

Prologue

In a remote castle, north of Krakow, Poland

It was early December 1991. They arrived one by one. Strangers, but yet known to each other. After depositing their coats with the servants, they were shown to the elaborate study. The walls covered in ancient molded paneling were dark and lent a gloomy pall to the atmosphere. A large round table of mahogany was centered in the room, surrounded by twelve leather chairs worn with age. A fire was crackling in the enormous hearth, sending shadows cavorting across the room as the cobwebs that draped the corners seemed to come alive.

As they each took their appointed seat, an icy hush seemed to fall over the world. At the center of the table were decanters of the finest liquors and liqueurs with crystal glasses, as well as a small array of canapés, including a large crystal bowl of caviar. After all, these were no ordinary strangers, but scions of business from around the world. Anything less would have been an insult.

Obligatory pleasantries were exchanged along with formal introductions. The mood was solemn, almost sinister, as the business at hand was brought forth. Plans were proposed, suggestions made, parameters set. The verbal exchanges were lively but carried a diabolical undertone that, if heard by outside ears, would send icy chills up the necks of even the bravest of men.

Their gathering lasted well into the night and continued early the next morning. In the middle of the afternoon of the second day, through a haze of cigar smoke, they regarded each other with looks of satisfaction. Their leader spoke in low but firm tones as he detailed the final plan. When finished, he looked at each member, and then said, "So, we are agreed?" Each one in turn gave a brief nod. Though he never had any doubt they would, Number One was still gratified to know that he had chosen this group wisely, and their plan would proceed without question. Lifting his snifter of cognac, he proposed a toast, "To the world. Our world!"

On a remote island not far from Key West, Florida

As he exited the craft and first stepped foot on the island, he knew at once that he had found his home at last. The scent of flowers carried on the warm breezes that swayed the palms dotting the landscape, the lush greens, and the bright colors were like ambrosia for the senses. The villa just ahead was a

magnificent specimen of architecture, just as the surrounding grounds were a landscaper's dream. He had such wonderful plans for this, his tiny oasis of peace in the vast and troubled world. And he had the resources to make it happen.

Peace and tranquility, so often absent from his life, was finally within his grasp. The power he had at his fingertips would allow him to enjoy the comforts of life while still keeping his finger on the pulse of the ever-growing unease that was settling on the world around him. Yes, this small paradise would do nicely, and once his plans had become reality, he felt he would complete his journey. And what a journey it had been! From the rolling hills of Appalachia to the outer reaches of space. But even as he was finding his heaven on earth, all hell was about to break loose around him, and unbeknownst to him at that time, it would lead him into the proverbial bowels of a hell that would torment him forever after.