

Chapter 11

As he guided the red Ferrari through the noisy rush hour traffic, Weylin was bothered. Not by the honking horns or the stench of diesel smoke from the sea of trucks and buses, but by something else. I should be ecstatic, he thought to himself, after all, I just bought a vineyard and winery. Then why, do I feel uneasy? OK, it was a strange day; first that ridiculous scene with Dobbs and then the FBI but no, that's not it ... it was that weird e-mail. Was it meant for me or someone else? And what kind of name is Max Bites?

He saw a break in traffic, downshifted and threaded his way through at terrifying speed, arriving at his condo in half the usual time. Stopping at the lobby, he retrieved the day's mail and hopped back into the waiting elevator in search of the comfort and sanctuary of his penthouse.

When Weylin's housekeeper took note of the numerous frozen food tins in the daily trash, she began to prepare meals that would be left in the oven or microwave along with instructions. As a result, Weylin acquired the habit of making the kitchen his first stop upon

entering the apartment. He quickly read the instructions, set the timer and the oven to the proper temperature and went directly to the bedroom to remove his boots and put on his old jeans. Looking at his watch, concluding that he had another twenty minutes before the bell, he sat down in the living room to watch the news. I need to look at that e-mail again, he said to himself, while gazing at the screen without really paying attention. It's probably a misdirected message but still, there's something in the wording that's oddly familiar, but what?

With the TV playing softly in the background, he padded into his home office, sat in front of the computer and accessed his Condor e-mail account. I still don't get it, he thought, while reading the message over several times and then, an epiphany. Could it have something to do with Cassandra? he wondered. After all, she is involved in the art world. Maybe Vincent can provide some insight. A few minutes later, roused by the oven timer, Weylin put the message aside in exchange for the housekeeper's succulent lasagna.

As he approached his office the next morning, he spied Martha emptying a bag of fresh bagels onto a plastic tray that she kept alongside the coffee machine. "Now don't say anything," she pleaded, noticing his piercing stare, "I know these are not on my diet but I couldn't resist."

"I won't tell anyone if you share," he promised. "I had a tough night and I don't feel like facing the dining room crowd."

He walked into his office, followed several minutes later by Martha carrying a tray

containing a mug of coffee, two fresh bagels, assorted spreads and a mound of bakery cookies. “Some diet,” he said, while shaking his head with disapproval. “When you finish gorging yourself, place a call to Vincent Black.”

“FBI?”

“Yes.”

The intercom buzzed ten minutes later and Weylin, with a mouthful of powdery cookies, wiped his hands and lifted the receiver. “What?” he mumbled.

“Agent Black on two.”

“Good morning, Weylin. I’m almost afraid to ask ,but what can I do for you?”

Vincent inquired.

“Sorry to bother you before your morning doughnut ...”

“This is the FBI,” he broke in, “we don’t do doughnuts.”

“Touché. I need your insight into a strange e-mail that I received yesterday.”

“Really, how strange?” Vincent asked, sarcastically.

“Rather than read it to you over the phone, I’d like to send it to your e-mail address. Ordinarily, I would have erased it but something about it troubles me. It makes reference to art and I’d like to make sure that it isn’t related to Cassandra, since I’ve taken your advice and distanced myself.”

“OK, send it on. I’ll have a look at it and see if I can figure out where it came from.”

“Thanks.”

“I’ll be in touch, I’m off to find some doughnuts.”

He returned the phone to its cradle and was about to begin his review of Condor’s quarterly statement when the intercom buzzed again. “Yes Martha?” he said, with a tinge of

annoyance.

“Two things, security called to say that the pickets are out front again and the tramp is on line three.”

“What are you talking about?”

“The pickets or the tramp?”

“Whose the tramp?”

“That floozy in the short tight dress from the other day.”

“Jealous, at your age?” he marveled, then picked up the waiting call. “This is Dr. McCain.”

“Please hold for Mr. Basso,” the throaty voice said.

“Weylin, it’s a done deal. FedEx just delivered the signed contracts and copies of the name change forms. Things don’t happen too quickly in Italy, the actual name change registration may take awhile but their lawyer said we can change the sign at the vineyard and start the relabeling process at anytime.”

“Can’t wait to get started. The hospital contracts expire in four weeks and I won’t renew. I figure I’ve got nine to ten months before the next harvest and during that time I’ll devise a new distribution plan.”

“What will you do for cash flow until then?”

“Half of this year’s small production is still stored at the winery. I think I can bump up the price and find a home for it. That should be enough to cover the overhead until next season.”

“I guess you’ll be leaving for Bolgheri sometime soon?” Charlie asked.

“As soon as I can but in the short term, the place can pretty much run by itself with

the remaining staff.”

He put the phone down and was halfway out of his chair, when the intercom came alive. “What now, Martha?” he snapped.

“Dr. McCain, sorry to bother you but Chief Ryan called and asked if you could spare a few minutes to talk with him in the lobby.”

“Was he kind enough to tell you why he needs me as opposed to anyone of our other numerous executives?”

“It’s that antiabortion group again.”

“Oh shit,” he breathed, slamming his fist on the unopened quarterly statement. “Tell him I’ll be down in a few minutes.”

Bob Ryan was in the lobby, pacing back and forth, when Weylin exited the elevator and walked directly towards him. “What’s the problem?” he asked.

Ryan turned and pointed through the glass enclosed front entrance. “There must be a few hundred of them packed close together and sitting on the ground blocking the entrance,” he said.

“And you couldn’t handle this yourself?”

“They won’t disperse until their organizer speaks to someone with authority.”

“There’s the authority,” he said, stabbing angrily at Ryan’s badge, “and you’re wearing it.”

“They asked for you, sir,” he replied in a subservient tone.

“I’m not going out there, they’ll tear me apart.”

Ryan placed his hands on his hips and tilted his head.

“OK,” Weylin acquiesced, give me a megaphone and I’ll talk to them from the

second floor balcony, it overlooks the entrance.”

The organizer promised that they would cease and desist if Condor would remove Delta 6 from the market. Weylin explained, diplomatically, that he could not make that decision on his own. Following twenty-five minutes of negotiations, Weylin agreed to allow the group’s attorney to address their concerns to the Condor board at some future date; they left.

He handed the megaphone to Ryan and returned to his office, commenting to himself, the board will never go for that meeting but at least I’ll have bought some time.

The end of another business day, he had just turned off his office laptop, in preparation for departure, when his direct phone line rang. “McCain here,” he said, after having considered ignoring it.

“Weylin, it’s Vincent. Glad I caught you before you left for the day.”

“Should I be sitting down?” he asked.

“Who do you know in Murmansk?” Vincent said, ignoring Weylin’s jest.

“Why do you ask?”

“That e-mail you forwarded to me was sent from Murmansk, Russia, however, there are signs that suggest it was only the next to last stop on its worldwide tour.”

“Worldwide tour?”

“Yeah, if someone had the technology and wanted to hide the point of origin of their message, they could use a technique that routes the e-mail from one server to another almost indefinitely, making it difficult to determine the original source. The technique is not infallible, however.”

“Does that mean you know who sent it?”

“No, but we think it originated somewhere in the Middle East.”

“Any thoughts on its interpretation?”

“If I had to guess, I’d say that it reached the wrong party. Probably meant for someone with a similar e-mail address.”

“Thanks anyway; speak to you,” Weylin said.

“No problem,” Vincent replied, then hung up.

I’d like to believe it was a case of mistaken identity, Weylin mused, as he left the office and headed for the parking lot, but something about it still bothers me.