

Prologue

~ Three years before ~

Madrid, Calle Neptuno

Noguera's bad day

Victor Cambra Noguera loosened the red tie around his neck. He dropped the briefcase in his right hand carelessly on the floorboard, crossed the narrow hallway with long strides and went straight to the kitchen, where he grabbed a can of beer from the refrigerator. Drops of water beaded off the cool metal of the can as he rolled it over his sweaty forehead. What a goddamn shitty day. The shittiest day Noguera had ever experienced in his nearly forty-four years. The day started off god-awful when he woke up in the early morning only to find that he had overslept by two hours. On any other day, this would have been annoying but relatively unproblematic; except today, when he had to dismiss Carla Almán Martínez at nine o'clock sharp for nothing less than chronic unpunctuality. Now he was late for this appointment, of all things. Extremely embarrassing!

In the late morning, he had attended one of those unspeakable service meetings with the twenty-one other branch managers of Madrid's *Caja de Ahorros Popular*, the country's largest savings bank chain. Two hours in which an incredible amount was said and virtually nothing was said – it was the same everytime. Then at three o'clock, Noguera had finally received a phone call from a man he had never met in person and yet had come to fear. Bruce Saranello was his name. Dr. Bruce Saranello, to be exact, as this fop insisted on this form of address in every conversation. Saranello was a client of Noguera's bank, at least still. In the past few months, he had shifted some large – suspiciously large – sums of money back and forth through his account. Probably to avoid an audit by the financial regulator, Saranello had offered Noguera a handsome sum of money a few weeks ago, but the latter had refused. Saranello had not been happy at all. During their numerous phone calls, he had never raised his voice, but there was something in his voice, in the way he had spoken to Noguera, that had made the latter afraid. He didn't know what Saranello did for a living and where those horrendous sums came from that he stashed away in the *Caja de Ahorros Popular* in Madrid. However, Noguera had long suspected that his client was not an honest man.

But he had remained firm, had not allowed himself to be intimidated by Saranello. His vehement rejections did not seem to have missed their mark because for almost two months he had not heard a single word from the Italian. It wasn't just that he had no interest in Saranello's money or simply wanted to ignore the suspicious transactions – on the contrary. About a week ago, Noguera had revealed to the head of his bank's human resources department, *Joaquin Bosquez Quintero*, that he wanted to report Saranello's suspicious activities to the financial regulator. *Caja de Ahorros Popular* simply could not afford to become embroiled in any political scandal or in whatever the money was for that Saranello was moving back and forth in his accounts by the millions. Quintero, a simple-minded man but with a peasant shrewdness that should not be underestimated, had advised Noguera against it. He had been quite intimidated by Saranello's manner, but Noguera was not put off by Quintero's hesitant, almost fearfully expressed concerns.

Nevertheless, it had been a little scary when Saranello called that afternoon of all days – the first time in weeks – and, in his words, wanted to ask one last time whether Noguera could not be convinced somehow. When Noguera had supported his point of view in a friendly but firm manner, Saranello had remained calm and wished him a pleasant day and thanked him for his services as branch manager. It had almost sounded like a farewell, as if Saranello wanted to change banks.

But that would no longer do him any good either. Once Victor Cambra Noguera had set his mind on something, there was no going back. As uncomfortable as he was at the thought of reporting a man like Bruce Saranello to the authorities – it was best for his bank. Its welfare, after all, was something he always had to keep an eye on. That was his job.

After drinking his beer, Noguera put a frozen pizza with tuna and onions in the oven. Opening a second can of beer, he made himself comfortable on the wide couch in the living room. He turned on the TV – just in time for the kickoff of *El Clásico*, the top game of the season. Real Madrid, Noguera's favorite soccer club since childhood, was hosting the league leaders from Barcelona. The clash between these two rivals and giants of European soccer was the highlight of every season. Periodically shoving a slice of pizza into his mouth and sipping his beer while putting his feet up on the low living room table, Noguera enjoyed the evening. Although he had arrived home rather late, even by his ambitious standards, he had the advantage of living a childless and husbandless life. He didn't miss anything. Basically, after that marathon day, he couldn't imagine anything more exhausting than coming home and taking care of a couple of kids and an annoying wife. He had never been interested in that sort of thing. In this respect, Noguera differed from the average Spanish family man.

He had just brought the beer can to his mouth and taken a sip when Real Madrid scored 1:0 just before the end of the first half. Noguera jumped up in jubilation, choked, coughed loudly, and almost missed

the doorbell ringing. Cursing, he put the can on the table, walked from the living room into the hallway, and opened the door. Standing in front of him was a tall, blond man in a black suit looking sheepishly down at Noguera.

“Evening,” the stranger said in perfect Spanish, although one could see that he was not a native Spaniard. His light hair, blue eyes, prominent cheekbones and angular features suggested a Scandinavian, a Swede perhaps.

“Can I help you?” asked Noguera.

“I hope so,” the man replied, pointing over his shoulder to a black Porsche parked on the side of the road. “My car broke down and my cell phone is out of power. Could I maybe use your phone to talk to a garage and my insurance company for a minute?” Noguera's gaze shifted from the blond hunk to his car. He had a Porsche at that age, plus he was extremely well-groomed with a palpable aura of power and wealth that surrounded him. He must have been a damn successful guy even at a young age. Some guys just got lucky.

“Of course,” Noguera said, opening the front door all the way so the man could enter.

“Thanks a million!” the latter replied effusively, stepping into the narrow hallway.

“The phone is in the living room,” Noguera said, leading the way. Immediately he looked at the television and cursed softly. At the end of the first half, Barca – as FC Barcelona was known for short, had tied the score. “There's the phone,” he said absentmindedly, pointing to the dark dresser on the wall where the phone was in a charging tray. As he did so, he kept looking at the TV, where they were showing the replay of the first half when a penalty happened and a rather contentious one at that, Noguera thought. The way the Barca striker had fallen and rolled across the turf after a slight bump, you'd have thought a two-ton truck had hit him. These days only wimps overreacted in such a way, for God's sake.

“Real or Barca?” asked the man who, instead of talking on the phone, was watching the TV with Noguera.

“Real,” Noguera muttered, wishing the stranger would finally leave.

“What a pity,” the latter replied. “I tend to stick with Barcelona.” Noguera turned around and froze. The man had reached into the inside pocket of his jacket and was holding a damn pistol pointed at him.

“What the ...,” he continued. They were the last words he would ever utter. Three silenced shots interrupted him in the middle of the indignant question he was about to ask. The first projectile pierced a rib and bored deep into his heart while the other two ate through his stomach and intestines, a strange feeling it was. Contrary to his expectation and his greatest fear that had haunted Victor Cambra Noguera since childhood, dying didn't hurt. It happened very quickly. The man who called himself

Albatross put the gun back in his shoulder holster and surveyed the dead Noguera, who had fallen against the couch and was lying strangely twisted on his side. He was lying there not because Albatross was a somewhat too radical Barcelona fan who took his club a bit too seriously. No, this was all about business, of course.