

Chapter 21

Weeks had passed since the wine exposition and Weylin had not heard from his distributor. Anxious, he placed a call. “Armond, it’s Weylin McCain. Any word on the wine shipment?”

“It passed through Customs yesterday,” he replied, “and should be on my loading dock by this afternoon.”

“It was shipped by air express three weeks ago and arrived the next day ... why so long?”

“I’m told that security screening has delayed everything but don’t despair, my agent arranged for it to be stored in a refrigerated locker and besides, it’s cold outside.”

Four hundred and ten cases just sitting and waiting, he said to himself, as he hung up the office phone. The orders were all cash on delivery and, of course, Armond will not pay for the shipment until he’s been paid. I should never have agreed to that stipulation. There still are approximately eighty odd cases remaining. I wonder if Paolo needs any more?

Winter had convincingly arrived. It was late afternoon, middle of the Condor work week, and Weylin turned briefly to gaze out of the office window. The barren trees surrounding the parking lot bowed under the weight of their snow covered branches. Looking down, a speck of red shone through the fresh coat of light snow that covered the Ferrari like so much powdered sugar. I don't know why, but this weather makes me miss her, he mused. Never in my wildest dreams could I have envisioned Svetlana evoking these feelings, however, there's no denying it. I don't think I can put off the call to Sascha much longer; my last conversation with Svetlana revealed her impatience.

Earlier, Martha had taken a message from Vincent thanking Weylin for the case of wine that he'd sent. Weylin had dialed his private number several times during the day but encountered only a recorded message. He glanced at the desk clock, four-thirty, he remarked to himself, too early to call Paolo, I'll try him from home.

The time difference had made communication with the winery an onerous task and as a result, most of his correspondence was accomplished via e-mail or evening calls from home.

After dinner that evening, he called Paolo at the trattoria. "Paolo, it's Weylin McCain. How are you?"

"I am fine but this is a sad day."

"Why is that?"

"I lost a dear friend last night."

“What happened?”

“His wife said that he was sitting at the dinner table surrounded by his three young children when he complained of feeling sick to the stomach. He then told her that he couldn’t feel his tongue and immediately thereafter stopped breathing.”

“Did they attempt CPR?”

“She called the ambulance but by the time they arrived he was already gone.”

“I’m sorry for your loss. Perhaps I should call back another time, I had a business related question?”

“Please, go ahead. Life must go on.”

“The winery seems to have a larger than anticipated inventory. Do you need any more?”

“Ah yes, the wine. I probably could use another few cases. I had given my ...,” Weylin could hear a few faint sniffles, “friend six bottles of your wine as a gift.”

“Call signore Capelli. By the way, if you know of any other local restaurateurs of your caliber who would be interested, please give their names to signore Capelli.”

“I will do so. Thank you.”

How unfortunate, he pondered, while resting the cordless phone on a countertop, to lose two relatively young friends in such a short span of time.

Chimes could be heard emanating from the living room. “Eleven bells,” Weylin murmured, while walking towards the marine version of a grandfather clock that he had received as a gift several years prior. Well, he thought, I think I’ve stalled long enough. One glass of madeira and then the dreaded conversation with Sascha.

Thirty minutes later, he dialed Sascha's private cell phone. It was five-thirty in the afternoon, Geneva time, he had half hoped that Sascha would be unavailable. After two rings, the answering machine picked up but was quickly interrupted by the familiar baritone voice.

"Dr. McCain, to what do I owe this pleasure?" Sascha asked.

"Good afternoon, Sascha, I hope you are well?"

"Yes, thank you, but surely you did not call to question my health."

Alright, the moment of truth, he said to himself. "I'm calling to talk about Svetlana."

"What has she done now?"

"She has developed into a wonderful woman whom I've grown quite fond of. I would like your permission to see her socially."

"Ah yes, the recent trip to Italy ... I knew she had a reason other than shopping."

"If there is blame to be placed, it's my fault; I invited her."

"My dear Weylin, she is a big girl, a woman, as you so aptly described her. She has been making her own decisions for some time now, but I am flattered by the consideration you have afforded me."

"So, I assume you do not object?"

"On the contrary, I am pleased with the prospect of her involvement with someone like yourself. She would do well to distance herself from our previous life. I trust there are no further clandestine incursions in your future?"

"Only in my nightmares."

"Then you have my blessing, if that is what you seek."

"Thank you. I doubt that Svetlana has made mention of it but, I have recently

purchased a vineyard and winery in Italy. It produces a fine Cabernet and I would like to send you a case.”

“An offering, so soon?”

“Not exactly,” he laughed, “just a gift to a friend with a discerning palate.”

“Well, in that case, I would be honored.”

“One more thing, have you had any further thoughts regarding the e-mail?”

“I gather that Svetlana has informed you of my interpretation?”

“Yes, but the part about *personal interest*, what do you make of that?”

“If we are to accept its literal meaning, I would assume that the author intends to imply that they have taken a personal interest in your activities.”

“Do you suggest any action or precautions?”

“Weylin, unless we can validate the author, I would do nothing. The message is sufficiently vague and although one might assume a veiled threat, it cannot be acted upon.”

“Still, it’s a bit unnerving.”

“Understandable, but keep in mind that your discountenance may be its very purpose.”

“I appreciate your input.”

“That was easier than I’d anticipated,” Weylin whispered to himself, as he hung up.

“I’ll call her tomorrow.”

“Dr. McCain,” Martha said, as he passed her desk the following morning on the way into his office. “Mr. Dobbs left a message for you early this morning.”

“Oh God, it’s too early for threats. I’ll need my breakfast and coffee first.”

“That was the message, sort of.”

“What?”

“He said to tell you that he would be having an early breakfast in the dining room and asked for you to join him.”

“How wonderful ... breakfast with a side order of indigestion.”

“Should I have something brought to your office?”

“You know, it’s OK to forget a message from time to time,” he said, as he turned and headed towards the dining room.

The corporate ethos lauded hard work and frowned upon idle time. As a result, most of Condor’s executives avoided the dining room during the breakfast hour. Accordingly, the room was empty, save for Dobbs, who occupied Weylin’s reserved table. Weylin forced a smile and approached. “Good morning Franklin,” he said, with an almost musical tone.

“Have a seat, Weylin.”

Before Weylin had made contact with the seat, a uniformed waiter placed a cup before him and filled it with coffee. “Your usual order, sir?” he asked.

“Yes, thank you.”

Dobbs took a long drink from his cup, lowered it and stared pensively at Weylin. “I wanted to fill you in on the meeting we had with the antiabortion representative,” he said.

“I hope you didn’t fall for their line.”

“Not exactly. We agreed to listen and that is all we did. No promises were made from either side, I might add.”

“So, where does that leave us?”

“Vulnerable.”

“Is there something the board wants me to do?”

“Unless you have a profitable replacement for Delta 6, I guess we just have to wait and see.”

At that moment, the waiter arrived with Weylin’s breakfast. Without another word, Dobbs rose and slowly left the table causing Weylin to spin around so violently that he barely avoided falling from his chair. Trailing beneath and behind Dobbs’ black blazer, for a distance of four to five feet, was a length of white toilet paper following him like a devoted puppy. What is it with that guy? Weylin remarked to himself, as Dobbs and his train exited the room.

Later that day, Armond called to say that the wine had arrived and that it was in the process of being delivered to the buyers.