



SAMEER KAMAT

BUSINESS DOCTORS

Management Consulting Gone Wild

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Chapter 1

A vicious kick in the ribs woke Chang up. Another one aimed at his chest missed its mark as Chang doubled up in pain. Instead, it landed on his face, splitting open his lower lip. As blood spurted out, he heard a familiar menacing voice that had been his nemesis since the day he had come to this godforsaken place.

It was Taylor, the prison guard – over six feet of flesh and muscle built to sent shivers down the spines of seasoned criminals.

“Wakey wakey, little boy. Some guardian angel you have out there has sent you this note...” he spat, throwing a scrap of paper at his disoriented victim.

“...whatever that means,” he said, punctuating every word with a body blow, targeting a selection of tender body parts with each kick.

Retaliation was not an option. Chang muttered obscenities as speaking out loud would have only accentuated his tryst with this sinewy beast of a man.

The ordeal did not last for long. The cage slammed shut and Chang was left alone, to lick his wounds and wonder. This definitely didn't seem like one of the surprise midnight raids orchestrated by the warden and his band of thugs to check for concealed weapons, drugs and other contraband.

A few minutes after Taylor left, when Chang had fully gotten back to his senses, he scrambled for the note and fished it from under his bunk. It seemed to have been hurriedly scrawled on to the corner of a cheap ruled notebook page that had then been torn off. It was cryptic but clear - "Roof. 4 A.M. New Moon."

Chang smiled through his split lip, the salty red bodily fluid still oozing out of it. That's what that dickhead was mad about.

Good boy Spike, keeping the promise that was made when was thrown into prison, thought Chang. But how the hell do I make it to the roof at four in the morning with all this security around? The new moon was just one night away, wasn't it? Gosh, even with ample amounts of time at hand, in prison, it was so difficult to keep track of it.

Chang had spent six months in the cell. Life within the Los Angeles county prison was hardly the lifestyle he had aspired for. As a convict impounded for murder in the first degree, he had no option but to wait and hope. An early release seemed improbable. His entire existence in the slammer would largely depend on polishing certain highly specialized skills, one of them being to keep a solid grip on the bar of soap in the shower. The only way he would survive in there was if he became some powerful inmate's bitch.

He needed to get out of this place – at any price, just to keep himself from committing the very alleged crime that had landed him in this hell-hole in the first place. Six months in the prison had toughened him, but he could still clearly recall the smug expression of the double-breasted-suit-wearing prosecution lawyer when he lost the verdict.

Chang had vowed – *When I bust out of this place, I'm gonna get myself a crocodile and feed this bastard to it.*

The last remaining shreds of Chang's dignity had been stripped the minute the jury's decision was announced. Now he was nothing more than just another brick in the wall, or as the sadistic warden would say, "Another prick in the hole."

Chang was lodged, holed-up would be more like it, in the Level IV housing. This was where concrete, steel and flesh meshed together. Most of the high-powered convicts were held up here, for serious and violent crimes such as murder, or people that were fighting long-drawn cases. That was one whole complex. Then there was one for those with psychological problems. Plus another ward for cokeheads and meth freaks undergoing rehab. The number of inmates hosted in the prison was twice its capacity. There were no female inmates - it was a male-only prison. Sprawled over its 262 acres, its dubious distinction of having one of the worst records of prison fights and slayings gave Chang the shudders every night.

Not wanting to leave any trace of the note, Chang tried to swallow it and went red in the face. He was choking. His chest was in spasms, making garbled noises. A few troubled moments later, he coughed out the torn shreds of paper. "Just floosh eet down da faakin' toy-let, aas-ole" screamed the French convict, a fine specimen of European garbage lodged in the adjacent cell, who was in for kidnapping and murder, "and let me sleep een piss."

Later on, at the evening meal, the tall bearded guy came over to Chang's table. "Did you folks hear? Drake's got a love letter from da guard and he's goin' nuts tryin' to figure out what it means. Maybe it's a secret ad that reads 'Call 1-800-PLEASURE for a rockin' time'. He's sure not tellin' us fellas."

On hearing this, Chang knew what he had to do in the next five minutes. No, not the 1-800 number. That would have to wait till he was released. He would first have to approach Drake and find out more about the message, and if there was any similarity with his own note. He sidled over to Drake and spuriously examined Drake's note. It was identical. "The bloody cops are playin' cat and mouse again. Seems like another one of their fuckin' practical jokes," Drake cackled.

Many had been planning this from day one – each convict's first and last thought, and every one in between - How to get out of this hell hole? Some were more desperate than the others. Drake and Chang, both belonged to this category. It was time for them to put their feet where their mouths were - and act on it. Chang gave Drake the look that meant that they were going to risk it, practical jokes notwithstanding. What could be worse?

That night both men plotted and schemed restlessly in their bunks, running over and over again, the plan that had been simmering quietly for months. The note was the first signal that there was help waiting outside.

Chang's ribs were burning and badly bruised from the previous night's beating. His body was exhausted, but his mind refused to let him rest. He lay still in his bunk and listened to the snores of his cell-mate - a sleep-addict - the primary reason why Chang got along famously with him. They all called him Buzzy, strange name for someone who must've hardly grunted ten words to Chang in the last six months.

Lying perfectly still in his bunk, while his thoughts swirled and sloshed around noisily in his head, he tossed and turned, and mentally ticked the passing minutes. The

evening meal was over by 7:30 P.M. and they were herded into their cells by eight. He did not have the luxury of having a watch on him, but he estimated it was at least an hour since they had bedded for the night. The cell block had fallen silent.

His body needed to sleep but his mind would not let him. The fact that this was arguably the biggest night of his life, was the primary reason. Minutes turned to hours, with only his pulse to keep time, Chang's body sprang back to life at around 11:00 P.M.

The cell was dark, save for the dim light coming from the corridor. It took him a moment to realize that the cell door was unlocked and slightly open. He couldn't believe his eyes.

Spike must've paid a hefty sum to manage that. Who else had he greased and how far? Where do I go from here? Who opened the cage? Was it the same son of a bitch who beat me up earlier? Chang's brain raced.

The latches were well oiled, with hardly any friction. He wondered - *Were the hinges well-maintained for such special occasions?*

Chang's mind was buzzing with activity. But this was no time to appreciate the interior design of the cell or the maintenance efficiency of the staff. He tried to keep calm as he had to plan and execute his next steps to freedom, all on the fly, with zero room for error. With a lot hinging on luck, the next hour or two would decide radically one way or the other.

He walked through the prison's layout in his mind. On his left the corridor led to the courtyard and then to the kitchens. Staying up for several hours without any rest or sleep made his stomach rumble. He could certainly do with another round of dinner, but that could mean spending the rest of his

life eating the same crap. If he went towards the right, he'd pass through the shower rooms, then on through several gates right up to the main entrance of the prison. That was a strict no-no. The only practical part was to get to the roof and try to scale the wall on the north-east perimeter. Scaling that thirty-foot wall was said to be the only 'easy' way to escape. He had no rope and no super-human powers. Well, if you discount the ultrasonic whistle he occasionally used to blow with his puckered lips to drive the dogs in his neighborhood crazy. Anyway, that last skill wouldn't have been handy here, at this time.

Damn! He had spent an entire day making a mental route of his escape but the thirty-foot-wall issue remained open. Amidst all this mental activity, he had forgotten that roof was only a rendezvous point and had started plotting his escape path. He decided to mull over the wall issue when he got there. He'd go through the kitchens as planned, without stopping for a bite, and up the chimney.

There wasn't anything in his cell that he could use as a tool or a weapon. He'd just have to take chances with his bare hands and his threadbare bed-sheets, which he'd bound tightly around his torso before sleeping to help his bruised ribs.

Chang slipped out of his cell, sliding against the corridor walls, hiding in the shadows, sweating coldly, praying that none of the other cell mates would notice him as he crept past. Extremely slowly, the seconds crawling past, Chang made his way carefully to the kitchens.

In the ten painfully slow minutes between his cell and the kitchens he saw no movement other than his shadow. Not a single guard. The guards seemed to be missing from their posts! Was this normal?

Petrified that any second he'd fall upon a gun-toting guard, he slunk in to the dark kitchen and moved carefully towards the chimney, relying on his memory for guidance. Just as he was about to enter the kitchen, a foot appeared from across the kitchen gate. Before the man could present himself, Chang quickly hid behind one of the corridor walls and started bracing himself for a round of fisticuffs – he was not willing to give in so lightly. Straining his neck, he was relieved to note that this was the cook who had probably left something behind and had been driven back in the middle of the night for the fear of losing the artifact. He waited patiently for the cook to come out. The cook was soon on his way, and as the trot of his boots on the hard floor faded away, he waited some more, just to be sure. Finally mustering the courage to come out of his rabbit hole, he reached the kitchen and sighted the chimney. He slid up it and was soon engulfed in blackness. It was much narrower than he thought and looking up he could barely discern what he hoped was a faint light coming from the opening at the top. He prayed it was not barred at the top by some mesh. Chang hoisted himself up, feeling around, trying to grapple for handholds. The surface was smooth and covered with soot - slippery.

Gotta get the technique right, he thought as his legs and arms stretched taut against the walls to wedge him into position, while attempting to push himself upwards.

There's no way Santa could be in this business if he suffered from claustrophobia, Chang groaned, making a weak attempt at humor.

Slowly, laboriously he nudged himself upward. After twenty arduous minutes of straining himself, he paused for breath. All he could see was inky blackness above and below him. He surmised that he must've climbed at least twenty feet

and still had no signs of reaching the top. A fall from such a height might not guarantee instant death, but it would definitely life as a cripple, without a limb or two, or worse. Breathing deeply, he labored upwards, a searing pain spreading through his chest that felt as if it was going to explode. The gush of cold air signaled that he was nearing the top. Soon, he could feel the cool breeze, inciting him to pump out the last ounce of energy. Whispering a silent prayer, in the hope that there would be no guards on the roof, and half expecting to be peering into a waiting gun barrel, he scrambled over the mouth of the chimney. The iron netting over the chimney was, strangely enough, missing, or removed.

Voila! he thought as he dissolved in the shadows on the roof.

I underestimated Spike's capabilities. What do I do now?

The night lights cut through the darkness – the parts of the complex where the twin beams gleamed, revealing the minutest details – roving rhythmically over the stone fortress. Chang had studied the frequency of the lights from the window in his cell and knew that he had exactly seven seconds between the consecutive lightings. He dodged the floodlights and kept out of sight of the watch tower. Sliding slowly and carefully to the edge of the terrace, he peered over the wall, barely able to discern the ground. The northern side of the prison was surrounded by powerful electric fences, and running into it would mean he'd end up as one lump of barbequed meat, minus the seasoning. If he could manage to scale the wall, the main road was still roughly a mile and a half away. He hoped Spike had a getaway car gassed up and ready to roll at the perimeter. A loud explosion on the south perimeter broke the stillness of the night. Startled, Chang saw the lookout room of the

watch tower bursting into flames, engulfing within it the on-duty watchguards.. The prison was under attack! Sirens started blaring and the night came alive. Orders boomed from the PA system, and the guards started to group together in the assembly area, away from where Chang was. Just then, a small group of guards caught sight of him. Taylor was one of them. He realized that the explosion was a ruse. Their eyes met. For an instant, Chang felt as if life was slipping away from his clutches. As a reflex action, he started running back towards the chimney in the dumb hope of earning a pardon for heading back to his prison cell. A whirring sound, of steel cutting through air, caused him to bolt out of his reflexive act. His far side view was blocked off by a chopper that had appeared out of nowhere. In the confusion, he could make out that it was some sort of a civilian chopper, outfitted with side-mounted chain guns, with the intent putting them to good use. The precise stream of gunfire was aimed at Taylor and his band of thugs, who were charging towards Chang to deliver justice. The guns won. No one keeps charging after being served with 7.62mm NATO rounds.

Shocked, Chang stood still, uncomprehending, when the chopper got close, and dropped a rope-ladder.

Disoriented, but once again reflex taking over reason and reacting to the moment, Chang lunged for the wildly swaying ladder, grabbed it with both hands and hung on. Escape could not have tasted sweeter.

Realizing that the explosions were to divert their attention, the guards started firing at the chopper.

This isn't so bad, thought the pilot. He recalled the hell he had once faced during one of his sorties in Afghanistan. Surrounded by a score of Kalashnikov-wielding *mujahids* pumping out blankets of fire, he had successfully offloaded

18 marines, onboarded 2 injured comrades, lifted off with a bullet-pierced leaking tank and shattered visor, and landed safely, in the process taking 5 bullets, among them a particularly stubborn one that lodging itself in his left forearm. He looked at the nightmare unfolding around him and thought, *Gotta head back soon – need to catch the game tonight.*

The chopper was now lifting off and starting to drift away from the building, towards its planned destination – with Chang hanging on for dear life.

Just then, another convict hiding on the terrace emerged from the shadows, and started running towards the chopper. It was Drake. Chang heard another volley of rounds from the chain guns. The guns had won again - Drake was cut down long before he could reach the ladder.

After a long time, Chang was enjoying his personal space on the ladder and a second person dangling next to him wasn't what he was hoping for. He thanked God for his new-found freedom and prayed that the bullets would continue to evade him. The chopper dipped away from the building, blades churning furiously. It sped away and within seconds disappeared into the grimness of the night.

The simplicity and brilliance of the plan convinced Chang that there was a mind far sharper than good old Spike's at work. But he still had no idea who was behind this and what was in store for him next.

By the morning, the chain guns would be disassembled. Over the next day, body shop specialists that were standing in toe would repair the dents and gashes where the bullets from the prison guards had made their mark. The red paint would then be touched up, sanded to give it an authentic worn look so that it did not stand out, and after another day, during which time the repairs would set in and the paint

would dry, it would be returned to the rental agency. The clerk at the rental agency, observing the lower number of hours logged on the Hobbs meter, would not feel the need to inspect the aircraft too closely.

The rental agency would rent out the aircraft to another client later in the day, the body shop specialists would be back at work at their respective auto body shops, the pilot at his regular daily job, and Chang whisked away to an appropriate location. All possible trails leading to the prison break would stand erased into oblivion.

* * *

Three months prior, in an upscale neighborhood in Malibu, there was another event unfolding.

“Pass the toast honey,” Stephen Woody said to Angie, his wife of almost three years.

Angie pursed her lips and passed the plate to her husband who took it blindly, his face buried in the obituary column of the morning’s papers. He hardly ever spoke to her these days, most of his waking hours spent at work and the evening hours hanging around with his buddies at the club. “Darling?” Angie queried, seeking his attention.

“Hmpph,” Woody grunted from the midst of the paper. He was skimming through the main stories and stopped at the obituary section.

“ - will you please listen to me?” Angie muttered, an edge to her voice.

“Won’t you let me read my paper in peace?” He went on without waiting for her response, pages rustling. He sounded irritated.

“No,” she pressed firmly. “How bad is it?”

“How bad is what?”

“Woody, don’t be a fool. It’s visible to any idiot that we are in deep shit.”

Everyone called him Woody, including his wife. That was the name that he was known by within the business. After three generations in the business, it was no longer a name. It was a brand. A brand that commanded respect and fear.

He glared at Angie “Don’t bother your pretty head about it. I am on top of things. It’s just this recession that is affecting everybody – the papers say this economy thing will go up by next year, so I think we should be good by then too. Anyway it’s all too complicated for you, let me bother about it and you take care of that pretty face.”

Angie was barely able to keep her temper in check. She knew from her sources that they were losing money, and their arch rivals were reaping the benefits of their lack of enterprise.

Woody tried at insouciance but he lacked the refinement to carry it off. He shrugged and ignored his wife’s facial contortions.

Women! Why don’t they mind their own business? he thought sullenly.

Big, broad shouldered, carrying an excess weight of twenty pounds, Woody had the look and manner of a spoilt brat, something like a cross between a bouncer and a businessman. Woody’s blue eyes were perhaps the only physiognomic feature that lent a certain icy coolness to his demeanor. Most times when he was business-like, he looked like a belligerent bouncer. He lacked finesse, and dressed in the best money could buy to compensate his lack of polish. But the overall effect of his personality was still raw, intimidating and unfinished.

He had bluffed his way through life – bluffed that he ran a multi-million dollar corporation, which, in truth, was handed over to him by his well-respected father who was considered an ace in the business. Woody bluffed himself the most,

which was his major shortcoming. Many a time he refused to accept the truth and to take action. The result was a slow deterioration of a business that was once extremely lucrative. The recession had very little to do with it.

Woody, this breakfast morning, was dressed spiffy in an Armani suit which lent him the skin of sophistication. He was ready to hit his plush office, once he was done skimming the papers. At six feet four inches, he towered over his wife, as he rose to leave the room. He paused to look at his three-storey oceanfront property, soaked with all luxuries money could buy and wondered for how long he could keep up the ruse. He pecked a regulation kiss on Angie's cheek, absently, and made good his escape.

Angie sat fuming, as he completely ignored her and stalked out of the lovely breakfast room that she had painstakingly designed, along with the rest of the house, in warm earth colors and textures.

Upset, Angie rose gracefully and went up to stare at the horizon from the first floor full-length windows. The morning sunlight streamed in, filtering through her negligee and silhouetting her body enticingly. Her face was bare of expression. She was good at playing plastic. Her years in the modeling world had trained her well.

Angie was a beauty few could withhold, certainly not a crass man like Woody. She was ambitious and demanding, but was methodical in her approach. At five feet six inches, she was a little short for a model but she possessed a beauty that could pole-axe a person at twenty paces. She used her charms like a weapon. Large brown eyes, slightly slanting in an oval face, a mane of cascading mahogany, a decadent mouth and a body that induced hot blooded male fantasies. Her pout could set pulses racing inside a rectory.

Though Angie lacked the height to be a ramp model, she had graced many a Vogue cover doing cameo advertisements. After five years of modeling, Angie hooked up to a better and far less demanding source of income – Woody.

Her first encounter with Woody was in a high-profile party that she had been to. One of those where an overt display of glamour and wealth took center stage. From his swagger and his overall attitude, it was unmistakably obvious that Woody provided the latter. Angie had no pretenses and was well aware that her modeling career had a short shelf-life and would take a nose dive with age. The thought of not being able to retain the lavish lifestyle that she had grown accustomed to was also a serious concern. None of the Greek gods, the male models, she worked with in the industry could provide for her what she yearned for. Their time in the limelight, just like hers, was limited. Their money and fame wouldn't last for long.

Angie's ambitions stretched far beyond the modeling world. She craved for money beyond the usual millions. She knew this sort of position was available either to those in the political circles or the ones who were above the law. Woody fell into the second category. The fact that he was very courteous to her, though his rough looks made that combination seem incongruous, made him the ideal target. She soon befriended him and learned from sources about his widespread business empire, the power he wielded. She also found out about his underworld status and reputation. Getting Woody to propose to her was a matter of convenient timing more than anything else. For Angie that was the toughest decision of her life. Though she viewed her marriage to Woody as a passport to a secure, future – for as long as it lasted anyway – she would have to spend her life

as an underworld don's show wife. After a lot of introspection, she reached a decision where her brain played a bigger role than her heart. She chose to be a rich man's doll and enjoy life's riches. And that's how Woody used to treat her in the early days of their marriage – like a doll. She knew she was arm candy - a trophy wife. She did not mind. She graced his home and warmed his bed. Woody in turn gave her security and loads of money to spend. She had no illusions about him and he was sufficiently smitten with her charms to propose marriage within days of their meeting.

The memory brought a bitter sweet smile on Angie's lips. Looking back, she was not sure if she would have made the same decision after three years of marriage. The money was there, no doubt, but Woody was too much of an old-school male chauvinist to share any of his business dealings with Angie. She had started feeling stifled in the glass house she had so painstakingly designed and built. Just then, the bell rang and brought back Angie from her reverie.

Chapter 2

At his office in downtown L.A., Stephen Woody banged his fist hard on the mahogany table in his office. That action had the intended effect - the handful of men in the room flinched. The table's contents, a few whisky glasses and a Mauser, rattled and settled down nervously.

Woody was reputed and feared as a man who had uncommon strength when enraged. This was not just rumor – two of the men present in the chamber had seen their boss twist off the arm of a rival goon - mercilessly – agonizing screams echoing from the victim, till the arm was just hanging off via loose tendons. Suffice to say the doctors could not sew back Woody's handiwork.

Woody made killing look easy. With his lineage, he had inherited it, and over time, mastered and perfected the *art*, much like a carpenter, blacksmith or a luthier would. It was only natural that he had the privilege of learning the tricks of the trade at an early age. He first realized his love for violence and inflicting pain at the ripe old age of twelve when he bludgeoned his best friend close to death – the point of contention being a tiff which none could recall later when their parents asked. Since then Woody had never looked back and had gone from one escapade to another. His affinity to violence could barely be contained by his designer suits and his entire demeanor reeked of menace. He wore several large gold rings on his fingers and their sound resounded noisily in the closed confines of the

Dungeon as he drummed his fingers impatiently on the table. The resulting tapping sound achieved the same effect as the usage of a minor scale in a musical piece – to build tension and create an air of suspense. The routine was so effective that it might have been worthwhile for Woody to consider music composition as an alternative career option, if the proportions of brain and brawn were more balanced. Woody had called a meeting of his lieutenants in the Dungeon, a name they used to describe their meeting room. Woody's grandfather had used the name when they started their business way back in the thirties, and in those days the room did live up to its name. It was buried deep underground. The wide and varied equipment of torture that decorated the place added to the sinister ambience. Over the years as money flowed into the business and the mafia acquired a patina of polish, the family hired interior designers, for a hefty fee, to re-design and re-furnish the place, in an effort to give it a modern and contemporary look. In a way that objective had failed. The grisly nature of their business, which included certain acts of torture that came with this unique line of work, that needed to be performed at the place, contributed to its sinister ambience – something that a group of interior designers were not able to dispel overnight. Petrified, terribly afraid of their client, the interior designers were appalled when they were introduced to the Dungeon. They were more horrified when they were instructed to retain all the original devices and artifacts. The designers were only expected to beautify the place and make it more comfortable, so to speak, without destroying the *heritage*.

The resultant outcome was walls covered with black wallpaper interspersed with wallpaper having scarlet roses design. Sections of the old cave were left to give the place

an authentic yet contemporary feel. Air ducts were left visible to lend a raw appeal to the place, the sorts found in some of the night places familiar with the inhabitants of the Dungeon. All around the room, the implements of torture were artfully displayed. A pair of spiked chain clubs graced one wall. An Iron Maiden stood peaceably in a corner. An art deco table displayed strange tools, the curious use of which made many a man shudder. The lighting was subdued. Maybe the decorators realized that bright lights would only accentuate the vile things, but on the other hand the dark gloom made the place more macabre – the dim glint of light being reflected off the polished steel of the machete blade, the reddish-brown glow emanating from the metal grip of the iron maiden, and the sparkle off the barrel of the old Beretta all added to the macabre ambience.

The dark ambience would either lull one to restless sleep or the loud floral print would induce horrendous nightmares. In the semi-darkness, the roses seemed like blood splotches smeared, oozing from the walls.

This morning, like most others, the Dungeon was filled with hardened criminals, the coterie of Woody's empire. Tattoos covered about half of all visible skin in the room. That figure would possibly be higher if the clothes came off. Many of them were etched in fond remembrance of a fallen comrade, as a sign of loyalty to a gang or a mark of protest.

But in sheer animal ferocity Woody beat them all and that's why they respected him. Not because he had brains – he had never shown any signs of better brainpower than any of them. Not because he held the reins of the business. But because he was a brutal animal and they feared crossing him.

With his icy blue eyes, he glared at his bunch of men and demanded to know how each of his businesses was doing.

“So where do we stand, fellas?” Woody wanted to know. The top seven men in the empire, from each of the nefarious businesses Woody ran met every three months to provide him an update on where their businesses were heading. They were seated across the large mahogany table—another piece of furniture that struggled to blend in with the Dungeon theme. Also present in these meetings was Joe, Woody’s man Friday.

Woody’s Family Business, or WFB as it was better known, was active in the highly lucrative and risky areas of weapons, drugs, prostitution, gambling and possibly others that Woody had lost track of. Their operations were controlled from Los Angeles but spanned across the country.

Woody was losing big money to his competitors from Santa Monica. Rookie gangs that were hardly on anyone’s radar screens a few years ago were suddenly dipping into the melting pot of riches. WFB was in bad shape. Woody personally owed an unthinkable amount to the loan sharks — not even his underworld don status would keep him safe from them. Some of their best men in the business were snapped up by rival organizations. The situation was close to hopeless as Woody had begun to discover. Unless he acted promptly and came down hard on the competition, WFB had no future.

“Gimme the dope, Phil,” he looked at the drug baron. Phil Buchanan was one of the old-timers in the business. Woody’s father had picked him up when he was a small time street-peddler. Within WFB he got the money and the contacts to do what he was doing earlier, but on a bigger scale. So he stayed on.

When it came to his build and stature, he would have perhaps exceeded Woody but for the attached brand name.

The wrinkles on his face gave away his age, though he still looked like he could take down many others half his age present in the room. He was a self-made man who took pride in being a first generation underworld bigwig.

“There was a heavy crackdown by the cops last week,” explained Phil looking glum. “Truckloads of our shit headed for Asia and Africa have been seized.” The downfall of their narcotics business had hit a new low. Phil went on for the next five minutes – more accounts of seizures, arrests, and busted hideouts. After he had finished, Woody looked down at the table, thinking.

Five minutes of bad news hadn’t made Woody lose his temper. This was rare. This was also an opportunity for ‘Captain’ Jacob, the man responsible for the pornography business to put his share of the bad news. While Woody was still staring at the table, Jacob explained in his inimitable style, slurring the words sagaciously, “The industry has gone flaccid too boss. It needs some intense stimulation to stroke it back to life. Stiff competition has been erecting hurdles in our paths. Our clients aren’t coming...” “Cut the crap, Jacob. Give it to me straight,” Woody cuffed Jacob.

Jacob knew he was not getting his five minutes of monologue. Lucky Phil had got off easily. Jacob continued, “Er, I ain’t getting’ no fresh meat, boss. All the young chicks are being picked up by the others,” he gestured, indicating the rivals. “The movies ain’t doin’ good either. Our holes have been smoked twice and we’re hardly doin’ a couple of scenes a week. The new chicks seem to like the other geezers that are into this new *in-traa-net* thing – they’re tellin’ me that there’s more money and quick stardom in computer porn. Boss, me thinks if we buy a computer and do this new *in-traa-net* shit, we will do good.”

As the meeting continued, similar stories emerged from the other business bosses - extortion, contract killing, arms trading, gambling had all been seeing a downturn. Several of their big customers had deserted WFB. New clients of the same stature were not ready to come onboard a sinking ship.

Key people across their businesses had either moved on to other gangs or been killed by the police or by rival gangs. Those that went to other gangs took with them many of the existing customers.

Woody's business was steadily going downhill, and the ride was rough. It seemed as if lady luck had stopped shining on it for quite a while. But no one wanted to accept it. Things were different when his father, Jack Woody, was alive. Stephen Woody was shielded from all the ups and downs of the trade. There was always someone else to fix the issues so he could sleep well at night. His dad's death suddenly exposed him to the real business – warts and all. Stephen Woody took resort in a new skill he discovered early on after taking over the reins of the business in his hands – the power of blind delegation. He had his trusted lieutenants to fall back on whenever there was the slightest hiccup to his business. His men were more than enthusiastic to embrace those problems for their boss. Woody was happy, his men were happy and the business was pretty much on cruise control for all these years. Or was it? Woody was now unsure of why and how things started going downhill. After a long time, barring the initial few weeks as the head honcho of WFB, Woody was secretly wishing his dad had been there to manage this new crisis. His men called his father 'Woody'. The father and son duo were never in the business together. So there was no need to address them as Woody Senior and Woody Junior. There was one boss.

After Jack Woody died, Stephen inherited the crown and the title - *Woody*.

When asked about the confusion it might've created, Stephen Woody would joke. "If the *Phantom* legacy could be passed on for twenty one generations, the Woody clan has only scratched the surface, my friend."

Being the only child had its advantages. After his dad passed away, there was no coup or any apparent power struggle. The heavyweights who managed the individual businesses could have taken advantage of the situation, moved away and started their own independent teams. But they hadn't. Though the occasional thought of how and why things fell in place so easily did cross Stephen Woody's mind, he did not bother too much about it. He assumed it was only natural for his dad's loyal followers to support him. He was the boss now and that's what mattered.

He collected his thoughts, regained his composure and got himself mentally back in the room.

"In all our earlier meetings right here in the Dungeon, you guys said it was a temporary phase and that we'd see the situation changing in a few months. It's been over a year now and we have no idea how badly we've been hit."

Woody's rage was palpable. He got up, and started pacing and circling the company – both to vent his anger and to circle the group as the eagle before going in for the kill. The deep rumble of his voice sounded concerned. He realized his team had been taking him for a ride and hiding the bad news. The fact that today none of them made any attempts at false promises made him shudder and realize how bad the business had turned. After all these years of keeping it all under wraps hoping for the tide to turn, they knew it was pointless to keep covering it up. They had been in denial for

all these years. But the writing now seemed to be clearly on the wall.

Alfredo, also from the drug business, had an uncanny ability to verbalize the darkest fears that everyone else had in their minds and as always, made no effort to curb it –

“We lost three customers last month, and now four more, and all of them moved on to either Nortenos or Surenos – they are getting stronger all the time. And they get their shit directly from Zetas. The small time Russians are also quickly getting into the game. Looks like one fuckin’ big party that no one wants to miss out on...,” he summarized. “If this continues, in the next six months most of our top buyers will be gone. Looks like the beginning of the end for us. We are doomed, man, we are so freakin’ doomed. I knew I should’ve taken up that factory job my old man arranged for me when I was still a kid.”

‘Captain’ Jacob quipped - “And you should have done that, you wimp, coz you seriously lack the balls or the brains to be in the business...”

Cutting him off, Woody said, “Ok. I get the message. We are in deep shit. And you know something else? You guys got us into it - and you are going to get us out of it.” Woody stopped walking around and collapsed into his chair.

‘Anyone got any brilliant ideas?’ Woody opened the floor, tilted his head back on the headrest of the chair and stared at the ceiling. Traditionally, he had never really proposed solutions to any problems earlier and had always been at the mercy of his trusted men to bail him out.

Jacob seemed to have an idea in mind and was the first to offer his thoughts. “We need to set an example to our existing clients. Let’s go out there and kill those who’ve left us. We have their names and addresses. We also know

where to find them - and when we do, we'll teach them right for messing with us." Jacob was not known within the team for his IQ. He was great at hustling innocent young girls and boys into the flesh trade and had reliable sources for fresh recruits but lacked any real brilliance when it came to solving problems. Woody gave Jacob a killer look, but did not say anything.

Raymond, the head of the casino business, was not privy to Woody's expression from where he sat. Encouraged by the fact that the boss had not killed Jacob yet, he added, "We should also kill the cops who are targeting us -"

"Don't be an ass, Ray. That would take us down faster than the Titanic, moron!" Alfredo argued, "We don't have any great pull with the cops these days, most of our buy-ins have sold out. Don't you know that killing a cop is like asking for a bullet through your brain."

"Why don't we gun down the heads of Moe, Harry and Smithers - and also the guys who left us to join them," a voice pitched in. The energy in the room reached a crescendo, every one incensed and upset, screaming for blood.

"Shut the fuck up," Woody roared. "I always suspected your brains were up your asses and now you're proving it. Obviously, there isn't anyone in this room who's got a fucking clue about how bad our situation is and what we should do. I give you a day more to think about this. When we meet again tomorrow, you'd better have some ideas that won't make me blow your brains out."

Subdued, the men made themselves scarce. Woody alone in the Dungeon, poured himself a large peg from the decanter and offered himself to the oblivion of the hard alcoholic beverage.

* * *

Woody, for a large, violent man, was physically gentle with his wife. It went against his nature to physically hurt a woman especially one as lovely as Angie.

Given the morning's tiff, Angie had dressed to kill, hoping Woody would give in to the temptation. From the raw animal, Woody transformed into a blue-eyed boy eager to please. Whether it was Angie's smooth skin or the smooth single malt, it had the desired effect.

Lying in bed after making love, Woody was sated but was still anxious about his businesses' predicament. He clipped a cigar, lit it and inhaled deeply.

Angie pulled the blanket over her nakedness, feeling suddenly lonely.

Today was a rare night, when she had Woody for herself. With her hubby finding solace outside more often than at home these days, she was often left unsatisfied. The fact that Woody was a tiger in bed, made the desire more acute. Angie would often swallow her disappointment, her insides trembling with the need for fulfillment.

Today, her expectations were different. Angie knew something was gnawing at Woody from within. But she also knew he wasn't ever going to get her views or her help. She had tried on several occasions to offer her support, but Woody had, politely at first and more firmly in the past few days, asked her to mind her own business and not his. But Angie was made of firmer material and after tonight's performance, decided to push her luck one more time. Eyes unusually bright, Angie twisted towards her husband asking,

"You wanna talk about it?"

Woody usually never discussed business with her. But these were not usual times. With huge discomfort, he cursorily

explained the Dungeon's proceedings. Laying bare his business problems was tough on his ego.

Angie thought for a minute while her husband puffed at the cigar.

"What do you do when you have toothache?" she queried.

"What?" Angie's question seemed totally disconnected from the serious topic that they had initiated. Her query made no sense. Was Angie displaying early signs of short-term memory loss?

"You playin' with me?" Woody asked.

"Humor me, Woody."

"Well, I go to a dentist."

"And what do you do when one of your key men get held up in jail?"

"I get my lawyer to bail him out," Woody shrugged.

"And when you want to know what you can do with the shitloads of money that your men used to get you in the good old days?"

"My banker handles it. You know all this Angie, what are you trying to tell me?"

"All I'm saying is, when you have a problem that you don't fully understand, you approach an expert for help, don't you?"

"Yes, I do. So?"

Angie did not respond and allowed Woody to think for a while.

The extrapolation seemed easy, but it took him a while. "So if I'm facing problems in my business now, do you mean to say there are, er, business doctors who can help?"

"Yes, there are. They are called management consultants. Sounds a little more sophisticated than *business doctor*,"

Angie forced a smile, hoping it would diffuse the tension a little.

“And where can I get myself one of them consultants?”

Woody was curious.

“There are plenty of them. Most of the big guys in the business will not even look in your direction when they get a whiff of who’s trying to seek their help. Their reputations are at stake. The smaller ones may not be worth approaching, as they may end up screwing your business worse than your own men. They’ll just speed up your downfall.”

Over the years, Woody had figured out that his wife was bright, though he wasn’t always sure where she was coming from. He looked at her with new eyes.

“Well? What do you suggest I do then?”

“Well, I can draw up a list for you of the usual suspects and you can decide for yourself?”

“Hmm, I am not convinced that this’ll help, but only to make you happy, sugar. It can’t possibly get worse than this.”

Angie had been thinking of this for a few months and already knew what to do. Once Woody was asleep, she used the power that she had only recently discovered when during one of the many parties she attended, a nerd looking nouveau billionaire was attributing his riches to the knowledge he had gained from the internet. After that, she had spent her lonesome hours searching for everything she had ever loved. Coming up with the list of business consultants was the easy part – she took two names from the first page of the internet search results, two from the fifth and two from the tenth page on the list and made a mental note of her pitch to Woody the next day.

The following morning, she got up early, changed to her pink sheer satin thigh length inners, and made breakfast for Woody. Woody got up to the breath of freshly brewed coffee

“Well, well, well. Looks like I am rediscovering why I fell in love with you, darling”, he said with a gaping mouth as he

rediscovered the lust for Angie, seeing her at her seductive best.

“Oh come now Woody, don’t you have the meeting this morning to take care of? Here, I made a list of six business doctors you can talk to.”

“Arrghhh...how on this blasted earth am I gonna decide who’s good? Couldn’t you have simply given me the best guys for our job?”

“Patience, baby – here, let me help you out. The first two you see are the big fish. I don’t think we need to spend so much money. In any case, these guys are steeped in stupid concepts of ethics and morality.”

“Yes, makes sense. Didn’t you say this last night too?”

“Did I? Anyway, let’s move down the list. The next two could be worth a check, but these guys are really wannabes. They are neither the top guys nor the guys hungry for business; if I were you, I wouldn’t even risk calling them!”

“Alright, let’s get this over with – with this rate, I wonder if you are going to make a fool of me at the end of all this!”

“Now we come to the real guys. They will probably give you the same expertise but at a fraction of the cost of the big guys. Plus most of them will be willing to at least talk to you. Of the two on the list, I have heard about the last name in the papers. You may want to start with them”

“Huh, you could have saved me the time and just given their name in the first place. But it’s alright, at least we know who else is out there”

Woody got up from the table and left to meet his loyal posse.

Angie smiled. The inception was complete.

* * *

Woody walked into the Dungeon at 11:00 A.M.

“You’ve had your time to think. Any ideas, anybody?” Woody scanned the group quickly. He wasn’t expecting brilliant bursts of creativity from the group.

“Mr. Woody, Sir, I thought a lot last night and have a few more ideas to share,” started Ray, who had initiated the *kill-em-all* pitch the previous day.

Unwilling to hear another boatload of stupid ideas, Woody cut him off short, “We won’t need them. At least not till we speak to the experts.” He paused expecting their reaction.

“What experts?” Phil asked.

“I am calling in experts who will help us get back in the game.”

“Whaddya mean boss?” Ray asked. “You have a tie in with the Army, the Navy? Experts!?”

Good. The setup had worked. This was the moment Woody was waiting for. It was time to show them why he was the boss. This is where he could come in and share his wisdom with the rest of the team, in a language the idiots would understand.

“Let me explain.” Woody sat on the edge of the table and looked intently at one of his goons. “Ray, what do you do when your tooth hurts real bad?”

“I use a spanner, and yank it out real hard. The big ones you get at Walmart for \$19.99 work really well.”

Woody shook his head in despair. Ray wasn’t exactly a top contender for Mensa membership. This was going to be more difficult than Woody had thought. He turned to Alfredo.

“What do you do when one of your guys gets thrown into the slammer?” Woody looked at Alfredo optimistically.

“I make sure we kill him before the cops have had a chance to interrogate him and get all our secrets out of him,” Alfredo responded coldly. There was no way his loyalty would

permit the cops to use his own ammunition against him or his boss.

Woody was close to losing his temper, but decided to give it one last shot. He addressed Jacob, "What do you do on pay day, when you get your hands on all that cash?"

"No brainer, I blow up some of it on booze and stash away the rest in my backyard for a rainy day. I ain't half as dumb as I appear to be, ya know. So, what's with the *expert* story, boss?"

Obviously this wasn't going in the direction Woody had presumed. It all sounded so smooth the previous night, with Angie. Maybe it was the ambience. But Woody had no intentions of wearing sexy lingerie or getting in bed with his men, just to replicate the ambience from the previous night. He decided to move on to the main message.

"Never mind. We'll need to get in touch with the business doctors to see if they can come up with ideas to fix up this mess. Joe, here's their contact information. Get them over for a discussion, pronto. And for heaven's sakes, play it real quiet. I don't want them knowing that they are getting hired by the underworld."

"Won't they find out eventually?" Joe raised the least nonsensical point of the morning. He was Woody's Man Friday. He wasn't responsible for any specific business. But being the boss's right hand man gave him an exposure to almost all businesses.

"Yeah, I guess so. But let's hook them in first. We don't want them to leave the town before meeting us and never return."

What Happens Next?

- Is Woody committing the biggest blunder of his life?
- Will Woody's thugs allow a bunch of nerds to run the show?
- Do you think there might be a romantic angle between Angie and Schneider?
- What does Chang's escape from prison have to do with any of this?
- Can a lowly novel entertain as well as educate?

You'll get all the answers when you read the rest of the story.

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