

# OUTSMARTING CRAZY TOWN



A BUSINESS NOVEL ABOUT HOW DERAILED  
PROFESSIONALS CAN GET BACK ON TRACK

**BRENDA ABDILLA**

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## PREFACE

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{ THE URBAN DICTIONARY DEFINES CRAZYTOWN AS:  
*Living in a state of insanity or being around  
the crazy/insane of the universe.* }

### **ARE YOU LIVING IN CRAZYTOWN?**

You might be in Crazytown when you finally land your coveted dream job at a Fortune 100 company, but your entire director team aligns to sabotage your every effort and initiative—even going as far as giving you misinformation for reports you provide to the CEO. You quickly realize why you are the fourth VP in two years.

You might be in Crazytown when the charismatic CEO of the company, who is the most inspirational person you have ever worked for, is fired by the new private equity firm. The new CEO, who behaves more like a CFO, has no interest in innovation, product development, or customer satisfaction initiatives—all things in your domain. You go from being completely engaged in your work to a constant state of incredulous frustration.

Crazytown is what you feel after being promoted to senior management and then almost immediately denied “a seat

at the table.” You are left out of key meetings, important calls, and decisions that impact your team, and you have no idea why. Your peers are also confounded. Any mention of this is summarily dismissed by your supervisor.

Crazytown is working for a newly promoted boss who listens to your phone calls through the thin walls separating your offices, insists on reviewing and editing every communication you send out to the team, and scrutinizes every dollar you spend from your department budget.

Crazytown is when work turns into a headshaking, logic-defying, maddening place for you. Crazytown can be a situation, a state of being, a culture, or just your own private hell—at work.

It may surprise you to hear that most Crazytown workplaces are not created out of evil or malintent—we are not talking about working at Enron. On the contrary, at the core of what has gone awry is usually a good intention. The company is trying to save money, or increase profits, or choose a new product path, or expand their market—all good intentions. It is just that the decisions or changes that come from good intentions may suddenly stop working for you. Crazytown can be that you suddenly work for misguided, inexperienced, even incompetent leaders and are surrounded by an otherwise ideal environment. That still makes it Crazytown for you. Sometimes, Crazytown is finding yourself in a culture of people who are clearly not your people.

Many would suggest that the people who find themselves in Crazytown simply leave and find new jobs. But the entire work landscape is constantly shifting, so switching

companies is not always the answer. You could be trading one form of Crazytown for another. Plus, you have made sacrifices to get where you are, and the reputational costs that could be associated with leaving your current post are not to be discounted. In short: *it's complicated*. Wouldn't it be much smarter if there was a way to fortify yourself against the impact of the craziness and *then* decide if you will stay or go?

Crazytown can exist in publicly traded companies, startups, nonprofits, government agencies, B-corporations, and every known industry.

Accepting that Crazytown exists both inside and outside of your current organization will result in better decisions about your career trajectory. We all make better decisions when the rationale is based in reality—and the reality is that Crazytown is here to stay. Perhaps you have already left your Crazytown, or were pushed out and are seeking another post. By fortifying yourself against Crazytown, you will gain some perspective on the past, and also make a better cultural and career choice in the future.

## MEET MIKE

Get ready to meet Mike Rogers. Mike is a great guy who has a wife and young family in Spokane. He is the senior manager of IT for a small software company that has recently been purchased, and as a result, Mike's life is about to change dramatically.

Some alarming stuff happens at work that throws Mike into a bit of tailspin. All this change happens at a time when Mike is already questioning his choices and his

future. He turned forty last year and is wondering about his career, what is meaningful to him, and why this unsettled feeling is growing inside.

But on another level, Mike feels he has no reason to complain or change jobs. He is well compensated and has great benefits. His wife just went back to work after staying home with their girls for seven years. Things are feeling normal at home again. He wonders if maybe he should just suck it up and deal with the changes at work. But Mike is burned out, not sleeping, and starting to dread going to work. He feels trapped.

Lucky for Mike, he finds a mentor who agrees to help him navigate this critical time in his career. His mentor can relate completely to his predicament and takes Mike through some useful processes to clarify his thinking and his career direction. Mike's mentor teaches him that he needs to work in four major "buckets," and that doing so will pay off for the rest of his career by helping him navigate, or outsmart, nearly any kind of Crazytown that comes his way.

## **FOUR KEYS TO OUTSMARTING CRAZYTOWN**

- 1. Learn to deal with stress like a boss.** Making career decisions in a triggered state is a bad idea. Burnout is real, and Mike learns how to deal with his career baggage, manage his stress levels in new and important ways, and see where the gaps are in his life. This provides him a level of clarity he has never experienced before.

2. **Figure out your career superpower.** Popular wisdom would have Mike discovering his passion and monetizing it. But nothing could be more confusing for someone at a major crossroads. Instead, Mike learns what superpower skills separate him from others and how detailing the life he really wants can make a huge impact on his direction.
3. **Find your blind spots.** Anyone witnessing unusual or acting-out behavior at work can point a finger and blame. But we all have bad habits or thought processes that block our ability to reach our ultimate level of success. Mike discovers something about his leadership that changes everything.
4. **Develop and leverage your network.** Many professionals who have been working hard and getting results look up one day to realize they have not been developing their network, let alone leveraging it. Mike learns how to develop his network in a way that aligns with his personality and already-busy life so he will never feel trapped again.

This book is a business novel. It is written in story form so that you can derive what you need from the content and apply it to your own life and career.

Enjoy!

Brenda Abdilla

## CHAPTER 1

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# SLEEPLESS IN SPOKANE

Mike Rogers couldn't sleep.

He kept replaying the events over and over again in his mind. A much larger company, MorTech, had recently acquired Mike's employer of fourteen years, Bonzo, where Mike served as the chief technology officer.

Things at work were pretty quiet for the first six months after the acquisition, and nothing really changed. But then, the rug got pulled out from under Mike when his boss, Albert, was fired. Mike thought he and Albert were the victims of undeserved misfortune.

Albert was the chief operating officer (COO) and had been with Bonzo for twenty-five years. Albert mentored Mike and taught him everything he knew about leadership. When Mike first got promoted to CTO, he knew his job like the back of his hand but had no idea how to lead.

Albert took extra time to coach Mike on how to run his team meetings, how to hire and recruit top professionals,

how to deal with difficult employees, and how to get his team of independent, sometimes socially awkward IT experts to work together as a cohesive team. Thanks to Albert, Mike had a reputation in the industry for his ability to lead and retain a team.

Mike was shocked that after more than two decades of service, Albert was summarily released. No party. No congratulations. No closure. Just a one-line email from the new CEO.

Mike had a nasty feeling in the pit in his stomach, and it was waking him up every night. Would Mike be the next to walk the plank?

Naturally, after the MorTech merger, Mike was a little worried. But his friends and colleagues in the software industry put his mind at ease. Most of them had not only survived but thrived in the era of acquisition.

“I got rid of my psycho boss in the acquisition of our company,” said his buddy, Craig. “Plus, I received stock options and a bump in pay from my new employer.”

But Mike had no idea how the acquisition would impact him. These days, Mike tried to fall back asleep by watching *SportsCenter* on ESPN at 2:00 a.m. This had become somewhat of a habit the past few weeks since more changes went down at work.

Mike’s wife, Sonja, had no idea he was not sleeping well; she was always a good sleeper. Their two girls, ages seven and three, shared a room down the hall, and Burt, their chocolate Labrador, slept soundly near Mike’s feet.

Mike had a great marriage and family. He met Sonja at work sixteen years ago while working at the software company, Dreamsoft. Sonja was on the design team, and Mike was in IT. Mike found Sonja to be confident and comfortable with herself in the mostly male environment. It was pretty much love-at-first-meeting for Mike.

They were happy beyond measure when their daughter, Bella, came along seven years ago. Their joy quickly turned into dread when the doctors discovered that Bella had been born with an atrial septal defect, which required immediate heart surgery. Mike and Sonja watched as the cardiac team wheeled their tiny girl into surgery. Bella required weeks of hospitalization after her successful surgery and would need very close care for the next year.

Mike had returned to work two weeks after Bella's birth and was fortunate his boss, Albert, was completely supportive even though Mike was basically a zombie.

When Sonja's six-week maternity leave was almost up, she and Mike needed to make a decision.

"Should we hire a nurse-qualified nanny, or should one of us stay home for the next year until Bella is out of the woods?" asked Sonja.

They both earned a good salary from their jobs, so either of them could have become the main breadwinner. They decided that Sonja would stay home. Secretly, Mike was relieved that his wife was essentially taking one for the home team. He was immensely grateful.

The family fell into a nice routine over the next couple of years. Lea was born four years later, and Sonja taught a freshman-level coding class at the local junior college. Once she decided to go back to work full-time, she attacked the task with the same intensity she approached everything. She researched and networked and conducted informational interviews and was confidently unapologetic about having stayed home for seven years. After all, she had kept up on advances in her field of expertise, and the demand for her specific skill was very high in the current job market.

It felt like they could finally breathe at home. There was more money coming in, and everything just felt like it was falling into place. Mike and Sonja were a good team. And then Albert got fired so coldly and mysteriously. Suddenly Mike felt directionless.

Mike now regretted turning down a great job offer the previous year. Mike had been contacted by a recruiter representing a competitor and received an offer that would have increased his base salary by 25 percent. Mike and Sonja decided he would pass. The big reason he passed was that he was just thirteen months away from being vested in the company stock option at Bonzo. The stock could have meant a lot of money since Bonzo had experienced huge growth in the previous few years. Mike passed on the other role and would now live to regret it since Bonzo sold before he was vested, and MorTech would reset the vesting clock for all employees who stayed on. He felt like an idiot.

Sleep would not come that night for Mike. He didn't know it yet, but Mike had entered Crazytown.