



THE
PROBLEM
WITH LOUIS

Scott Zarcinas

THE PROBLEM WITH LOUIS

Scott Zarcinas

ALSO BY

SCOTT ZARCINAS

Free eBooks

Finnegan's Cat

Rain

Jessica's Confession

No Time To Play

Lorraine's Diary

Fiction Titles

Samantha Honeycomb

The Golden Chalice

DeVille's Contract

Ananda

Roadman

Non-Fiction Titles

Your Natural State of Being

THE PROBLEM WITH LOUIS

Scott Zarcinas



DoctorZed
Publishing

www.doctorzed.com

Copyright © 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 published in digital format 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: N/A (ebk)

DoctorZed Publishing rev. date 26/12/2017



For My Girls

*“Short stories are tiny windows into other worlds
and other minds and other dreams. They are
journeys you can make to the far side of the
universe and still be back in time for dinner.”*

— Neil Gaiman

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 Becker 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 god-damned 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 untethered 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.

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 H_2O ; 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."

Louis 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 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 air-

craft 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.

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. 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 godforsaken 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.

~ THE END? ~

The Problem With Louis is an excerpt of *DeVille's Contract* by Scott Zarcinas. If you'd like to read more, click the cover image below to learn how you can purchase the book.

Available in hardcover, softcover and ebook formats.



Read more...

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Dr. Scott Zarcinas is a father, husband, son, brother, writer, doctor, public-speaker, house dad, taxi driver, freelance marketer, and very average soccer player.

He is the founder of Unlocking Your Life seminars, established in 2008 to help others achieve their personal-development goals through the philosophy of Empowered Living.

He is also the director of DoctorZed Publishing - specializing in digital publishing and distribution.

He has written several books, including *Samantha Honeycomb*, *Your Natural State of Being*, *Ananda (Thanksgiving Day)*, *The Golden Chalice*, *DeVille's Contract* and many short stories.

Enquiries:

email: scott.zarcinas@doctorzed.com

website: www.scottzarcinas.doctorzed.com

join our mailing list

sign up



MORE TITLES BY SCOTT ZARCINAS



Samantha Honeycomb

Wrongly punished for breaking the ancient laws, Samantha Honeycomb is expelled by the queen into the wild and untamed Crazy Lands. Her only hope of redemption is an impossible quest...

[READ MORE](#) ▶



The Golden Chalice

Fleeing the dreaded plague that has struck his village, the orphaned Giacomo heads to the mountains and its mysterious Golden City in search of the Elixir of Life, the only thing that can save the village and the woman he loves.

[READ MORE](#) ▶



DeVille's Contract

Louis Hugo DeVille, CEO of the giant pharmaceutical company, Global Resolutions Network, suffers a heart attack in his office, only to wake up in the underground tunnels of LeMont International Enterprises.

[READ MORE](#) ▶



Roadman

Lorraine Jackson is a single white female looking for Mr. Right. But when the Roadman knocks on her door, she isn't prepared for the secrets he's been hiding... and would kill to keep them hidden.

[READ MORE ▶](#)



*Ananda (*Thanksgiving Day)*

Michael Joseph and his wife seek a fertility doctor to help conceive the child they have always yearned. One climactic Thanksgiving Day their newborn child, Ananda, is kidnapped, heralding the anxious search for her safe return.

[READ MORE ▶](#)



Your Natural State of Being

Ever sat down and asked yourself, “Why aren’t I happier?” “Why am I here?” *Your Natural State of Being* is the book that leads us to the answers of our deepest questions and helps reveal the motivating forces and innermost needs of our lives.

[READ MORE ▶](#)