

## *Dance with the Devil*

By Michael Danese

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Hermey is a chronic down-on-his-lucker. He's been out of work for a while, his car was repossessed, and his girlfriend just broke up with him. He's in his mid-thirties, but his prematurely gray hair, which is thin and unkempt, makes him look much older. He also has a thin mustache that he's been trying to grow since his teens. He's rail thin with small glasses. People have compared him to Woody Allen, but just not as good looking. He's wearing a blue sweater and a pair of Dockers that are well past their expiration date. They say that you can tell a lot about a man by his shoes. His scuffed boat shoes shout "life-long loser."

Hermey was drinking his sorrows away in Sally's. It is a dark and quiet bar specializing in cheap drinks and solitude. The perfect place to be if your only interest is the next drink.

To Hermey's surprise, an attractive woman took the stool next to him. He tried not to look but couldn't help it. When he finally allowed himself to look over, her face lit up in a huge smile. She took an interest in him, observed how depressed he was and decided to cheer him up. She had long black hair and dark eye makeup, what they used to call a "goth" look. She seemed to know that he went for that.

"Hi, why so down in the dumps?" she asks while making a sad face.

"Hi ... I'm ok, just having a bit of bad luck, but I see that is about the change!" he said cracking a slight smile.

"My name is Evelyn, do you mind if I join you?" she asked.

"Please do! My name is Hermey," he said as he raised his glass to clink with hers.

"So, your luck is changing?" she said in a whisper.

"Sure, you're here now," he answered.

Evelyn smiled and decided that he was a good project for her. She bought the next round and they shared small talk for a while. Since Hermey had quite a head start on her, he started to fade. She put a few dollars on the bar as he stood up, or at least he tried to.

"It's been quite a pleasure spending this time with you, but I think I need to be on my way," he slurred.

"Yes, it's been fun, here, let me help you," she said as she grabbed his arm and helped him to his feet.

She knew he was in no shape to drive, or even where he was going, so she brought him to her apartment where he passed out on the couch.

The next morning, he pried his eyes open to the stabbing arrows of sunlight assaulting him through a large window. He pulled his sweater and pants on and stood up and sighed. He peered around through squinting eyes with a "*where the hell am I*" look on his face.

"Good morning sunshine!" chimed Evelyn as she walked toward him with a cup of coffee.

She was quite a vision to his bleary eyes. Her long black hair was flowing, and she was wearing black silk pajamas. “Are you okay?”

“Yes, thank you ... and thanks for taking care of me last night, that was very kind of you,” he said as he sipped the coffee. “Can I please use the bathroom?”

“Sure, down the hall and to the left. I put some fresh towels in there, and there is a new toothbrush on the counter,” she said.

“I feel like you’re my guardian angel or something!” he joked.

“Or *something* ...” she said with a smile.

Hermey found a razor on the counter, along with deodorant and the toothbrush. He took a long, hot shower and pampered himself with the fluffy towels. He emerged from the bathroom to the aroma of bacon and toast. He was a new man.

She poured him another cup of coffee and they chatted over breakfast.

“I don’t mean to pry, but you said you’ve been down on your luck?” she asked.

“Yeah, but I don’t really want to talk about it now. I’m enjoying myself too much,” he said.

“That’s fine, I certainly understand. It’s just that I have a bit of experience helping people to turn their lives around, you know, to put them on a path to success. I’m *sure* I can help you too,” she said.

“Really?” he asked.

“Yes, really. Success is a state of mine. Your life is worth living, and living well. I *know* I can help you get back on track, in fact, I *guarantee* it!” she said as she leaned in towards him.

“Hey, sure, mold me, I’ll take all the help I can get! I’m putty in your hands, what do I have to lose?” he said jokingly. “And what do you get out of this? What’s in it for you?”

“For me, not much! All I want is your eternal soul!” she said with a wry smile highlighted by her two dimples.

Hermey laugh and says, “Sold! So, what’s next?”

She reached for his hands and squeezed them, then slowly kissed them. “Thank you! I’m so happy, for *both* of us! Now, take a deep breath, hold it, slowly exhale then do it again.”

“Easy enough so far,” he said.

While still holding his hands she said, “I want you to keep looking into my eyes.”

“With pleasure!” he said.

As they are in a gaze lock she said slowly, almost whispering, “The key to your success is all mental, I want you to concentrate hard on what you want, and attack it with the strongest positive attitude. What do you want in your life? What do you *really* long for? What does the ultimate success look like to you? What would you *sell your soul* to achieve?”

Hermey pauses for a moment, formulating his answer, “I’m really just a simple guy. I want my pharmaceutical sales job back, and I want to excel, to show my boss how wrong she was about me, to become a star performer in the company and rise to the top level. I also want to find love, with a girl like you.”

“That’s all within your grasp, and I’m right here in front of you, lover,” she said as she leaned in and gave him a long, loving kiss. “So, if you achieve what you wish, if you find success on all of your terms, then I get your soul, right?” she said with that impish smile.

Hermey laughed again and said, “Absolutely! Do I need to sign in my blood or something?” he asked jokingly.

“This isn’t an old movie!” she said with a laugh. “A kiss and a fist bump will seal it!”

She pulled him close and they kissed again, a long lingering kiss, then they bumped fists just as thunder cracked and lightning flashed as the sky darkened.

“Wow, you have some power!” he joked.

“You have no idea, lover,” she said in a whisper.

In the coming weeks things quickly began to look up for Hermey.

He called his old boss and asked for a meeting. He was astonished when she said yes.

“Before your meeting, I would like to make a few changes, if you don’t mind,” she said.

“Like I said, I’m putty in your hands, mold me!” he said.

“Great, first, do you have a middle name?” she asked.

“Yes, it’s Nicholas,” he said.

“Perfect, from now on your name is Nick, no offense, but it just sounds so much stronger than Hermey,” she said.

“Yeah, I like it! I feel stronger already!” said Nick.

“Now, about your look,” she said as she stood back and glanced up and down at him.

She led him into the kitchen and sat him down. First, she removed his glasses.

“We’ll get you contact lenses later today, then Lasik surgery,” she said.

“Great!” said Nick.

Then she shaved off his mustache and trimmed his hair to a short, styled look. Next, she dyed his hair to a light brown. She held up a mirror and asked, “Would you hire this guy?”

“Wow, I can’t believe it’s actually me! Yes, I’d hire him for sure!” said Nick.

Evelyn wasn’t done yet with her transformation. She dressed him for the meeting. She advised, “dress for the job you want, not the one you have!” She bought him a tailored blue pin-striped suit, a matching designer tie and pocket square, and a sharp pair of brown wing-tipped shoes, along with a beautiful calfskin briefcase. During the fitting for his suit Nick thought that he grew almost two inches and put on some muscle. He was sure it was just his imagination and his new attitude.

Needless to say, the meeting went well, even better than he expected. Nick was bursting with gratitude. On the way home, he bought a huge bouquet of red roses. He presented them to her and said, “Evelyn Payne, you are a miracle worker! Tonight we are going to Emilio’s for a celebration steak and lobster dinner!”

Nick started back to work the next week. He had a newfound confidence and expertise. The doctors and other medical professionals were quite impressed with Nick's style. His sales increased with every call he made.

His romance also blossomed as the couple became inseparable. Nick moved into Evelyn's apartment and he often commented that he had never been happier in his life. This always brought a huge smile to Evelyn's lovely face.

Within a few months Nick became a staff manager. His team found inspiration in his wisdom and leadership. The next quarter, his staff became the company's sales leaders. A few months later, Nick was appointed district manager. His contagious enthusiasm and compassion for his team translated into record-setting sales.

Nick's success caught the attention of the executive suite. Within a year he was appointed vice president of sales and marketing. He soon had the ear of the board of directors and helped to guide the company to their highest sales. The stock price skyrocketed.

Nick surprised Evelyn with a large house in the suburbs and his and hers matching Maseratis. His love for her grew along with his happiness about his success. From time to time, usually while they were in bed, she reminded him of their "deal," and he always responds with, "I'm yours, my love, now and forever and ever!"

A few months later Nick was thrilled to be honored by the pharmaceutical industry for his accomplishments and contributions. There was a black-tie event with a seven-course banquet. It was the society event of the season. It was attended by the most influential industry movers and shakers, the mayor, senators, and members of congress, along with several celebrities. Nick's speech brought the house down. He thanked all the right people, told a few industry-related jokes, and finished with a loving tribute to Evelyn.

Evelyn, stunning in a floor length black gown, her hair coiffed to perfection, and dripping in jewels, met Nick as he exited the stage where they embraced and kissed. Nick was the envy of everyone in the room. The women, and even some of the men wanted to be with him, the rest of the men, and some of the women, wanted to be with Evelyn.

For the rest of the evening, the couple held court with their admirers. They had drinks and hugs and handshakes, made plans to get together, heard promises of new business, and accepted congratulations.

On the way home, Evelyn gently took his hand and said, "My dear, are you happy, truly happy?" "You know it, my love," he responded.

"I mean, have you accomplished all that you had hoped and desired?" she asked.

"That, and more, thanks to you," he said, squeezing her hand.

"Well, then my work is done. It's time," she said as she pulled her hand away.

"Time for what now?" he asked.

"You knew this day was coming. I'm ready to collect on our deal," she said.

"What exactly are you saying? What can you possibly want that I haven't given to you?" he questioned.

"I want what I've always said I wanted, your immortal soul," she said.

“You have it, my love, now and forever,” he says.

“No, I don’t. Not yet, she said.

“What do you mean?” he said.

“Your *soul*, when you pass away, I will collect it,” she said.

Nick begins the squirm and question what he had agreed to.

“You knew this day was coming. They always do this,” she said to herself.

“What do you mean by that?” he asked.

“Wherever it’s time to collect, they always try to weasel out of it,” she said, raising her voice.

“Who are *they*, he queried.

“Well, the list is endless,” she said.

“I have time,” he said.

“OK, Hemingway for one. I made him the world’s greatest author ... Hitler, he wanted the world and I gave it to him, Julius Caesar, same thing. Marilyn Monroe wanted to be world famous, then there was Al Capone ...” she said until she was interrupted.

“Whoa! Listen, I know that I’m drunk, and I really shouldn’t even be driving, but, are you sitting here telling me that you are ... The *Devil*?” he said.

“I’ve been called by many names, Lucifer, the Prince of Darkness, but Ozzy Osborne seems to have stolen that one, Beelzebub, Mephistopheles, Lord of the Flies, the Antichrist, Father of Lies, or simply Satan. But I really just prefer *Evelyn*.”

“So, you really just expect me to just sign over my soul to you?” he asked.

“Exactly! That’s the deal. But I’m patient. I don’t expect it tonight, but soon. Remember, I can take it all away as quickly as I gave it to you. You can ask Hitler and Caesar when you meet them,” she said.

“I have no intention of meeting them!” he said as he looked over and saw her eyes glowing red.

He glanced down and noticed that she wasn’t wearing her seat belt. He felt the heat as her rage grew. He floored the Maserati along the winding road. As he was coming into a tight curve to the left, he went off the road directly into a large tree. The airbags exploded into his face and he was knocked unconscious. Evelyn was ejected through the windshield and flew into the ravine and ended up at the bottom of a creek.

Nick slowly opened his eyes to a blurry bright light. He assumed he was dead, but when he felt the sharp pains throughout his body, he knew otherwise.

“He’s awake,” a voice said.

A flashlight soon blinded him as his eyes were pried open. “Can you hear me?” the voice asked.

“Is she dead? Please tell me she’s dead, please!” pleaded Nick.

A policeman next to the doctor spoke, “Yes, she’s dead. Is that what you wanted?”

“Oh yes, thank God, *thank God!*” said Nick.

“So you wanted to kill her? Planned to kill her?” the policeman asked.

“Oh yes ... yes. She’s the devil. She was trying to kill *me!*” said Nick.

“The devil?” asked the policeman.

“Yes! The devil!” said Nick.

The doctor interrupted, “that’s enough questions for now. He’s obviously very confused. He has a nasty concussion and several broken ribs. Let’s let him rest and you can talk to him later.”

The police returned the next day. “So you killed the devil?” the officer asked.

“I know it sounds incredible, but yes. She was trying to get my soul. I had no choice.” admitted Nick.

“You’re under arrest for the murder of Evelyn Payne. You have the right to remain silent ...” the officer quickly said.

A few days later Nick was released from the hospital and his lawyer bailed him out. The price was very high, but Nick could afford it.

Nick’s attorney, William Lincoln Goldstein was as good as they come. He had a long pedigree of high-profile cases and he’s used to working under public scrutiny. He was also thrilled to be the underdog in this attention-getting case.

Goldstein spent hours with Nick going over every detail of the case. He was even close to the point of believing Nick’s version of the story. However, he knew that there was no way that he could win a “I killed the devil” defense. He thought through the aspects of a self-defense angle, but he couldn’t come up with a way to sell Evelyn as an attacker.

Nick’s story was so outlandish that he decided on a temporary insanity defense. He worked hard to persuade Nick to play it that way, but Nick would not budge from his story, no matter what Goldstein said.

The “Devil Killer” trial caught the attention of all of the national news and social media outlets. Nick became somewhat of a folk hero. The headlines picked up on the victim’s name, Evelyn Payne and began calling her “Evil and Pain,” and said she *must* be the devil.

The prosecution’s case was extraordinarily strong. Nick admitted planning to kill her while he was driving, which made it premeditated murder in the first degree. They heaped sympathy on Evelyn. She was the daughter of a farming couple from rural Pennsylvania. Her crying parents in the courtroom helped their case.

She was new to the city, and amongst her things was a diary filled with entries proclaiming her undying love for Nick. The prosecutor read from the dog-eared notebook, “I found the man of my dreams ... I’m looking forward to spending eternity with him ... This is true love, the love I’ve longed for all my life ...”

Public opinion quickly turned on Nick, as he became the despicable criminal, the cold-blooded killer of a helpless young girl that had nothing but love for him and everything to live for.

Towards the end of the trial, the lawyers huddled in the judge’s chamber. Goldstein again presented that he strongly believed that Nick certainly had some type of mental deficiency, and he had presented several expert witnesses to testify to that. Plus, he was very intoxicated at the time, not that that was an excuse. The prosecutor was convinced enough that he offered a plea.

Murder in the second degree, life imprisonment without the chance of parole, instead of the death penalty.

Goldstein saw this as a major victory. He saved this wretch from the needle. He met with Nick and presented the deal. Nick knew he was beaten. Goldstein strongly suggested that Nick accept the deal, and he did.

Nick moved into his new home and final resting place, an eight by ten-foot cell in a maximum-security prison. He was only allowed out of the cell for breakfast and dinner, and in the afternoon he had one hour for exercise.

It wasn't long before he started to feel the effects of prison life. He became depressed, delusional, and claustrophobic. He started to see Evelyn's face in the shadows, and it was always laughing at him.

A few months later he found himself peering into the small shiny panel on the wall that was his shaving mirror. Instead of his face, he saw Evelyn looking right at him. However, it wasn't the sweet face he fell for, but an angry, wrinkled, weathered face.

"You surely didn't think that you would escape your bond? And what you did to me was inexcusable! I loved that body, and she served me well! But you'll pay and pay *dearly!*" the face in the mirror said.

Nick just stared at the face, he couldn't bring himself to speak, let alone to look away.

"Look at you, a pathetic, broken man, a criminal, you're so much worse off now than when I rescued you. I told you I could take it all away as easy as it was given to you." Her eyes began to glow red. "I was thinking that I would let you rot here for forty miserable years or so, and have you constantly looking over your shoulder before I came to collect. But I'm just plain done with you."

"I never thought that you were serious, I actually thought that we were in love!" pleaded Nick.

"But we were in love, *my darling!* But from the beginning you knew the deal," she said.

"Crying parents? And that diary? Some nice touches there," he said in a whimper.

"Thanks, I was going to also bring out the Sunday school teacher and Girl Scout leader, but I didn't want to oversell it, you know?" she said proudly.

"But your time's up, the bill is overdue, and I've spent enough time on you already!" she yelled.

A sly smile crossed her face and her eyes glowed brighter. "Do you feel that? That's my hands on your heart."

Nick's face turned to horror as his chest felt like it was about to explode. He tried to talk, but he just emitted a terrible gurgle.

"I'll just slowly squeeze it as I watch the life drain from your body as I collect your debt." she said, almost gleefully. The last thing he heard was her laughter.

A few seconds later, Nick was in a crumpled pile on the floor with the look of horror frozen on his face.

The next day the headlines read, "*Devil Killer has Heart Attack in Prison.*"

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