

## Chapter 23

By Thursday morning, traffic leading up to Condor's front entrance had not improved. Weylin, however, had called ahead and notified Bob Ryan to be on the lookout for his rented green Buick. After allowing Weylin to pass ahead of the waiting line of cars and SUV's, Ryan entered his security vehicle and followed him to his parking spot. He stopped alongside the Buick and exited. "If you're trying to look inconspicuous," he said, "I'd find another place to park."

"Good point," Weylin agreed, as he restarted the engine and drove to a space fifty feet away.

Ryan rolled to a stop alongside once again and leaned out of the window. "If you don't mind riding with the help," he said, "I need to talk to you and now would be a good time."

Weylin entered the security vehicle and Ryan slowly rolled the car towards the back entrance. "The S.W.A.T. team," he said, "along with our guys, managed to interrogate most

of the demonstrators by early evening yesterday. Many, however, had taken off in a hurry when the police vans arrived.”

“Learn anything?”

“Two things. I think they’ve had enough for awhile but don’t count them out. The other is the most important ... we found a high powered rifle in the bushes.”

Hearing those words, Weylin turned briskly to face him. “What about the shooter?” he snarled.

“Long gone. The police dusted for prints but there were none. Probably wore gloves or wiped it clean before taking off.”

“Any clues to its origin?”

“You mean make and model?”

“Yes.”

“It’s an American made M24 SWS long range sniper rifle with a neat little scope. The odd thing about it, though, are the serial numbers. They don’t correspond with the series made for distribution to our armed services.”

“What does that mean?”

“I’m not sure. The cops are running the numbers through the FBI’s database. We might know something by the end of the day, however, I’m not taking any chances on a rematch. I’ve got a security detail patrolling the streets circumventing the complex. We’re keeping a close watch on any position that might hide a shooter. For the time being, pick another office to work from and keep moving around.”

“I’ll take your advice—let me know as soon as you hear from the police,” Weylin said,

as he exited the vehicle.

Approaching the lobby elevator, he found Martha seated in a chair awaiting his arrival.

“What are you doing here?” he asked.

“Mr. Ryan left a message for us to temporarily relocate.”

“I know, I just left him.”

“I’ve been waiting to take you to today’s office--oh, and the glazier called. He’ll be here this morning to take measurements for the window.”

“Tell him to make it bulletproof.”

Weylin took one look at his windowless office, frowned, snatched the newspaper from Martha’s hand and padded off to the dining room.

The waiter brought his usual western omelette and coffee. I don’t know how I’m going to work in that closet, he thought to himself, even if it is just for one day. He scanned the paper for any mention of the death described by the Villa Torino’s owner but none was found. The ongoing traffic chronicle had abandoned accusations in exchange for a list of ludicrous solutions.

Having wasted as much time as possible, he journeyed to the new location, lifted a stack of messages from Martha’s makeshift desk and took a seat in the desk chair that had been moved from his own office. At least something is familiar, he thought, as he settled into the comfortable rut that had formed in the natural leather.

With no distractions or window to draw his attention, the day passed quickly and productively until four P.M. when Martha knocked at his door. “Dr. McCain, Mr. Black is on line five.”

“Thank you, Martha,” he said, while lifting the receiver and punching the flashing button. “Hello Vincent, sorry for any delay but I’ve been moved to a windowless office.”

“There was no delay but I’ve got some information for you that the locals probably won’t release for awhile.”

“Good or bad?”

“Hard to say. I guess you’re aware of the rifle’s serial number issue?”

“Yes.”

“OK then, this particular weapon came from a lot ordered by and delivered to the I.D.F. on or about nineteen ninety-seven.”

“I.D.F.?”

“Israeli Defense Force.”

“You think the Israelis are out for me?”

“Not for a minute. I think the weapon was either stolen, sold or lost but who its last owner was is even more interesting.”

“Are you going to tell me or is it classified?”

“The local office will tell you eventually; please pretend that you’re surprised when they do.”

“OK, sure.”

“The rifle was clean externally but there were a few prints left in the oil residue covering some of the internal parts and on a cartridge casing found a few feet away. This guy was careless.”

“I appreciate the suspense but who is he?”

“The name is not important to you but I can say that he is on our *most wanted* list for killing a doctor at a rural abortion clinic. He’s not A.I.F. but just as rabid.”

“What are the chances of catching him ... I’d like to resume some semblance of a normal life?”

“He’s pretty cagy and seems to have considerable standing in his group, although, they all deny condoning his methods.”

“Doesn’t sound too promising.”

“We’re doing our best. Stay out of his sights!”

Hardly a comforting conversation, he said to himself, as he hung up the phone. I’ll give it until my window is replaced then, business as usual.

He drove home in the green Buick, parked in an empty space beside the Ferrari and cautiously made his way to the garage level elevator.

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Following a double portion of the housekeeper’s version of meatloaf, Weylin grabbed a cordless phone and dialed Svetlana’s Swiss cell number while walking towards the living room. “Svetlana?” he said, surprised to hear her voice.

“Who is calling?”

“It’s Weylin.”

“It’s been almost two weeks since we last spoke,” she hissed, softly.

“I’ve been thinking about you but there have been many problems in the past few

weeks and little time for anything else.”

“Do you want to see me again?”

“Very much so. Didn’t your father tell you about our conversation?”

“Yes, but they were only words. I am free to travel.”

“I would love to have you here with me but now is not a good time.”

“I see. Then you can tell me when it is a good time and I will tell you if I am available,” she said, petulantly.

“There is no other woman, if that’s what you are thinking.”

She did not respond.

“Did your father receive the case of wine?”

“Yes, he looked at the release date and decided it needed some time. It’s in the cellar.”

“OK, I’ll speak to you soon and we’ll make plans to meet again.”

“If I’m available,” she said, just before the connection ended.

Oh brother, he said to himself, I don’t need another source of anxiety right now; it makes no sense to get her involved in this sniper business even with her experience.

Glancing at the chiming clock sitting beside the large plasma screen TV, he pondered, eleven o’clock, time for the news. Switching to a local station, he sat back on the couch and prepared for the monotonous voice of the nightly commentator, unprepared for what ensued:

*We have been following a developing story that made its debut in a New York Times article condemning the City’s approach to traffic management. New York City’s trendy upscale restaurants, where in the past one could unconditionally depend upon high quality and lofty prices, have become the source of eight unexplained deaths in as many days. Health officials have noted, however, that there seems to be a common*

*thread comprising a unique pattern of symptoms consisting of facial and body numbness, abdominal distress and severe breathing difficulties that have in most cases led to rapid death. Although initially thought to be the result of a potent variety of food poisoning, none has been found. A police investigator offered her own interesting observation, noting that all of the victims had consumed at least two glasses of an Italian Cabernet, a type of red wine, prompting some commentators to refer to these events as the Red Death. We'll keep you informed as the story develops. And now, on to local news ...*

“Oh shit!” Weylin uttered through clenched teeth, his heart pounding, “there are only a few Italian Cabernets—but it can’t be McCain, I drank quite a bit in Pisa and so did ... wait a minute, Paolo’s friends.” Looking at his watch, he quickly calculated the time difference, thinking to himself, it’s about six o’clock in the evening in Pisa. Picking up the cordless phone that had been lying on the couch since Svetlana’s call, he dialed the trattoria’s number. He was about to hang up after ten rings, when an unfamiliar voice responded. “Pronto, Trattoria della Quaglia,” the voice announced.

“This is Weylin McCain calling from the U.S., is Paolo available?”

“Ah, Americano, aspetta.”

“Weylin my friend, sorry for the wait,” Paolo said, after a three minute interval, “we are very busy tonight with a private party that started very early. How are you?”

“I’m fine, but I called to ask you a question about your friends.”

“My friends?”

“The deaths you spoke about the last time. I remember you telling me about their breathing problems but was there anything else?”

“I think there was some vomiting and numbness but I don’t remember who had

what.”

“Do you recall if they drank McCain Cabernet with their last dinners,” Weylin asked, keeping his fingers crossed that they had not.

“One for sure, the other I had given several bottles as a gift. I don’t know if he drank it.”

“Could you find out, and one other thing, don’t drink or sell any until I get back to you.”

“I have not had any wine since our last dinner together. The day after you left, I had an appointment with my doctor and he told me that I am a diabetic. It is in my family, so, I guess that means no wine or desserts for awhile. But, why should I not serve it?”

“There may be a problem with it. Trust me, keep it in a safe place where none of your staff could accidentally sell it.”

“I still don’t understand.”

“There have been a few deaths in New York restaurants attributed to severe breathing problems. It’s not thought that they are related to the food but someone noted that the victims had all consumed several glasses of an Italian Cabernet without saying which one.”

“I will remove all my Cabernets from the menu. Thank you my friend but I must get back to the party.”

Reaching for a pen and pad, he quickly made a list of all of the people to whom he had personally sent his wine. I’d better call them right away, he thought, and Armond, I need to speak to him. Then again, maybe I’m acting prematurely, after all, it could be from another vineyard.