

# SCOTT ZARCINAS

DEVILLE'S CONTRACT



A Pilgrim's Chronicle



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## PROLOGUE

### *The Grand Vision*



HIDING HIS SMILE at the head of the table, Louis DeVille eyed the suit and ties filing into the boardroom. With a wink and a nod he greeted every one of the Vice Presidents as they sat down. Could say this was what he had been working toward since the day he began the company, the culmination of his life's work he might say, in a moment of nostalgia. He basked and took it all in, and why shouldn't he? The company was about to burst onto the big stage. All thanks to him.

"I'd like to call this AGM open," the company secretary said, standing and glancing at his watch, "at 6:04, March 25, 2004." It was time.

As the secretary read out the minutes of last month's board meeting and called the vote, Louis suppressed the urge to fidget in his seat. He didn't have long to wait, however. All thirteen hands shot up in unanimous agreement and it was done. As quick as that.

Careful not to let it show, he puffed his cheeks with relief; it was a goddamn rubberstamp. Should he really have been so worried? Maybe. Maybe not. Despite the feeling that everything would go according to plan, there was always a niggler of doubt in the back of his head. He had never recovered from that time he'd almost lost it all in the early eighties, in this very same room, if you could believe it. That had been a lesson he wouldn't forget in a hurry. *No sir-ree*. Nothing in life was a guarantee, except death and taxes, if you believed that goddamn nonsense. But what the hell, it was all in the past. He was re-elected as CEO and now he could get on with the real purpose of this meeting.

To the applause of the VPs he stood and gathered his thoughts. He thanked them and gestured for silence, stretching the jacket lapels over his fortunately sized belly, what the media had recently popularised as "middle-aged spread." "As you know, when I started out in the late fifties I was just a salesman doing the rounds for one of

the drug companies here in New York,” he said, squeezing a button into the eyelet. “One of the ‘Big Four’ back then.”

On the table next to a pile of dossiers his PA had left on the table was a pitcher of cow juice, as he had asked, and from it he poured himself a glass and raised it to his lips. God, he hated this stuff, but he needed it. Grimacing as it squirmed over his tongue and down the back of his gullet, he eyed his subordinates over the rim. They were chuckling. Everyone knew Louis DeVille had bought out that company in the mid-eighties when it had careered into a bottomless pit called bad debt, then stripped it of its assets and made a goddamn fortune. All that remained was the impressive slab of mahogany they were now seated around.

He smiled with his VP’s and put the glass back down on the table before going on. “I was good at what I did, and what I did was sell the wonder drug of the day: Penicillin.” There were more chuckles. Then he said, “Unlike most of you, I grew up in Brooklyn. The only education I got was on the street. College was never a consideration. Nevertheless, it turned out to be a goddamn blessing in disguise. Those years were my apprenticeship. I learned what it took to get to the top in the only school that matters, the school of hard knocks.”

Several grey and balding heads were nodding in recognition. The others, fresher faced and fuller on top, just stared back with polite interest. *A little cliché, Louis my boy, but you made your point.*

“Without wishing to bore you with details,” he said, “I hated making money for someone else. Plus, I wasn’t getting promoted as fast as I wanted, so I figured the best thing to do was resign and start my own company. Best goddamn thing I ever did.” The grey heads chuckled and nodded some more. “The market was tough, let me tell you. I had to plead with the banks to call off their goddamn hounds more than I care to recall. Nevertheless, DeVille Pharmaceuticals was in the black within four years. Within ten we’d broken into the south and Midwest. Within twenty we’d stretched right across the country. We then started looking across the Atlantic, and in the eighties we even changed our name to Global Resolutions Network. Now, almost forty years to the day it was born, the company is approaching another milestone. Listing on the Dow. The goddamn Holy Grail.”

Louis brought the glass to his lips again, hesitating before he took another sip. Then he passed around the dossiers from the pile next to him and waited until everyone was ready. He held up his ring-bound

copy, a sky-blue cover across which was written in bold whiteness: THE FUTURE OF GLOBAL RESOLUTIONS NETWORK. Glaring beneath it in red: STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL. “Each of you now has a dossier of my vision for GRN,” he said. “Everything I’ve learned about the pharmaceutical industry is in here. The secret of my success. The secret that will rocket GRN to global dominance of the drug market.”

The Vice Presidents each picked up a copy and began flicking through it. Louis could see a couple of wry grins. This was going to make every goddamn one of them wealthier than they had ever imagined, and they were entitled to raise a few eyebrows at what they read. They were welcome to the money. Some of them though, the older boys, the ones with a third wife and second coronary understood that it was more than just the number of zeros on the bank statement. The game was about dominance. Proving everyone else wrong. Making a goddamn success of your life despite the odds.

He nodded toward the company secretary, one of the fresher faces with a full head of hair but not too far from hiding the double chin behind the hairy mask of a goatee. “Stop taking minutes for a moment. Go on, put your pen down. Tell me what the gurus at Yale taught you about marketing.”

The secretary put his pen to his mouth and leaned back in his chair. “Uh... to identify and target a niche, I guess.”

Louis hit the table with the soft part of his fist. “Exactly. Find a gap in the market and exploit it. Give the man in the street what nobody else can, and he’ll make you rich. That’s basically what it means, isn’t it?” The secretary nodded, his eyes darting from side to side, wondering why he was the target of the boss’ sudden attention. Louis glanced around the table. “And it’s all horseshit. Every one of you who went to Harvard, or Yale, or MIT, you’ve all majored in horseshit,” and he sniffed the air. “I can even smell it.”

The secretary wiggled in the seat, looking for a means of escape. The VP next to him hooked down his tie. No one else said a word, staring down at the dossier in front of them, not daring to make eye contact with anybody, let alone the boss.

“But it’s not your fault, and I don’t blame you for what those idiots taught you.” Resting his knuckles on the table, Louis hunched forward. “If you want to earn a lousy million, then targeting a niche might do it for you. But if you want to earn hundreds of millions,

even billions,” and he trailed off, reeling them in, “then you *create* a niche.”

The Vice Presidents looked at one another and shrugged. It was the secretary who broke the awkward silence. “I’m not sure I follow.”

Louis had been glaring at some of the greyer heads, hoping they would be the first to catch on and speak up. He flashed his gaze onto the secretary, and said, “How did Bill Gates become the richest man in the world?”

The secretary didn’t answer. Louis eyed the rest of them. The question, as he had expected, was met with blank faces.

“Well I’ll tell you. He didn’t *find* a niche in the software market. His creation *became* the software market.” Still nobody spoke, but Louis could tell a few of the older boys were now starting to cotton on. “What about Henry Ford? He didn’t find a niche in the motor vehicle market. The invention of the assembly line *created* the market for him.”

“So you’re saying we have to do the same?” the secretary said.

Louis straightened his back, flattening the length of his tie with his knuckles. “Exactly.”

“But how? The pharmaceutical market is flooded.”

Louis fisted the table again. “By creating our own *disease*.”

The secretary stroked his double chin. At first a blank, his face began to lighten as the concept slowly dawned. Louis smiled, opening his confidential dossier to the first page. The sound of flicking paper filled the room as everyone else did likewise.

“That’s the first step in our four-step plan. We need a disease for which only GRN has the product to cure. We have to monopolise an illness, patent it if we have to, and then flood the market with our wonder drug.”

Louis lifted his glass and took another sip, a small one, barely wetting his lips this time. When no one offered a comment, he said, “We turn the tables on the current approach to curing illness. Most pharmaceutical companies waste millions in research and development, all competing for the same thing, all hoping to find the magic bullet that will put an end to cancer or AIDS or whatever. We’re not going to spend a goddamn cent. We’re going to create a disease to fit the drugs we already have.”

The silence continued, then the secretary said, “I hope you’re not thinking of poisoning the water supply.” His candidness elicited a few

nervous snickers around the table. “I mean... uh... something like that wouldn’t be ethical, would it?”

Louis grinned. “What has ethics got to do with the pharmaceutical industry? We’re in the business of making money. Simple as that.” He planted his forefinger on top of the dossier. “But to get back to the point, to create a disease all we need do is turn something that’s normal into something that’s abnormal. Something that has to be treated. You’ve heard of Münchausen’s Syndrome, haven’t you?”

The secretary stroked his double chin again. A few VPs wiggled in their seats and pretended to concentrate on the dossier.

“Just let me explain. Someone who’s a Münchausen is perfectly healthy, but they make the doctors believe they have an illness that needs treating. They’re con artists. They have thousands of dollars spent on investigations and medical intervention. And for what? There’s nothing wrong with them. So if one individual can divert thousands of dollars from the insurance companies, imagine how much we can make if a whole city like New York, or the whole country for that matter, is convinced they have an illness they don’t really have.”

The secretary glanced up from his dossier. “You want GRN to create a pretend illness?”

Louis nodded. “A pretend illness with a real drug. We already have a range of anti-depressants. We’ll use one whose sales have dipped. Repackage it to save on costs,” and he smiled. “Of course we’ll have to come up with a savvy name for what it’s treating. DeVille’s Syndrome, or something like that.”

The secretary had the pen in his mouth again. “But... will it work? I mean...”

“Of course it will. The trick is to make the consumers feel worse about themselves than they already do. That our magic pill will take away their problems and make their life more bearable.” He paused to take stock. “The pharmaceutical industry has moved into the next phase of its evolution, and we have to move with it, if not take the lead. Pills are no longer just about treating life-threatening conditions. They also improve our *quality* of life.”

The secretary had a wry grin. “Pills for a lifestyle?”

The comment was greeted with a murmur of chuckles around the table.

“That’s not such a silly idea. People are always looking for something that will make them happier, or increase their sense of security, even feel more popular. Pills already exist to treat anxiety and stress, why not have a pill that can treat our everyday sadness? Or even guilt? You’ve just cheated on your wife and are feeling bad about it. Take a pill! Wash away those unwanted feelings. Next, take a pill to save the marriage. Even the career that’s on the ropes. The consumer needs to believe that a pill will save them in their hour of need. Step in GRN.” The flash of an idea momentarily stunned him. *That’s brilliant, Louis. Just goddamn brilliant.* “In fact, here’s our criterion for the diagnosis of DeVille’s Syndrome. A triad of symptoms: sadness, insecurity, loneliness.”

The secretary glanced at the dossier. “You’re sure the public will fall for it?”

Louis had been waiting for that question and almost jumped on the secretary in his eagerness to answer. “Look at ADHD, Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder. According to some statistics over one in three kids have it. We’re in an epidemic of hyperactive brats jumping all over the furniture and climbing the walls. Sure, some of them might have an underlying pathology that actually needs treatment, but thirty percent? Goddamn ludicrous. That was a disease created to sell more amphetamines. The medical profession has swallowed a lie and the pharmaceutical companies are making a fortune out of it. Which leads to the next step.”

Everyone flipped the dossier to Step Two: BUILDING CONSENSUS WITHIN THE MEDICAL COMMUNITY.

“An integral part of the plan involves winning over the hearts and minds of the medics and any other legalised drug pusher in the community,” Louis said. “The basic platform is already established. We don’t have to do much more than what we’re already doing. I’ve highlighted the main points on the page,” and he pointed to the list. “First, we need a marketing strategy to educate doctors in the triad of DeVille’s Syndrome and what to do about it. We’ll stress the need for early diagnosis, and of course the correct drug to treat it. Next, we’ll foster interactions between our patients with the mysterious ‘new disease’ and those doctors or scientists we get on board early, the ones who’ll become our experts in DeVille’s Syndrome. Of course we’ll have to bankroll a few conferences across the country to get our message across. Vegas. Aspen. San Fran. Even here in Manhattan.”

Louis paused again. He had to stop getting too far ahead of himself. Man, he was flying, but he had to remain calm. He had balls between his thighs, after all, not goddamn ovaries. He asked the table if there were any questions before he went to Step Three: Reaching The Consumers.

When no one spoke up, he said, “The next step involves increasing the public’s need for our drug, which we’ll call Hypnocal for the time being. As you can see in the dossier, I’ve outlined a few means of achieving this. We need a tab line. Something to perk the interest like, “By the time you’ve reached retirement, it’s likely you will have experienced the detrimental effects of DeVille’s Syndrome at least once.” Or even, “Lonely, frightened or blue? Hypnocal’s for you!” Anyway, you know what I’m getting at. You’ve seen it before. Remembering of course we need to use a lot of medical jargon to confuse the average monkey in the street. The more confused they are, the more likely they’ll think they’ve got the disease and need treatment for it. We won’t say someone’s sad. We’ll say they’re suffering “severe hypo-affectation.” Loneliness will be “intractable agoraphobia.” Insecurity will be, what? Help me out here...”

“Psychosomatic Delusional Complex,” the secretary said.

This time every VP was laughing. Even Louis smiled.

“You’ve got the picture,” he said. “We’ll also use the media to give us free publicity for Hypnocal, just like we’ve done before. We’ll run items in the papers and brief the radio and TV channels. Marketing disguised as news. You know the things. Something like, “A new drug has been found to significantly reduce the harmful effects of DeVille’s Syndrome.” That usually gets the public going. We’ll hammer home the fact that it’s a “breakthrough treatment” and get our experts interviewed on how it’s improved their patients’ life. Of course, if we can get a celebrity endorsement of the product, someone big who’ll come out and say they’ve had DeVille’s Syndrome for years and didn’t know it until they improved with Hypnocal, then we’re laughing all the way to the bank.”

Louis rubbed a clenched fist down his tie, then reached for the jug of goddamn cow juice and filled his empty glass. One of the VPs inquired as to whether or not he was feeling okay. Grimacing a little, he nodded that he was doing fine. It was just a little gastritis. Had had it for years. All he needed was some antacids to calm the flames.

Excusing himself, he went to the intercom on the side-table abutting the wall behind him. He lifted the handset and punched the call button. When his PA finally answered, he told her to fetch a bottle of Kwel-Amities he kept in his office desk. Once done, he went back to the head of the table. “Okay, where were we?” he said, clearing his throat and glancing at the dossier. “Ah yes. Step Three. An important channel for promoting awareness of DeVille’s Syndrome is the use of supporter groups. We’ll set them up in every major city and town. Forums on the Internet are also the way to go, especially if we want to go global with this thing. We’ll encourage free screenings for people who are worried they might have the disease. We’ll assist government lobbying for grants to help the poor.”

The secretary perked up. “I’ve just thought of something. What about a National Day for DeVille’s Syndrome?” He glanced around the table. “An awareness day. Like they do for AIDS and breast cancer. We can get people to wear a pair of wacky sunglasses to raise money for future research. You know, the ones with the funny nose and moustache that make you look like Groucho Marx.”

The VPs chuckled at the thought of the whole country wearing them. At that moment, Louis’ PA entered with the bottle of antacids. Ash-blond with melons like Dolly Parton, and not an inch over five foot, even in sneakers, she made him feel like a giant cat about to pounce on an unsuspecting mouse. While she put the bottle of Kwel-Amities on top of the table, he manoeuvred himself so that his elbow rubbed her breasts. Then, as she turned to leave, he let his hand fall to his side and brush her gorgeous ass. Running his forefinger across her skirt, he wondered how long it would be before she would give in to his advances. They always did, in the end.

She lifted her face to stare into his eyes. “Will that be all, Mr. DeVille?”

“For now,” he said, absently toying with the ring on his wedding finger.

Once the door had clicked shut, he opened the bottle of Kwel-Amities (one of his competitor’s products, ironically, but goddamn it they worked wonders) and took two of the little blue diamonds, chasing them down with a swig of milk. He then flicked the dossier to the last page: RESEARCH AND CLINICAL TRIALS.

“Your last suggestion is more valid than you think,” he said to the secretary. “Step Four is concerned with the scientific validation of

DeVil's Syndrome and its treatment. Probably the most difficult stage; the scientific community is as cynical as hell. Goddamn bunch of assholes if you ask me, but we need them. If we have to bin research that's less favourable than others, then so be it. It's common practice anyway. If we have to manipulate the statistical data in our favour, then we'll do that too. Again, it's common practice. In today's world, clinical trials are nothing but marketing trials anyway. Every scientist knows that. As long as the data reflects positively in favour of Hypnocal, then we'll do everything we can to push it into the public arena."

Louis took another sip. Every face at the table was turned to him. He then held up the dossier and said, "Deep down human beings are nothing but an organic process of chemical reactions. Chemicals determine how we feel, how we act, and how we think. Even love is nothing but a chemical reaction. Why not give the goddamn public what they want, control over their own chemistry? Surely we owe them the best possible life they can get. Because you know what, once the reactions stop, there's nothing else."

He felt like ending his talk with a big, hearty "amen." Instead, he put the dossier down and brought the meeting to a close. The Vice Presidents slowly dispersed, patting him on the shoulder as they passed and telling him what a fine job he was doing; GRN was really going places. Despite the burn beneath his chest, he smiled and thanked them and said he hoped he could count on their support in the coming months.

*If not, they'll be out the doors so goddamn fast their feet won't touch the ground.*

Finally, the last suit and tie exited the boardroom. He opened the bottle on the table and took two more blue diamonds, thinking he'd better get his PA to book him in for another check-up. He rubbed his knuckles down his chest, wondering what in hell had changed of late. The gastritis just wasn't responding to treatment like it used to.

He let the thought slide. There were more important things to worry about, like how to get his PA into bed before any of the younger VPs beat him to it. He leaned back and clasped his hands behind his head.

Now *that* would be something, wouldn't it?

## **PART ONE**

*“Hell is a choice.”*

**M. Scott Peck**

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Louis' Problems*



LOUIS DEVILLE SAT behind his desk wondering just what to do. He wasn't outraged. He wasn't baffled. He just had a lot on his mind this morning. A lot on his plate, his wife would have said. Piled right up to the office ceiling, in fact. Piled like a mound of rotting garbage that had been dumped in the IN tray and marked to his attention: "CEO Global Resolutions Network." It was piled so high he could almost see it spilling against the bookshelves and the filing cabinets. Spilling, still more, out the tenth-story window onto the pedestrians scuttling along Broadway.

Good ol' Lady Di, he mused. She might not be right about many things, but she was right about that; and wouldn't she just love to rub it in? He could see her now at the Beeker Street penthouse. All five-foot two of leanness and exuberance in her leotards and legwarmers, pedalling on her Ezy-Cycle in front of some celebrity aerobics video or the Home Shopping Channel, burning off the calories in some vain attempt to defeat the aging process, stretching muscles and joints he didn't even know existed. He could even hear her nagging at him while she did it.

"It's your own fault. You're a workaholic, Louis," she would be saying. He hated the way she deliberately called him *Lewis*. It was *Lewey*, like Donald Duck's three sons, Hewey, Dewey and Lewey. "You're going to die at your desk one day, believe me." She wouldn't stop there either. "You're never home before eleven. It's not good for a man your age. You should be thinking of retirement, not expanding the business. Leave that for the *younger* men," and she would say younger in such a tone that would make him want to throttle that slender neck of hers.

He clenched his fists and thumped the desk. The intercom jumped and the computer monitor flickered momentarily, then switched itself off. Retirement? Hells bells, he was too damn young to retire. He was only sixty-six, and as fit as a goddamn fiddle. Not quite what he was

in his mid-twenties when he started the company, but who the hell was when they had been steering the helm for over forty years? Sure, he would pay the price for it one day. There was always a price. Cardiac arrest. Heart attack. Flat line. He had thought about it often enough, whatever name you wanted to call it. Hadn't everyone his age? But he had no concerns except his goddamn gastritis. That was all. Got himself checked up every six months. Still had a good twenty years left in him before he had anything to worry about.

"Do you really think so, Louis?" he heard Dianne DeVille say in his head again. He could even see her taut legs pumping the Ezy-Cycle in a blur of pink and blue in front of the TV, her bouffant hair as motionless as her silicon breasts. "Do you really *think* you've got twenty good years left? I mean, look at your waistline." It was always waistline, never belly, or guts, or stomach, words that were just too crass to ever spill out of her surgically perfected lips. "It's not what it used to be, is it dear?"

He could feel the burn of his gastritis just thinking about her, like he had swallowed one of those stupid party candles that never went out when you blew on it. He rummaged through the top drawer looking for his antacids while Lady Di kept nagging in his head.

"Your poor heart," she said. "I'm surprised it hasn't given up already."

Ha! Really? he snapped back, vaguely aware that he was talking aloud. He had already outlived Peterson, that good-for-noth'n union slob, not to mention several others who she had thought would live to a ripe old age. So much for them, huh? Look who's had the last laugh!

Lady Di had no reply. Her pedalling image began to fade like some overused videotape that could no longer record. Then she was gone and he was alone again, back in his office with his pile of problems stacked to the ceiling.

Walter Peterson, though, stayed fresh in his mind. The old toad who had stolen from the rich and kept every cent for himself, good old Mr. Fat and Ugly with a hairy wart on his right cheek (and probably on the cheek of his ass, too), always sticking his pug-nose in business that wasn't his. Coronary got him a few years ago, no surprises about that. Only surprise was that it didn't happen earlier. Would've saved GRN thousands in "charity donations" if he had croaked it when he should have. That chain-smoking scumbag had

taken more money from his pocket than his yoga-stretching wife, and that was saying something. He was better off dead. Never did any good for anyone.

Like that rat from Morgan Divott. Another scumbag he had had the misfortune of sharing business intercourse. He had been the first to go. Now that *was* a surprise. Coronary, too, wasn't it? Or was it the big CA? One of his clients once told him over lunch it was actually that faggot disease, the one all the heroine junkies were dying of too. Whatever it was, the end was sudden, that much he knew. Here one minute, gone the next. Almost too young to die really, still in his forties, but he had never forgiven the little vermin for trying to force him out in the eighties.

Damn near succeeded too. Had almost two-thirds of the board on his side. Bunch of backstabbing mongrels. They had ambushed him in the boardroom with a vote of no confidence and almost succeeded. Taken completely by surprise, too, he was. Hadn't even the foggiest clue his own vice presidents were scheming behind his back. He had trusted them, he guessed. That was his weakness. Too much goddamned trust. Well, it was a hard earned lesson, but he was still here, and where were they? Gone to hell, as far as he cared.

"Ha!" he said. "There you are."

Goddamn bottle of Kwel-Amities hidden right at the back of the drawer. About goddamn time. His gastritis was really fired up and frying the inside of his lower chest. He removed the bottle, unscrewed the cap and peered inside, then grunted and rolled his eyes. Wasn't that always the goddamn way? Just when you really needed two or three, there was only one of the little buggers left. Just typical. Just goddamn typical.

Before he took it, he got up from behind the desk and lugged his hefty frame to the window. Horns blared somewhere downtown, the angry howls of New York's mechanical wildlife. Directly below in the shadows of the high-rises and skyscrapers, grazing animals crawled along Broadway. Every goddamn creature in the jungle was down there. A cement truck bull-rhino charged anything that moved. Buffalo buses chewed the cud, not in any hurry at all. Yellow deer taxis moved in herds, nervous and alert, ready to dart away at any sign of danger. Even the monkeys of the jungle were there, scuttling along the sidewalk in office-wear, head down, briefcase in hand, not one of them lifting their eyes to see who was looking down on them.

He imagined a rifle in his hand, picking them off one by one. Not that he had ever shot someone before. God knew he had often wanted to. His wife for instance. Could do it too, and not so much as bat an eyelid. If he could get away with it, that was.

Ah, the perfect murder. Did it exist? Probably not. Everybody got caught at some point, usually when they bragged about it. Which was a bitch, because what was the point if you had to keep it secret? That's what trophies were for, weren't they? But if he could get away with it, ah yes, he had no qualms about picking someone off from his tenth-story window every once in a while, especially when his gastritis was playing up. Like that good-for-noth'n bum at the Metro corner always begging for money. He would be the first to go. Then that jogger who thought he owned the sidewalk. Then the hippies cleaning windscreens at the traffic lights, even when you told them you'd got no loose change to pay them. Ping. Ping. Ping. All three gone to meet their maker courtesy of Sniper Louis, the only CEO with big enough balls to rid the city of its filth.

He laughed a little. Sniper Louis. That was a good one.

While he took a couple more imaginary pot shots from the window, the noonday sun peeked from behind a drifting cloud and shone directly into his eyes. He winced with pain. The burning from his stomach had turned up a notch like some goddamned internal boiler running on solar energy. Cursing, he yanked the drapes and tipped the remaining Kwel-Amity straight from the bottle into his mouth, then made his way back to his chair crunching the pill into sharp little shards that stuck between his teeth.

Goddamn it, he grimaced, these buggers tasted awful.

At the desk he chased the bitterness down with a swig of scotch from the bottom drawer, then wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He slipped his thumb between two shirt buttons to give his sternum a massage. The skin felt hot and sweaty, as if a boiler really had been fired up beneath it. Still grimacing, he took another swig of scotch for good measure, and as he tilted his head he caught himself staring back.

"I know, I know. It's getting worse," he said, thumb-massaging his sternum. He could still taste a lingering bitterness in the back of his mouth, so he took another swig of scotch. "I need to see the doc again."

The portrait behind the desk kept staring its frozen accusation. The painter had captured all his best features (as he had been paid a goddamn fortune to) – his dark hypnotizing eyes; his broad shoulders; his expansive chest – and had managed to minimise his less noble attributes – his double-chin; his overhanging gut (*Waistline, dear, it's a waistline!*); the thinning patches on his scalp. Done a pretty damn fine job, too, he might add. At the time he was posing for it though, he had reckoned the idea of wearing a laurel and toga was kind of prissy, but the painter had assured him that the Caesar look with the backdrop of ancient Rome oozed the essence of success and power he needed in his line of work. Louis had paid him cash straight away. Best goddamn five grand he had ever spent.

He tossed the empty drug bottle into the bin beneath the desk and took a final swig of scotch before putting it back. Just as he sat down, his secretary buzzed on the intercom. The image of her abundant cleavage drifted in front of his eyes like two un-tethered helium balloons. “What is it?” he said.

“David Epstein’s on line one for you.”

Goddamn it, he had told her he was busy. No interruptions. Wendy would have understood. Now there was a damn fine secretary. Damn fine woman too. Not keeping her at the firm was the only thing he truly regretted. These young women nowadays didn’t understand what a boss needed. He should have sacked Sarah ages ago, although he had to admit she was a hell of a lot better than the previous one. Frumpy bitch was nothing but trouble from the day she started. Stirred up all sorts of legal mess the company didn’t need, and was still stirring. Damn shame they didn’t make secretaries like they used to. In fact, you weren’t even allowed to call them secretaries anymore, were you? Personal Assistants, PA’s, or some or other bullshit term for someone who didn’t type or do anything of the “personal” nature Wendy used to provide.

The red light on Button-1 kept flashing. “What does Epstein want now?” he said.

Sarah’s voice fluttered across the intercom: “Didn’t say. You know he won’t leave a message. He’ll only talk to you.”

Louis rolled his eyes and said, “Okay. Okay. I’ll take it.” He picked up the handset and punched the flashing red button. “This had better be good,” he said to Epstein. “I don’t wanna hear the contract hasn’t been signed.”

There was a pause on the line from the LA office. Either it was a bad connection or Epstein had taken fright. “That’s what I want to talk to you about,” Epstein said eventually. Louis had been about to growl at him to speak up. “Collins wants another week to think about it.”

“Think about what?” Louis thumbed his sternum. “He’s had six goddamn months! We need that signature! We’re hedged to our teeth over here. If he doesn’t do it today, there won’t be any goddamned contract to sign. D’you hear what I’m saying?”

Epstein paused again. “I’ve been my persuasive best. The guy just won’t put pen on paper. I think he’s holding out for a higher offer.”

“What kind of bullshit is that? We’ve already doubled our original bid. We’re the only ones interested in his goddamned business and we’re not offering one more cent than what’s already been agreed. Tell him he can take it or leave it.”

“Do you really mean that? I thought...”

Louis rolled his eyes and gritted his teeth. “No, I don’t really mean that,” he said. “Of course we’re not going to let him go. We’re in too deep.” Still massaging his chest as he had, Louis could feel the thumping of his heart against his thumb. Then, remembering his favourite line from *The Godfather*, said: “Make him an offer he can’t refuse.”

Epstein paused again. “What does that mean?”

“Just do what you’re paid to do. Get the signature on the contract.”

Louis slammed the handset down and clasped his hands behind his neck. Tilting back in his manager’s chair, he released the pent up air with a long exaggerated sigh. Hells bells, he thought, the garbage was really piling up today. It was never ending.

Still, he had faced worst and gotten through in one piece, hadn’t he? He was a goddamn survivor. History had proven that.

## CHAPTER TWO

### *Coup-d'etat*



HIS MEMORY OF the attempted *coup-de-tat* was a little hazy, what, nearly two decades ago now. He couldn't remember exactly who was in attendance or where they were sitting, he couldn't even remember all of their names, but he certainly remembered Johnny Winterbottom and the guy who had almost choked to death on the ice cube. He could actually picture the scene in the boardroom, now that he thought about it. The blinds were drawn, just as he liked it, the bare white walls reflecting the artificial light as though they were glowing with radioactive energy. Suits and ties occupied all thirteen seats around the table (no skirts or "power suits" back then, not on *his* board of control), except for one, the one next to Johnny at the other end of the table, the only vacant bay in the parking lot. He hadn't known it then, but that empty seat had saved him.

"We've... got something else on the agenda," Johnny Winterbottom had said that Friday back in '84.

Louis had already stood, tired and cranky at the end of another long week of eight-till-late. "This isn't protocol. The meeting's over," he said, then hit upon the most likely reason for the delay. "Is it the damn unions again? I thought we'd fixed that last month. Does that greedy bastard Peterson want more money?"

A couple of vice presidents shuffled in their seats and fidgeted with their ties, eyes fixed to the new mahogany desktop. "Not... exactly," Johnny said.

There was something in the way the young lawyer was trying to appease him that Louis immediately disliked, as if he had a poisoned water cooler he wanted the CEO to drink from. *Go on, try it*, his look was saying. *It's kind of refreshing. You'll like it.* It was the look of a lizard trying to coax a fly onto its forked tongue.

One of the VP's on Johnny's immediate left, Louis' right, cleared his throat and took a sip from a glass of water. It was the Irish kid he

had employed on Johnny's advice a few years back; a clever mathematician who had already made an impact by halving company tax, but had all the social skills of a frightened guinea pig. He took a long swig and then began to gag on something, turning red in the face as if someone had snuck from behind and started throttling him. Nobody moved to slap him on the back or do anything to help. Nobody did anything except stare. The kid brought his hand to his throat, gagging and gasping for air, and Louis could actually see his temple veins beginning to throb like engorging bloodworms. Then, just when his face was turning deeper crimson, he spat the offending item across the table. An ice cube slid across the mahogany and landed in the empty seat directly opposite, the seat normally occupied by the financial advisor from Morgan Divott. All the VPs watched the ice cube hit the leather upholstery, stunned into frigid silence.

Louis, too, watched the ice cube's route. He wasn't thinking the tax whiz lucky not to choke on a frozen piece of H<sub>2</sub>O; rather he was thinking it completely unlike Herbert Grimsby to miss the board meeting. The closet faggot was usually the first to plunk his scrawny ass in his seat. That's what Louis had initially liked about the guy; eagerness, promptness, willingness (not his cutesy-wootsy ass), the kind of qualities he wanted – no, demanded – from someone in control of the company funds. Why he wasn't in attendance, he didn't know. Neither did anyone else. Not at that moment, anyway.

All the VPs around the table turned and faced Louis, including the kid who had spat the ice cube across the table. His color had mostly returned, but his mouth was gaping and his eyes were bulging, not quite believing what he had done in front of the boss.

"What, not exactly?" Louis said to the lizard at the end of the table.

Johnny's expression hadn't changed. In fact, now that the atmosphere inside the hothouse had chilled to something like the ice-cube, he didn't like the expressions on most of his subordinates. They looked like members of a jury not sure which way the evidence was pointing, evidence that could send him all the way to the gallows. It was like that movie, *Twelve Angry Men*, his VP's turning on him like the jury who wanted to hang the kid. Something was up. Something rotten. He could smell its stench like Peterson could smell a bribe.

*No, he reckoned, it's not Twelve Angry Men. It's The Dirty Dozen.*

“Are you going to tell me what this is all about?” he said to Johnny, and glared at the rest of them. They all averted his gaze, apart from Johnny, who maintained his stare but still couldn’t say what was on his mind. Except he didn’t have to; Louis had a pretty good idea what was going down, and company protocol wasn’t going to save him. “Go on!” he said, almost growling. “Be a man. Have the balls to say what you want to say.”

Johnny glanced at the empty chair, the one in which the accountant’s cutesy-wootsy ass should have been parked. The ice cube had begun to melt in a little pool of water.

So that was it, Louis thought, he’s stalling for Herbert. Johnny wasn’t the leader in all this. That rat from Morgan Divott was, but he wasn’t here, was he? Something had happened, something the rest of them hadn’t planned on, especially Johnny. That’s why they were stumbling all over themselves, why Johnny had taken it upon himself to take control. Thrust the first dagger, so to speak. They had meant to catch him by surprise (and they had, hell’s bells yes they had), but he’d had a little slice of luck; their leader had gone AWOL, and just for the moment the mutineering sons of bitches didn’t know what to do. Goddamn it, the company was his, and his alone, and he wasn’t going to let some lizard-kid come in and steal his baby from under his nose.

“There... there’s a significant majority of the board...” Johnny began, once again glancing at the empty seat.

*Here it comes, Louis smirked. Et tu Brutus?*

Perhaps he should have seen this coming. When he had employed Johnny straight out of law school his grades hadn’t topped the list of candidates, not even in the top ten, but his ambition had stood out like the only vacant seat at the table. Ambition was a two edged sword, though. Louis knew that more than anyone. It could get you where you wanted to go, and fast, but it had its price. In that way, ambition was more like rocket fuel than a sword. Lots of fire, lots of power, but burned out quickly, more than often in a spectacular ball of flames. He had tried to bring Johnny under his wing and control his ambitious nature, help the protégé learn his trade while he climbed the corporate ladder. That was his second mistake, after trusting him. You can’t control rocket fuel. It just burns until there’s nothing left.

“What significant majority?” Louis said, bluffing. He could see around the table that most had already turned against him. He

clenched his fists and rested his knuckles on the table. “You’d better have two thirds. You’ll burn in your own fire if you don’t.”

Johnny’s expression steeled. His eyelids hooded and his lips pursed. Coldness emanated from him. The lizard was back. “We’ve got it,” Johnny said.

The kid who had nearly choked to death on the ice cube cleared his throat again, reached for the glass of water, then withdrew his hand. Others around him fidgeted with their ties and scratched imaginary itches on their scalps and noses. Louis had to act now.

“Then call your vote.” He undid his top button, hooking down the knot of his tie with his finger. He thought of sitting, then decided against it. If they were going to bring him down, they would have to do it with him looming over them. He needed every advantage he could get, even if it was a psychological one. He knew his size was daunting, but was it enough? He needed to scare the willies out of a few of them, cause them to doubt which way they would go. One vote might be enough to swing it. He only needed one third, or four of the twelve. In fact technically, although Herbert’s absence annulled his vote, it worked in the CEO’s favor: it counted as a no vote. He only needed three to cling to power.

Louis could tell Johnny knew that too. The rat’s absence had made the count closer than he had wanted. Johnny was gambling. He probably had six definites, seven including himself, bought them off with false assurances of pay rises and promotions when the old weasel had been cast out and all the blood had been washed from the boardroom walls. Would probably get rid of the majority within a year if he won, just maintain a handful of trusted friends at his side (and, oh, wouldn’t he learn the hard way; there’s no such thing as trust in this world) and bring in a fresh group of young lawyers and accountants straight from college, kids that wouldn’t dare challenge his power, at least not for seven or eight years. But now he needed two more to be safe, and that was just the problem. He didn’t have them.

“I... uh... I need to go to the toilet,” the Irish lout said. He pushed his chair back and stood up.

“Gregory, sit down,” Johnny said, still as cool as a lizard. “You said you were in.”

Gregory’s face went as red as it had earlier. “No... uh... to be sure, I never said that, not really. I said I’d think about it.” He glanced

at Louis, eye-to-eye, and visibly cringed. For someone pushing six foot two, Louis thought, he was kind of weak at the knees. Gregory returned to Johnny and stepped back from the table toward the door, hands flicked up at the wrist, as if in surrender. "I... I don't want to be a part of this anymore." Taking another step back, he glanced over his shoulder at the door, then back at Johnny. "I... uh... I really must be going."

"Gregory, if you don't sit down now your career's as good as over."

Gregory glanced at the door again, and Louis wondered if the lanky galoot knew he would be out of a job by Monday irrespective of who wrestled control in the next few minutes. This was his chance, however, to create another vacant seat, another annulled vote. Once the dominos had started to tumble, who knew how many would fall? Then he summoned his most pleasant *I'm-really-your-best-friend* smile, and said, "Gregory, come and sit at the table." He almost felt sick saying it, like telling Lady Di he loved her, but he needed the tax whiz like never before. "You don't have to vote if you don't want to. No one's putting a gun to your head."

Relief evaporated from Gregory's shoulders like waves of heat above a desert road, and the faintest smile brushed his lips and eyes. "You... you're sure?"

Louis nodded. Gregory stared back at him as if he were Jesus Almighty, the goddamned savior of the entire universe, and took his seat back at the table. Louis suppressed the urge to laugh, then glanced at Johnny. The lizard-kid's nostrils flared almost imperceptibly, the only sign belying his coolness. The dominos had started to tumble; and to add to his woes Wendy knocked on the door and entered with a note for Louis. She barely glanced at the others, seemingly unaware of what was happening, then left with a wiggle of her curvy hips, a subtle invitation for Louis that they were available whenever he wanted. It was an offer he would certainly take up. Tonight even, right after this sordid little affair was dealt with.

Still standing, he glanced at the memo. "Ha!" he blurted, and chuckled with surprise. The whole situation just got better and better.

He reread the memo, just to be sure. It was a message sent straight from heaven (if you believed in that bullshit), delivered by an angel with a great set of jugs and butts of steel. "It seems, gentlemen," he

said, making no attempt to hide his glee, “that your glorious leader will be unable to come to your rescue.”

He glanced at the traitors, letting them know he had them by the balls. They were all staring at the note in his hand, even Johnny. Gregory was the only one who wasn't anxious. He was leaning back in his chair with an expression of a passenger smug enough to believe he was the only one safe in a plummeting aircraft because he was the only one wearing his seatbelt. He was smiling. He was actually smiling.

“It says here that Herbert Grimsby has been struck down with a mysterious illness and is currently in a coma in Intensive Care at St. Mary's Hospital. The prognosis isn't good.” Louis now let Johnny have the full intensity of his glare. “And the prognosis isn't good for you, either. The game's over. I accept your resignation, effective immediately.”

Johnny's hooded eyelids lifted slightly. His nostrils flared, and for a horrid moment Louis thought he saw a forked tongue flick out and lick his lips. “The game's not over, yet,” he said, cool as ever. “As you've said, we have to follow protocol. There's still a vote to be taken.” He scanned the faces around him. “We don't need Herbert. We can still do this.”

The suit and tie two seats up from Johnny's right fidgeted with his cuffs and scratched his balding scalp. “I'm... um... going to abstain,” he said.

Johnny stared in disbelief, his cool now rapidly thawing like the ice cube in the seat next to him.

The VP on Gregory's left spoke up next. “Me too. I don't know what we're voting for anymore, now that Herbie's in ICU.” He made the sign of the cross on his chest.

Louis now beamed. That was four, five including himself. Johnny had just lost his two-thirds majority. The dominos had fallen quicker than he had expected.

“As I said, I accept your resignation, effective immediately,” he said.

Glaring at the two who had just betrayed him, Johnny stood, sniffed contemptuously, and headed for the door. Before he left the boardroom, he turned and fired one last parting shot. “This is not the end. You haven't heard the last of me.”

Louis laughed in his face. “The goddamn sky will fall down before you’re ever a threat to me again.”

Johnny’s eyes hooded over. Then he was gone.



– END OF SAMPLE CHAPTERS –

A quick word from the author:

Of the seven Pilgrim Chronicles I have in mind, including the other two I have already written, DeVille’s contract would have to be the darkest one of them all. Like *Samantha Honeycomb* and *The Golden Chalice*, the main protagonist sets the mood of the story. It is, after all, a story about Louis DeVille, and he is not a very nice guy (as you’ve probably gathered). But, again, like the other stories in the series, it’s a journey of self-discovery. Louis is just a little bit slower at learning from his mistakes than Samantha or Giacomo. In fact, there’s a lot of my old self in him, so when the book is finally published, please treat him kindly.

So long and best wishes,  
Scott Zarcinas