

CHAPTER 1

Sebastian Perez sat on a cold bench about a block from the cider bar where his friends were waiting for him. He pulled his jacket close against the late December chill. He'd been anxious to see his friends since he returned for winter break from university in Madrid.

Now, things were different. He wasn't sure he would be welcome. Over the holidays, his whole family, his whole life had imploded.

He texted his best friend Felix, asking him to quietly leave the bar and meet him on the bench. He needed to get a feel for whether his friends would accept him after what his father's top lieutenant and his son had done before Christmas.

Felix came jogging over, his breath hanging in the air.

"Man, what are you doing? Come inside. We have a table and I know the girls in there are waiting to see Oviedo's hottest guy."

"Do my friends want to see me after what happened with Eduardo and Bartolomo?" Sebastian asked pointedly.

Felix became somber. "They aren't your family, man. No one blames you, but yeah, there are hard feelings toward your dad. A lot of our friends' dads don't have jobs anymore. Some of them were working for Eduardo's crew too. They got fired also. Perez was

harsh because he didn't know who was in on the double-cross with Eduardo and who wasn't. They say this was all Eduardo and Bartolomo. No one knew they were working with the Russians. I believe them, man. They wouldn't cross your dad."

Sebastian put his head in his hands and cursed. He had told his father before that Eduardo couldn't be trusted, and neither could his half-wit son Bartolomo.

"Is it true Eduardo and Bartolomo are on a ski trip in Switzerland? That's the rumor." Felix looked at his friend and waited patiently for an answer.

"Can you keep this between us?" Sebastian asked, knowing the answer. Felix nodded. Sebastian would trust him with his life. "My dad is the one who alerted the National Police when he found out Eduardo was dealing coke with the Russians after Raul explicitly forbade it. The original deal was they could drive their trucks to the Bay of Biscay *only* and load it onto their ships. Eduardo made a back-door deal with Valdev Belevich, the leader of the Russian crew. He and Bartolomo would get a thirty-percent cut if they let one of the smaller trucks deliver to Perez distributors. When everything went down, millions of dollars of uncut cocaine was confiscated by the National Police. They confessed to my dad because they were more afraid of the Russians than him."

“I knew they were on their own! No one in this town would turn against the Perez family,” Felix said vehemently.

“My dad promised to get them out of Spain and to a safe house, away from Belevich. But I overheard him talking—Eduardo and Bartolomo will be assassinated as soon as they arrive.”

Sebastian leaned back against the bench and closed his eyes. He felt like a weight had been lifted, being able to talk with his best friend. There was more he had learned this Christmas break, but he couldn’t talk about it yet. He was still processing the family’s biggest secret.

“Damn!” Felix leaned back next to his friend. It was clearly a lot for him to take in.

“Do you think my friends will still be happy to see me?” Sebastian said, nodding towards the cider bar.

“Of course, they will! C’mon, let’s get you inside and get drinking!” Felix was shaking, but not just from the cold.

The best friends stood up and, shoulder to shoulder, walked across the moonless courtyard toward the cider bar and their waiting friends. For the first time in weeks, Sebastian had a genuine smile on his face.

As they neared the entrance, a truck came speeding around the quiet corner and screeched to a stop in front of them. They stopped to look and were met with a spray from AK-47s. Both young men hit the ground.

Sebastian managed to slide under a car. He reached for Felix, only to see his face and body were riddled with bullet wounds. He was dead. Sebastian held his hand over his mouth so he wouldn't scream.

Before he could physically react, he heard Russians shouting. He watched in horror as the lifeless body of his best friend, his brother, was picked up. He heard a thud—the dead body was now in the back of the truck. Footsteps circled the car he was under and walked around the parking lot. People from the cider bar must have been peeking out, because he heard some shots hit the wood of the bar door. More Russian yelling, and the truck drove off.

Sebastian slid out from under the car, not realizing he was injured and bleeding profusely. As he stood in the spot where his friend had lain, he felt the blood pouring out of his arm. He wrapped it in his jacket and ran, leaving his car.

In terror, he ran and crawled through the brush the two miles home. He avoided being seen. Finally, he reached his house. Shock had set in and he passed out on the front doorstep.

It was no longer just a story. It was all suddenly real.