

Chapter 15

After leaving Vincent at the airport, Weylin took the rest of the day off and returned to his condo to reflect.

With the blackmailer subdued and the Cassandra affair hopefully behind him, he needed to concentrate on the vineyard. Since he had not had a real vacation since assuming the position of CEO, he decided that one was in order. In preparation, he arranged for several of the senior vice presidents to handle his more important day to day responsibilities and made a mental note to call Dobbs the following day to inform him of his plans.

Physically and mentally drained from lack of sleep and the efforts of the night before, following a housekeeper prepared dinner, Weylin poured a glass of madeira, entered his home office and prepared to review the day's e-mails. He had almost forgotten about his phone call to Sascha and the strange e-mail he had received some days earlier but there, at the top of the list, was a return message from the ex-KGB agent.

Dear Weylin:

My father has asked that I take his place at the computer, he is not fond of typing. He has confirmed the apparent origin of your e-mail. The content, on the other hand, might possibly represent a coded message. Father will respond with his thoughts when he has reached a conclusion.

On another note, I enjoyed the brief time we spent together. Pity it couldn't have lasted longer.

Regards,

Svetlana

A coded message, he thought, who would have sent it and why? And, according to Vincent, it came from somewhere in the Mideast via Murmansk. Reading Svetlana's message once again, he pondered, I wonder how she would react to an invitation to meet me in Italy? I really did enjoy her company. He drained the last few drops of madeira from his glass while composing a reply to her message. I hope she gets to read the note before Sascha, he mused, as he clicked the send icon.

Morning arrived sooner than desired. Reluctantly, he flung his legs over the side of the bed feeling sleep deprived but with a renewed sense of purpose and freedom. He quickly showered, dressed and drove to the office.

"For a man who sounded so ill yesterday, you seem awfully chipper," Martha declared, as he walked past her desk whistling softly.

"I feel great today and I've decided to take an unscheduled vacation," he said.

“It’s about time you starting thinking about yourself. Condor won’t crumble without you.”

“Are you saying that I’m not needed around here?” Weylin chuckled.

“You know what I mean.”

Halfway through the entrance to his office, he stopped and turned to face his secretary. “Martha,” he said, “do me a favor and check on Alitalia’s business class flights to Pisa leaving towards the end of this week.”

“Returning when?”

“Leave the return date open but I won’t be gone more than two weeks. Oh, one other thing, put a call through to Mr. Dobbs and when you’re done with that, arrange a short lunchtime meeting between myself and our two senior vice presidents.”

While waiting for his call to Dobbs, Weylin began compiling a list of things to be done at the McCain Vineyard. Deciding that a typewritten program would be better, he put aside his ballpoint pen and turned to the laptop seated off to one side of the desk. Let’s see, he said to himself, if possible, relabel all bottles currently in stock with the McCain logo. Make certain that the wine remaining in barrels is placed in McCain labeled bottles and cartons. The remainder of the list pertained to accounting issues, employees and the establishment of a new distribution network. Turning away from the computer, he dialed the number of a rare bottle wine distributor, Armond, with whom he had established a friendly relationship over the years. “Armond?” Weylin inquired.

“Yes, it is I,” he responded.

“It’s Weylin McCain.”

“What fortunate timing, I have just taken delivery of a case of a wonderfully aged Gran Cru ...”

“My cellar,” he interrupted, “is bursting at the seams right now but I might be interested. Listen, Armond, I need your expertise and assistance.”

“Of course, my friend.”

“I have recently purchased a small vineyard in Bolgheri, Italy, that produces a magnificent Cabernet.”

“Congratulations. A wonderful region, what is it called?”

“It was called Camalia but I have changed the name to McCain Vineyard. The product has been distributed locally only but in my opinion, it’s worthy of a high-end boutique distribution.”

“You have piqued my curiosity.”

“Can you arrange for it to be reviewed and rated by one of the well known wine experts?”

“I trust your palate my friend but before I place my reputation in jeopardy I would have to sample it myself.”

“I’ll have several bottles shipped to you immediately.”

Dobbs called back later that morning, pleased that Weylin had thought to call him first about his vacation plans but not entirely secure with the planned absence. It took

Weylin's repeated assurance that a satellite phone would be at his side at all times, before Dobbs expressed a modicum of acceptance.

Weylin met with his vice presidents as planned but his mind was elsewhere. Martha had transcribed his dictated list of their proposed duties; it required little explanation. While the VP's sat at his usual table in the executive dining room reviewing the list and eating lunch, Weylin conjured images, first of his new vineyard and the surrounding picturesque countryside and then of Svetlana. Since their chance meeting in Florence, she had surfaced in many of his nightly dreams. The mornings following those dreams were the most satisfying and relaxing, so much so, that he tried to evoke them by thinking about her before drifting off to sleep.

"Could you expand upon the last item on the list, Dr. McCain?" one of the VP's asked.

Svetlana's face momentarily faded as he returned from his reverie. "I'm certain you both recall the recent antiabortion demonstration?" he said.

"Yes, of course," they replied in unison.

"In order to coerce them into leaving, I foolishly promised their representative a voice at an upcoming board meeting. I've instructed my secretary to notify either of you should he call in my absence. Stall him until I get back. I'll deal with it then."

The meeting over, he returned to his office anxious to check the computer for e-mail, hoping that there might be an answer from Svetlana, not from Sascha. Damn, he thought to himself, after scrolling through the long list of messages, no reply yet.

Martha had placed a list of available flights on his desk pad and as he considered the

various departure times, he flashed back to his most recent visit. That small hotel in Pisa was acceptable, he said to himself, but if Svetlana agrees to meet me I would like something more romantic. All those dreams, they were more metaphysical than sexual. I must find out if the truth lies within. Since the death of my wife, I've avoided emotional attachment but that was a mistake. Sure, I told myself that it was to limit the potential for derailment along the road to success but who was I kidding? It was the fear of vulnerability that kept my emotional door shut. That night in Florence unlocked it--brought back those old feelings.

He was about to call the American Express travel service to ask for a hotel recommendation when he was struck by an idea. The trattoria owner, Paolo, he seemed like a friendly sort, he remarked to himself, he offered his assistance if needed. I'm sure he could provide a more personal view of the available hotels. Sorting through a stack of business cards, he found the one Paolo had given him. As he gazed at the ornate desk clock positioned in front of him, he calculated the time difference and decided to send an e-mail rather than call. He composed a short message describing himself for purposes of clarity and asked for Paolo's assistance in finding a hotel accommodation with a romantic setting. In closing, he provided his Saturday arrival date as well as his gratitude for the anticipated assistance.

It was four-fifty P.M., Wednesday afternoon, and Weylin had spent the better part of the day making the necessary arrangements for his trip. He had sent an e-mail to the vineyard earlier in the day informing them of his intended arrival. In the message, he asked that all accounting records and operative documents be ready for his review. He was particularly explicit about requiring the presence of the managers from the winery and vineyard as well as

the enologist. Following a last minute glance at the computer, not finding any response to his e-mails, he sat back to organized his thoughts. I've got less than two days to finish up any loose ends here at Condor before my Friday evening flight, he told to himself. He closed the lid on the laptop, removed his cashmere topcoat from a hanger and headed for the parking lot.

The heavy metal door that was Condor's rear exit slammed with a bang as Weylin quickly walked towards his car. Although darkness was rapidly replacing the gray November daylight, the bright red Ferrari shone in the rays from the surrounding mercury vapor lamps. "Shit,shit,shit," he shouted, in the near empty parking lot. The words, *baby killer*, were written in white over the entire right side of the vehicle. Seething, thinking on first impression that the vandal had used spray paint, he surveyed the lot with clenched fists, hoping the perpetrator was still about. Seeing no movement and hearing only the soft wind blowing through the barren trees, he allowed his hand to brush across the defaced surface of the Ferrari. "What the hell is this?" he hissed, as the white substance blew from his fingers. "Thank God, it's only shaving cream."

Ryan will hear from me tomorrow, he promised himself, as he angrily turned the ignition key. In the meantime, I've got to find a place to wash off this crap.

After stopping for dinner at a local Japanese restaurant, Weylin returned home with a renewed sense of exhilaration. He bypassed the heat and eat dinner left by the housekeeper and went straight to his home computer to check for messages. A small icon blinked rapidly at the bottom of the screen indicating the arrival of new mail. Ignoring the multitude of spam messages, he zeroed in on two new arrivals; An e-mail bearing Sascha's address and signed by Svetlana, read: *I am flattered by your invitation. Please call the attached cell number so we may discuss it further.*

Beneath her note was a reply from Paolo: *Dear Dr. McCain, I am pleased by your respect for my opinion. The description of yourself was, however, unnecessary as your presence left a distinctive impression. I look forward to counting you as a new friend. With that said, the Castello di Magona is the most romantic venue that comes to mind in this region. I include a link to their web site for your review. The Castle is quite small, only five rooms and eight suites but, I have connections. Therefore, if you agree with my recommendation, e-mail me immediately and I will make the arrangements. Your new friend, Paolo. P.S. I look forward to sampling the McCain Cabernet.*

Wow, Weylin said to himself, while gazing at the Castello's photos, it's perfect. He quickly sent off a message to Paolo asking him to reserve for a full two weeks.

The phone call to Svetlana, on the other hand, required some thought. Why am I so nervous, he wondered. We're not exactly strangers, having been through bed and battle

together. He stared at the telephone for several more minutes, then dialed the Swiss cell number.

“Yes?” Svetlana’s familiar voice intoned.

“It’s Weylin, I’ve just received your message.”

Her voice softened. “I am glad you called. I enjoyed the time we had together in Florence and was saddened by your quick departure.”

“I found it hard to leave. It felt as if I had met you for the first time.”

“What you saw was a preview of the real Svetlana.”

“Would you like to ...”

“Yes,” she interrupted, “very much so but I must make certain my father does not have need for me.”

“I thought he was semiretired.”

“As did I but he is finding it difficult.”

“Did he read my e-mail?”

“No, he is away, attending to a legal matter.”

Relieved, after providing the location and description of the Castle, he suggested an arrival date that would allow for one week by himself to deal with the vineyard. Svetlana promised a speedy reply. He hung up smiling, while thinking, there is definitely something about that girl.

At Paolo's insistence, his brother-in-law waited at the Pisa airport for Weylin's arrival. He loaded the bags into the same Alpha Romeo that Weylin had rented on his last visit and together they drove into town. It was Saturday, seven-thirty A.M. local time, too early to visit Paolo at the trattoria and thank him. Therefore, after leaving Paolo's brother-in-law at his Avis store, Weylin continued on to the Castello di Magona.

Although the November climate was cold and damp, the Castle could be seen from a distance, enshrouded by an orange glow from the early morning sunlight. This place must be spectacular in the springtime, he remarked to himself, as he slowly drove towards the entrance, passing acres of once green grass and lush trees. Moments after exiting the Alpha, a uniformed attendant approached, retrieved his bags and after a brief introduction at the reception desk, escorted Weylin to his palatial suite. Incredible, he mused, looks as if nothing has changed since the time Leopold II called this place home.

The bedroom contained a large elevated bed covered with what appeared to be a colorful handwoven spread. The ceiling was beamed, paneled and adorned in its center with a large crystal chandelier. Elements of modernization were apparent throughout, as evidenced by the electric lighting, air-conditioning and modernized bathroom fixtures. Double doors opened onto a shallow terrace allowing the entrance of a soft, yet salty ocean breeze and from whence, rows of barren olive trees could be seen. Exactly as I pictured it, he thought to himself. I hope Svetlana likes my choice.

After a quick breakfast in the hotel's very private dining room, he got back into the Alpha for the short drive to the McCain Vineyard. The car came to a gradual halt one hundred feet before the entrance to the main building. Weylin opened the door, exited and stood beside the Alpha, admiring the vista. A large sign spelled out McCain Vineyard, S.p.A., in gold letters over a black background. "Damn, that's beautiful," he whispered. He got back into the car and drove on, parking directly in front of the building. The managers of the vineyard and winery were waiting for him as he passed through the front entrance. Although he half expected some form of festive formality, none was forthcoming.

The small welcoming committee got right down to business. The office of Alberto Capelli, the previous president, was now his own. Computer printouts covered the large rosewood desk. "These are the documents you requested," the winery manager announced in passable English, while pointing to the stack of pale green and white striped sheets of paper.

"I will attend to these shortly but at the moment, I would like to tour the facilities with the both of you," Weylin said.

"We are here at your disposal," a manager replied.

"Is Hathar, the enologist, here today?"

"Yes, Dr. McCain," the vineyard manager said, "she is in the underground control center."

"We'll save that part of the tour for last," Weylin said. "I'll need a few minutes to look around this office—I'll be with you both shortly."

As the two men exited, Weylin sat at the desk and examined the contents of the

drawers. They were empty, save for a partially chewed pencil and a yellow pad. The walls of the spacious office, once covered with framed posters and paintings, were now a hodgepodge of variously faded rectangles. Weylin examined the masticated pencil, tossed it into a nearby trash can and withdrew a ballpoint pen from his pocket. OK, he said to himself, as he began writing on the yellow pad, let's paint this room a nice warm beige and cover the walls with a few tastefully framed prints. Oh yeah, he mused, while gazing down at the floor, and get this marble polished.

Carrying the yellow pad under his arm, he joined the two waiting managers. "Alright, gentleman, let's get started," he ordered.

The first stop on his agenda was the winery, a large warehouse-like structure that housed the entire wine making process. Standing at its entrance, the long line of large stainless steel vats and wooden barrels was impressive. The room was brightly lit with florescents and was remarkably free of odor save for that of the oak barrels. As they slowly walked from vessel to vessel, the winery manager described the steps followed in their wine making process. "These metal vats have been cleaned and are now empty," the manager proclaimed. "The last crush was in September and the wine is now aging in those casks," he added, while pointing to a long row of stacked oak barrels.

"How long do you age before bottling?" Weylin asked.

"In the old days, they would keep the wine in barrels for years but now, we fill the bottles after one year in wood and age for another one to two before release."

"Where are you storing the currently aging bottles?"

"They are in the attached building, we go there next."

The second building, slightly smaller than the first, was connected via a wide vine covered driveway. Passing through a pair of fifteen foot high sliding metal doors, they entered the bottling and storage facility. Weylin stopped briefly at a large machine where workers were busy attaching the new McCain labels. As he watched, a stone faced workman approached and handed him a sample. Weylin, impressed with its appearance, shook the worker's hand and rejoined the managers who were standing in the middle of the room examining stacks of unmarked bottles that had just been transported from the storage area. "Some of these bottles appear to have been used before," Weylin observed, while lifting one from a crate and pointing at the bits of paper still glued to the glass.

"We did our best to remove the old Camalia labels," the manager apologized. "They will go on that conveyor belt over there," he said, while gesturing across the room, "and pass through the labeling machine for the new one."

"Where do they go from here?"

"These are ready for release."

"How many bottles do we have at this stage?"

"They will fill five hundred cases."

Weylin walked several paces away from the men and surveyed the crates of bottles as they were being prepared for the conveyor belt. This wine was not produced on my watch, he remarked to himself, I'm not certain it should carry the McCain branding but it appears to be too late for a change of plans. "As you know," he said, upon rejoining the manager, "our contract with the hospital system has expired and will not be renewed. I am in the process of making other arrangements that will most likely involve the exportation of a portion of our

production.”

“We are not accustomed to storing bottles that are ready for release,” the manager said, with a questioning tone.

“Have no fear, they’ll be gone before the next bottling session. By the way, I would like you to send several cases, with the McCain label, to addresses that I will provide.”

“Signore Capelli set aside ten unlabelled cases from last year’s release for the new owner. It was our best production so far, although, with further aging, the current release should surpass it,” the manager gloated.

“Please have the McCain label placed on those bottles and pack them in the newly marked crates.”

As Weylin prepared to examine the darkened storage room, to his surprise, the manager called upon a group of workers to remove the bottles that they had just placed on the conveyor belt. Not wishing to interfere with the manager’s authority, he leaned against a nearby wall and watched, while a second group of employees drove a forklift into the storage room, exiting several minutes later carrying ten strangely marked cases. These cases were then quickly unloaded and placed on the belt for labeling. The managers then joined him and walked towards the storage area. “Why did you rush to label those bottles?” Weylin asked.

The manager hesitated, appearing momentarily confused. “They were unmarked,” he responded, “I did not wish to confuse them with the current release.”

Seems logical, Weylin commented to himself, as he continued to walk on. Following a quick journey through the storage room, they passed into daylight and headed towards the underground control center/laboratory. Upon reaching the elevator, forgetting for the

moment that he was the boss, Weylin turned to face the managers. “I think I can handle it from here,” he said, “I’ve taken enough of your time—thank you both.”

The elevator rapidly dropped beneath the surface for a distance of two floors. He exited and walked through a maze of computer terminals, microscopes and other unfamiliar machines, while thinking to himself, looks like a smaller version of Condor’s genetics lab. Hathar’s square, white coated figure was clearly visible through the plate glass window that enclosed her office. Weylin approached and entered after gently knocking on the glass.

“Ah, Dr. McCain. I was expecting you,” Hathar exclaimed.

“I’ve spent the last few hours with the managers of the winery and vineyard. I am prepared to spend the rest of the day with you,” he said.

“I am at your service.”

“On my last visit, you rather diplomatically avoided a discussion of your disease preventing process. Since I am the new owner of this establishment and a licensee of your process, I expect an explanation.”

“Yes, you are entitled. If you would follow me, I will explain as best I can.”

Weylin followed her into a twenty by twenty foot stark white room and sat beside her at a large computer terminal. “Why is everything in this room white?” he inquired.

“Once your eyes adjust to the colorless brightness, it becomes possible to appreciate the slightest changes in contrast or hue. This is important for our microscopic work,” she replied, as she swivelled on her chair while pointing to a long table behind them that contained fifteen equally spaced white microscopes. “If you recall, this facility was originally constructed as a research center. The sale of wine was never its intended purpose, although,

it has paid for a small portion of our operating expenses.”

“You were about to explain the process,” Weylin reminded.

“I do not wish to bore you with an extensive discussion of complex biochemistry, however, I would be happy to supply you with our documentation if you so desire. Suffice it to say, that after years of investigation, I have synthesized an agent that can be liquified and supplied to the vine’s root system. It is thereby absorbed by the plant and subsequently incorporated into its fruit producing mechanism.”

“Doesn’t it interfere with the sugar content or the eventual taste of the grape?”

“No, in fact, it actually alters the quality in a favorable and reproducible way.”

“Since your agent is a pesticide of sorts, is there any danger for humans?”

She smiled, and avoiding eye contact gazed at her wristwatch. “It is almost time for lunch and I believe a special welcoming meal has been prepared. We can continue afterwards.”

“Lunch can wait. The answer, please.”

“Very well. My process requires two separate but necessary components. Part one consists of a modified version of a conventional pesticide, applied to the grapes by means of a surface mist.”

“Those vertical pipes peppering the vineyard, they are the supply vehicles?”

“Yes.”

“OK, continue.”

“The second, and most critical part, is supplied directly to the vine’s root system by means of underground tubing. This agent, once incorporated into the vine and later the fruit, stimulates and increases the effectiveness of the modified surface agent. So, as you can see,

the pesticide is never truly introduced into the fruit. As such, safety is assured.”

“What about the absorbed activating agent?”

“A glycoside, a harmless sugar compound. I assure you, it is quite safe. We have been distributing our wine to the local hospitals for several years now and have had no problems.”

Satisfied with Hathar’s explanation, Weylin endured the congratulatory luncheon and the inevitable questions regarding the tenure of the current staff. He assured those present that no major changes were afoot. While he sat at the table watching his managers enjoy their specially made pasta, along with several bottles of McCain Cabernet, he realized that a business decision was forthcoming. I really need an overall manager, he said to himself, and there is no one to promote from within.

As the diners prepared to leave the table and return to work, Weylin asked the winery manager to stay behind. “You seem to be the spokesperson for the group,” he said. “So far, I am very pleased with the work you and your fellow managers have been doing and have no intention of making any changes. However, in order to keep things running smoothly, I need a supervisor who can oversee the entire business and communicate with me. I would like that to be someone from the outside. Do you know of anyone in the local industry who might be suitable?”

The manager scratched his stubble encrusted chin for several seconds and then grinned. “When Camalia was sold,” he said, “Signore Capelli was discharged. He was a good and fair man and I believe that he is available.”

“Do you know how to contact him?”

“Yes. He calls from time to time to see how we are doing.”

“Give me his telephone number. I will give it some thought; thank you for your assistance.”

Returning to his office, he pondered, Capelli might be a good choice. After all, he ran this place before I got involved. Of course, he would have to be willing to accept a pay cut and a less splendid title. Before making a decision, however, he resolved to have dinner at Paolo’s trattoria and thank him, with a case of his newly labeled wine, for all he had done. He spent the remainder of the day reviewing a collection of computer generated financial printouts. He had already arranged for a case of McCain labeled wine to be sent to the wine distributor in the U.S.A. Enclosed, was a short note suggesting that the distributor remove a few bottles and forward them to the wine expert of his choice. He was free to keep the remainder for his own consumption.