

Chapter 29

This special meeting of the Condor Board of Trustees is now called to order,” Franklin Dobbs announced, his authoritative voice joined by the bang of his gavel. “As this is an unscheduled gathering, we will refrain from discussing old business and address only recent developments as they pertain to our current sitting CEO.”

Here it comes, Weylin said to himself, with a sideways glance at Dobbs, as he sat quietly awaiting what he assumed to be their predetermined verdict.

“My Dear Dr. McCain. Since its inception,” Dobbs continued, while glaring at Weylin, “Condor has endeavored to maintain a responsible and conservative profile, however, two issues have recently surfaced that threaten to tarnish that image. I refer to the antiabortionist outrage for our development and sale of delta 6 and, more recently, your direct association with the spate of deaths related to a red wine whose label bears your name.”

Weylin wasn’t about to take the tongue lashing without a retort, particularly, since none of the Board’s concerns were of his doing. He pushed his chair back and stood, allowing his

angry gaze to shift in turn to each seated member. Convinced that his outrage was appreciated by all, he began: “Mr. Dobbs,” he said, “members of the board, please allow me to address those issues. First of all, Condor’s aura may proffer a conservative appearance but our income is anything but conservative and Delta 6 is fully one third responsible. As for McCain Cabernet, well, the facts speak for themselves ...”

“What are you implying,” a board member at the far end of the table interrupted.

“Although the second police investigation has not yet explained the deaths, I feel that there is a clear cause and effect relationship and I mean to ferret out the root cause. To that end, I have contracted with a private laboratory to perform a parallel investigation and I currently await their results,” Weylin explained.

“Dr. McCain,” Dobbs broke in, “your apparent efforts, vis-a-vis the wine debacle, are commendable, however, the fact remains that people have died and the whole issue has placed you, as Condor’s CEO, in a bad light.”

“Franklin, I’ve done my best to separate personal business from that of Condor.”

Weylin replied tersely.

“Well, it hasn’t worked, has it? There have been FBI agents cruising our campus and news trucks parked at our front entrance.”

“Alright,” Weylin barked, while still standing, “I’m getting the distinct impression that the board has already decided upon some form of action. Why don’t we just cut to the chase.”

With a sweeping movement of his right arm, Dobbs, implying a unanimous decision, said, “We have concluded that an extended paid leave of absence might be in the best interest of Condor ... look at it as a long overdue vacation,” he said, with a smirk.

Weylin, realizing that this could be the first step towards dismissal, lowered himself back into his chair, symbolically indicating his reluctance to leave. “Exactly what time frame are we discussing?” he asked.

“Discussion is not an option, however, we feel that your return would be welcome following a favorable resolution of the wine fiasco.”

“Well then, I guess there’s little else to say. I’ll finish whatever pending business I have and make arrangements for other members of senior management to assume my duties.”

At the meeting’s close, Weylin left the room in a state of emotional turmoil. Given the board’s history concerning the past CEO, he thought to himself, as he walked towards his office, I shouldn’t be surprised by their decision; I got off easy. At least they’ll continue to pay my salary and the door was left ajar for my return. Besides, I won’t be any good to Condor until I figure out what happened to the wine.

Still driving a rented car, he left the parking lot and headed for home, taking a detour at the last minute to Villa Torino. The restaurant was empty at that early hour and the proprietor directed him to a table close to the kitchen. “Would you like some company?” the proprietor inquired.

“Not tonight, I’ve got a lot on my mind, but thank you,” Weylin replied, with a forced smile.

The Proprietor reached behind to a sideboard cabinet and slowly turned back towards the table. “You look like you might need this,” he said, as he carefully placed a bottle of barolo in front of Weylin. “It’s on the house.”

“Thank you, but it’s not necessary.”

“On the contrary, one look at your face and I know that you’re troubled.

Weylin shook his head in agreement as the proprietor placed a menu before him and walked away. The sad look on Martha’s face when I told her I was leaving for awhile, he said to himself, as he took a sip of wine, I can’t erase that image.

Having consumed a large portion of seafood pasta and most of the wine, he slowly made his way to the car and drove home. Damn, that wine got the better of me, he marveled, while turning the key in his front door lock. I’m glad I had the foresight to e-mail Paolo, I couldn’t handle a lengthy phone conversation in this state. He locked the door, threw his keys on the entrance table and headed for the bedroom. Ten minutes later, overtaken by the first stages of sleep, the phone rang. “Oh shit,” he hissed, as he reached for the receiver and dropped it before bringing it to his ear. “Hello,” he said, gruffly.

“Weylin? It’s Svetlana.”

Alerted by the tone of her voice, he did his best to shake off the drowsiness. “You sound upset,” he said, “is something wrong?”

“Yes, something is definitely wrong; I haven’t heard from you in the past week.”

“Please forgive me, I’ve been faced with a pack of problems.”

“Anything you care to discuss?”

“Well, there’s the wine issue and problems at Condor.”

“Tell me what is happening with the wine?”

“It’s late, why don’t we discuss it another time?”

“Weylin,” she said, her voice stern and threatening.

He took a deep breath and exhaled. “OK, here’s what I know. First of all, as

expected, the deaths have precipitated a criminal investigation that now involves the FBI. I've hired a high powered New York attorney to deal with that and for the time being, they've left me alone. Today, to make matters worse, the Condor Board of Trustees placed me on extended leave. They claimed that they needed to distance themselves from my bad press."

Several moments of silence followed causing Weylin to ask, "Svetlana, are you there?"

"Yes," she answered softly. "I need to see you Weylin. I know that it might sound selfish of me at a time like this but I think you need my help and support, if you will accept it."

Lowering the phone slightly, he pondered, she's right, I can't do this alone. "I agree, I do need you and your help as well."

"Good, I will be there within two days time."

"You don't have to rush."

"Yes, I do. I'll call with the flight schedule, until then."

He eased back onto his pillow, the sound of her voice still echoing in his mind. She's very much like her father, he thought, but talking to her gives me something Sascha doesn't—butterflies.

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The following morning, he arrived at Condor later than usual, took care of the few remaining loose ends and headed for the parking lot. Nothing like the aroma of Ferrari leather, he thought, while opening the car door and entering. With his foot on the accelerator, he headed for Interlabs, the company he had hired to investigate McCain Cabernet.

Interlabs had a reputation for precise analysis and had been employed in the past by the pharmaceutical industry and Federal organizations for independent evaluation of various substances.

“Can I help you?” the Interlabs receptionist asked.

“I’m Weylin McCain, I have an appointment with your specialist.”

She squinted, while scanning her appointment book. “Oh yes, here it is. Straight ahead. It’s the third door on the left,” she said, pointing down a corridor with her pencil.

He knocked, entered and took the seat gestured towards by the specialist who was engaged in a phone conversation. Moments later, he lowered the phone and offered his hand. “Sorry about that,” he said, as he gripped Weylin’s hand rather loosely.

“I’m Dr. McCain, I’m here to discuss the wine analysis.”

“Yeah,” he replied, while shaking his head, “you have no idea what kind of problem it has caused for us.”

“Difficult analysis?”

“Without question, but the FBI heard about your cases of wine being delivered to our facility and they’ve been all over us. Anyway,” he added, with the flip of his hand, “I guess it’s goes with the territory.”

“Found anything yet?”

“At this point, it won’t be easy to justify our exorbitant fees.”

“You found nothing?”

“Just what you’d expect to find in a good Cabernet plus a slightly higher than normal concentration of sulfur.”

“No lethal agents?”

The specialist smiled and shook his head as if to say “no.”

“Doesn’t make sense,” Weylin said. “There has to be something in that wine that’s killing people. Did you take samples from all the cases I sent you?”

“Yup. We looked for anything commonly and uncommonly lethal that could survive in the wine’s environment and found zippo. Unless there’s an invisible killer hiding in those bottles, you’d better look for another explanation.”

“Alright, but let me know if anything else turns up.”

“That won’t happen, were finished but you can expect a handsome bill.”

He left Interlabs in a state of bewilderment. One of the most respected labs in the country found nothing? How can that be, he wondered, as he slid the key into the Ferrari’s ignition. There’s got to be something in that wine! I have to find it. Without it, I’m ruined.

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It was Friday afternoon, Svetlana had called the night before with her flight schedule and Weylin sat in the terminal waiting. A glance at the overhead monitor revealed that her flight had arrived but as the crowd of travelers approached, their image seemed to disappear as he zeroed in on one. Rising from his seat, he waved with his left hand while the right held firmly to a bouquet of flowers. She smiled, dropped her bag and opened her arms as he approached. They embraced, warmly at first, then more intensely. Pulling away slightly to smell the flowers, she said, “Oh Weylin, how thoughtful with all you have on your mind.”

“With you in my arms, everything else seems trivial,” he replied.

She kissed him wetly. “Let’s get out of here,” she said.

“You must be tired after your trip.”

“No,” she protested, smiling impishly, “I am hungry but that can wait. Tell me about your problems.”

“I pretty much covered everything over the phone the other night.”

“Now Weylin, if I am going to help, I need to know everything.”

“You sound like your father.”

“Who do you think trained me? By the way, he sends his regards and told me not to come back until I have solved your problems.”

“I’m confident you can solve one of them this evening,” he said with a grin.