

Chapter 8

The condominium's concierge took Weylin's bag while he gathered a several day's collection of mail and local newspapers.

His penthouse was as he had left it, neat and clean, although the housekeeper had not been there. He dropped the mail on a nearby table and in doing so, Thursday's local paper hit the ground with the front page headline glaring up at him. *New York Socialite's Warehouse Raided*. He picked up the paper, about to place it on the table, when he was struck by the photograph of a familiar face. He immediately dialed Cassandra's number but there was no response, the answering machine did not pick up. Oh shit, he said to himself, as he slumped on the couch holding the broach, what a mess. Maybe it's a mistake—why would she do that with all her money and stature? Uh-oh, wait a minute, we've been seen all over town together, that can't be good!

And it wasn't, a message awaited his arrival at the office the next morning that read:

Dr. McCain, a special meeting of the board of trustees has been scheduled for four P.M. on the day of your return, signed Martha. Great, he thought, the bombs keep falling.

Although the relationship with Cassandra was purely social and lately not even that, he realized that it would be difficult to convince the board that he knew nothing of her activities. I need more information, he said to himself. He reached for the intercom.

“Martha,” he called, “see if you can get me special agent Vincent Black at his D.C. office.”

“Yes sir, as soon as I have finished collating some documents.”

“Now Martha!”

Minutes later, she buzzed. “Agent Black on two.”

“Vincent, thanks for taking my call.”

“Uh-oh, this isn’t a social call, is it?” Vincent asked.

“Not exactly, I need some information on an acquaintance.”

“Who and why?”

“A lady friend was arrested last week during the raid of her New York warehouse ...”

“Oh yeah,” he interrupted, “Cassandra something, the socialite. Stolen artefacts and support of terrorism, you can’t get much worse these days.”

“Isn’t it circumstantial?”

“Does it matter? She’s been found in possession of the goods ... she’s pretty much guilty until proven innocent and that ain’t gonna happen overnight.”

“But the paper says she’s out on bail?”

“OK, she has some friends but it won’t help; the scale of justice is already weighted against her. Just how close are you two?”

“We’ve been seen out together for some time.”

“My advice buddy, is to stay as far away as you can get. Government prosecutors are experts at disrupting lives, don’t get in the way of their steamroller.”

“I can’t just ignore her,” he groaned, feeling helpless and at the same time guilty for the thoughts he was having about abandoning her.

“Did you not understand what I just said, she’s lethally radioactive.”

“I guess you’re right, thanks for the advice,” Weylin agreed, as the conversation ended.

After a brief telephone call to Charlie Basso and an arrangement to meet for a quick dinner, Weylin spent the remainder of the day pacing about his office, formulating a response to the board’s inevitable questions. His thoughts, however, were clouded by the recent encounter with Svetlana and the Cassandra affair. She seemed to embody everything I sought in a partner, he pondered. She had class, education, sophistication and wealth. But that wasn’t enough for Cassandra and I now realize that our values were different; I never belonged in her world. The little Russian girl, on the other hand ...

Four o’clock arrived without warning and Weylin entered the board room. His entrance was met with an uncomfortable silence, the only audible sound, a gentle hiss as the cushioned chair reacted to the weight of his body.

“Dr. McCain,” Franklin Dobbs, Jr., the spindly, pencil mustached chairman of the board announced. “Much has happened in your absence.”

“Excuse me,” interrupted Weylin, “I’ve been gone for two working days.”

“Yes,” Dobbs agreed, while looking over his horn rimmed glasses, “but in that short time a potentially damaging situation has developed; a situation that could have some bearing and reflection upon the leadership of this company.”

“I assume you are referring to my relationship with Cassandra Bannister?”

“Quite so,” he said, as he faced Weylin and then scanned the remaining occupants of the austere furnished board room.

Before Weylin could present his case, a member seated to the left side of Dobbs requested the floor and was recognized. “Dr. McCain, we realize that this special meeting may give the appearance of a kangaroo court but I assure you that is not out intention.” The statement was met with an affirmative, “Here, here,” from most other members, Dobbs being the exception, as he angrily glared at the speaker.

Weylin cleared his throat, pushed his chair aside and stood. “Ladies and gentlemen of the board,” he said “ordinarily, one’s personal life should remain as such. However, I recognize your concern, as this incident may bring a degree of unwelcomed publicity to myself and thus, indirectly, to Condor. Ms. Bannister and myself have maintained a purely social relationship and I assure you that I had no prior knowledge of any illicit dealings. I am as disturbed by this unfortunate situation as you are and have decided to have no further contact with her.”

Before Weylin had settled into his chair, Dobbs rose, his face glowing like a red Christmas light. “I am afraid that you have failed to recognize the serious damage that you may have caused to our image,” he shouted, “particularly after all the work we did rebuilding it following the Olera debacle.” Weylin did not respond, he remained seated while Dobbs stared at him, daggers in his eyes, and then continued, “If we find that our image is indeed in

jeopardy, it may be necessary to reconsider your tenure, for the good of the company, that is.”

I knew this was coming, Weylin said to himself, as he pocketed a ballpoint pen he'd been nervously clicking open and closed. “I understand your position,” he said, “I will discuss a preemptive statement of noninvolvement with our legal department.”

The meeting ended with Weylin's words still echoing in the now empty room. He sat motionless for several minutes contemplating his past, present and future, then rose and left.

Charlie Basso had been impressed with Weylin's past Italian restaurant choice, so, it was no surprise that he insisted on meeting there again. As before, Weylin entered and found Charlie already seated, deeply engrossed in the newspaper lying before him. He paid no attention to Weylin as he approached the table and noisily took a seat. “Seen today's paper?” Charlie asked.

“Haven't had the time yet,” he replied.

“Your girlfriend is really in deep shit.”

“I'd rather not get into it right now, the board just put me on notice.”

“How so?”

“If my relationship with her comes back to haunt me, they may ask for my resignation.”

“Well, how was the trip?” Charlie asked, changing the topic..

The question triggered a brief flashback of his encounter with Svetlana and he smiled

inwardly. "It was more beautiful that I had remembered."

"What do you mean?"

"The vineyard photos that you showed me," he lied, avoiding any mention of the little Russian girl, as he had begun to think of her.

"Oh yeah."

"One thing still troubles me, I didn't get a chance to meet any of the principals, although, I did spend time with the president of Camalia. Do you have any further information regarding the actual owners of the holding company?"

"Not really, however, when I met with the broker to present your initial good faith check, he removed an envelope from his case that was labeled *Malaysian account*. May just be a tax dodge ... you know, an offshore account."

"Well, no matter. I love the deal. Considering the Board's warning," he said, while handing over another check to Charlie, "lets get it done quickly. If there is a problem developing at Condor, I need to get the loan approved before the banks get wind of it. They may not consider me a good risk if I'm on the skids. One more thing, at closing, we need to register a name change to McCain Vineyards."

"Done, now let's order," Charlie said, while tossing the newspaper onto a nearby empty table.