

Chapter 33

Staring at that telephone will not make it ring any sooner,” Svetlana said, while seated in front of Weylin’s desk thumbing through a magazine.

“I thought the lab would have called by now,” he replied.

“It is clear that you are not accustomed to the Italian concept of time. If you were, you would have understood that their promise to call on Thursday was just an approximation.”

“How can you run a country like that?”

“It has worked for eons,” she replied, nonchalantly returning to her magazine.

At that moment, the phone rang and Weylin, in his haste to answer, dislodged a cannister of pencils that fell noisily to the floor. “Dr. McCain here,” he blurted out.

“It is I, Alberto. The investigators you had hired to inspect our facility have left.”

“They left? They were supposed to report their findings to me before departing,” he growled.

“I have some information ...”

“Hold on,” he interrupted, “I’ll be right there.”

He bolted from the chair and headed for the door but stopped when he noticed Svetlana’s apparent disinterest, as she continued to flip the pages of her magazine. “Aren’t you coming?” he asked.

“No, I will stay here and use your computer to check my e-mail, if you don’t mind?”

“OK, I’ll fill you in when I return.”

He walked the short distance to Capelli’s office and entered. “OK, what was their conclusion?” he asked.

“Well,” Capelli replied, “the team leader was in a hurry to return to Milano but he claims to have found nothing.”

“Nothing at all?”

“He said that if there had been any evidence for a toxin, it was undoubtedly removed during the cleansing process that we normally undertake after each bottling run. Anyway, he promised a written report in a few days.”

Weylin shook his head in disbelief. “Is there anything else we need to discuss?” he asked.

“There is one other thing. I received a call this morning from a captain of the local Carabinieri; he is a friend. He informed me that we are to expect a visit from Interpol this week.”

“I’m not surprised,” Weylin replied, “I’ll be in my office for awhile if you need me.”

When he returned to his own office, he found Svetlana still seated in front of the computer. “What did you learn?” she asked, while quickly exiting from whatever site she had

been viewing.

“The place is clean, or rather, has been cleaned.”

“It was not unexpected.”

“Did you collect your e-mail?”

“As a matter of fact, I did. There was nothing important.”

“Any calls while I was out?”

“No, they have not called,” she replied, “but they will when they are ready.”

“OK, you’re right but I’m just so wound up by all of this.”

“I understand, but causing your blood pressure to rise will not make them call any sooner.”

“Alright, then how about a break for lunch?”

“A wonderful suggestion,” she agreed, turning off the computer with the flick of a finger.

Weylin chose an antiquated local restaurant that had been recommended by Capelli on past occasions. Following their leisurely lunch, they returned to the winery to await the anticipated phone call. Weylin took his place behind the office desk while Svetlana returned to the magazine article that she had begun to read earlier in the day. “It’s two-thirty,” he said, pointing to a noisy wall clock, “I’m paying their bill, I can’t wait any longer.”

Svetlana shook her head in agreement without lifting her gaze from the shiny pages resting on her lap.

“Yes, this is Dr. McCain calling from McCain Vineyards in Bolgheri. I’d like to speak to your director,” he said, while clicking the mechanism of a new ballpoint pen.

“Just one moment,” the laboratory secretary replied, in barely passable English.

“Dr. McCain, my subordinate was about to call you,” the director said, seconds later.

Where have I heard that before, Weylin remarked to himself. “What have you got to tell me?” he asked.

The director cleared his throat several times. “We did not find your saxitoxin, instead, our analysis revealed only common pesticides from the sample marked underground supply and relatively clean well water from the other.”

“Are you certain?” Weylin said, with profound skepticism.

“Quite. We repeated the test several times, as is our policy for this type of investigation.”

“I’ll need a written report for both the laboratory analysis and your investigation of my facility?”

“Yes, of course. I imagine that the authorities will require a copy and I will include both English and Italian versions.”

“Thank you for your expert assistance,” Weylin said, before returning the phone to its cradle.

“So?” Svetlana inquired, with the apathy of a disinterested party.

“Well, you may have been right.”

“About what?”

“It seems that Hathar’s *process* was a hoax. It consisted of nothing more than ordinary pesticides and water.”

“That means that if she is responsible, it was probably added at the time of the sulfur change.”

“Yes, but why did they make such a big a deal about her proprietary process, I would have been interested in the vineyard without it?”

Svetlana sat silently for a few moments, her fingers steeped before her face. “OK,” she said, finally, “suppose you wanted to sell something to someone, not anyone but someone in particular. You would make the deal irresistible, no?”

“I suppose so, but are you implying that the prior owner intended to sell to me specifically? How could they know that I’d be interested in their little vineyard and why would they go to the trouble?”

“Weylin, you must know that I am a suspicious person by nature of my KGB training. I am merely posing a hypothetical but, you were told that the vineyard was created for the purpose of research, correct?”

“Yes, that was the explanation given for its small size and availability for purchase.”

“Well, we now know that the alleged *process* had nothing to do with their research, so, what were they doing? Let me answer. Suppose the research had to do with finding a deadly toxin capable of surviving in wine without altering its taste or otherwise becoming detectable?”

“OK, go on.”

“Did your friend not tell you in his e-mail about the unexplained deaths at the hospitals that served the Camalia wine? Suppose for a moment, that the hospitals represented a perfectly controlled environment where the lethal toxin could be tested and where the resultant deaths could be swept under the carpet, thereby avoiding the scrutiny of state investigators.”

“It’s a good theory.”

“Theory? I think not,” she replied, sarcastically. “What remains to be discovered, however, is what made you their intended target.”

“I haven’t exactly kept my interest in wines a secret.”

“That is not what I had in mind. Why would someone go to the expense and trouble of creating such an elaborate ruse to kill only a handful of people?”

“What are you thinking?”

“There had to be a different purpose that we have yet to discover.”

Weylin rose from his chair and approached the window that looked out over the sleeping vineyard. He studied the landscape for several minutes, then turned and said, “I think it’s time to ask for Sascha’s help.”

“I agree. Tomorrow is Friday, I suggest we make plans to fly to Geneva over the weekend.”

“I’ll take care of it.”