

Chapter 31

Monday afternoon, after making arrangements for their trip to Bolgheri, Svetlana remained at the condo packing for their late night flight while Weylin drove over to Interlabs. They were expecting him this time and the receptionist let him pass without comment. The door to the specialist's office was open and upon noticing Weylin's approach, he jumped from his chair. "Dr. McCain," he exclaimed, excitedly, "glad you're here."

"What's the verdict?" Weylin asked, hoping for the best while expecting the worst.

The specialist scratched his head. "Frankly, I thought you were nuts when you barged in here and made your demands," he said, "but I couldn't believe my eyes when those florescent molecules lit up like a Christmas tree. It probably would have gone unnoticed if you hadn't thought of it."

Weylin stared off into space for a few seconds and then said, in a lowered voice, "Thank you."

“You know, I can’t keep this a secret,” the specialist advised, “I’m obligated to notify the authorities immediately.”

“I understand,” Weylin said, as he turned and left the office, heading for the parking lot.

Closing the Ferrari’s door behind him, he locked it and without starting the engine, lifted the cell phone and dialed Vincent’s private number. It rang several times before being answered.

“Vincent, it’s Weylin.”

“I’m in the middle of a meeting, is it urgent?”

“Yes.”

“OK, give me a minute.”

He sat in silence, waiting for Vincent to return, while he tried to reconcile with the specialist’s finding. I expected it, he said to himself, but hearing the confirmation made the reality that much more tangible.

“I’m back,” Vincent said, raising Weylin’s level of alertness.

“OK, I’ll be brief.”

“Go ahead, I’m all ears.”

“As you know, the police weren’t able to find any toxic agents in the wine, so I hired a company called Interlabs ...”

“I know them,” Vincent interrupted, “we’ve crossed paths before.”

“After a little research of my own, I asked them to test for P.S.P. or, more specifically, saxitoxin. I’m sitting in their parking lot at the moment--they found it; they’re probably calling the local FBI office as we speak.”

“Whew, that’s some nasty stuff. It sheds a whole new light on the situation.”

“What are you saying?”

“Someone put it there knowingly and with deadly intent. I hope you understand that it now becomes a homeland security issue and will be viewed as a potential terrorist act.”

“Yes, I do, that’s why I’m calling. I’m on my way to Italy this evening in an attempt to solve this mystery. Once the government gets involved, it’ll be impossible to clear my name. I was hoping you might be able to give me a head start.”

“Deja vu, buddy ... didn’t we go through a similar scenario with olera?”

“You’re right, but this time it’s not the entire western civilization that they’re after, more likely it’s just me.”

“Well, considering that the problem is for the most part contained, I’ll see if I can pull out a length of red tape to slow things down. But it won’t stop them.”

“Thanks, Vincent.”

“Be careful, saxitoxin is not the hallmark of a casual killer.”

At Svetlana’s insistence and with Paolo’s help, they checked into Castello di Magona at noon, Tuesday, after stopping in Pisa to rent an Alpha from Paolo’s relative.

Following a quick lunch in the hotel dining room, they left for the winery and while en route, Weylin tried to set the scene. “When we get there,” he said, “stay close by and keep your eyes open for anything, and I mean anything, that looks suspicious.”

“I can read faces better than the newspaper, I know what to do.”

As they approached the main building, he noticed Capelli's car parked in the first space. "Good," he remarked, "they're not expecting us." Quietly, they closed the car doors and entered the building. The anteroom was void of activity when they passed through heading towards Capelli's office. With Svetlana in tow, Weylin knocked and opened the door without waiting for a reply. Capelli, studiously concentrating on a magazine, suddenly raised his head. "Dr. McCain," he stuttered, "I wasn't expecting you."

"That's obvious," he replied, with his hands on his hips.

"I--I was just reading an industry periodical," he said, while clumsily stuffing the magazine beneath his desk blotter.

Twisting to face Svetlana, Weylin raised his hand, as if to silence the startled Capelli. "Svetlana," he said, "I would like you to meet signore Capelli, the direttore."

Preening himself, Capelli smiled animatedly, while rising from behind the desk. "I am honored to meet you, signora," he said, extending his hand.

Weylin, realizing that Capelli had made the assumption that Svetlana was his wife, ignored the response as did Svetlana, who spoke fluent Italian. "Signore Capelli ..." Weylin began, before being interrupted.

"Please, you are the boss, call me Alberto."

Weylin nodded in agreement. "We are faced with a very serious problem, Alberto," he said, solemnly, as he and Svetlana sat before the desk.

"What problem is this?" Capelli asked, his speech pressured, as a few beads of sweat began to appear on his forehead.

"People have died drinking our wine and I suspect sabotage."

“Sabotage? But how can that be?”

“That’s what we’re here to find out.”

“All of our employees are good, hard working citizens. I hope you don’t suspect any of them?” Capelli said, his nostrils flaring.

“At this point, anything is possible.”

Alberto slumped back in his chair while running a hand through his greasy hair. “I suppose that I am among the suspects?” he said.

Weylin quickly glanced at Svetlana, who had been sitting silently by his side. “Look,” he said, “I’m not accusing anyone but unless we find the culprit, McCain Vineyards will soon cease to exist.”

“Perhaps the sabotage, as you call it, occurred in the United States,” Capelli replied, defensively.

“I have evidence to the contrary. In fact, I believe that the problem began at least two years before my purchase.”

“Preposterous,” Capelli shouted, indignantly, “I would have been made aware of any unusual occurrence during those years.”

For the first time since the onset of the conversation, Svetlana touched Weylin’s hand, signaling her entry into the fray. “Do you employ any workers of foreign origin?” she asked.

“No,” he answered, brusquely, without hesitation, “but wait--there is Hathar.”

“Is she the only foreigner?” Weylin inquired.

“Yes, her assistants are all Italians.”

“Tell her that I would like to see her in my office in twenty minutes.”

“That will not be possible, she left for vacation several weeks ago.”

“When is she due back?”

“She was to have returned this past Friday but, as you can see, she has not.”

“Did she leave a contact address or phone number?”

“No.”

“What about our employee records, wouldn’t they contain next of kin information and such?”

“Yes, but Hathar answered only to my prior employers. She was not even part of our payroll and for this reason, I have no records.”

“Then how is she currently being paid?”

“I believe she received a generous stipend from the prior owner following the sale. It was intended as a bonus and payment for the time she was expected to remain here and monitor her process.”

“Well, we have our first suspect,” Weylin announced, as he stood to leave. “One other thing,” he added, before exiting the room, “there will be a team of experts going through every inch of the winery and technical facility, give them whatever assistance they need and don’t be surprised when the police or Interpol or whoever, eventually shows up at our doorstep.”

They left Capelli’s office and headed for Weylin’s to talk things over. “What did you think of him?” he asked, once behind the locked door of his office.

“Arrogant peacock,” she replied.

“That’s for sure,” he said, laughing, “but did you get a feeling for his honesty or lack thereof?”

“I don’t think it was him but tell me about this Hathar person.”

“She’s an Egyptian enologist that developed the process used in the vineyard to allegedly ward off various vine diseases. It was one of the selling points for this establishment and I bought into it.”

“How does it work?”

“The proprietary agent is introduced to the vines through a complex system of underground tubing in combination with a surface s-pray ...”

Svetlana glared at him, his words still hanging in the air. “Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” she asked.

“Shit, we’d better send that stuff off for analysis right away,” he said, while shaking his head in disbelief. “I’d hate to think it was that simple and I’d missed it.”

Interlabs had given Weylin the name of a respected laboratory in Milan and Weylin spent the remainder of the afternoon on the telephone making arrangements for samples of the process reagent to be sent to them and for a team of their people to scour the winery and technical labs for signs of saxitoxin. While he toiled over the telephone, Svetlana explored the facility.

At four-thirty, she returned to his office and found him making notes on a yellow legal pad. “Have you made the arrangements?” she asked.

“Yes, all taken care of. I sent a liter of the liquid to the lab via courier. We should have an answer by Thursday and their people will be here tomorrow.”

“Good, I’m hungry. Didn’t you say that you had a friend with a trattoria in Pisa?”

“Trattoria della Quaglia,” he replied.

“Well, I’m sure they serve something other than quail.”

“That’s what the name means?” he asked, in amazement, while opening the office door.

“Most definitely.”

“I’ve got to learn this language.”

As on past occasions, at six P.M., the trattoria was empty, save for Paolo and the kitchen help but they were welcomed nonetheless.

“You should have called,” Paolo chided. “Had I known you were coming I would have planned something special,” he said, while staring at Svetlana, clearly ignoring Weylin.

“This trip was an unexpected pleasure,” he fibbed.

“And who is this lovely creature?” Paolo asked, now shaking Weylin’s hand while continuing to appraise Svetlana.

“Svetlana, allow me to introduce Paolo. The owner of this wonderful establishment.”

“You are too kind my friend,” he said, while guiding them into the restaurant, “let me show you to a nice table.”

When Paolo left to see what was available to be served at that early hour, Weylin moved closer to Svetlana. “Why did you have that strained expression when I introduced you to him?” he whispered.

“Something about him reminds me of the past, but he is your friend, it is probably of no consequence.”

Several patrons trickled into the trattoria as dinner progressed and after greeting them,

Paolo stopped at their table. "Has the food been satisfactory?" he asked.

"Excellent as usual," Weylin replied. "I hope you have stored the McCain Cabernet in a secure location as we discussed?"

"I disposed of it weeks ago."

"Good. The winery will be sending you a refund."

"Who would have thought that a simple grape could cause such destruction," Paolo remarked, as he turned and headed towards the entrance to seat several new arrivals.

"Would you like something for dessert?" Weylin asked.

"No thank you, I've had quite enough of this place."

"What's bothering you?"

"There is something here that is making me feel uneasy."

"Something or someone?"

She turned to face him with the steely glance that he had only witnessed on one prior occasion, that being, just before her entrance into battle with a group of A.I.F. operatives.

"Alright," he said, disturbed by her reaction, "here are the car keys. I'll pay the check and meet you outside." When he exited the trattoria, Svetlana was already waiting in the driver's seat, engine running and the radio playing. He had barely closed the passenger door when she put the car in gear and took off. "Why are you acting this way, is it something I said?" he asked.

She hesitated. "No, it is not you. Sitting in that restaurant, I felt a chill. There is something about that man that bothers me, I don't trust him."

"But you barely had two words with him."

"Maybe it is a faulty instinct but I feel it just the same."

They slept peacefully in each other's arms that night and by sunrise, no further mention was made of the trattoria experience.

That morning, with Svetlana's assistance, Weylin discretely interviewed each of his employees separately. "What do you think?" he asked, when the last worker had left his office.

"I got the impression that these were simple, hard working people. They did not fit the profile needed to accomplish the poisoning."

"I agree. That leaves us with the obvious, Hathar. She alone had the responsibility for the wine's chemistry and, let's face it, the wine industry today is all about chemistry. She must be located somehow."

"Now, are you ready to ask for father's help?"

"Let's wait one more day, we should have heard from the lab in Milan by then."

"Why are we waiting? Whether her process is responsible or not, she is the most likely suspect. She could have easily accomplished the task by another route."

Weylin leaned forward in the chair and rested his chin on one hand while staring blankly. "What are you thinking?" she asked.

"When I closed on this place, Alberto told me that he had held ten cases of wine aside for distribution to the new owner. When I asked why, he said that during the bottling process, Hathar had made a change in the sulfur concentration to account for an alleged deficiency. It was his opinion that the wine's quality might be impaired by the increase."

"So, the ten cases came out before the increase in sulfur?"

"Yes, but what if she was introducing something more than sulfur?"

"Did he say how many cases were bottled before she made the change?"

“Two hundred.”

“This is getting very complicated. The case of wine that you gave to Paolo when you bought the winery, where did it fit into the picture?”

“It came from my ten--damn, doesn't make sense. I drank quite a bit of that wine without a problem and so did Armond and others and yet, several of Paolo's friends have died.”

“Hmm, we are missing more than one piece to this puzzle.”