

Chapter 27

On a Monday morning, two weeks following the last conversation with Vincent, Martha rang through on Weylin's intercom. "Mr. Ryan called and would like an appointment to discuss an urgent matter."

He ran his finger down a list of scheduled appointments. "Tell him I've got fifteen minutes open in my schedule, if he can come up right now."

"Yes sir."

Less than five minutes later, Ryan knocked on his door. "Come on in and have a seat," Weylin requested, pointing to an empty chair in front of his desk.

"Thanks for seeing me but I think you'll be interested in what I've got to say."

"I hate to rush you," he said, while gesturing towards his wristwatch, "I'm due at a meeting in ten minutes."

"OK, I'll get right to the point. A police detective called to say that the FBI has arrested the shooter," Ryan announced, with a big grin.

“That’s a relief. Is that all?”

“Ugh, not exactly. You know, all the extra security personnel has put me over budget. Do you think we can cut back our numbers now?”

“No! He’s not the only mad dog in the pack.”

“Is there something you’re not telling me?”

Unwilling to discuss the nebulous A.I.F. threat, he quickly fabricated an excuse.

“Surely, you don’t think that he’s the only abortion foe with a gun?” Weylin remarked, while nervously tapping a pencil eraser on the desk.

“No, I guess not.”

“Send me your cost projections, present and future, and I’ll adjust the budget accordingly.”

“Thanks,” Ryan said, as Weylin rose from his chair, picked up a stack of files and waited for him to leave.

He followed Ryan out of the office, stopping briefly at Martha’s desk. “Martha, I’m going to be in meetings for the rest of the day. If you have an emergency page me, otherwise, I’ll be going straight home afterwards.”

“I’ll try not to bother you,” she replied.

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The departmental meetings lasted longer than anticipated. By the time Weylin had arrived home at seven- thirty in the evening he was famished and thankful for the

housekeeper's prepared dinner. Ignoring the day's mail and blinking answering machine, he went directly to the kitchen and quickly microwaved the waiting pan of lasagna.

Forty minutes later, having finished dinner and a half bottle of McCain Cabernet, he passed by the answering machine on his way to the bedroom. A review of the waiting messages revealed two from Armond; the time stamp indicated that they had been received earlier in the day. Probably wants his refund check, he thought, it can wait.

Fatigued, following a relaxing shower, he made his way to the living room, plopped down on the couch and clicked the TV's remote to a local news channel. Exhaustion, combined with the newscaster's monotonous voice had the usual sedative effect. With his head leaning back, his eyes were about to close when he heard: *Just when you thought it was safe to drink red wine. Red death has struck again over the weekend at two small restaurants in Brooklyn and Westchester country.* "Oooh shit," Weylin cried out, as he bolted forward on the couch, increased the TV's volume and listened: *Unlike the incidents of several weeks past, where deaths have occurred in some of New York's trendiest establishments, these three unfortunate souls lost their lives in the pursuit of a good meal and a friendly glass of wine at small family owned restaurants. Sources close to the investigation have indicated that the common denominator is an Italian Cabernet produced in Bolgheri, Italy, by McCain Vineyards. Although prior analysis of this wine did not reveal any lethal substances, health officials have issued a request for all bottles to be removed from public and private establishments and to be delivered to the following address ...*

Weylin was frozen in front of the TV, not knowing what to do first, when the program segued to a weather report and was then quickly interrupted: *This just in, one hour ago, paramedics were dispatched to "Julio," Tribeca's famous Spanish restaurant often frequented by foreign dignitaries and New York's upper crust. A CBG news crew at the scene reports that fifteen people attending a*

*wine tasting dinner became violently ill shortly after consuming small amounts of McCain Cabernet. Several of these people have already expired on the way to a local hospital. Our reporter spoke to one of the diners who claimed that his female companion had inhaled from her glass of Cabernet in an attempt to capture the wine's fragrance. She had barely taken a sip from the glass when she gasped several times, turned blue and fell to her side. We'll have more as the story develops. Now, back to ...*

O-h m-y G-o-d! he thought, and those poor people. And the board, they'll be on my case first thing in the morning--I can picture their solemn expressions when they ask for my resignation. Wait a minute, what the hell's going on here? I just drank several glasses of the same thing. Checking his wristwatch, he ran into the den and dialed the winery. The phone rang several times before being answered.

"Pronto, chi parla?" the evening caretaker asked.

"It's Dr. McCain, do you speak English?"

"A little, signore."

"Can you call Mr. Capelli to the phone?"

"He is gone home."

"Can you give me his home telephone number?"

"Momento," he said, before the phone went silent, returning several seconds later with the information.

"What is your name?" Weylin inquired.

"Marco, signore."

"Thank you, Marco."

Still holding the receiver, he disconnected and dialed Capelli's number. The phone was

answered immediately by a high pitched female voice that, upon hearing Weylin's question, rapidly switched from Italian to British accented English. "Yes, Dr. McCain, just one moment please, I shall get him," she replied.

"Dr. McCain, how nice to hear from you," Capelli said, "I trust all is well?"

"Not exactly. There seems to be a problem with the wine we shipped to the U.S., people have died after drinking it."

"A problem? With our wine? I don't understand."

"I'm not sure I do either. I've been drinking from the cases that you held aside for me and yet, people have died from bottles sold from the main shipment. What makes them different?"

"They all came from the same harvest and crush."

"Then why were those ten cases held apart?"

"I believe the chemist altered the sulfur concentration during or just before the bottling process and after the first twenty-four hundred bottles had been filled. In my opinion, the adjusted concentration that followed reduced the wine's intensity. The ten cases that were held aside contained wine bottled before the change and was the best representation of Camalia's product."

"When you prepared the welcoming luncheon, the table was full of McCain bottles. What part of the production run did they come from?"

"The first. We have always kept a healthy supply of each year's production for our own consumption. It is one of the perks of a winery."

"Healthy supply, that's an interesting choice of words. Have any of your people

consumed the wine bottled after the change?”

“No, as I’ve said, we have a large supply from the beginning of the run.”

“But, you just said that the wine before the change tasted better. How would you know if you hadn’t sampled both versions?”

“From experience. I have been in the industry for many years and have a working knowledge of the chemistry involved. I have witnessed significant losses of bouquet and flavor with even the slightest increases in sulfur concentration.”

“I see. And by chemist, I assume you mean Hathar?”

“Yes.”

“Did she give you a reason for the increase?”

“No, but the prior owner allowed her complete discretion over such decisions.”

“Were there ever any reports of illnesses from your hospital clients?”

“Not that I am aware of but of course if there were, these were, after all, sick people.”

“That’s all for now, however, don’t be surprised if official investigators show up at our doors.”

None of this makes any sense, he said to himself, as he tilted back in his chair. The increased sulfur might destroy the wine’s quality but it shouldn’t be dangerous unless one was severely allergic and it’s unlikely that they all were. Could the bottles have been tampered with while they sat at customs? That’s a question for Armond; I’ll call him first thing in the morning, if he’ll talk to me.

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At seven-thirty the next morning, Weylin was seated in his office trying to devise a plan of action as he reviewed the list of people he had to call. With his door closed, he sipped from a large container of Starbuck's coffee as his gaze shifted from one name to another. The cases that I'd sent to Vincent and Sascha came from Capelli's original ten, they must be OK, he reasoned. I've been drinking from that batch myself. Paolo, however, his order came after that. I'd better call him later.

By eight o'clock, the coffee container was empty and his stomach was signaling the need for breakfast. The executive dining room had barely opened when he walked through the door hoping that no board members were afoot. Following a quick breakfast, he headed back to the office to call Armond but was stopped by Martha who was seated at her desk with a bagel in one hand and a pink message pad in the other. "Good morning," she said, while quickly swallowing a crusty morsel. "Mr. Dobbs just called, said it was urgent."

"I expected he would," Weylin said.

"Oh, and there was another call from a Mr. Armond--wouldn't give me his last name but said you'd know what it's about."

"Hmm, I'm afraid I do."

"I watched the news last night and early this morning. "How bad is it?"

"About as bad as it gets. Was there something of interest on the early news? I missed it trying to cope with that terrible tragedy."

“Twelve of those people from last night have died, including the woman whose boyfriend watched her turn blue. But I’m afraid the news reported six more victims at a private party on Sutton Place; no survivors.”

Tilting his head forward while kneading his temples, he winced. “It’s my fault,” he said, his voice quavering, “I should never have allowed its release after the police investigation.”

“There’s no way you could have known there would be further problems,” she replied, in a soothing voice, reminiscent of his mother’s.

He turned away as his eyes began to water. “I’m not here if Dobbs calls again,” he said, choking back his emotions, “but get me Armond, please.”

“Dr. McCain, your call is on two.” she called out.

“Armond, we’re in a real mess,”

“As I see it, I am just the intermediary, a salesman. The mess is yours,” Armond replied.

“OK, I see your point and I’ll make good on the eventual refunds but there is a bigger issue here.”

“Ah yes, I suspect that the local legal community is already salivating.”

“That’s to be expected, but it’s not what I’m referring to. Do you think that the bottles could have been tampered with when they sat in the warehouse awaiting customs approval?”

“Of course, that is possible, but who would do such a thing and why?”

“How could it have been done?”

“First of all, one would have to carefully open the wooden cases to avoid breakage and then be equally careful resealing them. Next come the bottles. The foil covering the corks



would have to be removed or injected through. In either case, there would be visible evidence.”

“Do you have any unopened cases?”

“There are forty sealed cases in my warehouse. Why do you ask?”

“The police lab found nothing with their last investigation. I’m going to do my own. So, figure out what I owe you in refunds and as soon as I’ve made arrangements with a laboratory, I’ll have those cases picked up and yes, I’ll pay for the storage until that time.”

“Under the circumstances, the storage is free. In some respects, my reputation is on the line as well.”

Moments after the conversation ended, Martha knocked on the outer door and entered carrying several file folders. “This document,” she said, pointing to a bright red folder now lying on his desk, “contains Mr. Ryan’s cost projections and overruns. In the yellow folder are the bills for the security gates. Both, need your review and signature.”

“I’ll take care of it,” he replied.

Ten minutes after leaving his office, Martha interrupted him again. “Dr. McCain, I hate to bother you but there are two police detectives out here who insist on seeing you right now.”

“Find out what it’s about,” he said, but there was little question in his mind.

“They said it’s not about Condor business.”

What took them so long? he wondered. “Alright, Martha, show them in but make them aware that I have a busy schedule today.”

Two preppily attired detectives entered and took a seat in front of his desk without being asked. “What can I do for you gentlemen?” he asked.

“You can start by confirming your ownership of McCain Vineyards,” the blond haired detective with a bad complexion demanded.

“That’s correct, I am the owner of record.”

“I imagine you’re aware of the havoc wreaked by your product? We’ve been assigned to the investigation, although, I suspect that the FBI will soon be involved, given our track record and the company’s foreign registry,” the second detective interjected, after looking up from a small flip pad that he’d been referring to.

“Is this a criminal investigation?” Weylin asked.

“Not yet, but it’s heading in that direction,” the note taker said.

“Then I think it might be best to postpone any further discussion until my attorney can be present.”

“That’s your privilege, but we need to hear back from one of you by the end of the day,” bad complexion interjected, as he dropped his business card on the desk.

Weylin showed them to the door while signaling Martha to enter with the wave of his hand. Returning to his desk, he opened a small black leather directory and copied the telephone number of a powerful New York attorney to a blank piece of paper and handed it to her. “Call this number and don’t hang up until his secretary puts him on the phone.”

“Who am I calling?”

“An attorney.”

“Does he know you?”

“No, but he will.”