

Chapter 12

What a day, Weylin thought to himself, as he sat in his dining room tearing off pieces of French bread and dunking them into the remains of his chilli.

Having put the dishes in the sink, he retired to the living room, poured a small glass of madeira and sat before the TV to watch the late night news. A brief interval of light sleep, brought on by the monotonous drone of the newscaster, was rudely interrupted by the ringing telephone. He rubbed his eyes and looked at his watch. Ten-thirty, he remarked to himself, who could that be? Putting the receiver to his ear, he was startled by a metallic sounding voice. “Are you enjoying the antique vase that you purchased from Ms. Bannister?” the voice asked.

“Who is this?” he snapped.

“Just a concerned citizen.”

“What do you want?”

“To remind you that you lied.”

“About what?”

“You claimed your relationship with Bannister was purely social but we know that is not true.”

Surprised and confused by the caller’s allegation, he violently hung up the phone, wondering, who would have that information other than Cassandra and myself? It was a legitimate purchase, although, I paid cash and received no invoice or receipt. Before he had time to think about it further, the phone rang again.

“Guess who?” the metallic voice crooned.

“Who are you?”

“Don’t you recognize my voice?”

“Look,” he hissed, “if you persist, I’m going to call the police.”

“I don’t think that would be in your best interest.”

“OK, tell me why—that is your plan, isn’t it?”

“How intuitive of you. Alright, how much time would it take Condor security to escort you to the parking lot if the board found out you had lied to them?”

“How do you know about the vase?” Weylin asked, hoping to encourage the caller to slip and reveal his identity.

“I’ll never tell ... or will I? Let’s see, Condor board, FBI, local police, my gosh the possibilities are limitless.”

His heart was pounding, the caller had gotten to him. Blackmail, he said to himself, it’s a dead end street and one that I will not walk on. His knuckles turned white as he gripped the receiver. “What do you want?” he growled.

“Tonight’s special introductory offer of silence, for those who respond immediately,

is one million dollars in unmarked bills to be delivered where and when I say.”

“Are you nuts, I don’t have that kind of cash!”

“To keep your job you’ll find it.”

The caller’s last word was abruptly followed by a resounding click and the line went dead.

Weylin sat immobile, not knowing what to think or do. If I call the police, he said to himself, word will certainly get out and that’s bound to raise more questions. It’s got to be one of Cassandra’s employees, who else would know. Damn, Vincent was right when he said she was radioactive. If it hadn’t been for my desire for social elevation I would never have gotten involved with her in the first place. I need to think long and hard about my aspirations. The higher the climb the greater the fall, he mused, while trying to remember who said it.

By the time morning had arrived, he had decided to call the only person he could confide in. I hope Vincent doesn’t get bent out of shape, he commented to himself, I’m really stretching our friendship to the limits. He put the newspaper aside and reached for the kitchen wall phone and then quickly let his hand drop, thinking, I’d better use a different phone; you never know when someone is listening.

He left the condo in search of a payphone, finally finding a working instrument not far from his office. “Special Agent Vincent Black, please,” he said, when the FBI operator answered.

“His line is busy, can someone else be of assistance?” the operator asked.

“No, I’ll hold for awhile.”

Eight minutes later, Vincent came on the line. “Good morning, Weylin, is this finally

a social call?”

“I wish it were,” he said, after a moment of hesitation.

“Well, if you’re calling about that e-mail, I don’t have anything new to report.”

“I’m not, it’s a different problem. Are your conversations recorded?”

“Yes, why do you ask?”

“It’s a personal matter. Can you call me back from a secure phone?”

“It’s raining like hell here in D.C., are you asking me to leave the building?”

“Unless you’ve got a better idea?”

“Aw gee--alright, give me the number.”

“Call my cell phone, you have the number I’m sure. When you call, I’ll give you another number that should be secure.”

Weylin got back into the Ferrari in search of another pay phone and found one behind a gas station where he waited for his cell phone to ring. Twenty minutes later, Vincent’s call came through. “Weylin, I want you to know that I wouldn’t do this for anyone else.”

“I really appreciate it but I’m in kind of a bind.”

“OK, I’m sitting down in the back of a Starbucks. Let me have it.”

He told Vincent about the phone call, repeating the caller’s words as best he could remember. “How should I handle this?” he asked, when he had finished.

“Has the blackmailer called back with the drop information?”

“Not yet.”

“Well, first of all, don’t give him one red cent because if you do, you’d be stepping onto a slippery slope that has no end.”

“What do you suggest?”

“Unofficially, I’m telling you to report it to the local police. If you don’t, and this issue surfaces somewhere in the media, it’s gonna look like you did something illegal and are attempting to hide it.”

“But if I do report it, there’s an excellent chance that it will draw media attention and I’ll be out of a job.”

“Yeah, damned if you do and damned if you don’t but at least you won’t be out a million bucks.”

“Isn’t there anyway we can stop this person without involving the police?”

“Aw-shucks Weylin, I wish I didn’t have this badge right now ... alright, listen carefully. When he calls back, and he will call, stall for time. Say that you are having difficulty putting the cash together. Ask for a few days. If he goes for it, maybe we can put together a sting at the drop site.”

“You’ll help?”

“Do you know anyone else dumb enough to offer?”

“I don’t know if I could ever repay you for all the help you’ve given me over the years.”

“Oh, I’ll think of something. Do you still have that encrypted satellite phone?”

“Yes.”

“Good. Here’s the number of a secure phone you can call when you have further information. It’s a little something I use when I don’t want the bureau eavesdropping.”

Weylin wrote down the number, hung up and drove on to the office.

\*\*\*

“Are you feeling OK?” Martha asked, as Weylin passed her desk on the way to his office.

“Of course, why?”

“You look flushed?”

“I was running late this morning--rushed a bit,” he said, as he entered and closed the door to his office. A pile of documents sat in the middle of his desk for review and signature and gazing at them, he frowned, eased into his leather desk chair and stared out the window at the gray, sunless sky. I never thought I could lose my ability to concentrate, he pondered. That blackmailer really got my attention, so many things depend on his silence even though I did nothing wrong. And now I’ve created further complication for myself by purchasing that vineyard. A huge investment for me and I can’t even begin to get personally involved until this mess is cleared up. His mind went blank for a few minutes while he watched the tall barren trees that surrounded the parking lot swaying in the cool breeze. Out of the blue, a thought surfaced, Murmansk. The e-mail came from Russia; could Sascha have sent it with some hidden meaning. On second thought, why would it have been sent from there rather than his country of residence, Switzerland. Still, might be worth a phone call and I haven’t spoken to him in some time.