

Chapter 25

Friday morning, following a quick breakfast in the executive dining room, Weylin returned to his office in a state of anxiety. A Times article had rehashed the prior night's TV announcement, emphasizing the possible connection between the deaths and an Italian Cabernet. Nervously, he glanced at the desk clock. Still too early to call Armond, he realized, while drumming his fingers on the leather desk pad, wish I'd asked for his home number.

Unable to concentrate on the lengthy financial statement before him, he turned to the glowing laptop and scrolled through his e-mail. He waded through the usual accumulation of unwanted solicitations, deleting them one by one, until he encountered an uncomfortably familiar message, that said: *Past deeds spawn ominous actions from afar. Max Bites.* Another riddle, he thought, just what I need right now.

Recalling Sascha's interpretation of the prior message, he wondered, what past deeds--u-n-less, it refers to Olera and the prion debacle? It's the threat, however, that worries me the most. He quickly forwarded a copy of the message to Sascha's e-mail address, planning to call

him later on that day, checked the clock once again and dialed Armond who answered immediately.

“This is Armond, how can I help you?”

“Armond, it’s Weylin McCain. Did you happen to watch the news last night?”

“Yes and even worse, I have been contacted by the police.”

“The police? Why?”

“It seems that I am the sole New York distributor for the confiscated wines.”

“Then I guess McCain is among those under suspicion?”

“The situation is most disagreeable.”

“What do you mean?”

“My sources tell me that at present, McCain Cabernet is the prime suspect, in fact, it is the subject of intense laboratory analysis.”

“Are you telling me that all of the victims drank the Cabernet?”

“Indeed,” Armond said, with a saddened tone.

Incredulous and momentarily at a loss for words, Weylin stared into space trying to comprehend the magnitude of Armond’s statement. “Have you notified all of our customers?” he asked.

“That has not been necessary, they have contacted me as of early this morning. I was in the process of making arrangements for it all to be retrieved when you called. I assume McCain Vineyards will make good on these returns?”

Weylin swallowed hard. “Of course,” he said, “but there is still a chance that the wine was not responsible.”

“It hardly matters, my clients could not sell it under this dark cloud.”

“Send me an inventory of the returned cases and I will arrange for payment. Do not dispose of them, however. If the police lab finds anything suspicious, I will need the lot for an independent investigation.”

“There is the matter of storage.”

“I understand, Armond, I will pay for the space,” Weylin replied, angrily.

When the conversation ended, Weylin rose from the desk chair and stood in front of the now bullet proofed window. I really need to find out what the police know, he said to himself, but how likely are they to tell me? I’ve been using Vincent as my personal investigator- I’m sure there’s a limit to his largess but I have no choice.

He hastily buzzed the outer office. “Martha, see if you can get Vincent Black on the phone.”

“Yes sir.”

Twenty minutes later, he summoned her once again. “What happened to the call to Mr. Black?”

“They have me on hold, line four,” she said, “you can pick up and hold yourself, if you like.”

“Alright.”

As he pressed the line button, a voice said, “This is agent Black?”

“Vincent, it’s Weylin. How are you?”

“They’re coming at me from all sides today. What’s up?”

“Have you caught the shooter?”

“We’re workin’ on it.”

“I hesitate to ask, but have you heard anything on the news about possible wine related deaths in New York?”

“Yeah, I’m aware of it. Why?”

“The police have collected most of the wine bottles in question and are analyzing the remaining contents.”

“Don’t tell me your Cabernet is among them?”

“My distributor claims it’s the prime suspect.”

“There has to be another explanation. Allergic reactions, food poisoning etc.”

“Vincent, listen, I must find out what the police know or don’t, for that matter. I doubt they will tell me, however. Is there anything you can do?”

“Yeah, destroy the case you sent me, but all kidding aside, I can use its foreign origin as an excuse to ask questions.”

“I’d really appreciate it, although, even if they find another cause, I’m afraid my vineyard will go down the drain.”

“I’ll do what I can. I’m sure you’ll find a way out for the vineyard.”

“And the shooter?”

“We’ll find him eventually, always do. If he hasn’t made another recent attempt I doubt he will. Probably looking for his next target as we speak.”

“As always, thanks,” Weylin said, as the conversation came to an end.

With the e-mail and wine fiasco threatening to overcome, his level of concentration for Condor business had dwindled; he decided to take an early lunch. While walking to the dining

room, he was struck by another idea. I'd better call Capelli and see if there have been any problems in Italy. He walked directly to his table, deeply preoccupied, and took a seat.

"Would you like today's menu sir?" the waiter, who seemed to appear out of thin air, inquired.

"Just give me the special and a bottle of mineral water." As he turned away from the waiter, he noticed Dobbs sitting at a nearby table having lunch with several other people. Oh God, he speculated, the board, an explosion waiting to happen. They're sure to go ballistic if my name appears on the evening news.

Having consumed the daily special as quickly as possible, he rose from the chair and snaked around the back of the room, managing to avoid eye contact with Dobbs before exiting. That was close, he thought, I couldn't deal with his bantering today.

Martha was waiting when he passed her desk on the way to his office. "There was a message from Mr. Black," she shouted, as he walked by without stopping, "said it was important." She shrugged and turned her attention to a stack of files on her desk.

Weylin had closed the door behind him as he entered the office and slowly began to pace the room trying to clear his mind. If I could focus on just one problem, he thought, I might have a better chance of figuring things out, but I can't! Maybe Vincent has some good news for a change. He pushed the button on his overused intercom. "Martha, see if Mr. Black is available to talk to me."

"I didn't think you heard," she answered.

"Sorry, my mind was elsewhere."

He lowered himself into the desk chair, reclined and waited. Moments later, Martha

buzzed with his call to Vincent. “Vincent, my secretary said it was urgent?”

“I believe I said important, however, I have some information.”

“OK, I’m sitting down, go ahead.”

“I’ll spare you the details of my subterfuge but I think what I have to say will put you at ease.”

“Alright, I guess I can breathe now, so, what did you learn?”

“The police lab ran the usual toxicological tests, including a search for heavy metals, cyanide, etc. Bottom line, they came up empty handed.”

Weylin exhaled audibly. “Where does that leave the investigation?”

“With a big hole. They thought they had the culprit when their information confirmed that all of the victims had consumed McCain Cabernet but the autopsies did not reveal evidence for any known poison.”

“I don’t get it.”

“You don’t have to, just relax. The press have been hounding the police for information; they’re going to release their results today. By tomorrow, your wine should be back on the menu.”

“Probably not. As of this morning, my distributor was making arrangements to pick up our customers’ unused cases.”

“Well, when the police give the all clear you can find another market, right now, I’ve got other things to attend to. Speak to you later,” Vincent said, as he hung up.

I’m no detective, Weylin considered, as he slowly lowered the phone to its cradle, but it seems to me that there is a cause and effect relationship. On the other hand, the wine is

apparently clean and that's a free pass from the board's potential wrath. I wonder if Armond can find another market. Picking up the phone again, he dialed Armond's office. The line was busy but he kept trying and eventually got through. "Armond, it's Weylin McCain. I've got good news."

"You're bringing the refund check?"

"I have some inside information regarding the police investigation. Their laboratory has not found anything wrong with the wine and, in addition, the autopsies showed no evidence for poisoning."

"Interesting. When will this information be made public?"

"Today, I was told."

"Let me make some calls and I will get back to you," Armond said. "By the way, to what did they attribute the deaths?"

"I don't know. We'll have to wait until the press release, later today."

Having wasted the entire day on personal business, Weylin, figuring there was little else he could accomplish for Condor with the remaining one hour, left for home.

One hour later, he found himself seated in the condo's kitchen going through the mail and waiting for the oven to finish heating the housekeeper's daily delight. I wouldn't mind a glass of wine right now, he thought, but after the Cabernet brouhaha I'm not so sure. Tossing the day's mail, mostly advertising, into the trash, he walked into the living room, opened the

refrigerated wine cellar and removed a bottle of Chardonnay.

With dinner and a half bottle of wine consumed, he retired to the den and dialed the vineyards number. “This is Dr. McCain, please connect me with signore Capelli.”

“Yes sir, right away,” replied an accented voice.

“Dr. McCain, so nice to hear from you. How can I be of assistance?”

“You can tell me what problems, if any, have arisen in my absence.”

“Everything is running smoothly. It is rather quiet at this time of the year. As you know, the vines are sleeping.”

“I’m not an idiot, Alberto. I may not be up to date on the latest enological developments but I’ve made damn sure to learn whatever I can about the operation of my winery and vineyard.”

“Please, I meant no offence ... I have great respect for you.”

“I assume that all tanks, pipes and other machinery have been cleaned since bottling?”

“Yes sir,” Capelli said, sharply.

“Have you heard anything about an Italian Cabernet problem in New York?”

“The television news made brief mention of a few deaths but also stated that wine had not been definitively implicated.”

“Yes, that is true. Have there been any similar local reports?”

“Not that I am aware of.”

“The remaining cases of wine, have they been sold?”

“There have been no requests, they remain in the cellar.”

“If there are any requests in the near future, I’d like you to call me before making any

sales.”

“Yes sir. Oh, by the way, I have arranged for your office to be redecorated as you had requested. The contractor will undertake the renovation of mine as well.”

“I trust you have remained within the budget allowance?”

“Well,” he hesitated, “the cost of materials was greater than we anticipated but not by much.”

“If the cost is within ten percent of the budget you can proceed, otherwise, find a less costly approach. E-mail me with the final figures.”

The overrun was clearly not for my office, he thought, as he gazed at his wristwatch and decided it was time to make one more phone call before retiring for the night. Carrying a cordless phone into the living room, he chose a comfortable easy chair and dialed Sascha’s number. A deep resonating recorded voice announced. “Leave your name and number.”

Less than ten minutes later, Sascha returned his call. “Good evening my friend, how is life treating you?”

Startled by the unusually warm greeting, Weylin hesitated briefly. “I’ve had better days,” he said.

“Is there something I can do to help?”

“First of all, Svetlana told me that the wine I sent is being stored in the cellar?”

“I hope you are not offended, but after seeing the release date, I decided to let it age some.”

“Although remote, there may be a problem. I’d rather you didn’t drink any of it until further notice.”

“What kind of problem, other than immaturity?”

“There have been several unexplained deaths in New York that were initially attributed to the consumption of an Italian Cabernet, specifically, McCain Cabernet. Police analysis of the contents, however, did not reveal anything out of the ordinary. But the fact remains that all of the victims had consumed the wine. Suspicious, wouldn’t you say?”

“In my business, the obvious often obscures the truth but I will heed your warning and make certain it is not touched.”

“There is another issue. Have you checked your e-mail today?”

“No, I have not.”

“I received another coded message this morning; I sent you a copy.”

“Very well, I will call you after I’ve had time to contemplate its contents.”

“I sensed a measure of urgency in the wording, so, please get back to me as soon as you can.”

“Good-bye, my friend.”