



FEATHER

SAUGATA NANDI

Feather

By Saugata Nandi

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Dedicated to 'I'

I am a life I am a hope I am a reason for a smile

I am a song I am a dance I am the rhythm for a group

I am happy I am sad I am never in despair

I am a treat I am a menu I am everything for the one
I love

I am a guru I am a learner I am an asset for you

I like to lead and be led I like to teach and be taught I
challenge you and I make you the best

I am an acorn I am an oak I will provide you with
shelter

When you are lonely and sad

When you need me and feel bad

I will always be there for you



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Matt Colin sipped his Chivas Regal, deep in thought. On the side table lay a revolver. Matt looked back over the last four months of his life, turmoil he had never anticipated. A dead colleague, several top ranking officials arrested across different countries, large companies facing criminal cases and judicial probes, his team being hunted down... And tomorrow, he was meeting the President of the United States.

He didn't know if he would live through the night. There were strong forces that wanted to eliminate him and his three colleagues. But he had the US security blanket and the CIA. The whole world had discovered the way several agencies systematically worked to make the rich richer and the poor, poorer. The complex maze of the economic interdependence between countries, grants, commodity trading, forex trading and exploitation had been unearthed by his sharp team.

What started as a consulting assignment for a \$52 billion global shipping conglomerate based in Denmark had exposed several secrets to the world. Lee Yuan was unable to bear the immense moral pressure. He had uploaded all the classified information on Youtube and shot himself after exposing the document.

He had handpicked the team of Alexia Border, Sunil Navaratne, Neha Vamsi and Lee Yuan, the brightest in his firm, to work on the assignment. Their energy and intelligence were all that Matt needed to handle this extremely complex assignment. They had done that, and much more.

They had uncovered some of the darkest truths, some of the scariest linkages between countries and corporations. What they had done was right, Matt knew that. However, what they did destroyed over four hundred very powerful people across the world, and Matt knew these people would not let them off lightly.

It was just a matter of time before they were all dead. How Matt handled things tomorrow with the President would be critical to ensure that they lived and led a normal life. He was determined to save his team. The youngsters should not be penalized for doing what was right. The world watched this battle of conspiracy and truth, not knowing who was right.

The CIA was holding the other three members of the team in their custody. Matt did not know where they were—most probably in the American embassies of their countries. Matt pushed away his revolver and decided to fight for truth—something he had never done in his corporate career, but circumstances now forced him to do so.



It was on the first of November that Matt Colin was asked to handle one of the most prestigious assignments for the Denmark-based Global Liners, a \$52 billion shipping company. Matt was known in the organization for his ability to handle large clients with complex requirements. Global Liners had been in the business for over 200 years but it was not as profitable as the CEO wanted it to be. Paul Digg, the CEO of Global Liners, wanted to create a new strategy and reorganize the company.

The shipping liner's most profitable business was in containers. The allied businesses of port handling, commodity trading, oil exploration and shipping consulting were not yielding substantial results. Paul felt that commodity trading and the shipping business were interlinked and that there ought to be a major growth in both these lines of business.

The largest offices of Global Liners were in New York, Colombo, Mumbai and Singapore. They had 200 ships, 130,000 containers and 25,000 people in the organization. They had smaller offices in a 100 countries and complex IT systems to

track the movement of their ships and the loading and unloading of containers in various ports.

The most critical and well-paid employees were the seafarers. A typical ship had about fifty people on board when it sailed. If they needed more sailors, they would get them on contract for various assignments. Some people were in the maintenance department while the rest were office workers.

Strategic decisions had to be made about the nature of commodities to be carried—hazardous, semi-hazardous or non-hazardous. The hazardous commodities were the most lucrative but risky segment. Long-term traffic forecasts were used to buy and build ships. A lead time of three years was required to get a ship after deciding to buy it. The financial options to buy a ship were complex and needed substantial analysis before making a decision.

After his first meeting with Paul, Matt realized that this project would require people with diverse skill sets. His first task was to put together a team that had experience working in developed and emerging economies, had an understanding of finance, could crunch data and carry out analyses and had detailed understanding of logistics and operations.

It would be a further advantage if his team could be based where the largest client offices were located. A quick search on the internal company database of consultants revealed forty-five who came close to fulfilling the criteria. Matt narrowed

down the list to twelve and went through the consultants' records.

He talked to the other Engagement Managers who had worked with these consultants and understood their strengths and weaknesses. He brought the number down further to four mailed the selected consultants about the upcoming engagement for Global Liners. His hand-picked team members were Alexia Border from the New York office, Sunil Navaratne from the London office who would be moved to Colombo for the assignment, Neha Vamsi from the Mumbai office and Lee Yuan from the Singapore office. All of them were asked to report to the New York office, the global headquarters, for a briefing within seven days. Matt's secretary, Jessie Hughes, made detailed itineraries for those who were travelling from other parts of the world and mailed them out the following day.



New York Office

Holding a cup of Starbucks coffee, Alexia Border raced to her office on Broad Street. She had just finished working on a major assignment and was looking forward to the weekend. She hoped to be free and catch up with her friends at Battery Park, a favourite place where Alexia and her friends had hung out since college.

Alexia was a management graduate from Wharton Business School, Pennsylvania. She was the topper in her batch and had majored in finance. Before joining college she had served with the Peace Corps in Africa. Alexia had worked with a Wall Street investment banking firm before joining the consulting company. She wanted a very hectic life and did not enjoy the enormous amount of data crunching she had to do as a Wall Street analyst.

While with the Wall Street company, she had churned out at least two reports a week and was never sure if they were actually being used or just lying in the company database. The need for more action and excitement made her apply to the management consulting firm. After a series of interviews and aptitude tests, the firm recruited Alexis. She had impressed the

interviewers with her understanding of business drivers and her strong belief that responsible business was the only way to change the world.

Over the past three years with the firm, she had executed several projects and travelled across three continents. The pace of consulting, three meetings a day at different locations, and the opportunity to solve complex problems that businesses faced was thrilling to Alexis.

She could analyze the annual reports of a firm over the last three years and find out how the company made money and, comparing that with the funds flow, assets and liabilities, she would often comment on the financial health of the company. Her ability to translate every business decision in financial terms helped her generate options for managerial decision making quickly.

Alexia reached her workstation and opened her mailbox. After sifting through the trivial mails, she came to two mails that caught her attention. One was from Matt Colin and another was from Jessie Hughes. Alexia had overheard some of the consultants talking of the big contract that had come the firm's way from a large shipping company and that Matt Colin was heading that engagement.

She also knew that she was one of the candidates being screened for the engagement. Alexia opened Matt's mail. Her

hands shook with excitement when she read the text of the mail. It said:

“Alexia,

I have heard a lot about your analytical abilities and want to engage you in the assignment for Global Liners. I hope you will enjoy working with the team and deliver very high quality services to our client, as always. You will receive further details from Jessie Hughes. Hope to see you soon.

Regards,

Matt”

Alexia grinned. Such mails were critical to establishing herself in the consulting organization. Appreciation from a senior person meant a lot. One failed engagement and she would never work on an assignment with a reputed person like Matt. As the firm constantly strived to achieve par excellence results and outputs, Alexia knew that she was as good as her last assignment. History of performance did not mean much, unless it was consistent excellence.

Next, Alexia opened the mail from Jessie Hughes and noted the details in her diary. The mail outlined the proposed plan for implementation and mentioned the details of the team that would work on the engagement. Alexia knew she had to gather information about everything she could before the meeting a week from now. No one in the firm could walk into a meeting unprepared with the basic and relevant facts.

This naturally meant studying the liner's annual reports, reading about the key people in the client organization from the Hoovers database, going through the stock exchange data on the traded scripts and going through at least a few analyst reports on the company, the industry and its competition.

Alexia was glad the meeting was in New York—she could still meet up with her friends, though her Saturday plan of a quiet evening dinner with Ronald after a visit to the hairdresser would have to be ruled out. Ronald was Alexia's seventh boyfriend. Her associations were temporary because she found work more exciting than men.

Ronald would feel bad. He had often said that she didn't see him enough and no relationship could be sustained that way. Alexia apologized, citing some excuse or the other. In a way she was happy that she wouldn't have to put up with Ronald for dinner and then spend the night with him. She found the whole thing of little value given that it took up so much energy and time.

She opened her personal mail account and started writing a mail to Ronald.



In spite of the Worli Sea Link, Neha Vamsi's commute time remained unchanged. As she drove down the familiar route, Neha received an alert on her Blackberry. The blinking red light indicated the arrival of an e-mail. While waiting for the traffic signal to turn green, she checked the mail headers—one from Matt Colin and another one from Jessie Hughes.

Neha recalled one of the seniors in the firm stating that he had given a positive reference to the New York office about her a few days ago. For Neha, a new project meant more back end work on her already cluttered up schedule. She was tired of working in the backend and preparing data and analysis for the consultants. She longed to get onto a client engagement.

Whenever a new engagement came up, Neha was always a valuable member of the team, as a backend support for data analysis. She hated it, felt very used and did not go for the project parties. She felt there was much more to her than data analysis but the other engagement managers didn't see it.

The head of HR told her several times to be patient. A direct client engagement typically came to an associate after

four or five years of work experience, he told her. Neha often felt that a lack of an MBA from a good institute was holding her back. She was a computer science graduate, the topper of the batch in the reputed Indian Institute of Technology, Powai. After joining the company, she had been through an induction program that taught her management concepts.

She found management education confusing as there was no clear right or wrong answer and the professors frequently discussed several alternative options with no definite answer. Neha felt that statistical techniques and computer modelling could help project these alternative scenarios and thus arrive at definite answers. The basic problem in management education, in her view, was the lack of adequate data and scant usage of statistical analysis.

She wasn't cribbing about management graduates getting the opportunity to go onto live projects earlier than her. She felt that she had waited long enough. She wanted to pursue a doctorate in statistics next year, in case the firm still kept her as a backend data analyst and a 'valuable' member of the team. She parked her car and entered the office.

She was greeted on the way by the Head of HR, who said, "So, Neha, hope you are ready to go to New York."

Neha didn't understand the comment and followed her usual routine of the morning—plugging the laptop into the network, logging in with a password any dummy could crack, and opening

her mailbox. While the mails downloaded, she ordered a cup of lemon tea from the cafeteria.

She opened Matt Colin's mail first and read the contents carefully. Matt said, "Neha, I have heard a lot about your statistical abilities. I also gathered that you can design very complex IT applications. I want to engage you in the assignment for Global Liners. This will be your first client engagement and am sure you will enjoy working with the team. I trust your ability to deliver very high quality services to our client, as always. You will receive further details from Jessie Hughes. Hope to see you soon."

Neha whooped with joy. She recalled the comment made by the Head of HR and quickly opened the mail from Jessie Hughes.

The mail outlined the proposed plan for implementation and mentioned the details of the team that would work on the engagement. Neha's tickets to New York would be sent in two days. Neha now understood why they got the multi-entry visa to the US and European countries on joining the firm.

She knew there would be a lot of work and did not understand how to go about it. She rushed to the Head of HR and asked him for advice. He advised Neha to carry clothing for at least two weeks after checking the New York weather forecast. He also told her she should be ready for global assignments in the future as Matt was very careful in selecting