

DEVILLE'S CONTRACT

Scott Zarcinas

Other Titles by
Scott Zarcinas

The Pilgrim Chronicles:
Samantha Honeycomb
The Golden Chalice

Fiction:
*Ananda (*Thanksgiving Day)*
Roadman

Non-Fiction:
Your Natural State of Being

DEVILLE'S CONTRACT

Scott Zarcinas



**DoctorZed
Publishing**
www.doctorzed.com

Copyright © by Scott Zarcinas

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced by any means, graphic, electronic, or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, taping or by any information storage retrieval system without the written permission of the publisher except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

First hardcover edition published 2017 by DoctorZed Publishing.

DoctorZed Publishing books may be ordered through booksellers or by contacting:

DoctorZed Publishing

IDAHO

10 Vista Ave

Skye, South Australia 5072

www.doctorzed.com

orders@doctorzed.com

ISBN: 978-0-6481315-4-0 (hc)

ISBN: 978-0-9924473-5-9 (sc)

ISBN: 978-0-9872495-4-8 (ebk)

A CiP number for this title can be found at the National Library of Australia.

Cover image © Ccaetano | Dreamstime.com - God And Devil Photo

Top of the World lyrics by Dwayne Wiggins, Eric Baker, Frederick Busby, as sung by Karen Carpenter.

DoctorZed Publishing rev. date 18/10/2017

To Martie, Zsa Zsa and Zenya

Acknowledgments

For fifteen years now I have been writing and for fifteen years I've had the loving support of my wife. Without her support this book and others would still be vague images trapped inside my head. Thank you again Martie for helping me give birth to this story.

To my readers who proofed the manuscript, thank you for your time, effort and suggestions. The book is better for your input.

Lastly, to God, thank You for showing me that we make a heaven and hell of our own choosing, especially on this earth, even if I'm a little slow in learning.

“With our thoughts we create the world.”

Gautama Buddha

Prologue

THE GRAND VISION

HIDING his smile at the head of the table, Louis DeVille eyed the suit and ties fling 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'd been working toward since the day he began the company, the culmination of his life's work. 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, glancing at his watch, "at 6:04, March 13."

The secretary then read out the minutes of last month's board meeting before asking Louis if there was anything he wanted to say before the vote. To the applause of the VPs, Louis stood and gathered his thoughts. He thanked them and gestured for silence, stretching the jacket lapels over his belly and squeezing a button into the eyelet.

"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. One of the 'Big Four' back then."

Next to a pile of dossiers his PA had left on the table was a pitcher of cow juice and from it he poured himself a glass. God, he hated this stuff, but he needed it. Grimacing, he eyed his subordinates over the rim. They were chuckling. Everyone knew Louis DeVille had bought out that company when it hit hard times in the mid-eighties and stripped it of its assets. All that remained was the mahogany table they were now seated around.

He put the glass back down on the table and went 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. “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 gray and balding heads were nodding. The others, fresher faced and fuller on top, just stared back with polite interest.

“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 gray 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 white: 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 grayer 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 page one. The sound of flicking paper crescendoed 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 monopolize 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 Münchhausen's Syndrome, haven't you?"

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

"Let me explain. Someone who's a Münchhausen 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 criteria for the diagnosis of DeVillie’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 legalized 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 DeVile'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 DeVile'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 DeVile'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. 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 maneuvered 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 DeVille'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 favorable than others, then so be it. It's common practice anyway. If we have to manipulate the statistical data in our favor, 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 favor of Hypno-cal, 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 returned to his chair, bringing his speech to a close. The next few minutes would tell whether he'd done enough.

"Well, I think that brings us to the vote," the secretary said, standing and glancing around the table. Louis drew a deep breath, suppressing the urge to fidget in his seat. "I put forward the motion to keep Mr. DeVille as CEO. I need a second."

The VP next to him shot his hand in the air before anyone else got the chance. "I second it."

"Then lets call the vote."

Louis kept holding his breath, maintaining an air of absolute seriousness. How long did he have to put up with this goddamn theatrical nonsense? Not long, it seemed. All thirteen hands shot up in unanimous agreement and it was done. As quick as that; a goddamn rubberstamp. Louis slowly released the air in his lungs and closed his eyes to collect his thoughts,

barely heeding the call for votes on the remaining board positions. Should he really have been so worried? Maybe. Maybe not. Despite the feeling that everything was going according to plan, there was always a niggle of doubt in the back of his head. He guessed he had never truly recovered from that time he had almost lost it all in the early eighties, in this very same room, if you could believe it. That was a lesson he wouldn't forget in a million goddamn years. *No sir-ree*. Nothing in life was a guarantee, except death and taxes, if you believed that horseshit. But what the hell, it was all in the past. He was re-elected as CEO and had survived another year. And, oh, what a goddamn year this was going to be.

After the vote for the position of secretary, the meeting was called to a close and 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'd all be out the door so goddamn fast their feet won't touch the ground.

Finally, the last suit and tie exited the boardroom. Louis opened the bottle on the table and took two more blue diamonds, thinking he had better get his PA to book him in for another checkup. He rubbed his knuckles up and 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

Chapter 1

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. 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, pedaling 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 pedaling 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 highrises 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 potshots 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 minimize 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?"

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 favorite 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 2

COUP-D'ETAT

HIS memory of the attempted *coup-d'etat* 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. 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, clear-ed 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 H₂O; 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), 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'd 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, sit down now or 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?

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 unfortunately 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.

Chapter 3

NO MORE PROBLEMS

LOUIS chuckled at the memory. History was written by the victor, no truer words had been spoken; and victory was sweet, as sweet as revenge, no matter what anyone else said, almost sweet enough to douse the burning inside his chest. Surprisingly, he hadn't seen nor heard of the lizard-kid since he slinked out of the boardroom and was escorted by security onto Broadway. He had just disappeared. Not that it wasn't hard to meld into the New York shadows, but to completely vanish without a trace was a little surprising. He would have thought he'd have heard something from someone, maybe another CEO who had received his CV, or a client who had been solicited for services, but no, nothing, not even a whisper.

He just wished the mound of problems he was facing would disappear as easily as Johnny Winterbottom. Sighing long again, he heard the muffled ring of the secretary's telephone through the office door. Simultaneously, the red light on Button-1 began flashing again.

Damned idiot thinks we've been disconnected, he grumbled.

He picked up the handset and punched the button before Sarah buzzed to tell him who it was. "Do I have to get on a plane and come over and kick your scrawny butt? Just get the signature on the contract. I don't care how you do it. Just do it."

To his shock, someone other than Epstein cleared his throat before speaking. "Mr. DeVille, this is Sergeant Washington. NYPD."

Louis felt his gastritis burn a path from his lower sternum all the way to his Adam's apple. He leaned forward, resting on the elbow of the hand that held the handset to his ear. The other hand rubbed his chest. He knew what the cop was calling

about (and he really should have known it would happen today, shouldn't he?). Just part of the garbage that had been building up since this morning, since two weeks ago in fact. He cleared his throat, and said, "What can I do for you, Sergeant?"

"I think you know, sir," Washington said, and he said *sir* in a way that twisted in his gut like a poker stoking the flames of his gastritis. Louis was sure the cop had been secretly coached by Lady Di to put him off his guard. "We've been waiting for you since half past ten this morning. This is the fourth interview you've failed to attend."

Quashing the urge to slam the phone down, Louis saw the red light of Button-2 begin to flash. An instant later, he heard the muffled ring of the secretary's phone through the door and then Sarah's faint voice talking to the caller.

"I'd like to remind you that sexual harassment is a serious issue," Washington continued. "We need to clear up certain facts before we can proceed with the claim."

"I can explain," he said. "My secretary's new. She's been letting a few things slip lately..."

Washington's voice firmed. "You can explain it to the courts. This is a courtesy call to inform you that because of your frequent refusal to attend police questioning a subpoena has been issued..."

"A subpoena? You're joking." Louis was now rubbing his chest so hard he feared he'd stick his thumb through the fleshy gap in his ribs.

"I'm not joking, sir."

Again *sir* in a manner that snorted down the line: *I've just about had enough of this*. It was Lady Di's coaching, all right. Maybe she was in cahoots with goody-two-shoes Sergeant Washington and that good-for-noth'n cow that had laid the sexual harassment crap against him. "But the bitch is lying."

Washington paused on the end of the line, a pause as long as Epstein's earlier. "I'd also advise you to get a good lawyer before you say anything that may incriminate yourself. Take this

as a friendly warning. The subpoena will arrive in the next day or so.”

Louis was left holding a dead line. The red light on Button-1 flicked off, but the light on Button-2 was still glaring. He could still hear Sarah speaking through the door and hoped she wouldn't put the caller through. It was bound to be more trash to pile on his plate, and he could do without that at the moment because...

...because, jeez Louise, this pain in his chest was really firing up. Hells bells, he could hardly breathe. The Kwel-Amity had done absolutely nothing. Not a goddamn thing. Worse, he had been rubbing his sternum so hard the skin was stinging raw.

Desperately hoping he had overlooked a bottle of antacids, he flung the top drawer open and rummaged around. There was nothing in there but crap. Blunt pencils. Capless pens. Last year's diary. Used paper. A stapler with no staples. Crusty Blu Tack. And what was this? A drugstore docket for... for goddamned Kwel-Amities!

He cursed and slammed the drawer. To his horror, the thud of oak on oak coincided with the biggest solar flare of the decade right in the middle of his chest. He flung himself back, arching in his chair, and tried to take a breath. The pain was too intense. So he just sat there, holding still, afraid that even the slightest movement would trigger another monstrous flare.

After a few seconds the pain began to ease enough to take a shallow breath. Then another. Except now he felt the whole of his goddamn neck tingling with pins and needles, including his left arm. Which was kind of strange because he could still move his elbow and wrist and wiggle his fingers, but his shoulder right down to his fingernails had suddenly numbed as if he had been asleep on it or something. A hot, restless sleep too, because his brow was clammy and his mouth was dry like he had had a real horror of a nightmare. What's more, his vision was starting to play up. The room had blurred so much he could barely make out anything in the dim light.

Goddamn it, he thought, he needed a Kwel-Amity. He needed one *right* now.

He scrunched his eyes to see if that would help, then opened them to some kind of sick joke. The room was spinning like a grownup carousel he didn't want to be on. The drapes, the door, the bookshelves, the filing cabinets, every goddamn thing in the room was rotating and moving up and down in an unsynchronized, queasy gyration, slowly at first, then quicker and quicker as the tempo of the music increased...

...Music? Goddamn it, he really *could* hear something. Church bells on a Sunday morning call to service. Yet there was something wrong with them. They sounded, what, out of tune? Almost as if someone was striking a massive gong that had cracked or split, striking it over and over again, faster and faster until the noise was one continuous warble that wormed inside his head and made him want to crush his skull between his hands.

Whatever the hell was going on, he wanted an immediate end to it. He wanted to get off this goddamn ride and throw up. That's what he really wanted to do. The burning in his chest. The numbness in his neck and arm. The gyrating furniture. The goddamn warbling. He needed to puke, and he needed a goddamn Kwel-Amity.

"Mr. DeVille!" Sarah said. "Are you all right? You look pale."

He had only just heard her over the warbling. He glanced over and saw her riding the door as if it were a wooden horse, gyrating up and down and spinning with the rest of the room. Amazingly, her breasts weren't moving. He half expected them to be bouncing all over the place. She also seemed to be holding something in her hand, something yellow and small.

"G'off thagodd'm daw!" he said.

"I can't understand you," she said. "You're slurring."

Louis scrunched his eyes and opened them again. Sarah was still spinning with the room. "Get... off... that... goddamn... door!"

Sarah frowned and glanced over her shoulder. He was about to repeat himself when another flare struck him in the middle of the chest. It scorched up his neck to his chin, then down the deadened arm to the hand he was dangling over the armrest. At first he gasped. Then he groaned, a long withering ejaculation that sounded not too dissimilar to the warbling inside his head.

Sarah rushed to the desk. "Mr. DeVille! Are you sure you're all right? Do you want me to call the paramedics?"

Louis sucked in a breath against the pain, held it for as long as he could, then let it out between his gritted teeth, long and slow, hissing steam from his internal boiler. He told her he didn't need the goddamn paramedics. He needed a Kwel-Amity, a whole goddamn bottle of the stuff.

"I can't hear you," Sarah said. She was almost crying. "You're slurring everything you say."

He felt his chest, neck and left arm fizzing in the aftermath of the recent flare. Focusing on her cleavage seemed to help. "Kwel... Amity," he said.

This time Sarah understood. She rushed to his side of the desk and opened the bottom drawer. From somewhere at the back behind the bottle of scotch she removed three drug bottles, then put them on top of the desk. "I thought you knew where I put the spare ones," she said. Louis didn't move, just stared at the bottles in disbelief. "Here, let me open one for you."

He snatched the bottle from her hand and poured the entire contents into his burning gullet. Some of the little white pills spilled onto his desk and lap like popcorn, but most arrived at their intended destination and these he crunched greedily, ignoring the savage bitterness at the back of his mouth and the goggle-eyed surprise of his secretary. He didn't care what he looked like. He had what he wanted. If only he could do something for his eyes. He could barely make out anything beyond the desk, just a swirl of darkness that was once his office.

"Scotch!" he said to Sarah's cleavage.

A pill shot out of his mouth across the table, gobbled by the black abyss. Sarah grabbed the liquor bottle, unscrewed the cap and handed it to him. When he took it he noticed that the yellow thing in her hand was a goddamn Post-It note. He poured the amber liquid into his mouth, crunching and grinding the pills into a sticky paste. Biting into a cake of soap-on-the-goddamn-rope would have tasted better. Worse, sticky foam began to dribble down his chin, but he kept crunching the pills in the hope they would start to do something pretty damn soon. The fire in his chest was starting to build again. The flares were coming in waves and the next one wasn't too far away.

"I'm not sure this is the best time to tell you, Mr. DeVille," Sarah said.

He could hardly hear anything she said now over the god-forsaken warbling. "Huh?" he said through a spray of foam.

"Your wife..."

"Whaddabout mar wife." More dribble splattered onto the desk. At first he thought it was bird shit, then realized his mistake. He lifted his hand to wipe his chin, found that he didn't have the energy, then let it fall to the side. The bottle of scotch dropped to the carpet. "Whadduz the ol cow wun now?"

"The hospital rang while you were on the other line." Sarah was sobbing. She put the Post-It note on the desk in front of him. "That's their details," she said. "You might want to ring them."

He squinted at the memo, a yellow blur with illegible blue squig-gles. Sarah hurried to the door that Louis could no longer see, disappearing into the darkness as if she had walked into shadow. He yelled after her, suddenly frightened at being alone. "You call them!" he said. "That's what I pay you for."

"Don't you care about anyone? Not even the woman you've been married to for forty years?" She was yelling from somewhere in the darkness. "She's dying! She's taken an overdose. The doctors don't think she'll pull through."

Suddenly, the warbling intensified into a deafening squeal

and the greatest pain he had ever felt smashed through his chest in an explosion of heat and flesh and bones. Sarah was still berating him, but he couldn't make out anything she was saying. He sunk forward, collapsing face down onto what used to be his desk, now a chasm of nothingness. For some reason the last voice he heard wasn't Sarah's. It wasn't even his. It was his wife's.

"I was right, wasn't I Louis?" Lady Di said. "Told you you'd die at your desk."

Then he heard no more.