

Chapter 26

Sunday morning, following a restless night, Weylin ambled into the kitchen and filled his cup from the automatic coffee maker. Barely awake, he was roused by a shrill ring and instinctively reached for the wall phone. “Hello?” he said, with a sleepy voice.

“Weylin, Armond here. Good news.”

“What time is it?” he asked, while wondering how Armond had obtained his home number.

“It is eight thirty, the start of a glorious day.”

“If you say so. What’s the good news?”

“My trucker was not able to gather all of the delivered cases. Those customers who are still in possession have agreed, on the basis of the press release, to keep the wine for a negotiated discounted price.”

“Discount?”

“Yes, it was the only way and I assume that McCain Vineyards will of course be

responsible for the refunds?

“That was your good news?”

“Partially. But the best part is that McCain Cabernet has been exonerated.”

“What happened to the ‘cloud’ you spoke of and more importantly, the cases that the trucker did retrieve?”

“I am better with wines than I am with the weather,” he said, chuckling apparently at his attempted pun. “As for the remainder of the shipment, I have managed to place the majority with smaller, less trendy restaurants. I am afraid that this negotiation required considerable discounting as well.”

“Thank you Armond, you did well. Send me an accounting of the refunds due and I will have the winery issue a check.”

Well, he thought, hopefully Armond’s powers of negotiation have allowed me to break-even. Although, I can’t help feeling a bit uneasy with the thought of releasing the wine, I’ll have to place my faith in the police laboratory.

Weylin spent the remainder of the day soul searching, trying to determine if he had made the right decision by allowing Armond to redistribute the wine. What if the police lab missed something, he wondered. Could I live with the results if they did? On the other hand, I and others have consumed the wine without any problems. In the end, Armond’s statement regarding the wine’s exoneration had served to ease his conscience.

Later on, following an early dinner at a local steak house, where he initially hesitated to order a Cabernet with his porterhouse, he returned home to complete the review of the Condor financial statements that he hadn’t gotten to on Friday. The file folders were neatly piled

alongside his computer in the den. He pulled the chair out from under the desk and sat before the monitor's dark screen and realized that he hadn't checked that day's e-mail. The computer completed its booting process just as he had turned the second page of the financial statement. A soft gong sounded, heralding the presence of new mail. Placing the folder back on the desk, he turned to the computer keyboard. Several unread messages appeared and among them was a one line note from Sascha that read: *Received your e-mail. Important you call me.* Calculating the time difference, he reached for the phone and anxiously dialed Sascha's number. The anticipated machine message filled the earpiece; he put the phone down and waited. Fifteen minutes later, Sascha returned the call.

“Greetings, my friend. I gather you have received my message?”

“Yes, what did you think?”

“Do you still have the encrypted phone?”

“Yes.”

“Get it, turn on the encryption and call me right back at this number.”

With heightened concern, Weylin quickly tread into the bedroom, removed the phone from where it sat on a night stand on continuous charge and punched in Sascha's number. It rang once, followed by the familiar deep voice.

“Can you hear me clearly?” Sascha asked.

“Yes.”

“I was intrigued by the author's choice of words. Assuming we are not dealing with a prank, it appears that the A.I.F. plans to take revenge for something done in the past. By my understanding, that can only refer to the death of Jamal Taroob.”

“Are you implying that I should employ a bodyguard?”

“It would be hard to guess what they might have in store for you but as fundamentalists, their belief in the doctrine of an eye for an eye is a reasonable assumption.”

“What do you suggest?”

“I trust you have not forgotten the lessons from our past outings?”

“Meaning?”

“Extreme caution and watchfulness are the best weapons right now.”

“Those are not comforting words, Sascha.”

“We live in dangerous times, my friend. In some respects, I felt more secure during the era of the cold war; at least we knew who the enemy was and there were rules. Now, there are no rules, no borders that cannot be crossed and no measure of protection that cannot be circumvented.”

“So, that’s it?”

“Unless there is another more specific message from your guardian angel, yes, that is it.”

“I’ll keep my eyes open but I can’t live in constant fear.”

“There are many things that can come between a plan and its action. Vary your travel routes, alternate your transportation and do whatever possible to avoid the establishment of a visible pattern.”

“I’ll do my best. Please tell Svetlana that I will call her within the next few days.”

“I will do this, but I will not be your romantic intermediary,” Sascha reminded, assertively.

I guess that means no Ferrari, he reasoned, while carrying the phone back to its charger. He checked the lock on the front door and walked back to the bedroom picking up a recent copy of Wine Spectator along the way. Locking the bedroom door, he threw the magazine on the coverlet, bent forward to open the bottom drawer of a nearby chest and withdrew an old Colt forty-five pistol; one of the few items he had inherited from his deceased father. Checking the ammunition clip that lay beside it, he loaded the gun and pulled the slide rearward, forcing a round into its breech. Convinced that he was ready for a fight, at least in the bedroom, he placed the gun under his pillow and settled down to read the magazine.

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He awakened the next morning, the magazine lying open on his chest, and looked at the clock. Eight o'clock in the morning, he said to himself while yawning, feels like I just went to sleep.

Walking towards the kitchen, he was greeted by the aroma of freshly brewing coffee and was glad that he'd taken the time to fill the machine before retiring. He had just opened the cupboard to reach for a mug, when the phone began to ring. Who the heck is calling on a Sunday morning, he wondered. A glance at the caller ID display revealed that it was an *unknown caller*. Maybe it's a wrong number, he pondered, as it continued to ring. "Oh alright," he hissed, after the tenth ring, and reached for the wall phone.

"Weylin? It's Vincent."

"What are you doing up this early on a Sunday morning?"

“My turn for the weekend shift, I’ve been at my desk since six A.M.”

“So, having nothing better to do, you thought you’d wake me to have a conversation?”

“Payback, for all those mornings you awakened me when you came back to our dorm after an all-nighter,” Vincent, ribbed. “But actually, something just came in over the wire that you should be aware of.”

“OK, I’m awake now.”

“Our friendly antiabortionist, A.K.A. the shooter, has been sighted Near the Jersey shore. The tipster claimed that he was frantic and obsessed with putting an end to something or someone. The agents on the case missed him by twenty minutes. I think we’ll get him this time but, just in case, keep a low profile.”

“That’s all I seem to be doing these days. Thanks for the heads up, Vincent. Let me know if you get him.”

“You can bank on it.”

“Just what I need,” he breathed, “another nutcase lookin’ to put me in his gun sight.”