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Supping with the Devil

Written by Richard Elliott-Square

Published by AuthorHouse UK Ltd

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SUPPING WITH THE DEVIL

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Published by AuthorHouse 2/12/2013

*ISBN: 978-1-4817-8356-9 (sc)
ISBN: 978-1-4817-8357-6 (hc)
ISBN: 978-1-4817-8355-2 (e)*

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To my special friend, Lizzie

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My thanks to Linda LeSage Chrisp who's help during the formative early days of *Supping with the Devil* was invaluable.

FIFTEEN YEARS AGO

There was a smell of medication and stale urine inside the room. For a once ruggedly handsome man, the gaunt face that had now replaced the matinee-star looks, with its taut, translucent skin, thin hair, and sunken eyes hidden within dark sockets in his skull, this was the last humiliation. He lay prone in his hospital bed, surrounded by drips of chemicals and saline, his skeletal frame accentuated by the loose, white linen sheet that covered his body. A full urine bag dangled below the mattress.

The cancer had come quickly and ruthlessly, a strain that was virulent and ever conquering. Cancer of the liver was the first diagnosis. He was a drinker among drinkers. And then, despite the endless hospital visits and consultations followed by one operation after another, he was told that he had cancer of everything else. He opted out of chemo, preferring to make the most of what life could throw at him. But he hadn't lasted more than three months. Self-indulgent, a bad drunk, a heavy smoker, and abusive to all that tried to get close to him, this thrice-divorced sinner had thrown sand in God's face, and now as he wheezed and coughed, he realized that he had perhaps gone too far this time. But he didn't care.

Only one person stood by his bed at that moment. He squinted at his visitor. His son, a good-looking young man of twenty, was looking down at the man who had abused him all of his life. The father who was jealous of everything he had, which he himself had possessed, but chose to throw to the winds. A man who had left the family destitute and a wife who never really recovered from the damage he had inflicted on her and their son.

"Is that you?" The voice belied the forty-five year old voice box that had been so sorely treated.

"I had to come." He paused. "How are you?" The young man drew closer in trepidation.

"I'm fucking dying," he rasped. "What a stupid question."

"Is there anything I can do?" He meant what his words said, but he didn't feel anything for this appalling man.

"Nothing! Why the fuck did you come?" His frail arms started to shake as he became agitated.

"You are my father, God damn you. That's why." A tear started to well up in his eye.

"Appropriate words indeed! Well, you can see that God has damned me. Thanks for telling me the obvious!"

"Father ..."

But the man cut him off. He tried to lift his head off the pillow without success, sinking back with a long wheeze. "Get out of here! Get the fuck out!"

"I came to see you ..."

"Die? Ha!" His pale, dry lips tightened. "I will not give you that pleasure! Get out now!" His emaciated fingers wrapped themselves around the nurse call button, which started buzzing in the distance. "And you know, Nicholas," he wheezed again, a hoarse dry sound that ended with a clicking sound from his throat, "I knew you were a waster, and I know that you will never achieve anything in your life. That is my paternal blessing! Go!"

The monitor flat lined, and his father was dead. The tears that streaked down his cheeks were not for this dreadful man but for himself. He moved forward and kissed the cold forehead. A teardrop fell from his eye and anointed his father's head, and then he whispered, "Goodbye, Father; you see what I do with my life! Just you see! I will never, ever be like you." He stood back and added, "I vow to rub out my memories and to prove you wrong. May God forgive you!" He turned, almost bumping into the two nurses that had arrived. "Too late! He's gone!"

Nick Adams left the hospital, and he was angry. He had heard what his father had said and made a silent vow.

FIFTEEN YEARS LATER— MANHATTAN

The vein on the right temple of his head throbbed and complained mercilessly. He brushed his fingers across his face as if to smooth away the ache. The painkillers he swallowed with a slug of whiskey not thirty minutes ago had clearly not worked. Exhaustion had set in. He had nearly finished. He stood up and tried with great effort to straighten his much abused and neglected back, which had all but seized up from being hunched over his laptop keyboard for hours on end.

The tall, heavily built man had a deadline to meet, after which he could take it a bit easier, maybe go on a vacation with his long-suffering wife. Being the wife of a journalist, she knew the score. No matter how illustrious and well-thought-of by his peers he was, she indulged him and went with the flow. Most of the time. Howard was worth it. This was a big story, and from what she knew, it would cause uproar and discomfiture at the highest levels of government.

Howard Wayne retrieved sheets out of the printer tray, lit a cigarette, and moved into the sitting room, where he sat down and started to read his work.

He knew that the newspaper subeditors would top and tail and no doubt exaggerate and manipulate his words, making them more sensational, but his meticulous research deserved a wide readership audience, and the story had to be told. It would go viral on the Internet, and it would open an international nest of vipers.

A scandal in the financial world is harming many innocent naïve investors—

Howard Wayne sucked at his cigarette, asking himself whether the opening was strong enough, and conceded that the subs would edit his work to hell anyway and read on.

a scheme that boosts the price of a stock through recommendations based on false, misleading, or greatly exaggerated statements. The perpetrators, who already have established positions in the company's stock, sell their positions after the hype has led to a higher share price. This practice is illegal, based on securities law, and can lead to heavy fines.

He flipped to a new sheet.

The victims often lose much of their investment when the stock falls after the process is complete. This “pump and dump” scam is the illegal act of an investor or group of investors who promote a stock they hold and sell once the stock price has risen following the surge in interest as a result of the endorsement.

Ash dropped onto his jumper without him noticing.

The stock is usually promoted as a “hot tip” or “the next big thing,” with details of an upcoming news announcement that will “send the stock through the roof.” The details of each pump and dump scam are different, but the scheme always boils down to a basic principle: shifting supply and demand. Pump and dump scams tend to work only on small and microcap stocks traded over the counter from companies that tend to be highly illiquid, whose stock price can move sharply can when volume increases. The scammers increase the demand and trading volume in the stock. The inflow of investors leads to a sharp rise in its price. Once the price rise has peaked, the group sells their position to make a large short-term gain—at your expense!

Howard had a reputation as the poor man's investment guru, often drawing flack from the more conventional financial institutions in New York, London, and Frankfurt.

On one stock I watched, the price rose from around ten

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cents to nearly \$5 in a one-week period, a massive increase. The stock had seen an average daily trading volume before the increase of less than 25,000, but during the scam the stock traded up to nearly one million shares on some trading days. The unsuspecting investors would have bought into the stock at around \$1, watched it grow, dreamed of riches, then suddenly it was back to being a penny stock!

Blah blah.... It was time for bed. He would have to be up early, finish the story, and load it onto a flash drive before going to his newspaper. He smiled to himself as he added,

Always keep this investment caveat in mind: If it's too good to be true, it probably is. I am now going to expose the people and institutions that allow this contamination to go on without any retribution.

He stubbed out his cigarette, raised himself off the sofa, and left the sheets as they lay. He grinned as he thought of the faces of those who would see themselves spread all over the *Wall Street Journal* in days to come.

The cigarette was not completely out, and a spiral of smoke wound its way upwards to the ceiling. It heralded the careers that would soon be turned to ashes.

NEW YORK

The client had given careful instructions. Half of the fee had been wired. The target had been chosen. This assignment was a walk in the park—simple, straightforward, with little danger. The time had come to put the meticulous planning into motion.

It mattered not that the actions taken that day would ruin so many lives and lead to a financial Armageddon that would expose corruption and greed on a colossal scale.

An assassin was on the prowl. She was in place, ready, waiting to pounce upon her prey.

ZURICH, SWITZERLAND

“Another glass of champagne, Herr Adams?” The voice of the waiter jolted him out of his jet-lagged semi-slumber.

A dream? Not at all! After all of the shit in his life, everything had suddenly changed.

Boy, how it had, and in bucket loads.

“Why not? Thank you!” He sat up in the overly comfortable hotel chair, feeling not a little embarrassed. He smiled back at the waiter, glancing at the expensive watch that sat rather ostentatiously on his left wrist. It was new, an acquisition purchased that very same afternoon from Cartier on the Bahnhofstrasse. The waiter poured the champagne and placed the elegant glass flute back onto the table.

Not so long ago he could have lived for four months on the money that had been taken off his private Swiss bank-issued credit card.

“Six o’clock here,” he murmured to himself while sipping the champagne, “that’s 11:00 a.m. New York time.” His BlackBerry flashed red, but he wasn’t about to spoil his daydream by dealing with the usual mundane e-mails that hounded him 24/7. He needed this break. The next day he would be back in the States, and until then everything could wait.

He slipped back into the chair and reflected on the previous and present day’s hectic schedule.

He had flown in the afternoon before. The hotel Mercedes had whisked him from the terminal building at Kloten Airport straight to the Park Hyatt hotel in central Zurich, where he was checked in and shown to his junior suite—all typically efficient in the true Swiss German style. He had gone through his usual routine of unpacking and activating his iPad and selecting the hotel Wi-Fi.

A quick check through his e-mails confirmed his appointment that evening. A shower reinvigorated him. He was unusually nervous. The next twenty-four hours would change his life.

At 7:00 p.m. he made his way down to the hotel bar, which was noisy and full of young professionals fresh out of their offices, middle-aged foreign businessmen, and a surfeit of stunning single girls, all with that East European look that made normally rational, sensible men shipwreck their lives upon the sirens' rocks, ultimately to be dragged through the divorce courts. He looked around at the faces, trying to identify his scheduled appointment for the evening. Despite the seductresses that smiled at him, he had important life-changing business to discuss. He found his man sitting in the shadows, seated at one of the corner tables, well away from the bar and the main source of noise.

"Mr. Adams!" He rose and offered his hand, stooping slightly as he tried to disentangle his legs from under the cramped table. "A pleasure!" The smile seemed sincere enough, Nick Adams observed as he pulled a chair back and sat down. They ordered two glasses of white wine, and the pleasantries done, started the business at hand.

"Because you're a US citizen,"—the man leaned toward him, trying to whisper somewhat unsuccessfully against the background noise—"normally we would not have been able to assist you ...". He broke off and gestured at the futility of competing with the cacophony.

His fellow guest smiled and got up. "Finish your wine! Supper calls!"

The chic Italian restaurant, almost hidden in a cobbled side street lined with pastel-colored ancient buildings, with first-floor windows built out overhanging the neat shop windows and office doors, and just off the main shopping street, the Bahnhofstrasse, was above all quiet. The local Swiss citizens favored this restaurant in "downtown Switzerland," as publicists sometimes described Zurich.

The table had been reserved, and they were duly shown to it. "As I was saying, US citizens cannot have offshore accounts in Switzerland." He glanced around the restaurant. The light of the

overhead chandelier flashed on the lenses of his rimless spectacles, but of course even had the conversation been overheard, the fellow diners who derived their very wealth from the work of this and countless other men such as him would have nodded their approval. "But as you know, we have a scheme that allows us to convince the back-offices of the local banks that you are not the beneficial owner. Therefore the authorities in the USA have no interest or jurisdiction!" He retrieved the veal that he had been pushing around his plate and put it into his mouth.

"Are you sure? The last thing I need is trouble with the IRS." A serious point made, but his grin gave him away. "I can see how you justify your charges!"

"Quite so." His dinner companion looked him straight in the eyes. There was no smile; money was to be treated with utmost respect. "Tomorrow will be a mere formality, I can assure you."

"Even though the account is in the name of the company your firm has set up, and the beneficial owner is not me, the bank will take instructions from me anyway?" He paused to allow a pretty waitress to remove his plate. "And they know that I own everything?"

"Oh, yes indeed, my friend." He put the wineglass to his lips and sucked red wine rather too noisily. "Everyone is doing it! Well, the rich in particular! And that covers you, even though you are not as yet über-rich; the banks like to mix and match." He smiled. "We have various parties who are clean and act as shadow beneficial owners. The banks check them out and accept them, even though they know that you really can take back control at any time, give instructions, and generally act as the sole owner. That way we all win!"

The lawmakers in the United States and the European Commission were forcing Switzerland to cooperate, whereby the Swiss voluntarily imposed a withholding tax on accounts held by the wealthy that banked within their borders. Switzerland had to strike such deals to try to preserve bank account secrecy, the cornerstone of its two-trillion-dollar financial services industry. But there were innovative ways around such matters, and Nick's newly acquired advisor specialized in such schemes.

They finished their meal. The bill paid, they made their way back to the hotel bar, which, if anything, had become louder. Most of the girls were now either not there, having found a temporary companion for the evening, or had found some father-figure friend eager to ply expensive alcohol through their Restylane-enhanced lips and down slender necks. Two drinks later, Nick shook the hand of his advisor in the hotel lobby. The next day would be an early start, and the young American had to be in top form.

He had hardly slept. Part of the reason was the international time difference, but it was mainly due to the excitement he felt coursing through his veins. It was 6:00 a.m. He called the front desk and cancelled his 7:00 a.m. alarm. After breakfast and a quick glance at the complimentary *USA Today*, he was off to his appointment.

The meeting room, one of many such rooms within the bank, overlooked the snow-capped mountains that loomed above the roofs of Zurich and the Cantons that stretched beyond, a timeless vista that had not changed for centuries.

His advisor, who oozed charm and professionalism through every pore, did the talking. He addressed the impeccably dressed banker seated on the other side of a table that had coffee cups, bottled water, and various Swiss chocolates neatly arranged in the center.

It was clearly a routine meeting between the advisor and the banker. For them this was normal daily business. A stream of Russians, Chinese, Greeks, Italians, East Europeans, Arabs, Africans, and exceptionally the odd Brit or American, all intent upon ringfencing their assets that had been obtained in various nefarious ways, walked into the very same antiseptic lobby of the bank, and if called, into one of many elevators that lead them to the very private levels where discussions and transactions took place in the utmost confidence.

“So, all is in order.” The banker took back the newly signed document and placed it into the file that was in front of him. “The new account for Zen Holdings is open, and as we anticipated a successful outcome, we ordered a card for you.” He smiled and

slid an envelope across the table. "It's operational and has no limit, as it is secured by the assets held on the account with us, and is, of course, anonymous. We will make the payments for you as they are billed. There will be no paper trail. Just do not use it outside Switzerland." He stood up, towering over the American, and shook the hands of the advisor and new customer. More fees for his bank. Job done. "We welcome you to our bank, Mr. Adams! A long and mutually profitable relationship we hope?" Nick Adams, some nine million dollars securely lodged in the bank, gave the banker a broad grin. "Why not do a little shopping before you leave Zurich? Use the card! Enjoy!" Nick almost choked with amusement. Almost.

And that is exactly what the American did. He couldn't help himself. It was like being locked up in the most exciting toy store after it had closed. He would have to get used to this life. Already he was contemplating who might accompany him on the next trip. Or judging from what he had seen in twenty-four hours, maybe he would be able to source locally.

But there was still a tight knot in his stomach. It had all seemed so simple and straightforward. If anyone of his close colleagues found out, all hell would let loose. But they wouldn't. How could they? He had taken only what was his by right. It was his business, he had taken the risks, and now it was time to harvest. A cool glass of champagne would settle his stomach. Christ! The company even bore his own name! Then it would be back to Kloten airport and New York. The world was his now!

"Not bad, eh, Father?"

While the population of the municipality of Zurich is only some 400,000 strong, the chances of Nick Adams running into a certain notorious banker during his fleeting visit would have been just not only very bad luck but probably extremely dangerous. His actions during the trip would be deemed traitorous, and there would be no excuses accepted.

It would seem, however, that on this occasion Lady Luck had protected him. But for how long her bountiful largesse would be bestowed upon him, only time would tell.

NEW YORK

A boisterous early morning wind snaked and spiraled its unpredictable way along the fashionable Manhattan street, weaving through the trees that lined the sidewalks. The heavy, glossed door of a townhouse slammed shut with a solid bang as the owner left for work. The noise startled a couple walking on the opposite sidewalk, who looked back sharply in the direction of the house. They did not notice a lone huddled figure lurking in a dark recessed gateway of the private residence and who remained undetected.

As was the usual case, at precisely 8:30 a.m., a black Lincoln 100 stretch limousine, bouncing on soft springs, glided to a halt outside a forty-five-story glass tower apartment building across the street from the townhouse.

Checking the time, the doorman greeted the now-familiar limo with a casual wave before retreating back to his concierge desk to continue reading his morning paper. The driver waved back, but rather than brace the bitter wind whipping up East Forty-Seventh Street, he remained in his snug cocoon and used his cell phone to announce his arrival.

The hidden observer watched and observed. Every detail had been committed to memory. Alongside the sidewalk, wide, well-scrubbed, shallow steps led up to the main entrance; to the curved zinc awning, its full expanse out of view of the doorman's post; and most importantly, to the location of stairwells and elevators within the lobby. Nothing had been left to chance.

She had been patiently watching there for almost forty minutes, leaning against a brick wall, hidden in its shadow. Dressed in full matte black, the hooded Brighton jacket concealing her smooth, milky face, a pair of mini binoculars were clasped in the palm

of her gloved right hand. She occasionally threw furtive glances, looking for anyone who might disturb her.

Ten minutes later, the doorman, clutching his blue cap to his head, rushed through the center lobby door to the parked limo. The driver wrapped his scarf tightly around his neck, cursing the cold wind, and immediately stepped out of his vehicle and followed the doorman into the building.

A short window of opportunity presented itself. It was time to make a move. The hooded figure sprang out of hiding and sprinted across the street to the opposite sidewalk, each step exact in its stride, her body in perfect synchrony. She knew from her observations that the driver would have left the car unlocked. She opened the streetside rear door and threw herself into the dark, plush interior, shutting the door behind her quietly. Even though the morning rush hour had started to get under way, nobody seemed to have noticed her. This was New York, after all! Before entering, she had shut one eye, allowing her pupils to adjust quickly to the dimness inside, a proven and useful tool in her trade.

Her routine was basic instinct. Every morning for one week she had meticulously planned and practiced her assiduous work ethic to get practicalities and every detail right; and she never disappointed her clients.

The driver would remotely lock the doors after stepping into the lobby, where he would wait as always to greet his customer. She knew that the privacy partition between driver and passenger would remain shut, creating a completely soundproof cabin. With tinted windows throughout, passengers were kept well hidden from those outside, including the driver.

Uninvited, she crouched below the privacy panel between the console and rear doors like a wild cat waiting for its hapless prey, her back leaning against the bulkhead. She removed a heavy object from her coat, which she gripped tightly.

The passenger appeared in the lobby from the bank of elevators, followed quickly by the driver, and made his way out of the building to the waiting limo. The passenger door opened, thrusting chilly air into the car. Sliding heavily into the rear seat

of the darkened limo, the passenger adjusted his crumpled coat, and the door shut firmly behind him.

The driver climbed in, looked at his mirrors, and slowly accelerated away from the building, joining the morning traffic. Seated comfortably and shielded from the chaos of New York City, the passenger's usual journey to work had begun. In recognition of his invaluable contributions to the success of the paper he worked for, and his seniority, he had the use of a company limo to shuttle him to and from the office. The usual stack of newspapers had been left for him on his seat. With reading lights on, he fiddled with ceiling-mounted controls to tune into a classical radio station before idly leafing through a copy of his own paper's early edition.

The unseen Valentina Vinogradov curled her gloved fingers around the gun's trigger and leaped with an athletic body from her hiding place. She lunged with impressive agility toward the passenger, ramming the cold steel of a silencer deep into his mouth, chipping one of his teeth in the process.

Terror-stricken, the passenger struggled in vain to shake the grip that held him. But Vinogradov straddled one leg around his arm and planted a knee on his chest to restrain him. Steel ground into her victim's teeth and he gagged.

"Shut up!" she hissed. "Do as I say or you are dead!" But the passenger squirmed and choked, refusing to give up the uneven fight. She twisted the barrel again and again inside his mouth. He choked up blood-slicked phlegm secreted from the mucous membranes inside his mouth, eyes watering as a trickle of blood slicked down from a cut on his lip.

"Be quiet," she spat. Eyes bulging, the victim stared, nodding frantically. Vinogradov removed the barrel from his mouth and thrust it against his left temple. Skin scraped off and more blood slowly oozed from a new wound.

"Tell me: where is your laptop?" Her Slavic inflections were becoming more apparent. She pressed harder with the weapon, searching the seat with her other hand. It wasn't there. She arched into a backbend to search the floor, still holding her victim in a vice-like grip. "You son of a bitch, where is it?"

"I haven't got it ... I didn't need it today," he blurted out in fear, his mouth full of warm blood. The barrel dug deeper into his face. "What do you want? Who are you, for Christ's sake?" His gaze fixed on the wild, almost demonic eyes staring back at him.

"Answer me! The data sticks, your files. Where are they?" She threw the weight of her body behind her hand and smacked him across the face. "Give me the keys to your apartment, now!" she spat into his face.

Turning abruptly to avoid a cyclist pedaling illegally against the oncoming traffic, the limo driver had to swerve sharply as he approached FDR Drive, causing Vinogradov to lose her grip. The passenger, seizing the initiative, swung his fist with a powerful blow to her neck, screaming out to the driver, but the raised soundproof partition worked as designed. His pleas went unheard.

Vinogradov tussled vigorously with her victim to gain control again. The beast, just barely under control within her, forced her into squeezing the trigger. A muffled pop sounded, and a single bullet smashed through the passenger's left cheek spiraling into the soft tissue of his brain. A sudden odor of smoke and cordite permeated the compartment. A torrent of crimson blood gushed from his open mouth and the entry point of the bullet, his body slumped onto the seat. He let out a last strangled moan, then was silent.

"*Chyort voz'mi!*" Vinogradov cursed. She grabbed at his suit lapels and shook him. "That was not supposed to happen, you pathetic imbecile!"

With an angry grunt she let go of the inert body. Her orders had been clear and precise. All that was required was to scare the reporter off and get him to hand over the main tool of his trade: his laptop. Shit! She knew the bastard always carried it with him. Murdering an investigative journalist would only give credence to his story. The conspiracy theories would compound and complicate things for her client, whom she had quite unintentionally compromised. She could imagine the wrath that would be brought to bear upon her wide, muscular shoulders.

A few moments passed as Vinogradov lay still on the limo's floor, taking stock. Finally her mental faculties shot into overdrive, and she snapped out of her uncharacteristic depression and dark thoughts of retribution. There was a way to salvage the botched assignment. Vinogradov pulled the slumped corpse back into a sitting position, checked his pulse just to make sure, and skillfully searched his pockets. She found a set of keys and pocketed them.

They were fast approaching the financial district. She had little time. The traffic had moved faster than Vinogradov anticipated. She removed the silencer and returned it to her coat pocket, cleaned the murder weapon with her gloves, and placed the gun in the hand of the dead man, pressing his hand around it. Grabbing his right arm, she bent it toward the lifeless drooping mouth, allowing the limb to drop and the gun to fall.

As the limo pulled up to One World Financial Center, *The Wall Street Journal's* world headquarters, workers scurried to shelter from the raging wind. Umbrellas were blown inside out. The driver stepped out of the limo. He pulled at the curbside passenger door handle, but the Russian had already escaped through the opposite door, quietly closing it unnoticed behind her. She disappeared, blending into the throng of pedestrians, her hood tightly wrapped around her face to avoid any video surveillance cameras.

The limo driver stood for several moments patiently holding the door for his customer. He bent down and glanced into the dark interior but saw no activity or movement. Leaning further into the car, he gently tugged at the passenger's coat sleeve.

"World Financial Center, Mr. Wayne ... Sir." There was no response. The driver squinted into the back seat. "Mr. Wayne, are you okay?"

He reached out to touch Wayne's shoulder, but the body fell off the seat and slumped heavily onto the floor. His left arm dropped lifelessly out of the door and hit the sidewalk. A trickle of blood dripped onto the ground.

The driver's face morphed into complete panic. He jumped back, almost losing his footing. When his heart leaped back into

his chest, he knelt down beside the motionless body. There was blood seeping from gaping wounds in Howard Wayne's mouth and head. Then he saw splattered blood all over the car's interior like an abstract painting. That's when he began to shout out for help.

In a surreal snapshot in time, a great gust of wind began to spiral out of control, swooping up pages of the rumpled *Wall Street Journal* from within the car and sucking them out, with pages flapping and dancing wildly like great soaring birds rushing upward through the air current, while others spewed out across the pavement like ghostly apparitions.

A crowd began to gather. Two women weighted down with shoulder bags and briefcases came over to console the driver, but he just gazed vacuously at the chaotic scene as he sat in disbelief on the cold sidewalk.

Then came the sirens, wailing in the distance. A fire department truck came roaring down West Street, lights flashing, bullhorn and siren blaring. Several police patrol cars were right behind them. In minutes, an ambulance with spinning red lights emerged from a side street, screaming its way through Battery Park. The NYPD pushed the bystanders out of the way and cordoned off the area. When the inevitable news hounds arrived, digital flashlights reflected and bounced off the car's windows. Forensic techs in white suits examined the limo inside and out. The medics transferred Wayne's body from the limo to a gurney, and the rubbernecking onlookers were rewarded with a clear view of the cadaver in a body bag.

Police officers took statements from the driver and what few witnesses they could find.

Valentina Vinogradov had seen all she needed to see. She had tried to make it look like just another New York suicide, but she had permanently silenced her intended victim, and now there was still a piece of unfinished business to attend to if the suicide theory was to be believed. She would get the second installment of her agreed contract fee only after she had secured the evidence that threatened to expose a number of high profile individuals and institutions, and after delivering Wayne's magnum opus

to her client. That meant his files would have to be found and delivered, and only then would the job be completed. She knew she had to finish the job. She followed an ironclad code of honor, ingrained from her days at the Kremlin. She checked for Wayne's house keys in her pocket, turned around, and vanished. Those who saw her cold, steel blue eyes averted their gaze as though they knew instinctively that she was trouble.

The early morning sun was lower in the sky, and it was much colder, the temperature reflecting the time of year. The weekend had been a welcome but unusual bonus after Nicholas Adams's trip to Zurich, and he had made a snap decision to trawl the last of the parties in the Hamptons. He touched a switch near the armrest and shut his window. Immediately he was cocooned from the outside world, enveloped in the luxurious interior cabin, the rich smell of new leather still pervasive within the recently acquired BMW X6. He ran his fingers across the dashboard and adjusted various buttons and knobs as he selected the ambient temperature. He turned his head and saw the skyline of Manhattan gradually emerge from the early morning mist. It was going to be a good day. He knew it was going to be all right. Everything had finally worked out, and he was in control of his life. No more day-to-day struggle with money and decisions. Less work, more play. Behind him there was a blare of angry horns and shouting. His daydreaming was abruptly halted, and he pressed down hard on the accelerator and closed the gap that had opened ahead. Nick Adams raised his hand, nonchalantly acknowledging the driver behind him. He reached up and adjusted the driver's mirror, caught his tanned reflection, and smiled. He ran a hand through his thick brown hair and grinned again. Nothing would faze him anymore. He vowed that from now on in it would always be like this. No going back. It was history. Soon he would be back in his apartment, shower, breakfast, and then answer a few e-mails before dressing for the office. Back to the daily grind.

At about 1:00 p.m., Adams stepped out of a hybrid New York Yellow Cab. With his iPad in one hand and a BlackBerry pressed to his ear with the other, he headed into his office building. He was late and hung over.

SUPPING WITH THE DEVIL

At just over six feet, he had the smooth gait and rugged good looks of a successful Ralph Lauren male model. His thick, dark brown hair with just a hint of invading gray along the temples complemented his genial, youthful air. Add the form of a natural athlete, and you had a rather striking, forty-something package, the envy of his not-quite-so-fit contemporaries. Indeed, Nick Adams was occasionally approached by magazine lifestyle editors for their “most desirable single and successful men of New York” columns. Women of all ages deemed him a great catch, and although he played down his reputation as a playboy, he insisted that he was no different from any other single man in his prime. But naturally he relished the attention; and now that he had the money, he would be able to play all the more. Life was good.