit of a dim bulb, and she was on The List of employees moving to the new company, thus due to receive a nice payout.

Being on Zoe’s good side had benefits. In return for help with technical issues, Zoe was a good source for office gossip. Zoe also had full access to Daniel’s email and calendar.

*The weakest link.*

Caroline resisted the temptation to search out Zoe. Patience was hard to come by these days, but she knew Zoe would be around soon to ask for help on some oddball problem.

She was rewarded several days later when Zoe appeared in the bullpen, red in the face. “I need to send Pat some information on the payout accounts, but I can’t figure out what she really wants. And she needs it now.”

“I’ll be right there,” Caroline said. She unlocked a drawer and extracted a copy of Daniel’s false account information. She selected *Record* on her phone’s camera app and set out for Zoe’s cube. Standing behind Zoe, she could see the admin’s laptop screen was locked. *Good girl, Zoe.*

“Turn away,” Zoe said. “I need to enter my password.”

“No problem.” Caroline turned her back but held her phone up facing over her shoulder to capture every one of Zoe’s keystrokes.

Over the next hour, Caroline worked steadily with Zoe, helpfully substituting the sheet of paper with Daniel’s new information into the stack of forms Zoe needed to process.

When Zoe left for lunch, Mita kept watch as Caroline logged into Zoe's machine. The email application Daniel and Zoe both used stored account passwords under a protected area in the Tools menu. Within seconds, Caroline had what she needed to access Daniel's account from any computer on the network.

As a test, she sent an email from Zoe to Daniel using her little laptop. She read it as Daniel, deleted it, and removed it from his Trash folder.

All the pieces were in place to step into the middle and snatch Daniel's payout. Now it was about timing—and patience.

#

The month leading up to Payout Day was so tedious, Caroline could barely sit still. Work that required her attention was tapering off, and she was forced to appear busy most of the day. The information flowing from Junior was less and less interesting, but they dutifully checked every day, in case there was a change in dates or updated documents required.

With only three days to go, she overslept and didn't arrive until 10:30 A.M.

She knew something was wrong as soon as she entered the bullpen but needed to turn around in a slow circle twice before she figured it out.

Junior was gone, as was her personal USB drive, dangling out the back.

Once Caroline's breathing returned to normal, she wandered over to Zoe's cube.

"Hey. Where's our printer? I need to print my resume for a job interview."

Zoe looked up. "Some guys took it away first thing. The office is moving at the end of the month. It was as old as the hills and so unreliable."

"How are we supposed to print?"

"Daniel lets me use his private printer. If you really need something, I'll print it for you."

"What if it's private?"

Zoe raised her eyebrows. "Then you shouldn't be using a work printer in the first place."

Caroline strode back to the bullpen. She unlocked her personal file cabinet and pulled out a small disk drive and a set of tools in a palm-sized case as she mentally kicked herself. She should have taken care of cleaning up Junior weeks ago.

She rushed to the upper lobby and ran into Mita coming up the stairs.

“Hi Caroline—,” Mita said. “Yikes. Don’t grab my arm like that. It hurts.”

Caroline pulled Mita back down the stairs. “Shut up,” she said in a hiss. “We need to rescue Junior from the eWaste pile.”

Mita’s eyes were wide and round. “Rear loading dock. Let’s go.”

#

Caroline and Mita ran through a maze of windowless corridors until they found a door with a wired glass window set about nose high.

Mita stood on tiptoes for a better view. “I see it,” she said. “There’s one of those big bins on the right. Junior is sitting right next to it.”

“Any people?”

“Maintenance guy. Tony?”

“Manny.”

“Let me go first.” Mita opened the door and slipped through.

Based on hand gestures, Caroline could see Mita was enticing Manny outside for a smoke. Once they had disappeared out the roll-up door, Caroline entered and ran in a crouch to Junior.

First, she yanked the USB backup drive out of the port. Next, she removed three screws at the back of the printer and lifted away the panel hiding the guts of the machine.

She didn’t dare look up. Time was too precious. She listened to Mita’s banter with Manny and tried to estimate how long a cigarette would last. She disconnected Junior’s disk drive, set it down, and plugged in her encrypted and blank replacement.

With the panel back in place, she was halfway through turning the second screw when she heard Mita’s voice grow louder. *Leave now.* She picked up the third screw and stuffed it into her pocket before she scurried along the far wall toward the door.

The door clicked shut behind her, and she slumped against the wall, sweat dripping from her face. She jumped when the door opened. Mita stepped through and offered a thumbs up.

“I think I need early lunch,” Caroline said. She leaned on Mita’s arm on their way back to the unattended lobby.

#

Daniel was swiping his badge to enter the building as Caroline and Mita reached the door to leave.

“Well, well, ladies. Not much time until we will part ways for good. Where’re you heading?” he asked.

“To celebrate on your behalf,” Caroline said.

He had already turned his back and was heading upstairs and out of earshot. Caroline offered him a middle-finger salute.

After early lunch, Caroline placed Junior’s hard drive on the pavement behind the left back wheel of Mita’s car.

“Back up about two feet. Now forward. Now back. Good job.” She tossed the crumpled drive into a trashcan and jumped into the passenger seat.

#

“Payout Day tomorrow,” Mita said, leaning far out over the railing of the balcony to send smoke rings into the sky.

“I’ve got a new job,” Caroline said. “I start in two weeks. It’s a good job. I won’t be a director, but they’re encouraging. Great pay. Stock options. Real HR.”

“I’ve got a job, too. I’ll miss you.”

“Me, too. But I don’t know if I can stand this much fun ever again.”

“We don’t have to do this. There’s time.”

“Not impossible. I could change the routing information for Daniel’s payout.”

“No one would notice?”

“No one would ever double-check.”

Neither woman spoke for several minutes.

“Is that what you want to do?” Mita asked at last.

Caroline spat a wad of phlegm at Daniel’s Tesla. This time, it hit the window with a splat.

“Nope. Game on.”

#

Caroline picked Mita up at midnight, and they rode to the public library. Although the library was closed, the wireless network was accessible by parking close to the building.

They took turns snoozing and monitoring the laptop. Mita gave a yelp when the notice of the payout transfer came in at 4 a.m.

Caroline snatched the laptop, deleted the message from Daniel's Inbox and then from his Trash folder. She handed the laptop back to Mita, who started moving the money.

"I can't close out the brokerage account right away," Mita said after a few breathless minutes. "How much money should I leave?"

"Ten thousand five hundred and thirty-four dollars," Caroline answered.

"Why that amount?"

"Read it like the numbers were letters. Flip the four."

"1-0-5-3-4. *LOSEP?*" Mita chortled. "No. *LOSER.*"

#

When Caroline reached the office at 10:00 A.M., several police cars were parked in the round plaza in front of the main entrance, blue lights flashing. She slid her car into the spot beside Mita's and forced herself to breathe steadily before she climbed out and started for the front door.

*When they arrest you, ask for a lawyer.*

The double doors of the main entrance sprang open as she reached them. She jumped back to avoid being hit by a team of two paramedics, pushing a gurney toward an ambulance, parked in back of the cop cars. The man on the gurney was holding a bloody wad of bandages and icepacks to his head.

They were followed by another team of a man and woman in police uniform, dragging someone in handcuffs between them. *Daniel!*

Caroline rushed upstairs to study the parking lot with Mita on the balcony.

"Who the hell was on the gurney?" she asked.

"Fred Wheeler, CEO of TDI." Mita's eyes were twinkling. "Apparently, Daniel had a fit when he couldn't find his payout this morning. He lost it. He accused poor Freddy of cheating him out of his money and—get this—sleeping with Pat. One thing led to another."

"Of course, someone did take his money," Caroline said, trying not to giggle.

“Yes, but this should throw a twist into the whole investigation.”

“Don’t you want a cigarette to celebrate?”

Mita emptied her cigarette pack over the side. “Nope. I am suddenly inspired to quit.”

#

Due to all the excitement, Mita and Caroline had to wait until Pat returned from making a police statement before they could officially part ways with XIM and TDI.

At 1:00 P.M., Mita coughed and closed her laptop. Caroline followed suit. She slipped all of her desk items into a shopping bag and tucked her work laptop and power cord under her arm.

The two women cooled their heels outside Pat’s office.

“I almost feel sorry for her,” Mita said, wiping away a fake tear.

“Save it for someone who deserves it.”

“Like you?”

“I only need your prayers that we don’t get caught.”

Pat’s door opened. She appeared composed despite a prominent black eye and split upper lip.

She turned and beckoned to Mita. They stepped inside and closed the door.

Caroline slouched down in the chair until her neck rested on top of the padded back, and studied the ceiling. After today, she and Mita wouldn’t dare see each other often.

Caroline wasn’t certain she would ever be able to tap into those ten million beautiful dollars sitting in the numbered account Mita had created for her. Maybe in a few years, she could suck it over in little sips.

The money didn’t matter. Much. She had her sights set on other opportunities. The fiery anger burning in her gut for months had been quenched by revenge.

Ten minutes later, Mita came out and headed downstairs. Per their arrangement, they would each leave right away without speaking and meet for margaritas later and to destroy the little laptop sitting in the trunk of Caroline’s car.

“Cookie?” Pat was waving to Caroline from her desk.

Pat pulled out a folder and spread the contents out like a deck of cards. “Please put your laptop and badge on the credenza. Here is your final contractor paycheck and the bonus check. Not as much as you’d like, I know, but still a nice bit of money.”

“So it is.” Caroline cleared her throat. “I’m sorry to hear about Daniel.” She stretched her hand out to sign but found Pat’s hands covering the documents.

Pat glared with her one good eye. “No need to feel sorry for Daniel. I understand he was upset, but I’m sure it is a simple mix-up. Going after Fred and me was completely unjustified. We are the ones who were assaulted.” Pat’s voice was tight with emotion.

“Of course. I didn’t state that properly. I’m glad you are reaping your just rewards.”

“Thank you.” Pat sniffed. “The good news is he won’t be working in Silicon Valley ever again. He’s looking at jail time. No more big payouts for Danny Boy. There will be a big media circus around this.”

*You have no idea.*

“Pat, if you call me by my name and not ‘Cookie,’ I’ll sign my name to those documents and be on my way.”

Pat swallowed and released the papers. “Caroline Cooke, please sign.”

Caroline picked up the pen and scrawled her signature.

Pat’s shoulders slumped. “Thank you. It’s been quite a day. Lots of drama.” She stood and escorted Caroline to the door. “I’m sorry this didn’t work out the way you hoped. Better luck with your next company.”

Caroline shook Pat’s hand and looked her in the eye. “Don’t worry. I’m good.”

THE END