

Chapter 14

It was four o'clock in the afternoon, Weylin had finally finished reviewing and signing the mound of documents that had been occupying his desk since early morning. The blackmailer's threat was in the back of his mind, slowing the process significantly. In addition, he now had the added burden of assuming control of the vineyard, a task whose magnitude was yet to be determined.

Taking a deep breath, he removed a black leather telephone directory from a bottom desk drawer and dialed Sascha's secure satellite phone. A familiar message, preceded by two rings, announced in both Russian and English, "Leave your name and number."

Five minutes later, Weylin's private line rang. "Good afternoon, my friend, to what do I owe this pleasure?" Sascha said, in perfect Americanized English.

"It's good to hear your voice. How are you?" Weylin replied.

"I am good, and you?"

"I had the pleasure of running into Svetlana," correcting himself, when he realized the

connotation, “meeting her, that is, in Florence.”

Clearing his throat in a knowing fashion, Sascha chuckled. “Yes,” he said, “she has told me so.”

“I never appreciated her sensitive side before.”

Sascha sighed. “Did you call to discuss your love life,” he complained, “or did you have something else in mind?”

Embarrassed, wondering how much she had told her father, he hesitated, then asked his question. “Did you by any chance send me an e-mail?”

“An e-mail? Why would I do that?”

“I received a strange e-mail that was apparently sent from Murmansk.”

“What did it say?”

“Something about an art forum having interest in my work.”

“Have you taken up painting, my friend?”

“No.”

“Then it was probably intended for someone else.”

“Just the same, there’s something about it that bothers me.”

“Well then, when you have a free moment, forward it to me. I’ll have a look at it and in exchange for your medical treatment of my Svetlana, there will be no charge.”

With the sheepishness of a teenager, Weylin laughed nervously. “Is Svetlana nearby?” he asked.

“You will have to pursue her on your own time. Good-bye, my friend,” Sascha said, as he terminated the connection.

That went well, didn’t it? Weylin remarked to himself, as he returned the phone to its

cradle.

After having saved the e-mail in question to a disk several days prior, he had purged the several hundred daily messages from his office computer. The disk is at home, he realized, it'll have to wait until later.

It was five-fifteen P.M.. Ever since the purchase of his new Ferrari, Weylin had looked forward to the end of the day anticipating the pleasure of driving it and soaking in its wonderfully aromatic leather interior. That day, however, the thought of returning home to await the blackmailer's demands was daunting.

Weylin turned the key in his front door lock, took a deep breath and entered. A handwritten note sat upon the entrance table, it said, *There is a meat casserole in the refrigerator. Preheat the oven to four-hundred and fifty degrees ...* She's a jewel, Weylin remarked to himself, as he followed her instructions and left the kitchen heading for the bedroom.

As he had done many nights before, he picked up the TV remote, turned on CNN and waited for the oven timer to call him to dinner. He gazed at the screen intently for several minutes and then pressed the off button thinking, caller ID, I never thought to look. Leaping off the sofa, he grabbed the nearby telephone and scrolled through the list, bypassing the familiar names and numbers and stopping only when he reached one that simply said, *caller unknown*. This must be the one, the time stamp fits. "Caller ID, useless piece of crap," he mumbled to himself, as he unwrapped a small telephone recording device he had purchased at a local Radio Shack and connected it to the phone.

Anxious, he finished the casserole, leaving the dishes on the table, and returned to the living room to await the inevitable call. At ten-thirty sharp, the phone rang and as he activated the recording device, the dreaded metallic voice said, “Are you ready to complete our transaction?”

“Listen,” Weylin said, “I’m having some difficulty putting together the required amount, I need a few more days.”

“That’s not how it works. I command, you follow.”

“Alright, but I’m doing my best. What do you suggest?”

Silence had replaced the eery voice, making Weylin think that the caller had hung up but then, it was back. “You have two days. If you are not ready by then, start looking for a new job.”

Weylin replayed the conversation with the hope that it might reveal its source but to no avail. The device used by the caller had completely altered the sound of the human voice. Leaving the living room, he walked back into the bedroom and removed his satellite phone from its charger. Turning on the encryption scheme, he dialed the number provided by Vincent. It rang several times before being answered. “Vincent, it’s Weylin. We have two days to come up with a plan.”

“OK, today’s Friday, we have the weekend to put this together. I figured it would play out this way, so, I’ve got an early flight from D.C. to Newark. I’ll call you from the airport before the flight leaves so you know what time to pick me up,” Vincent said.

“I’ll be there.”

Following a restless night, Weylin had fallen into a deep early morning sleep when he was awakened by Vincent's call. He rose, dressed, made a pot of coffee and killed time until the flight's scheduled arrival.

The flight was on time; he'd made only two trips around the airport, unable to stand or park, when he saw Vincent exiting the terminal with a small overnight bag. That's a relief, he thought, the Ferrari doesn't have much of a trunk. Vincent stopped when he saw Weylin's bright red car, gave him a high five and got in. "Big change from the old Corvette," he said, while carefully running his hand across the leather covered dashboard.

"Yeah," Weylin replied, solemnly, while he handed the small digital telephone recording device to Vincent. "Listen to the recording, see if it gives you any ideas."

The metallic voice was clearly reproduced by the device's tiny speaker. "Simple electronic gadget available at your friendly neighborhood spy shop," Vincent remarked.

"How could the blackmailer expect me to put together the cash over a weekend when I said I didn't have it as of Friday?"

"Probably an amateur, but it doesn't matter, you're weren't going to pay anyhow."

"Are you sure that's the right way to handle this?"

"Look, once these dirtbags get you on the hook, they never let you off. Besides, this isn't a life and death hostage situation."

"Well it is in a way. My job has become my life, it's who I am."

"If you want my help, that's the way we're gonna play it."

They spent Saturday and part of Sunday, constructing various what-if scenarios in anticipation of a Monday night phone call. Vincent had taken several vacation days and told Weylin that he would have to be back in D.C. by Wednesday at the latest.

It was ten o'clock Sunday evening. They had just returned from dinner at the Villa Torino when the phone rang. They looked at each other and then, Weylin pointed towards the den/office, waited a few more rings and picked up the receiver while Vincent did the same on an extension.

“Do you have the money?” the voice asked.

“You said I'd have two days,” Weylin said.

“Remember the rules; I make them.”

Vincent came running into the living room holding up a piece of paper on which he had written, *tell him you have the money*.

Shaking his head in affirmation, Weylin cleared his throat. “I have your money,” he said.

“Good. Now listen carefully as I give you the instructions. I will only say it once.”

Weylin grabbed a pen and watched briefly as Vincent withdrew a cell phone from his pocket and left the room.

The metallic voice began, “The money, hundreds or larger, should be put into the smallest suitcase possible. You are to rent a Mercury Marquis and put the suitcase into its trunk. The key is to be wedged behind the rear license plate after you lock and leave the car at ...” The instructions were lengthy and required that the car be parked in front of a specific x-rated video store in Atlantic City, at two A.M. Tuesday morning.

“If I leave the car, how do I get home and furthermore, what if the parking space is

occupied?” Weylin asked. There was no response.

“Hang up,” said Vincent. “I requested a trace to your phone number—we got it. Let’s go.”

The Ferrari screeched around several tight turns as they rushed to a pay phone in Fort Lee, New Jersey. Weylin stopped at the curb and Vincent exited, returning seconds later with a small handheld tape recorder. “Here’s your blackmailer,” he said, as he hit the play button and the familiar voice came to life. “He’s smart, probably thought the call might be traced due to its length,” he added.

“Now what?”

“We go home and get some sleep. I could have this dusted for prints but someone bright enough to use it would have worn gloves. Tomorrow, we’ll call around and see who has a Marquis to rent.”

“What happens when he finds the empty suitcase?”

“I’ve got a plan. We’re gonna catch him before he gets to open it.”

The local Avis agency had a white Mercury Marquis that Weylin rented early the next morning, along with a nondescript brown Buick. The second car was to be driven by Vincent, who would park, with the engine running, a distance away from Weylin’s and watch for the blackmailer to approach the Mercury. The blackmailer had instructed Weylin to leave the car and walk south without looking back.

They left the condo at ten P.M. to allow enough time to carefully explore the area

around the drop site and to be assured of a parking space. At two A.M., with the Mercury parked in front of the video store, Weylin exited and removed a battered vinyl suitcase from the rear seat, conspicuously placing it in the trunk. With the back of his legs pressed against the rear bumper, he reached behind and wedged the key between the trunk lid and the license plate and walked away. Vincent, parked less than one hundred feet north of the Marquis, had a clear view of the video store. Weylin, rather than continue walking, had taken refuge around the corner from the video store. Removing a handheld mirror from his pocket, he extended his arm and positioned it for a view of the Mercury, while a kaleidoscope of neon signs momentarily obscured his vision. The street was still crowded with a mass of seedy people bustling about in no particular direction. A wino passed by as he stood on the corner with his mirror, stared at him for a few seconds, took a swig from a concealed bottle of cheap wine and continued walking. Right now, he pondered, the bum looks more normal than I do.

At ten minutes past two, a black clad figure emerged from the video store and approached the Marquis. The person's face was invisible beneath their neutral gendered black floppy hat, as they leaned against the car's rear fender.

Weylin's anxiety had reached a peak by the time the figure began to slowly inch towards the trunk and with sweat pouring down his arms, he dropped the mirror, quickly reaching for it but missed. It fell with a resounding crash. The black clad figure, already bending towards the license plate, looked up, turned and ran, catching its pocket on the side view mirror of a nearby parked vehicle. Weylin, now on his feet, took off in pursuit but lost sight of the figure in a dark alley. He returned to the Marquis to find Vincent looking in the video store window. "Why didn't you run after him, you were closer?" Weylin asked.

"I'm getting too old for the chase, besides, I saw him drop something when he hit

that car over there,” Vincent remarked, while holding up a key chain with an attached plastic tag.

“What’s that?”

“It’s a key to something, but the tag is from a Hackensack parking lot and it’s got a magnetic strip on the back.”

“So?”

“Think! It probably opens the entry gate to the lot. All we have to do is find the parking lot and we’ve got him.”

“There’s no address or phone number on the card,” Weylin observed, while examining it, “only the word Hackensack. There must be hundreds of parking facilities.”

“Turn it over, see that magnetic strip? They often contain all kinds of information. First thing in the morning we’ll stop by the local FBI office and see if they have a reader.”

“Probably doesn’t matter, the blackmailer must have seen me when he ran and will certainly spill the goods,” Weylin bemoaned.

“I doubt it,” Vincent said, “it was too dark. He’ll call again and set up another drop for sure.”

Later that morning, after only several hours of sleep, Weylin placed a call to his office. “Martha, it’s Dr. McCain. I may not be in today. Please reschedule any appointments in my book.”

“Are you ill?” she asked.

“Yes, a little under the weather,” he said, feeling uncomfortable with the fib.

“Please call if there is anything you need.”

“Thank you Martha,” Weylin said, before he hung up.

After a quick breakfast, they returned the Marquis but decided to keep the Buick for the rest of the day; the Ferrari was too conspicuous for their intended purpose.

Fortunately, the local FBI office had the necessary equipment to explore the content of the lost card’s magnetic strip. While Vincent disappeared into the depths of the FBI’s fraud unit, Weylin, seated in the small outer office, busied himself with a copy of Wine Spectator Magazine. Damn, this mess has really dulled my excitement for the new vineyard, he thought to himself, but it’s my responsibility now and I need to attend to it.

Vincent reappeared fifteen minutes later, waving a sheet of paper as he approached.

“You gotta love this technology,” he said, when he stopped in front of Weylin.

“What have you got?”

“The card contained a lot of data, most of it useless for our purposes, however, it did reveal three important facts. The address of the lot, the assigned number of the holder and the date of expiration.”

“Is it current?”

“You bet, let’s go.”

The traffic leading into Hackensack was intense but they pulled into the parking lot thirty minutes later using the lost card. The magnetic strip had revealed the owner’s assigned space; it was empty, so they parked and left the garage.

“Anything around here look familiar?” Vincent inquired, once they reached the street.

Weylin surveyed the buildings that lined both sides of the street. “As a matter of fact,” he said, “that beige building across the street is where Charlie Basso has his office.”

“Who?” Vincent asked.

“He’s my financial/investment advisor. Wait a minute, he knows about the vase and he has a fair idea of what I have to spend. In fact, he just closed a deal for me on a small vineyard in Italy.”

“Vineyard? Man, you’ve come a long way.”

“You don’t think ...?”

“If it looks like it and smells like it, it probably is.”

They crossed the street but before entering the building, Vincent stopped, reached into his pocket and removed a small writing pad. “How many people does he employ?”

“It’s just Charlie and his secretary—never did get her name.”

“OK, here’s the plan,” he said, stuffing the pad back into his pocket, “we walk in together and ask to see this Basso guy. You tell him that I need an advisor, which ain’t far from the truth since I spend more than I earn. Then I’ll lay the garage card on his desk and flash my badge and see what happens.”

When they reached the entrance to Charlie’s fourth floor office, Vincent stopped, adjusted the gray department store suit jacket over his wide shoulders and produced a devilish grin. “Let’s do it,” he said.

When the door opened, Charlie’s secretary, apparently surprised by their abrupt entry, dropped a coffee cup that she was about to drink from. “My God,” Weylin exclaimed, “did you burn yourself?”

“My fault,” she whispered, coquettishly, “I wasn’t concentrating.”

“Is he in, we need to talk to him?” Weylin said.

She shook her head as if to say yes, picked up the phone to announce their presence and pointed to Charlie’s door.

After closing the door behind them, Weylin, about to make the introduction, was interrupted by Vincent who put his hand on Weylin’s arm. “Change of plans,” he bellowed. Without another word, Vincent produced the garage card and his badge, holding them in front of Charlie’s face.

“What’s this about?” Charlie asked, clearly flustered.

“I’m the lost and found,” Vincent said. “Is this your card?”

Charlie nervously grasped the card, carefully examining both sides. “No,” he stammered. “What’s it for?”

Vincent frowned, looked first at Weylin and then at Charlie. “Where do you park your car?” he demanded.

“I don’t,” Charlie replied. “The building has an on demand valet service. I call when I need it and they bring it from a nearby garage.”

“Where does your secretary park?” Vincent demanded, as he leaned forward and ripped the card from Charlie’s fingers.

“Across the street, I think,” he said. “Why?”

Vincent bounded through the door to the outer office but the secretary was already running into the corridor, her stiletto heeled shoes clacking on the granite floor. She tried to run down the stairs but tripped and fell on the first landing. Vincent bounded down the stairs and grabbed her. “Rape! Rape!” she shouted, while at the same time tearing open the front of her blouse, freeing her voluminous breasts to the Vincent’s astonishment.

“That ain’t gonna work,” he growled, as he cuffed and mirandized her, while flashing his badge at the same time. Covering her chest with his suit jacket, he dragged her back to Charlie’s office, locked the outer door and threw her into a chair.

With little effort, and with Weylin and Charlie standing by his side, Vincent managed to squeeze the truth out of her. It was revealed, that a daily dose of her visible sexual attributes was more than Charlie could bear. His unrealistic desire for her had caused him to reveal confidential client information in an attempt to establish an intimate relationship. It was no surprise, therefore, that she knew of the vase purchase and Weylin’s association with Cassandra.

Leaving the embarrassed Charlie to guard and glare angrily at the cowering secretary, Weylin pulled Vincent aside. “Look,” he said, “I know we should turn her over to the police but doing so will create a pile of publicity. Can’t we just scare the shit out of her, have Charlie fire her and threaten her with jail if she ever speaks out?”

Swiping the back of his right hand over a sweaty brow, Vincent took a deep breath and sighed. “That might work,” he agreed. “She doesn’t look like a hardened criminal. Most likely the product of too little pay and too much television.”

When posed with the prospect of jail, she happily accepted the alternative. Removing an old sweater from his personal closet and handing it to her to replace Vincent’s jacket, Charlie bid a tearful goodbye to his fantasy.

“I’d better find a new advisor,” Weylin remarked, as he and Vincent drove back to the condo.

“If he’s done a good job in the past, you can’t blame him for his hormones,” Vincent commented with a yawn.

“Yeah, but there’s a little matter of trust.”

After a quick lunch, Vincent returned the rented Buick while Weylin followed in the Ferrari with his friend’s overnight bag. At the airport, Vincent extended his hand but Weylin stepped forward and embraced him. “You’ve been a good friend, Vincent--the best. If there’s anything I can ever do for you, just ask.”

“How ‘bout a case of McCain wine,” he said, as his flight was announced.

“You got it.”

They shook hands and departed.