

After the plates were cleared and Ripovsky had ordered an espresso—Winston had declined coffee—Ripovsky resumed his narrative. He had urged his benefactor to branch out, he said, into real estate and technology and away from raw materials, which the Chinese were ruthlessly scouring for around the world. The older man had rejected Ripovsky's advice, so he formed a new company and reached out for other, younger Russians who shared his vision. That was ten years ago. Now and then, Winston's eyes went to Natasha. She leaned gracefully in her chair to look at Ripovsky as he talked. Her straight blonde hair fell to her shoulders. Every now and then, she swept her hair past her ears with her long arms in what seemed like a practiced move. Since that time, Ripovsky said, he had moved from Moscow to London and made it his new base of operations. He had named his company Rubicon Investments and expanded its reach into Southeast Asia, Australia, and the US. He was a major investor, he said, in several large technology companies and had bought a number of commercial and residential properties, "trophy properties," he said with a thin smile, on each continent. "If I can interrupt, what do you have here in New York?" Winston asked. Ripovsky mentioned three different addresses, two on Fifth Avenue and one on Sixth, none of which Winston recognized. But he should have realized that Ripovsky was an oligarch, the new breed of Russian power player, men who enjoyed the trappings of power and wealth and moved about the world as easily as a bird flits from tree to tree, albeit on SQUEEZE PLAYS 103 private jets. While most tried to stay out of the limelight, others flaunted their influence and their connections to the highest levels of the Russian government. "And so," Ripovsky said, "now that you know more about me, let's talk business. I've probably talked too much here, but I wanted to make it clear that I have a lot of resources at my disposal." He paused and looked intently at Winston. "And I'm prepared to help you—or, better put, your company—out." So now the cards would be laid on the table. "Well, I'm certainly willing to listen," Winston said, trying to sound noncommittal. "This is what I propose. I will advance Star Enterprises \$10 million this week, with an additional \$10 million in sixty days if my conditions are met. I think you'll find this will essentially compensate for the loan that was withdrawn by Whitehall. And there will be no interest charged; this is an investment, not a loan." Winston was stunned, both by the offer and the knowledge Ripovsky seemed to have of the company's financial hole. "Very generous," Winston managed to say. "But—but how did you know about the Whitehall loan?" "As I said, I live in London most of the time," Ripovsky said, smiling. "And my people are very thorough and very professional in what they do." "I guess they are," Winston murmured and smiled weakly at Natasha, who looked at him impassively. "So, what are these conditions?" "Well, first of all, this must not come back to me. I have a number of shell companies, one of which will be making this investment by wire transfer. I'm told that you're not really running the day-to-day operations, which may make things easier. If your financial people are curious about where this came from, you can tell them you don't know. But in any case, they need to accept it. Given your financial situation, that shouldn't be that difficult." JEFFREY MARSHALL 104 "I see." Cloak and dagger, something Winston had a hard time getting his ample head around. "Secondly, I'd like to place some full-page ads in the Star for my real estate holdings, especially the residential ones. Nice photos, elegant. I want to expand my—what?—beachhead here. Advertisements in your newspaper would help. And, for all I would be doing, I would expect those ads would be free." "I—I don't run the advertising area ..." Ripovsky's smile took on a more sinister cast. "No, but I'm sure you can exert your influence. Remember, this is one of my conditions." "Right, right," Winston murmured, swirling the water in his glass. "And the last condition may be the easiest one. I'd like you to arrange a charity function for me and my company to get introduced to important people here." Again, Winston demurred. "I—I don't do those kinds of things ..." "No, I'm sure not. But I think your wife does." Ripovsky sat back. "She's a famous designer, and I'm sure

she can put together a list of people.” Winston bobbed his head. “I’m sure she could,” he said slowly. “I’d like to do something next month, before your Thanksgiving holiday,” Ripovsky said. “There should be enough time to arrange that, I think.” Winston shrugged. “Yeah, I guess so. I can talk to Adrienne, but I don’t want to tell her about the money.” “No, certainly not. Tell her you’ve met me, and I’m a friend of the arts who wants to make a major contribution. Let her choose the charity she wants this directed to.” He leaned forward with his arms on the table. “Okay.” Ripovsky sipped his espresso. “Well, then, I think we can do business, Winston. You have my secretary’s number if you SQUEEZE PLAYS 105 have any questions.” He extended his hand. “Thank you for meeting with me. I’ll pick up the check, of course.” Winston shook his hand and nodded at Natasha, who nodded back. He realized this was his cue to leave. He gave a quick wave as he walked away and realized that Natasha, who hadn’t said a word to him the entire time, had left quite an impression as exotic, almost, as an alien with green scales and a set of ferocious-looking teeth.