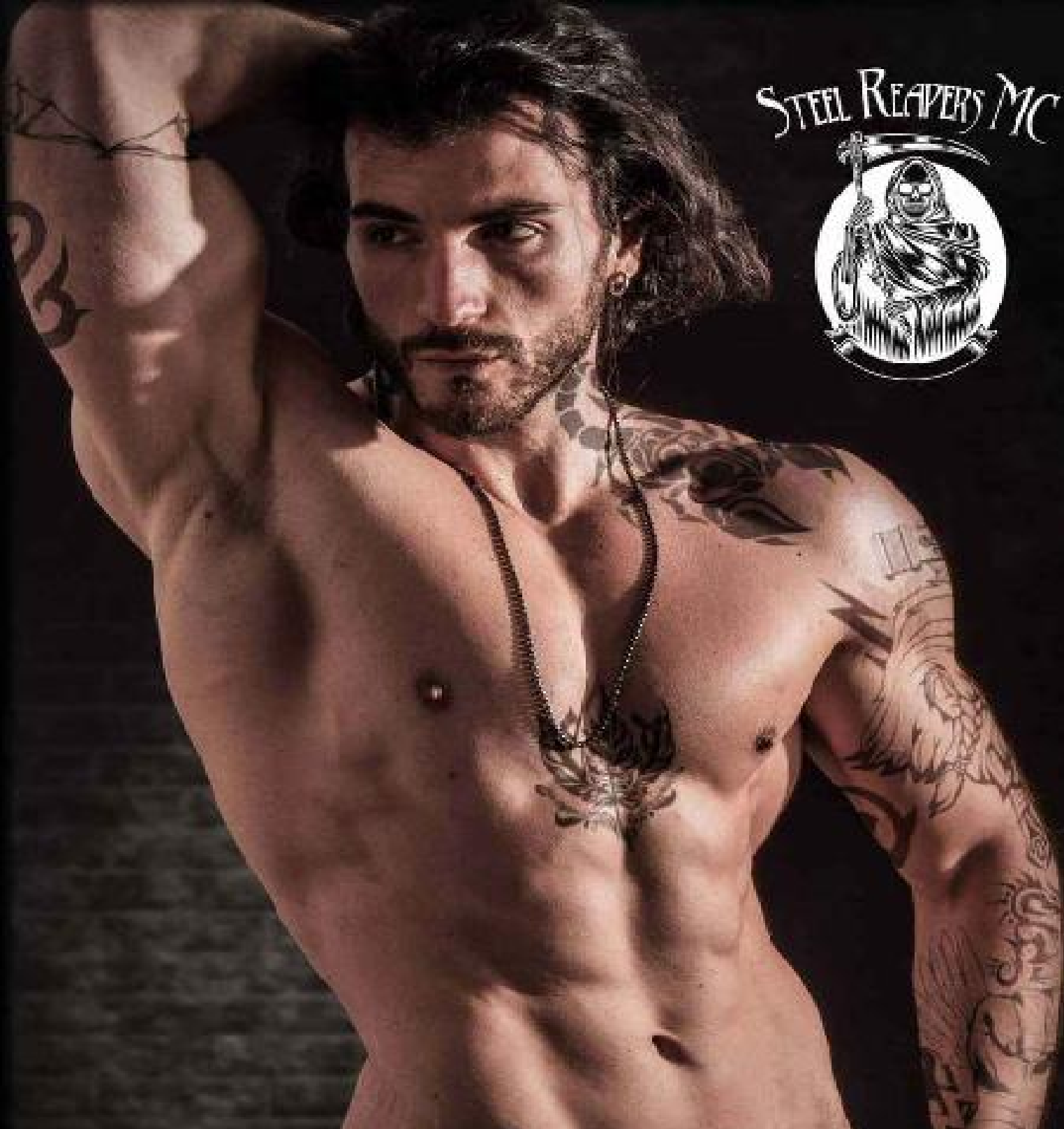


STEEL REAPERS MC



THUNDER

ZAHRA GIRARD

Thunder
Book 2 in the Steel Reapers MC
Zahra Girard

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Thank you,

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Chapter One

Amelia

“This doesn’t feel real.”

Gravel crunches beneath my feet and a smile lifts the corners of my mouth.

I look around me in awe.

As fantastical it seems, as it feels, as it even smells, I have to admit it is real; my eyes see it. They take it in; the gnarly oaks clustered against the rocks, in the ravines, their twisted fingers grasping for any drop of moisture in the air or falling from the sky; the wildflowers, blooming, abuzz with bees and perfuming the air; the rolling, chaparral-covered mountains dotted with small houses, a few cottages, an aluminum trailer; it’s all real, right in front of me. All my responsibility.

My chance to make something meaningful that’ll last for generations.

Yet it still doesn’t feel real.

“What do you mean?” My boss, Brian Russell, says beside me as I take equipment out of my bag: binoculars, a high-powered camera, vials for soil and groundwater sampling, and the clipboard that I now, begrudgingly, call my lucky clipboard because it’s lasted with me throughout my master’s program at NYU. Which, for a clipboard in an engineering program, where there is a strong temptation to, in the heat of the moment or in a very considered moment while reading a certain professor’s feedback, snap said clipboard over one’s knee, survival for even a year is a phenomenal feat. For several years, through both an engineering degree and in adding an environmental engineering master’s, is practically unheard of. So, it’s my lucky clipboard.

“This is my first assignment, and already I’m assisting you in running the development of what is going to be a massive Eco resort like Mar y Tierra?” My voice shakes with a trembling trio of emotions—pride, trepidation, confusion; I don’t doubt myself, but to be hired fresh out of grad school

and then put into a leadership role on a massive project like this is nearly unheard of. It's exciting, but it keeps my ears pricked to catch even the slightest sound of the other shoe dropping.

"You sound flattered, Amelia, when really it's just a testament to your resume and how you presented yourself in the interview. This was all earned."

I lower the camera from my eye and look over at Brian. Average height, overweight, balding, everything that happens when you spend too many hours for too many years behind a desk, and give him a smile wider than I've given to any man who's tried to pick me up. It feels good to get a compliment from someone you respect, someone who's offered to take you under their wing, and someone with enough industry awards on their wall that it'd take nearly two hands to count them all.

"Thank you."

"You can thank me by confirming the figures in our initial survey and making sure this is the best site for the development project. There's millions of dollars at stake here, Amelia, and that leaves no room for sentimentality. Just professionalism. So any time I tell you that you're doing well, it's simply a fact. And any time I tell you that you're not doing well, it's going to be the first, and last, time you hear it, because you'll be fired."

"Yes, sir."

I take up my equipment and begin plodding through the vast expanse of property that is likely to be the site for one of the biggest development projects in this part of the state in at least the last decade. So much money, so much responsibility, and so much opportunity—to protect and preserve a valuable natural space. Even thinking about it makes the world around me stand out in sharper relief. I can already visualize where the solar panels and wind turbines will go, I can see how the resort will blend in with the landscape, being one with it instead of apart from it, and I can see the wide swath of ocean that'll be set aside as a preserve. This area is so beautiful, and the knowledge that I'll be playing a part in safekeeping it for

generations means I'm smiling as I take every photo, every water sample, every breath of the sweet ocean air.

"What the hell are you doing on my property?"

I turn, lower my camera.

I've wandered far, though I'm still on the project site, but a long way from the car that Brian and I took to get here, which is now just a speck in the distance.

"Excuse me?"

"I asked you what the hell you were doing taking pictures of my damn property."

The source of the foul language is an old woman. Diminutive, gray-haired, with clear, crystalline blue eyes, a pale complexion, but rigid-straight shoulders and a posture that would put a soldier to shame.

She shakes a fist at me.

"Are you going to answer me, or am I going to have to call my grandchildren?"

"I'm just here doing a survey, ma'am," I answer, deciding a simple answer is better than to even open the can of worms trying to explain all the environmental data I'm collecting.

"A survey? Oh, so you're answering questions. Let me help you, dear, and give you the answer to your survey: get the hell off my land. That answer goes for you and that well-dressed tub of flab who's stomping all over my neighbor's property, too."

"Excuse me?"

"Get the hell out of here."

"Why are you so awful?"

"How would you feel if people kept coming up to your home, telling you they're going to take it from you, and then, when you finally get them to leave you alone, you get threats from the city council, the county board, and even strange calls in the middle of the night?"

I take a step back. She's clearly lost her mind.

"I'm just trying to do my job. That's all. This land is so verdant, so special. Someone has to make sure it's preserved and protected, which is why I'm here. So I'd appreciate it if you could stop harassing me."

"Harassing you? You think I'm harassing you? It is so astounding to me that a young person like you, someone who probably has a very fancy degree and doesn't need a hearing aid, could be so deaf and uncomprehending. Do you not understand what I'm telling you?" Then she throws up her hands. "Here I am, being a fool, trying to get you to listen. I warned you: I'm calling my grandkids."

With that, she turns and hollers toward her home in the distance. "Owen, Natalie, your grandmother needs you. Come here, please."

In moments, two figures jog toward us, toward me, from the distant house.

Owen comes into view first. Tall, short-haired, broad-shouldered, with a camo tee and dark-colored jeans, he's either fresh out of the military, on leave from the military, or he thinks he should've been in it, and I don't know which is worse. I take a step back and look around for Brian, who is still far off in the distance.

"Grandma, you need something?" Owen says the second he arrives.

Just on his tail, Natalie comes jogging up. She's petite, looks a couple years younger than me, has curly dark hair, freckles, and the same striking blue eyes as her brother and grandmother. She turns those shocking blues on me with curiosity and determination.

"Who are you?" She says.

"Amelia," I answer by rote habit. Then I question why in the heck I'm giving any personal information at all to an old lady and her two grandkids who all obviously hate me, and two of them at least—the grandmother and her commando grandson—scare the crap out of me.

“You’re one of them, aren’t you?” Owen says forcefully.

The old woman nods. “She is.”

“An environmental engineer?” I ask.

No one at college warned me engineers of any type would be so hated. I wish they had. I would’ve pursued something less objectionable, like chemistry, with an emphasis on testing cosmetic safety on newborn puppies and kidnapped school children.

“She’s one of those vultures in suits who wants to take my home from me,” the old woman says. “Did you lose your hearing along with your soul?”

“Ma’am,” I begin, drawing on the one thing I know in this situation: the specifics of the project that drew it to me in the first place. My voice shakes with enthusiasm, excitement, and heart. Even talking about the sheer potential of what could be built here makes me vibrate. “This is going to be the site for an eco resort, Mar y Tierra, and it’s going to protect and preserve so much of the natural beauty of the area and give so much back to everyone here. It’ll be powered by renewable energy, and any excess will go right back into the community. It’ll be built to not just be carbon neutral, but carbon negative. And so much of that,” I say, with a sweeping gesture that encompasses so much of the coastline. “Will be protected as a natural preserve.”

“There’s an entire state for your company to find somewhere else to build. And all of what you said, well, that’s all great, but it doesn’t help me when all I want is to die in the house where my husband and I spent fifty years raising children and grandchildren.” The old woman makes another gesture, off toward an oak tree on a small hill in the distance. “You see that tree there? That’s where he’s resting, waiting for me, and when I go, I’m going to be put in the ground right next to the man I love. Now, why should I be excited for some bunch of rich people to take my home and build a spa or whatever they’re going to build right on top of my husband’s resting place? Why shouldn’t I fight you and your company with every one of my very few remaining breaths?”

I take another step back.

A look over my shoulder tells me that Brian's watching from afar, standing next to the rental car with his hands on his hips.

"I'm truly sorry. That's obviously a lot to, uh, well, you see, this project is likely going ahead and I can assure you that everything will be done to respect the natural beauty of this place and, uh..."

I stop myself, because I was just about to say and your dead husband's grave, which I realize is probably not going to go over well.

Natalie, who has stayed mostly quiet during this confrontation, steps forward and puts a hand on my arm. "You should probably leave now."

A look at her brother, Owen, who I now realize has a noticeable bulge in his pants that is not indicative of his desire to have a good time, but is, in fact, a gun, tells me I definitely should leave. That, and the old woman has her fists balled up like she's ready to punch me in the face.

But my one step backward isn't enough for Owen, who now reaches into his pants and removes all doubt about whether the bulge is his penis or a gun.

It's a gun.

A big, scary-looking gun.

"Leave. Now."

"Yes, I'm leaving. Please don't hurt me," I say.

The trudge back to the car is long, and the scenery around me feels less like an idyllic piece of the California coast and more like the setting for a war zone.

Brian has a smile on his face that might be smug, as if he knew this would happen, or it might just be commiserating; I'm too out of sorts after being threatened by an old woman and her grandchildren to know the difference.

"I see you met the locals," he says, knowingly.

“So you were aware?”

“Aware? I talked to them last week. Week before, we had lawyers and a couple others out here. There’s some serious community opposition to this project, Amelia.” He opens the car door for me and I take a seat.

“So, what are we going to do about it?” I say as he gets in the driver’s seat and starts the vehicle. As we move, I watch the world out the window; my vision for what could be here is suddenly much less clear. “How can we move forward on this thing if all these people are so set against it and some of them even have guns?”

“Well, that’s part of what you’re here to figure out.”

I swallow and look sideways at him. “Me?”

“If you’ll remember from all the way back when you applied to work for us here at Sterns, Santo, and Russell development, which I admit was a couple months ago, and since your generation—what with its phone addiction—doesn’t have the same memory or attention span, so maybe you don’t remember, but your position includes project management, not just the environmental aspects. And your job as my assistant includes managing community relations.”

It all vaguely tickles my memory. Vaguely. Though it’s hard to recall through the sheer excited haze of getting a call from a well-known firm like SSR and getting offered a job so soon after graduating; I’d expected at least six months of struggling with an unpaid internship at some no-name firm before getting anything close to a real job.

“So, figuring out how to get those people out there, like that old lady and her gun-toting grandson, to not hate us so we can build this resort...”

“Is your job. You’ll either do it, or you’ll get fired. Do I need to remind you what a firing this early in your career, and from a firm like SSR, will do to your lifetime career prospects?”

It’ll sink them deeper than the Titanic.

“No, sir.”

The path ahead for me is clear: get those people who hate me, my company, and everything we stand for to stop hating us and give up their homes...

Or see if any of the local fast-food restaurants need a night time janitor.

Chapter Two

Thunder

One more turn, then all the pieces will fall into place.

“Try it now,” I call from beneath the hood of a car that belongs in a scrapyard more than it does the garage at Reid’s Repairs. Still, of every car under our roof, including the Tesla that some techie from San Francisco brought in to have some bodywork done and some baffling modifications added—poor guy saw *Mad Max* one too many times and now envisions himself as the Eco Road Warrior—this car is the most valuable.

“Got it, brother,” Bullet responds, cranking the key.

The Toyota chugs.

Chugs.

Rumbles.

Then it roars.

Yes, roars.

A twenty-eight-year-old Toyota Corolla, for the first time in the history of the entire model line, roars. I feel like a fucking maestro with a socket wrench.

I take a step back, slam the hood shut, and smile at Bullet. “Told you so.”

He shuts the car off and steps out, then he strides forward and gives me a hug, pounding my back. “Didn’t doubt for a second that you could fix this car up, Thunder. I just doubted whether it was worth it.”

My thoughts flash back to the old woman we encountered at the convenience store on the outskirts of Costa Oscura, whose car we stole, whose day we definitely ruined—being that we were covered in an unbelievable assortment of blood and other bodily fluids—and whose heart we probably came close to stopping with shock.

Who I haven’t been able to stop thinking about since.

“You know I had to do this.”

“Yeah, but did you have to turn her little putt-around-town car into something that drives like it came off the set of *Fast and Furious*?”

“Who wouldn’t want to do their grocery runs faster?”

“She rides this thing, she might literally pull a *Back to the Future*,” he says, slapping the hood. “Or at least she’ll think she is, when the damn g-forces make her pacemaker go out of control.”

“If you two are done fondling that car and staring moony-eyed at each other, we need to close up shop,” Rook hollers from the other side of the garage.

“You talk like you run this place, Rook. Whose name is on the sign out front?” Bullet answers.

“The name of the child who’s going to get punched in the face if he makes me late to my dinner date with Eliza,” Rook calls back. “And I’ll remind you, I haven’t been in a proper fight in months. I’m itching for a good one.”

“Months?” Bullet replies. “It wasn’t that long ago that you killed, what, three, four men working for the Covingtons?”

“At least. But those weren’t men. Just pathetic boys wearing their daddy’s clothes, playing at being tough.”

Bullet and I trade a look. We both know the question we want to ask, but neither wants to speak up and ask it, because there’s a good chance that the answer Rook gives will leave us traumatized.

Finally, curiosity gets the better of me.

“Rook, when was the last real fight you had?”

“Killing my brothers in my old MC. And nearly killing my actual brother, too.”

Stunned, Bullet and I trade another long look, each of us urging the other to ask.

Finally, my curiosity gets the better of me again.

“Your old MC? And your actual brother...? What was the story there?”

Rook leaves his place on the other side of the garage and slowly walks toward where Bullet and I stand. Neither of us can move. We're transfixed.

He stops right in front of me.

Looks me directly in the eyes.

“They all tried to keep me from going on a dinner date with Eliza. Just like you're doing right now. Do you want to stand here talking and find out more about just how big of a mistake you're making, or do you want me to get out of here so you can live another day?”

“You can go, Rook. Thunder and I will close up. I got a date with Maddy in a few, too. Something with her parents,” Bullet says.

“How are they taking to their precious daughter dating an outlaw and a mechanic?” I say.

“It doesn't matter. Maddy and I, we're together, that's what counts. So, if they've got a problem with it, they can keep it to themselves, you know?” He chuckles, then shakes his head. “They're fine with it. First time really sitting down with them was awkward, but once they found out I own my own business and have plans for expansion, we really got along.”

“Expansion?” I say. “The garage?”

He shakes his head and winks. “The MC. But I didn't tell them that. I'll let them think what they need to think, as long as it means they keep some beer in their fridge for me.” Bullet turns to Rook. “Where are you taking Eliza? If you say *Chez Patisse*, I need to call the restaurant and change my reservation, because I will not have your scary ass staring at me, creeping me out while I'm trying to enjoy dinner with my Maddy.”

Rook grunts. “Somewhere down south, in San Francisco. I don't know. It has some fancy Italian name. All I remember is Eliza came home from the hospital saying a coworker was just raving about it and she really wanted to go there. I called the

place to get a reservation, they said they were booked solid for months, so I rode down there and found the manager. We talked. I got the reservation.”

“When you say you two talked, you mean...” Bullet says.

“I mean, he came to understand just how important it was to his survival that he give me that reservation. You think I ever want to tell Eliza that I can’t bring her something she really wants?”

Bullet nods. “I get it. The things I’d do to make Maddy happy.”

“You understand it, Bullet. When they look at you, and they smile, and it’s not just a smile on their face, but in their eyes...” Rook pauses, coughs. “I’d slit a hundred throats just to see her smile that way one single time.”

I turn my attention to the car, to the overly powerful Toyota Corolla I’ve created. Maybe Eileen O’Connell—the old woman’s name according to the registration papers I found in the glove box—doesn’t need a car she can drag race in. Maybe I’ve been a little overzealous.

Maybe it’s because I wanted something missing in my life, even if it was a strange old woman that I’d scared the living daylights out of and stolen her car; someone to look at me with even a fraction of that appreciation that Bullet and Rook both have with their partners, Maddy and Eliza.

“You two go. I’ll finish closing up the shop,” I say.

“You sure? Thanks, Thunder,” Bullet says.

“You’re not horrible,” Rook adds.

“I’ll lock up, then I’m going to deliver the Corolla to Eileen. Check in on her, make amends. I think it’s time.”

“You’re going to spend your night with some old lady?” Bullet says, giving me a strange look as he scrubs a day’s worth of grease from his hands at the garage’s industrial sink. “What about that one chick? You know, the one you met when we returned those uniforms we used to sneak into the Covington Corporation. What was her name?”

“Nikki.” I grab a clean rag and a bit of wax and start putting some shine in the Corolla. It’s pointless—this car hasn’t shined since before I was born—but necessary. My hands need something to do as I grapple with what’s going on inside my chest. “She can wait.”

“Wait? What’s going on with you?”

“What’s so special about this Nikki?” Rook says. “Can she regularly shoot a target past 1000 yards?”

I gawk at him. “What?”

“Sniping. If she could regularly shoot a target past 1000 yards, she’d be impressive.”

“How the hell are you with someone like Eliza?” I say.

“Don’t know. I’m lucky, I guess. And I must be lovable, because she tells me she loves me all the time. Now, answer my question.”

“It’s not her sniping prowess,” I say. “She has other features that caught my attention. But she can wait. This car is more important.”

“You didn’t think that way when we met her,” Bullet says, teasing. Then he turns to Rook. “She worked at this cafe near the uniform place. Thought we were actual HVAC repair men and asked if we could take a look at her air system in her cafe, because it had just gone out and she couldn’t get ahold of anyone to fix it. Thunder here says, ‘Yes, absolutely. We definitely are HVAC repairmen.’ Next thing you know, she’s got us in the back room in the shop, and Thunder tells her she should go out front, because it could be dangerous, and then he spends the next half hour watching YouTube videos to teach himself how to fix HVAC units.”

“Fixed her HVAC, though. You should’ve heard how that baby purred,” I say. I’ll always feel proud of that accomplishment.

“Then you got her number, too. Said she didn’t need to pay, that all she needed to do was let you take her out to dinner. Brother, you couldn’t jump on that opportunity fast enough, and now, you’re putting her off so you can go deliver a rust

bucket on wheels to some old lady way outside of town? What the hell?"

"If you and Rook keep standing there, jabbering at me and watching me polish this sweet ride, you're going to be late for your dates."

"He's right. Shut your mouths or I'll shut them for you," Rook says.

But Bullet's still looking at me in that way that he does from time to time, where he knows me well enough to know something's off, and he's trying to peer inside me and figure it out.

I pat the car and give him a reassuring look. "Trust me, Bullet, this is just something I have to do."

Though even that's not quite the truth.

Deep down, this is something I *need* to do.

* * * * *

It's when I take the final turn off the coastal road and onto the long, winding driveway of Eileen O'Connell, with only the two, faded motes of light from the headlights to guide me, that I realize I'm taking a damn big risk for a damn stupid reason.

Who knows how this old woman will react to seeing the man who robbed her suddenly show up?

She might be grateful, or she might have a gun and decide, rather than hear out my apology, she'd rather just put a slug in my skull.

Or she might call the cops.

Either way, the likelihood of an awful outcome is far higher than my hoped-for momentary sense of fulfillment.

Fuck, here I am, calculating odds when I know what it is I want, and it's right in front of me. I've been spending too much time around Maddy.

I press my foot to the gas and go way too fast down the remaining bumpy, pothole-filled stretch of driveway.

When I park in front of Eileen's house, there are two other cars in the driveway and three shadows in the living room window, all clustered by the window, watching me.

No sooner am I out of the car than the front door opens and two of those shadows are yelling at me from the doorway.

"If you're with them, I warned you: I'm armed and you are trespassing," comes a man's voice. That warning is followed by the shadowy figure clearly drawing a pistol and aiming it in my general direction.

"Owen, we are not killing someone in grandma's driveway," I hear the second shadow, a woman, hiss at the first. Then she shouts at me. "Sir, you need to leave now. We're tired of all of you coming by, harassing our grandmother, and trying to force her out of her home. We won't let you."

Raising my hands, I step away from the vehicle.

"I'm not here to force your grandma out of her home. Actually, I know her. I robbed her not that long ago."

The shadow holding the gun, Owen, takes another step forward, more deliberately aiming the weapon right at my head. "You are not helping your case here, man."

"Shit, yeah, I realize now how that sounds," I admit. "It sounded better in my head."

"How can you think that would sound good? Have you had a head injury or something?" Owen replies.

"Owen, don't be an ass," the female shadow says.

"Quiet, Natalie, this guy robbed our grandmother. He doesn't deserve shit."

"Several head injuries, yeah," I say. "More than I'd like, and some recent, too. Listen, I did your grandmother wrong, but it was for the right reasons. I needed her car to help someone close to me who was in a real bad spot and there was just no other option, but I'm here to make amends. I fixed up her car better than when I borrowed it, washed it, detailed it, waxed it. As far as this car is concerned, it's like it's 1997 all over again."

“You stole our grandmother’s car, fixed it up, and then, what, came here to gloat about it?” Natalie says.

I shake my head and take a few frustrated steps forward before a gesture from Owen and his gun halts my progress. These people just don’t understand that a stranger could do something nice for them, or at least try to make up for something terrible they recently did; this is not at all the welcome I was hoping for.

“I’m here to return it. To give it back and apologize. Is your grandmother home?” I say. It’s clear she is. I can see a wizened shape in the window that has to be her, but it feels more polite to ask; Natalie and Owen seem determined to shelter their grandmother from any outsiders.

“Really? Why do you want to see her? Just leave the keys on the hood and get the hell out of here.”

“Owen, stop being an ass. He’s trying to be nice,” Natalie hisses.

Sensing an opening, a chance to actually get what I want, I hold my hands out wider and take a few more steps forward.

“I got in trouble a lot as a kid. Rode around, stayed out late, only came home when the cops brought me home. Course, they didn’t know that by bringing me home, they were just making the next time I got into trouble worse. Only family member I had who wasn’t a monster who liked to scream at me, spit on me, or hit me, was my grandmother, and she died before I turned five. Look, Owen, I needed your grandmother’s car, and I didn’t have any other choice, so I took it, but now I need to make up for that. Will you at least let me see her so I can do that?”

Natalie steps aside, and after a moment, Owen does, too. Neither of them says anything as I enter the house, though I feel their eyes on me every step of the way.

Eileen O’Connell is sitting on the edge of an old, tatty brown sofa in the living room, her hands folded, her back straight, her blue eyes boring into me. There’s no smile on her face, no sense of gratitude or even welcome radiates from her;

this isn't what I expected, but I step into that room and take a seat on the leather La-Z-Boy closest to her anyway.

She makes no move to speak, just looks at me like she can't decide whether to forgive me or have her grandson shoot me in the head. This older woman is night and day different from the old woman I remember robbing at the convenience store.

Then again, I remind myself, I robbed her in broad daylight. That could sour anyone's mood.

"I suppose you heard why I'm here," I say. "I took your car, I regret it, and I'm here to bring it back."

She's quiet for a second. Cocks her head and regards me with her sharp blue eyes.

"What's your name?"

"Marcus Thompson. Friends call me 'Thunder,' but you can call me whatever suits you best."

"Marcus, I bet you came here expecting a far different welcome than the one you received, didn't you?"

"Something like that, yeah."

"That's only natural. People these days, they don't care for others. Now, I want you to tell me something: what value does getting a stolen car back have compared to having your home, your land, the place where you raised a family, and where the love of your life is buried, stolen right out from under you?"

"Is this a riddle? In case you didn't get it from what I told you about myself back there in the driveway, but school and I didn't get along growing up."

Natalie speaks up. "Some company is trying to force her out of her home so they can develop all this land around here into some resort."

"They've been harassing her. Sending notices, people have been trespassing. It's getting bad," Owen adds. "Nat and I have both been staying here, trying to keep these people away, but there's only so much we can do."

“It’s true. They’re doing their best to take care of me. Which makes me feel like a very lucky old woman.” Eileen looks at her two grandkids with a loving, grateful smile on her face, and it’s a look that the two of them give back to her, as well. It’s a look that I never received from anyone in my family, except from my grandmother, and even then, I was so young I can hardly remember it. “But that also means, Marcus, that an old car means nothing to me. Not now.”

It takes me less than a heartbeat to know what I need to do; not just to make amends, but to fill that empty space inside of me that even the brotherhood of the MC and all the Nikki’s on earth can’t fill. The thing I’ve been lacking since I was five years old.

“You need someone to fight for you,” I say.

Natalie and Owen both nod, while Eileen stays silent, hands folded, watching me.

“I’m in. I’ll help you fight this thing.”

Chapter Three

Amelia

My heels click softly against the hardwood floor as I walk into the art gallery, my eyes scanning the crowd for my closest friend, Serenity ‘Sera’ Moon, and, not seeing her, I search instead for the nearest server on the catering staff and grab a glass of wine.

No, two glasses, because the first one goes down in a gulp.

I’m cloaked in a simple black dress. It’s nothing special, yet everything special; it’s a basic dress, but it’s one that I always feel great in, because it fits so perfect that it doesn’t feel real, it reveals just enough shoulder and cleavage to feel sexy, but not so much that I can’t wear it to a more sophisticated event like the one tonight—the opening night of a new exhibition at my best friend’s art gallery, Tide & Palette. Disappearing in the sea of nicely dressed people circulating around the room, viewing art, taking more free glasses of wine from a passing server, taking free hors d’oeuvres from a different passing server, it lets me escape the quandary that’s gnawing at my conscience.

Then I see they have Crab Rangoon; I take too many, eat them too quickly, then grab some more even though I know my stomach is going to regret it in the morning.

I’ll do anything to not think about work. Even make myself sick on crab puffs.

But, right now, I’m grateful to be here. Right now, all I need to do is look at art, admire art, and enjoy free food and drinks. Things are simple, good. And even those paintings of Sera’s—paintings that are mostly beautiful coastal landscapes of the area, which are her specialty—don’t prick too much at my conscience and make me think that, in order to keep my job and preserve some of the natural beauty of the area and the precious resource that is pristine nature, I’m going to have to put some people out of their homes.

Shoot, there I go again.

I grab another glass of wine, pass through a group of people that, strangely enough, seem to be talking about motorcycle repair, which is a very odd topic to hear about at an art gallery event, and focus on a painting of an old Spanish Mission, which definitely has nothing to do with coastal landscapes or putting old ladies out of their home.

What a relief.

I lean in, focus, look hard. It's a touching painting; the skillful lines, the vibrant colors, the small, thoughtful strokes the artist used to show the interplay of light, nature, and the passage of time on the old Mission.

"Babe, I am so glad you made it," comes Sera's voice behind me. "I thought I might lose you to schematics or reports or whatever it is you science types do."

I turn just in time to get pulled into a hug that leaves me smiling.

"Are you kidding? You know I wouldn't miss this for the world. My best friend opening a new exhibit? Come on, Sera."

"You missed it for a couple of years."

"Yeah, because I had that little thing called a master's degree to finish getting and NYU is a long way from Costa Oscura." I finish my wine and take another glass from a passing tray. I can't get enough of these. Even mentioning my degree makes me think about work and I do not want that on any level right now.

"You okay, Lia? You look decidedly not happy."

"Just work stuff. I don't want to get into it."

"Then don't. Enjoy the exhibition. And, if you need a chill place to relax, meditate, or just breathe, I have the studio space in the back set up just how you like it, so feel free to go back there anytime," Sera pauses, her eyes drifting around the room. "I have to go mingle. I've heard several people mention wanting to buy some of the paintings tonight and commission waits for no one. You should mingle, too. I've seen more than a couple of eligible distractions around here, if you know what I mean."

My eyes follow hers around the room. Even though she's right, my cheeks still get hot. "Really?"

"Free food, free wine, hot guys in suits, what's not to love? Go get some. I'll catch up with you later. Or, even better, maybe I won't cause you'll be off with some lucky guy."

With a swirl, she disappears into the crowd, leaving me to stand alone with my wine, feeling lost and wondering if I really should go looking for a distraction-worthy guy. Being that I'm not buzzed enough, yet, I take my wine and decide to go look at more paintings.

I find myself in front of a portrait of an old woman and a young girl. It's trite. The message is obvious. It's called 'The Passage of Time.' I hate it, but I also love it for what it is: an easy thing to criticize and distract myself by heaping hate upon it.

"Beautiful painting, isn't it?" Says a man's voice behind me.

I turn.

Long-ish dark hair, a bit wild, a beard, tattoos, piercing green eyes, and a tall athletic build all totally overwhelm my sense of good taste and leave me stunned for a moment.

"Yes, it is," I say, surprised that I'm not too tongue-tied to get those words out. Then I shake my head. "No, I mean, no it isn't."

"It isn't?"

"Like, technically, it's okay. The artist has a little skill, but the message is so on the nose."

"It is?"

"If you look at the little girl's eyes, and then look at the old woman's eyes, you'll see they're the same. Like, exactly the same. And if you look at other details in their faces, it's that way, too. It's the same woman, just at two different points in her life. It's basic and trite and stupid and..." I realize I'm ranting, waving my wine glass, and that other people are looking in my direction. Also, I probably shouldn't be criticizing the painting so harshly if my best friend is trying to

sell it. *Calm down, Lia. You're being a bad friend and kind of a bitch right now.* "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to dump all that on you. I've just been having a rough time at work lately."

"You sound like you really know what you're talking about. Do you paint, too?" He comes closer. He's nicely dressed, a button-up shirt that fits him well, hugging his muscular body just right, and his eyes are open, piercing greens that look at me with curiosity and respect, which clashes with both the dangerous aura that radiates off him, as well as with how people in general have treated me lately.

I'm drawn in.

"It's a hobby." Then I add, "No, it's more than that. I love it, actually. But it's not what I do for a living. What I do for a living, I'd rather not talk about it right now. Too much stress."

"Well, either way, you know more about this stuff than I do. I don't know a damn thing about art."

"Then why are you here?"

He points at the group I passed through earlier, the group that was talking about motorcycle repair. "My best friend's girl loves art, culture, all that. He loves her. And the rest of us love free food and wine. Though I think I may have found something else beautiful to pique my interest. I'm Marcus. And you are?"

For a second, I contemplate him over the rim of my wine glass. He's clearly not my usual type. He definitely—nice clothes or not—has a look about him like he does more than just fix motorcycles, like they're probably a significant part of his life; the tattoos, the longer hair, the beard, the vague feeling of danger—they all scream 'biker' to me. A biker lost in an art gallery. Which is intriguing and definitely a distraction.

And then there's those eyes.

They connect with me. Look at me like they give a damn about me and suffuse me with an electric urge to do things that will definitely make me forget about work.

Plus, he's probably not the commitment type.

Which means, after any ‘distractions’ tonight, I’ll probably never have to see him again.

“I’m Amelia, but you can call me Lia.”

Just then my phone buzzes in my purse, and being that I am a professional who, as much as she’s stressed by her job right now, has no desire to actually lose it, I reach into my purse and check my phone. A new email notification. The subject reads: “Urgent: Eco-Resort Project Meeting Tomorrow.”

My stomach sinks.

“Bad news?”

“More of the stuff I’d rather not talk about, because it’d mean I can’t enjoy any of these paintings or even my company.”

“Then maybe you need to let go to really enjoy yourself.”

“I’ve had four glasses of wine and more Crab Rangoons than I will ever admit. I think that qualifies as letting go,” I say. It certainly feels like I’m letting myself go. Probably too much.

“You look like, even though you’re here, you’re not here. Enjoy what’s right in front of you and leave everything that’s bothering you for another time.”

“Are you always so philosophical?”

“Only when I’m trying to impress someone,” Marcus says with a wink, making my heart skip a beat.

“Oh?” Looking into his eyes takes my mind off work in a way that the wine and too-many crab puffs don’t. It lets me think about other strenuous, but far more pleasurable, things. “Well, perhaps I could use a lesson or two in that. Do you offer tutorials?”

“Only for the truly committed,” he grins.

Then he steps closer. So close our bodies nearly meet. I can feel the heat from him, heat that blooms inside of me, making my heart race.

“I’m committed.”

He takes my hand, his calloused fingers brushing gently against my skin.

“Then consider this your first lesson.”

“And what’s the homework?”

Marcus leans even closer, so that his lips are almost touching my ear. “To not overthink and to allow yourself the freedom to feel,” he whispers. His words send a shiver through me, igniting a fire I so desperately want to let consume me. A fire that I didn’t think I could feel on a night like tonight. “What do you feel right now, Lia?”

I breathe in his scent. Masculine. Pine. Beneath that, the faint scent of sweat in an intoxicating way. His thumb caresses my hand and I shiver.

“Yes, I feel something.”

“Which is?”

In a grip that shakes with excitement, I take his hand. Squeeze it tight and look into green eyes that hold me captive, at least for tonight.

“I feel like getting out of here. With you.”

Chapter Four

Amelia

A motorcycle ride that leaves me vibrating with the feelings of the road, as well as tingles of excitement that surge through me, ends in the parking lot of the hotel that my firm, SSR, is paying for. I slip off the motorcycle and onto wobbly legs, with Marcus catching me quickly with one of his powerful arms.

I turn into him, press my lips to his and feel an incredible sensation of being so distant from my problems, of only having to worry about who gets to be on top first, surge through me.

“Since I’m feeling free to feel things, I felt like kissing you,” I say, when I take my lips from his and look up into two very startled, very captivating green eyes. “That’s part of the lesson, right?”

“It is.” He chuckles and kisses me again, his beard tickling me in just the right way. It’s like every time I touch him, in any way, my body feels more alive, more awake, more free, than it’s felt in a long time.

This could be dangerous. I can’t get too comfortable with him. Too close.

This is only for tonight.

Only because I need it.

“Listen, Marcus, before we go any further, I have one condition.” My words come out in a rush, as if they’re trying to keep up with my racing pulse.

“Sure, what is it?” He raises an eyebrow, curious and still smirking.

I take a deep breath. “I want this to be a one-night stand. No more personal information, not ever seeing each other again.” Then, because I sometimes doubt myself way more than I should, I add, “I hope you don’t mind.”

His green eyes lock onto mine, searching for a moment before he nods.

“I understand. You just want tonight, nothing more. I can do that.”

Still, it’s almost as if he looks disappointed. As if he wants more.

Then I remind myself that he’s a biker, he’s probably all about one-night stands, and all the wine I had earlier is probably just affecting my judgment.

“Good.” I exhale, relieved. Somehow, those intense eyes of his make me feel like he sees right through me, but I can’t let him get too close. Tonight is about passion and control, not emotions or attachments.

I’m here to let loose and escape my problems for a little while so that tomorrow I can focus on my problems with a clear head.

“You seem distracted. How about we focus on what’s important?” Marcus murmurs, brushing his fingers along my cheek before kissing me deeply. “Give me your lips.”

My pulse races as Marcus’s lips crash into mine, our bodies pressed together in the dimly lit parking lot. His hands roam over my curves, pulling me closer; I taste the hunger in his kiss and feel the heat radiating from his body.

“Yes, let’s,” I gasp, before I disappear into another earth-shaking kiss.

“Let me take you upstairs,” he growls between kisses, his voice low and seductive.

“Carry me,” I demand, breathless.

He grins, a feral glint in his eyes. “Your wish is my command.”

His muscular arms scoop me up effortlessly, cradling me against his chest. As he strides across the parking lot, I wrap my arms around him, feeling the muscles that move beneath his clothes. I envision his powerful body above mine, moving against me, into me, devouring me.

The anticipation of what's to come makes it hard to catch my breath.

"Ready for this?" he asks, smirking, as we reach the hotel entrance.

"More than you know."

Marcus carries me through the lobby, drawing curious glances from other guests. Thankfully, I don't see anyone I recognize—especially not my boss, I note with semi-drunken relief. All these other people seeing me, I couldn't care less; let them stare. They're probably just jealous.

Me, I'm in my own world tonight.

And the only things that matter are the biker who's carrying me and the release waiting for me in my hotel room.

We reach my room, and the moment the door opens, Marcus sets me down, pushes me against the wall, his lips meeting mine in a frenzy of lust. Our bodies grind against each other as our mouths explore and taste, hungry and insatiable.

"Tell me what you want," he whispers hotly in my ear, his breath sending shivers down my spine.

"You," I gasp out, feeling my desire for him build with every touch. "I want to let go tonight. I want to forget about everything except being with you, fucking you."

"Fuck, Lia," he murmurs, nipping at my neck. "You have no idea how much that turns me on."

"Show me," I challenge, my eyes locked with his consuming green gaze.

Our tangled dance of tongues and touches continues, the heat between us growing more intense by the second. In one swift motion, Marcus lifts me off my feet and throws me onto the bed.

The door slams shut behind us, sealing the world outside.

"Fuck, you're so fucking hot," he growls, climbing on top of me.

Our lips meet, tongues dancing in a heated frenzy, as his hands roam over my body, pulling at my clothes.

“Wait,” I gasp, pushing him back.

He’s panting, eyes wide with desire, but he obeys, allowing me to take control for a moment. Slipping off the bed, I slowly unzip my dress, letting it fall away to reveal me—covered only by a minuscule black bra and nothing else. Marcus’s gaze rakes over my body hungrily, his green eyes darkening with lust.

“Damn, Lia…” he breathes, barely able to contain himself. My cheeks get hot at his open admiration.

“It’s just crazy to wear panties with that little dress of mine. Do you like what you see, Marcus?” I tease, arching an eyebrow. But I already know the answer; I can feel his erection straining against his pants, desperate for release.

“More than you can imagine,” he replies, voice thick with want.

“Then come and get it,” I challenge, lying back down on the bed.

Without hesitation, Marcus moves to cover my body with his, our mouths meeting again in a searing kiss. His powerful hands slide up my thighs and I shift my hips, rocking them, inviting him to touch me.

“God damn, you’re beautiful,” he murmurs, his rough fingers brushing against my wet pussy. A moan escapes my lips at the contact, my hips bucking involuntarily. “And so fucking ready for me.”

“Wait,” I whisper, pulling away from a heated kiss. Marcus’s eyes are filled with confusion and desire as he looks down at me. “I want to be in control tonight.”

“Really?” He says, his voice husky and curious.

“It’s something I really like. But most guys aren’t into it… Still, it’d really help me let go, and if you agree, I promise I’ll make it worth your while.”

A wicked grin spreads across his face as he nods. “Alright, Lia. Show me what you’ve got.”

I quickly go to the closet and retrieve one of the belts from the hotel robes, looping it around his wrists with an excited grin on my face. I can’t wait to have him at my mercy. Marcus doesn’t resist as I secure the knot, leaving him bound and vulnerable. My heart races at the sight of this strong, wild man giving himself over to me.

“Your pants,” I order, command in my voice as I gesture for him to lift his hips.

He complies without hesitation, allowing me to strip him of both his pants and underwear, which I toss to the floor in a heap. The sight of his impressive, thick cock makes my mouth water at the thought of tasting him.

“God, you’re gorgeous like this,” I murmur, crawling up his body until I’m inches from his face. “You’re mine tonight. Understand?”

“Yes, babe,” he grins, clearly affected by my newfound dominance. Though my other effects on him have been visible for quite a while, I remind myself as his hot, throbbing erection pulses against my thigh.

“Good. Though it’s not like you have a choice.”

With a wicked smile, I slide down his body, my lips leaving a trail of kisses along his muscular chest and abdominal muscles. I can feel his anticipation mounting as I draw closer to my destination, his breath hitching when I finally take him into my mouth.

“Fuck, Lia...” he groans, his fingers clenching and unclenching as I work my magic on him. His reaction only spurs me on. I wrap one hand around the base of his cock, stroking him in time with the rhythm of my mouth. His hips buck involuntarily, desperate for more contact despite the restraints holding him in place. “Fuck, I love how you work my cock.”

“I’m just getting started.”

“Please,” he begs, his voice breaking. “I need you. I need to feel your pussy around my cock.”

“Patience. Tonight is all about me taking control, remember?”

As if to remind him of that, I take my time with his cock. Tease it, lather it with the barest of attention from my tongue, with a touch so gentle it’d make the breeze from a butterfly’s wing seem like a hurricane. His cock pulses with each tender touch, he groans every time my lips simply brush his erection, and a lick from my tongue is enough to make him gasp and convulse in pent-up need.

Then I release him as pre-cum drips in a steady stream from the head of his cock and he lies there, panting, at the edge of orgasm.

I want more, and I’m in control tonight, so I take what I want.

“Your turn,” I breathe, my voice laced with authority.

As I crawl back up Marcus’s body, I can see the desire burning in his green eyes. His chest heaves with anticipation, and despite the restraints, he tries to reach for me.

“Stay still,” I command, straddling his face. I feel powerful, in control, and a million miles away from anything even resembling a problem at work. “I’m not getting off until you make me come.”

“Whatever you want, Lia,” he responds, sounding both eager and nervous. But I know he won’t disappoint me. “Let me taste you.”

Lowering myself onto him, I close my eyes and revel in the sensation of his tongue against me. He’s skilled, no doubt about that, but I need more.

“Eat me,” I demand, grinding myself down onto him. “Worship my pussy. Make me scream.”

“God, yes,” Marcus murmurs, his warm breath sending shivers down my spine. He delves deeper, exploring every

inch of me, teasing and taunting in the most delicious way possible.

My head falls back, my fingers gripping his hair, guiding him to all the right places.

“Marcus,” I moan, feeling the pleasure build within me. I imagine the tattoos on his arms, the violent stories they tell, and how this night will be etched in my memory forever. “Don’t stop... Please. I’m close. I’m so close. Don’t you dare stop.”

He obeys, his tongue relentlessly flicking and swirling, sending me spiraling toward ecstasy. I can feel the heat radiating from his face against me, a stark contrast to the cool sheets beneath us. The room is filled with our ragged breaths and desperate gasps, a symphony of passion building to an explosive crescendo.

“Almost there,” I pant, my grip tightening in his dark hair. “Oh, god, don’t stop...”

And then it happens—a burst of pure bliss, bathing me like a tidal wave.

I cry out Marcus’s name, my body trembling as he continues to pleasure me through the aftershocks. I’ve never felt so alive, so free.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my voice raw and breathless as I finally lift myself off him. His face is slick with my arousal, his eyes glazed with satisfaction. The sight of him like this, tied up and used for my pleasure, only serves to fuel my desire for more.

I need to ride him.

“Untie me,” he whispers, “and I’ll fuck every one of your problems away.”

“No, I don’t think so,” I say, my eyes locked on Marcus. His chest heaves as he catches his breath, the tattoos on his arms glistening with sweat. I can’t help but feel a surge of power, knowing that I am in control of this wild, untamed man. Tonight is all about taking what I want. “But you’re still going to fuck me. And I promise you’ll love the outcome.”

I crawl down his body, taking my time to rub my skin against his, to touch, to feel, to explore every muscular, tattooed inch of him, all while his thick cock pulses with a desperate need.

Finally, I position myself where I want to be.

“Are you ready?” I ask, straddling him, feeling his hard cock press against me.

He nods, his piercing green eyes burning with desire.

“Then you may fuck me,” I pronounce, lowering myself onto him.

The sensation is intense, filling me completely. I ride him, rocking my hips back and forth, reveling in the pleasure that courses through me.

“Harder,” I gasp, my nails digging into his chest. “I want it harder.” Marcus complies, thrusting up into me with a fierceness that leaves me breathless. I slap him, my hand stinging from the impact. “That’s it, make me feel it.”

“God fucking damn, Lia. Your pussy is so tight,” he groans, struggling to keep up with my tempo. My body trembles with anticipation for the climax I know is coming.

“Remember,” I warn, slapping him again, “you can’t cum until I do.”

The thought of controlling Marcus’s orgasm sends a thrill down my spine.

He’s all mine tonight.

“Understood,” he pants, beads of sweat dripping down his face. The room smells of sex and lust, our bodies moving in sync as we push each other to new heights.

“Marcus,” I moan, feeling the pressure building within me. “I’m so close.”

“Me too,” he grunts, his voice strained. “Just a little longer...”

“Right there,” I scream, the wave of pleasure crashing over me. My vision blurs, my body convulsing around him.

And then, as if on cue, Marcus releases, his body shuddering beneath me.

I feel it as it fills me. I revel in every drop inside me.

“Fuck,” he gasps, his head falling back against the pillow. I collapse onto him, my body spent and quivering from the intensity of our passion. We lie there, chests heaving, limbs entwined, basking in the aftermath.

“Amazing. Exactly what I needed,” I whisper, still trying to catch my breath. Marcus hums in agreement, his calloused hand gently stroking my hair. In this moment, we are both lost in the ecstasy we’ve created, two souls connected by our most primal desires.

And for tonight, that’s enough.

I’ve got what I wanted, and so I move.

I press my lips against Marcus’, tasting sweat and desire in our passionate embrace. His green eyes hold mine, the intensity of our shared experience clear within their depths. I don’t want to let him go, but I know that’s what I must do.

No connections, no personal details, no stories, nothing beyond tonight.

Because tonight was just about meeting my needs, letting go, and that’s all it ever will be.

“Thank you,” I breathe against his mouth, savoring every bit of connection between us before lifting myself off his body. My fingers tremble as I reach for the belt that binds his wrists. “It’s time for you to go.”

“Are you sure?” he asks, the concern etched across his rugged face tugging at something deep inside me.

“Positive,” I reply with a small smile. “This was amazing, Marcus, but it’s time for you to go.”

He watches me intently as I untie him; the tattoos adorning his chest seeming to pulse with life as his breathing slows. Finally free, he sits up and rubs his wrists, flexing his powerful hands. The sight of him—all wildness and strength—sends a

wave of longing through me that would be so easy to surrender to, but I push it down.

“Alright then,” he says. “If that’s what you want.”

“Trust me,” I murmur, looking into those burning eyes, “it’s for the best.”

“Take care of yourself, Lia,” he says, standing up from the bed and reaching for his pants. The way he says my name sends shivers down my spine, but I steel myself against any lingering feelings.

“You too,” I respond, pulling my robe tight around me.

“If you need another lesson, you know where to find me: anywhere but an art gallery.”

“I won’t, but thank you.”

As Marcus dresses, I watch him, committing every inch of his muscular form to memory. When he’s finished, he strides towards the door, pausing just before he leaves. Turning back towards me, his eyes lock onto mine one final time.

“Goodbye, Lia,” he whispers, the door closing behind him with a soft click.

“Goodbye, Marcus,” I murmur to the empty room, a mixture of satisfaction and loss settling in my chest. “Even though I’ll never see you again, thank you for helping me with my problems.”

Chapter Five

Thunder

Community meeting, six o'clock. Be there and bring whoever you can for support. We have to fight this thing.

The text from Owen sits on my phone, just as it's sat all day. Until this moment—with just an hour till six—I haven't spared it much thought. Despite what I promised, my mind's been circling Lia all day.

Ever since last night.

Though I know it's just temporary, though I know nothing more than her first name and she's in town for work, I felt something with her. Something strong, stronger than the feeling of lust and conquest that comes with my usual one-night stands. There was something real there.

Carefully, I adjust my tie and check myself in the mirror of the shop's bathroom.

From my right, through the open door, I hear Rook.

"You dressing up? For the second night in a row? Who died?"

"No one died. Got a meeting thing tonight over at City Hall. It's important."

Bullet slides out from under a cherry red Miata and looks at me, grinning.

"Look at Mr. Fancy Pants over here. Got a hot date at the city council?"

"Yeah, with destiny. Or disaster. Haven't figured it out yet." I remove and start over with the tie. These damn things never look right, even when they're on right. Halfway, I'm tempted to just say fuck it and grab my jeans and cut and call it good.

Except tonight is important.

As temporary as last night's feeling was with Lia, I know that, with Eileen and her grandkids, I've got a shot at something deeper. Something real. A chance to help a family

and feel a sense of fulfillment more rewarding than conquering a fine piece of ass like Lia.

Maybe.

She was really fucking fine, though.

Still, I straighten my tie, finally getting it right—or at least, right enough—and knowing that the sense of purpose that I’m feeling right now with helping that family is well worth it. Ready, I step out into the shop and clear my throat, drawing attention from both Rook and Bullet.

“Tonight’s a big deal. Not just for me, but for some people who really need help. You know that old lady we stole that car from? Turns out her land, and a bunch of other peoples’, is right in the way of some development. This company is trying to push them out of their homes. I could really use your help with this.”

“Will I have to talk with anyone?” Rook says.

“You’re helping people?” Bullet adds.

“This is important,” I say. “And no, Rook, I don’t need anything from you except to show up, maybe wear something not covered in grease, and just raise your hand or whatever when they ask who’s against this thing. Can you do that for me?”

Bullet nods. “I’m in.”

“Whatever.” Rook grabs a chamois cloth and starts cleaning his hands. “Maybe I’ll show. But if anyone tries to shake my hand or make me talk, I swear, you’ll regret it.”

“Relax, you angry bastard,” I say. “This meeting thing should be simple, straightforward. I mean, what’s the worst that could happen?”

* * * * *

I arrive at the community meeting and quickly find a seat beside Eileen, Owen, and Natalie. The room buzzes with tension. In just a second, it’s clear to me that people are deeply divided and emotions are running high. A mixture of responsibility and adrenaline—the same way it feels before a

fight breaks out—simmers inside me. The people of Costa Oscura are ready for war.

“Glad you could make it, Marcus,” Owen says as I take the seat beside him. “We need you on this. Are the others coming?”

“They’ll be here.”

Someone that I vaguely recognize from some city council campaign poster steps onto the stage and announces that the meeting will begin in fifteen minutes, and that whoever parked their purple Volvo in the reserved parking space has ten minutes to move it or else it will be towed.

No sooner does the city councilman finish his announcement than I sense motion to my right and see Bullet and Rook both taking their seats.

I frown at Rook. “You’re wearing your cut? And what’s that logo? Did you design that yourself?”

“I can be creative when I want to be.”

“It says Steel Reapers MC. Are you just testing that out or what?”

“I like this logo. It speaks to me.” Rook shrugs.

“This is the first I’m seeing of it,” Bullet says. “What do you think you’re doing here with that thing, Rook?”

“Wearing my club cut. You got a problem with that?” Rook retorts.

“It sounds like you’ve decided it should be our club logo. We didn’t vote on that, Rook,” I say.

“If you’d like to discuss it, I’d be happy to come by your place later and we could talk it out.”

“It sounds like you’re threatening to kill me.” I scoot my chair to put a little distance between me and Rook.

“Nonsense. It’d be a friendly chat. See? I can be friendly.”

Rook then smiles in a way that reminds me of a loving mother lion eyeing a gazelle it’s about to murder and bring back

to her cub.

I look at Bullet. Our eyes meet and we both nod.

“I’m good with the new logo if you’re good with it, Bullet.”

“I think it looks great.”

Rook puts a hand on my shoulder and one on Bullet’s. “I knew you’d both agree.”

“As you all are aware, we’re here tonight to collect community feedback about the eco resort project, Mar y Tierra, that’s being developed on that stretch of property north of town just off the old coastal road,” says another city councilwoman who has taken the stage while I’ve been distracted with Rook’s potential threat to murder me over his artistic vision for the MC. “Now, continuing from how we left things at the last meeting, we’re going to open up the floor to community questions regarding the role of city council in the project. Then, after that, we’ll bring in representatives from the firm Sterns, Santo, and Russell to talk with you.”

There’s general shuffling and murmuring as some of the assembled community members cluster around a microphone that’s been set up near the front of the room for people to use to voice their questions.

Rook leans over to me. “I’ll remind you: I ain’t saying shit. So don’t ask me to ask any questions, got it?”

“Wasn’t that a question, Rook?” I reply.

“Do you want to know what happened to the last person who decided to be a smartass with me?”

“There you go with another question,” Bullet says. “Seems you really enjoy asking questions.”

“Shut the hell up,” Rook says a little too loud, drawing reprimanding looks from several members of the crowd. “Sorry,” he adds, standing for a moment to give an apologetic wave. “You two provoke me one more time. See what happens.”

There’s whispering and hushed conversations from the front of the room as the first person takes hold of the microphone.

It's an old man, in his sixties, maybe, with a smattering of gray hair on his otherwise bald head, a short, gray goatee, and spectacles so thick he can probably see atoms.

"I want to talk about the parking rates being charged along Pineview Avenue. Just last year, they were a dollar and twenty-five cents for an hour. Now, they're a dollar and seventy-five cents, and I just want to say that I don't think that's fair," he says.

The female council member, a woman in her mid-forties, with curly red hair, a pale complexion, and a look on her face like she's seen everything and ceased being shocked by it about ten years ago, clears her throat and picks up her own microphone.

"Sir, I hate to interrupt you, but we want to keep the questions strictly to the topic at hand: the resort development."

"But the parking rates are outrageous. Doesn't this community give a damn, or do all you high-handed elites just want to continue milking this city and all its citizens of everything we're worth?"

"It's fifty cents," she replies. "And if it's that important to you, which, if it is, fine, but you need to take it up at the city roads meeting, which is next month on the fifth."

"With all due respect, ma'am, I can't," the man replies.

"You can't?"

"Not since the restraining order."

"Please sit down, sir. Next question," she says.

People shuffle forward, ask their questions, and gradually all three of the city council members sitting on the small stage look as if they wish they could go back in time to the day they first got involved in city government and slap some sense into themselves.

"I think we're done taking questions for today," the city councilwoman says. "Now, we'll bring out the representatives from SSR. Just a moment."

“About damn time. All these people talking, reminding me why I hate everyone in the first place,” Rook mumbles.

“This is when we need to pay attention. Grandma Eileen is going to confront them, once they’ve finished speaking and open the floor up for questions, we need you and your friends to be very vocal in supporting her,” Natalie whispers.

“We will. Don’t worry,” I answer.

“I told you, I’m not talking,” Rook says. “But I’ll glare in a very supportive way.”

“His glare is serious. Trust me,” I say to Natalie.

“Are you sure, Marcus? We really need...”

But the rest of what she plans to say fades into the background, replaced by the thundering sound of my heartbeat in my ears as the SSR representatives step onto the little stage in the center of the meeting hall.

It’s her.

Wearing a tailored dark navy suit that fits her so well that, even though she’s now my fucking enemy, I still have to bite my tongue to keep in a moan as memories of last night and the way she moved every curve of her sensual body flood through me.

On the stage, some middle-aged man in a suit has a microphone, and he’s going on with some pre-rehearsed spiel. “Ladies and gentlemen, the Mar y Tierra Eco Resort is more than just a green, carbon-negative development. It is a gateway to prosperity for all of Costa Oscura...”

He says more, but my eyes are stuck on Lia.

She sits with her back straight, focus squarely on the man who’s probably her boss. She still hasn’t seen me, but I can’t stop seeing her.

Instinctively, I lick my lips a moment, recalling the taste of her as she sat on my face. Fucking delicious.

A fucking delicious enemy that wants to tear apart the community.

Why does it have to be her, of all people, pushing this nightmare?

To my side, Bullet leans in. “Is that...?”

“It’s her. From the other night.”

Rook chuckles, but thankfully keeps his thoughts to himself.

The middle-aged man in the suit finishes his presentation, and the city councilwoman, with regret in her voice, announces that they’ll re-open the floor to questions from the community.

The man with the concerns about parking prices reaches for the microphone, but with a gesture, the councilwoman signals for security, and two Costa Oscura PD officers take hold of the man and lead him from the building.

Eileen makes her way to the front of the line and grabs the microphone. She stands tall despite her diminutive stature, and she stares right at the man in the suit.

“You said this monstrosity that you’re pushing is a gateway to prosperity. Prosperity for who? People already well-off? What about those of us who’ve been here forever? What about the people you want to put out of their homes?”

Lia’s boss clears his throat. He smiles a slimy smile at Eileen.

“Trust me, we’re taking all concerns into account. Any development work is being done with the intention not just to preserve local beauty, but to improve it. Yes, there might be some cost, but all good things have a cost. Everyone whose home might be in line with the development project has received an offer for their land that we feel is more than fair.”

Someone in line for the microphone calls out. “You say that all concerns are taken into account? Bullshit. When was the last time any of you actually listened to us?”

Another yells: “You all just want to loot this place for every penny you can steal.”

“Now, now, that simply isn’t true,” Lia’s boss says, in a tone that drips condescension.

I stand up. I've had enough of these out-of-town assholes screwing with my community.

As I stand, Lia's gaze turns to me and, for a fraction of a second, her eyes go wide.

I smile at her before I cup my hands in front of my mouth like a megaphone.

"These people are nothing more than wolves in sheeps' clothing. They're just here to lie, to cheat, to steal, and they've got no goddamn shame about it. If you ask me, we don't just need to stop their project, we need to run their deceitful asses out of town."

Lia flinches.

Serves her right.

But then, calmly, she stands and takes the microphone from her boss.

Her eyes lock with mine.

The emotional current simmering between us—attraction, animosity, lust, betrayal—becomes so palpable it's like a slap in the face.

She smiles. Right at me. Another slap in the face.

"We're here to find a mutually beneficial solution, something that makes everybody happy. Because, unlike what some of the more radical, extreme, or just plain misinformed voices might try to tell you people, this project won't just improve only the land it's built on, it'll bring so much prosperity into the entire city. Don't you want that? More jobs, more income, more financial security for your community, and the chance to preserve a large swath of the natural beauty that exists right outside your window? Isn't that what you want?"

Every syllable, every word, she speaks while looking directly at me.

Directly into me.

This is war.

Chapter Six

Amelia

The moment Mr. Russell wraps up his answer to the final question from the crowd—a question which is just another iteration of grievances against the parking costs on Pineview Avenue—and it becomes appropriate for me to flee the stage without it looking like I’m actually fleeing the stage, I flee the stage.

My nerves are frayed as I push my way through the crowd. Just the sight of Marcus at the other end of the meeting hall, his hands raised to his mouth, his voice raised, his eyes accusing and downright defamatory, is enough to put my heart from “fight or flight” mode straight into “fight.”

I want to storm across the room and punch him.

Or at least, that’s what I fantasize about doing, if I wasn’t acutely aware of the many, dire consequences of such an action: me losing my job, possibly getting arrested for assault, the company probably losing the development project and definitely suing me for damages, and the strong likelihood that, even if I stormed over there, ready to punch Marcus in his gorgeous, ruggedly handsome, too-damn-infuriating face, the odds are just as likely that I’ll end up kissing him.

So I run.

Push my way through the crowd and out to the parking lot.

The cool sea air enters my lungs and leaves in a whoosh of relief.

It’s empty out here, mostly. The large portion of the citizenry of Costa Oscura is still inside the meeting hall, some of them trying to corner whatever councilmember they can get their hands on to discuss parking rates, the others—that old woman, Eileen O’Connell in particular—are forming little groups to oppose and harass my boss.

I really should get back in there. It’ll look bad for me to run away like this, I think as I walk toward my rental car with zero

hesitation in my steps.

“Lia.”

One word makes me whirl around to see him. That damned biker. That damned, handsome, charming enemy of mine who, if I even give in to any of the feelings I have for him—feelings that are shocking in their intensity—I will lose my job and find myself blacklisted in an industry that I have fought, tooth and nail, to get into.

“Go away, Marcus.”

“We need to talk.”

“I told you I never wanted to see you again. Yet we have sex one time, and here you are, stalking me like a needy puppy.”

“This is about more than us fucking, Lia. This is about you and the people you work for fucking over an entire community.”

I grind my teeth. “Were the facts, yes, facts, we presented back there too complicated for you to understand? *Mar y Tierra* is going to be an enormous boon to Costa Oscura. It’ll be powered with green energy, it’ll put excess energy back into the grid, it’s going to be carbon negative—which means the resort itself is going to make the environment better—and a huge chunk of the land, as well as the adjoining ocean territory, is going to be put aside as a nature preserve. It is literally—that means really—going to make things better here, and that’s not even mentioning the jobs it’ll create. Is that simple enough for you to understand, you stupid, greasy gorilla?”

“Greasy gorilla?” He spits back, eyes flaring, somehow, fucking somehow, making him even more attractive. “I suppose I should thank you for dumbing things down for an idiot like me, huh, Science Bitch?”

“Oh, we’re calling each other names now?”

“You started it.”

I throw my hands up. Not because he’s right, which, even if he is, *he* provoked *me* by storming out here and starting this

entire argument in the first place, but because I don't have time for this. "I'm leaving. Goodbye, Marcus. I hope I never, ever, ever see you again."

"Not so fast, Lia," he starts, but it's too late. I already have my butt in the driver's seat and my key in the ignition. Revving the engine, I back out of the parking spot and speed away, hoping that I've seen the last of that greasy gorilla.

Even though I know I definitely haven't.

My hope doesn't even last thirty seconds; just a block away from the meeting hall, I look in my rearview mirror and see a motorcycle in pursuit.

I speed up.

He follows.

Every turn, every straightaway, he's right there, pursuing me, with a fiery look in his eyes that fills me with heat and a fear for my life. It's the most arousing, confusing sensation I've ever felt, and I hate him for inspiring it in me.

My hands are clammy on the wheel, my breath short, shallow.

Is he going to turn into a stalker? Is he dangerous? Is he going to attack me?

I pull into the parking lot of my hotel just seconds ahead of him. Just my luck, but the lot is mostly empty, with most of the hotel's guests having either checked out earlier in the day or being off elsewhere.

Nearly jumping out of my car, I slam the door behind me and speedwalk toward the hotel lobby.

Marcus is right behind me.

"We need to talk, Lia."

"I think you've said enough for one evening."

"I don't think I have."

His footsteps echo in the empty lot as he moves closer, making my heart pound harder. I don't look back, but I know

he's right on me.

My hand drifts to my purse, to something I learned to keep on me at all times I go out at night.

"I said stay back."

His footsteps stop. Despite my better judgment, I turn around. I want to face him, look him in the eye and tell him this is over. That last night, however good it felt, is something I dearly regret, and that I want him to never, ever talk to me again.

"You're scared. I get it. But you don't understand everything."

"Oh, I understand plenty about the project that I'm managing, Marcus. I also understand you're against everything I'm here for. That makes us enemies."

"And what are you here for? Ruining lives?"

He comes closer. So close I can feel the anger, the intensity, the heat radiating from his toned body.

"I'm trying to save the damn planet, in case you didn't notice! Or at least a small part of it, which is a hell of a lot more than so many people do nowadays."

"By sacrificing the little people, right? Is that your idea of a fair trade? Is that what you really want, Lia? Or do you want something else?"

The space between us is charged, heavy with emotions neither of us wants to name.

Marcus takes another step. He looms over me. His face inches from mine. Within kissing distance.

Within range, too. Well within range.

"I warned you, Marcus."

With a quick motion, I pull the canister out of my purse and spray mace into Marcus' eyes. He shouts in pain and stumbles back, clutching his face. "You fucking maced me, you science bitch."

My voice rises into a shout. “I’ll call the police. You have two minutes to get the hell out of here.”

Ignoring the sharp sting in my eyes from my own tears at firing mace so close to my face, I dash into the hotel and don’t stop running until I reach my room, where I slam the door and the deadbolts behind me.

I collapse against it, trembling.

What just happened? Why is this happening to me? I’m trapped in a war with a man who is as infuriating as he is intoxicating.

And despite everything, I can’t shake the sensation that something irrevocable exists between us.

This is very, very bad news.

After a few deep breaths to calm my heart, I head over to the room’s tea kettle and start brewing some hot water. I need something to take my mind off work and the maddening man who seems determined to ruin my life and wreck my heart.

Then my phone dings.

It’s a text from my boss, and the message sends a jolt of panic through me: “We are bringing in some specialists to assist. We need to get this local situation under control or you’re off the project. Consider this your final warning.”

I forget all about the tea kettle until it screams at me like a banshee.

All I can think about is how trapped I feel.

If I fail in my first high-profile project, my career in the field will be over before it even starts. I’ll be branded as someone who can’t handle the heat, any heat, and who can’t negotiate her way out of a wet paper bag.

Blocking my way out of this mess is one man.

One disarmingly handsome, insanely kissable, frustrating-as-hell man that I can’t get out of my mind. I have to figure out a way to beat Marcus, or my professional life is over before it’s even begun.

Chapter Seven

Thunder

My eyes burn.

With the lingering effects of mace and nothing else, though I'm damn grateful Rook and Bullet aren't around to see me in the state I'm in. Gritting my teeth and squinting, I return my focus to the road, the long stretch of coastal asphalt that's my distraction from the conflicting emotions swirling in my chest—anger at myself, an unwavering resolution to protect the people in my life who aren't deceitful Science Bitches, people like Eileen and her grandkids, and an undeniable, yet confusing, attraction to Lia.

Even now, that heartless environmentalist has a hold on me.

My phone rings and I pull to the shoulder; it's a call from Owen.

“Yeah?”

“You close?” He says.

Something inside me drops, that gut feeling that comes with bad news. I seize on it, eager for the distraction from thoughts about Lia.

“Close enough. Fast enough, too. What's up?”

“Nat called me. Says someone's lurking near grandma's house. Looks dangerous.”

“Where are you at, Owen?”

“I'm on my way, but I'm not close. Went into the big city. Needed to let loose some steam after that bullshit community meeting. Can you get over there and take a look?”

“I'm already on my way.” It's only after I hang up I realize I'm smiling.

This may be exactly what I need.

I speed down the coastal road toward Eileen's. As I turn onto her driveway and take a corner, I spot a shadowy figure

near rummaging through a shed not far from her house. My pulse quickens and my smile returns. I park my bike a safe distance away and move silently toward the intruder, every muscle coiled for action. I tighten my fists as I spot the can of gasoline in the man's hands—this isn't a simple burglary; it's an attempt at arson.

Who is this guy? And who sent him?

As terrible a person as she is, and as much as she resembles a soulless, swamp-dwelling, seductive harpy, Lia doesn't strike me as the type to employ arsonists to eliminate her competition.

There has to be something else at play. Some other reason this man is here.

I silently stalk closer, watching this man for any hint of who he's working for.

He works quietly, spreading gasoline in a clear pattern so that, when it goes up, it won't just incinerate the shed, it'll quickly spread through the property, taking out the house and all its occupants, too.

This isn't just arson, it's murder.

I have to act.

I charge in.

“You picked the wrong place to mess around, you fucking firebug.”

In a blur of motion, I lunge at the man, my boots crunching gravel underfoot as I launch myself into the air and tackle the intruder to the ground.

We collide with a bone-shaking thud.

The man grunts as he hits the ground; the wind knocked out of him. But he's quick to recover, shoving me off, delivering a sharp elbow to my face and then scrambling to his feet.

I circle him, fists raised, heart eager, happy at the chance to let loose some steam.

The intruder throws a punch, which I dodge with ease. Then I counter with a series of quick jabs that send his head snapping backward and I follow up with a knee to the intruder's midsection that doubles him over, causing him to spit blood on the left leg of my nice pants.

"Fuck, I just bought these, you dick," I snarl as I hit him with an elbow to the back of the head. "And they were fucking expensive, too."

He slumps to the ground, but he's only down for half a second; quickly, he rolls to the side, dodging the stomp that I had aimed for the back of his head, and rising to his feet.

"Fuck your pants," he says. "You're gonna regret this."

"The only regret I'll have is that I won't be killing you. Whoever the fuck you are, I'm going to turn you over to the cops once I'm done beating your ass."

Fire in his eyes and a bloody, broken-toothed grin on his face, he charges.

A left hand hits me square in the jaw, but his follow-up hook misses.

I counter, landing a punch that stops him in his tracks. He spits blood and comes in again, fists raised.

"I'm going to enjoy killing you."

I snort. "Well, I'm going to enjoy kicking your ass."

The intruder reaches into his pocket. There's a flash of moonlight on steel as he holds up a large knife.

"We'll see about that."

I move in, fists raised, faking a left, then delivering a hard right as I blast the man's head with my fist. I can feel his teeth break under the impact and he staggers back, spitting blood.

"Next time, bring a gun."

I swing again, connecting with the man's ear and splitting it open. He staggers backward, blood now streaming down his face.

“I’m going to enjoy watching you die.”

He feints and then slashes, the blade of the knife coming so close to my face I could pucker my lips and kiss it. If I did, it’d still only be the second-worst thing I’ve kissed in the last twenty-four hours.

“You’re going to need a bigger knife, firebug.”

My fists fly forward, faster than the man can move. His head snaps back again, his knees buckle, he hits the ground, landing hard. The intruder tries to rally, lunging at me with a desperate, wild thrust.

I dodge and he stabs the air behind me.

A swift kick sends him onto his back and the knife flying.

I leap on him, cock my fist back, and hammer it into his gaping, bloody mouth.

“Who sent you?” I snarl.

He laughs. “You don’t get it, do you? You’re messing with something you don’t understand.”

Another blow shuts him up.

And gives me space to think.

It’ll do no good for anybody if I kill this guy right here. Or kill him at all. Whoever sent him, they’ll just send someone else—probably many someones—and then the people I care about will get hurt.

I can’t have that.

I have to handle this the right way.

Climbing off him, I scour the shed and find some rope, which I use to bind him. Then I call 911.

It isn’t long before flashing lights signal the arrival of the police. Two officers get out, and one cuts the intruder free of the ropes while the other slaps him in handcuffs.

“We’ll take this guy into the station for booking. Another officer will be by shortly to take your statement, so don’t go anywhere, okay?”

I nod.

But as the officer escorting the intruder takes him to the squad car, I see something that roils my gut; a whisper. An exchange of glances between the officer and the intruder.

It's a look of familiarity, an unspoken understanding.

A chill thought runs through me: how deep does this thing go?

Chapter Eight

Amelia

Warm, golden light of the early morning sun filters through the windows of Rolls and Twists, bathing the quaint cafe in a cozy glow. The aroma of freshly brewed coffee mingles with the irresistible scent of buttery pastries browning in the oven and tempting me from the display case. The smell, combined with the faint hum of quiet conversations and the gentle whoosh of an espresso machine hard at work, fills me with an urge to just sit down, open a book, and forget about the outside world.

Sera and I slide into a cozy booth near the window, our coffees steaming between us. She digs into a flaky croissant, crumbs scattering over the checkered tablecloth. I smile at her enthusiasm, despite the knot of anxiety tightening in my chest as my mind keeps drifting back to work and all its worries. I wrap my fingers around my cup, feeling the warmth seep into my palms.

“God, this is heavenly,” Sera mumbles between bites, her eyes closed in bliss. “You need to try one of these, Lia.”

“Maybe later,” I reply as I take a sip of my coffee. The rich, bold taste does little to soothe my nerves. I just can’t shake the feeling that my life is about to come crashing down around me.

“You sure?” She replies. Then, when I don’t answer, she returns to savaging her croissant. For someone who is so precise and downright delicate when she has a paintbrush in her hands, she is mauling her pastry like a hungry bear attacking an unlucky hiker.

“I’m sure.”

As she eats, my anxiety gnaws at me. Grows. Consumes me.

“Ugh, I can’t keep it in any longer,” I blurt out, drawing Sera’s attention away from her croissant. “My job’s on the line, Sera. The community’s backlash against the Eco Resort

project is insane. My boss gave me an ultimatum—if I don't turn things around, I'm out."

"Yikes, that's rough," Sera replies, setting down the remains of her pastry. Her eyes are warm and concerned as she reaches across the table to squeeze my hand. "But hey, you're the master of spin. Or at least, I'm sure you put that on your resume. Don't worry, babe, you've got this."

I take a deep breath, trying to let her words wash over me like a soothing balm. But the fear gnawing at my insides persists, impossible to ignore.

I force a smile, a shaky attempt to reassure both of us.

"Thanks, Sera. That means more than you know." My grip tightens around my coffee cup, my knuckles turning white with tension.

"Don't feed me that line of crap," she says. Sera's eyes narrow, her voice growing serious. "You're stronger than you give yourself credit for, Lia. You always have been. Just remember what we used to say back in college: when life gives you lemons—"

"Make lemonade and spike it with vodka," I finish, chuckling at the memory. It feels like a lifetime ago, a simpler time when our biggest worries were exams and party planning.

"Exactly," she grins, winking at me. "So, let's brainstorm some solutions. What do you need to turn this whole mess around?"

The cafe sounds fade into the background as we hunker down, determination sparking between us and Sera resuming the merciless destruction of her croissant. Time passes, and it feels good, losing myself in something constructive: problem solving with someone I feel confident with, someone I can share every single crazy idea that crosses my mind and not worry that they're going to judge me for it.

I need this.

Then the bell above the door jingles, snapping me out of my anxious thoughts.

I glance up to see Marcus walking in, his broad shoulders filling the entrance. Sunlight streaming through the windows highlights the athletic build beneath his dark clothing and biker's cut. His medium-length dark hair is tousled, and those piercing green eyes scan the room before he marches towards the counter.

“Speak of the devil,” I whisper to Sera, unable to tear my gaze away from him. “That’s Marcus—the guy who followed me to my hotel. Also, my one-night stand from the art gallery. And my, uh,” I pause, my brain scrambling for the right word, “my arch-nemesis.”

“Is that so?” Sera’s eyebrows shoot up, her curiosity piqued as she watches him order an array of pastries and coffee in a self-assured tone. “Well, he’s easy on the eyes. And apparently has an enormous appetite. But what’s his story?”

I study Marcus more closely, noticing the bruise blooming under one eye, a fresh cut on his lip. He looks like he’s been in a fight. Just how dangerous is he? I feel a shiver run down my spine, the heat from our night together flooding my senses, mingling with the uncertainty of his intentions.

“Beats me,” I admit, swallowing hard as I force myself to look away. “All I know is that he’s against my project and could be the reason I lose everything. So I hate him.”

“Sounds complicated,” Sera murmurs, sipping her coffee. “But maybe there’s more to him than meets the eye?”

“Maybe. Or maybe not. Probably not.”

“True. He could just be your basic scandalous and scary biker. And let’s not ignore—hot. Like, ‘stop, drop, and roll’ level of hot. I swear, if I painted him and hung it in my gallery, I’d have to put up a warning sign: do not lick this painting.”

“You are awful,” I tell her, grinning despite my nerves. “I love you.”

“Hey, I’m just stating facts here,” she retorts playfully, raising an eyebrow as we both watch Marcus place his order.

“Besides,” Sera continues, leaning in closer to me, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper, “if he’s got anything to

do with your job being on the line, it doesn't hurt to find out more about him, right?"

"Right," I agree, still unable to tear my eyes away from Marcus.

"Okay, focus," Sera says, snapping her fingers in front of my face. "Time to put on your detective hat, Lia. What have you found out so far?"

"Other than the fact that he's infuriatingly attractive and has terrible timing?" I ask, forcing myself to meet Sera's gaze. She rolls her eyes at me, unimpressed by my lack of progress. "Nothing."

"Seriously, Lia, do you want to get fired? Or do you want to figure this out?"

"Alright, alright," I relent, trying to gather my thoughts. "He's part of the opposition to the Eco Resort project, which means he's connected to the community here. Possibly that old woman, as I remember him sitting next to her at that town hall meeting last night. And judging by the way he's been shadowing me, he might be a stalker."

"Interesting," Sera muses, tapping her chin. "I wonder what I can do to get a man like that to follow me around. Also, why would he care so much about some old woman or your project?"

"Maybe it's personal?" I suggest, shrugging my shoulders. "I don't know, Sera. All I know is that if I want to save my job and turn this project around, I need to find a way to get through to him—and everyone else in this town."

"Then we'll figure it out together," Sera promises, reaching across the table to squeeze my hand. Then she stands. "Starting with getting to know our mysterious Marcus a little better. Stay tuned for intel," Sera says with a mischievous grin, her eyes fixed on Marcus as he stands at the counter.

I watch her saunter over to him, her hips swaying with each step.

My heart beats faster, my fingers tightening around my coffee cup.

Sera chats him up, laughing at something he says, and touching his arm. A pang of jealousy surges through me—I don't want her hands on him. I scold myself for such thoughts. What does it matter if she's flirting with him? He's against everything I stand for, and yet, here I am, feeling possessive.

"He's your enemy, Lia, not your fucking boyfriend," I mutter under my breath, trying to focus on the steam dancing above my coffee.

I watch it for a long time.

Until it's no longer steaming.

"Here comes the intel!" Sera announces, bouncing back to the table. Her eyes are alight with excitement as she slides into the booth next to me. "Guess what? He's buying all those goodies for the old woman and her grandkids. Apparently, the granny had a panic attack after someone tried to break into her home. She's in the hospital overnight."

"Really?" A flicker of surprise runs through me at this revelation. That wild and rugged-looking man that I called a 'greasy gorilla' is doing something so... kind? My mind is spinning like a whirlwind, trying to reconcile the Marcus I've met with the one who's buying treats for a family in need.

"Yup," Sera confirms, sipping her coffee. "Seems like your mysterious one-night stand isn't such a bad guy, after all."

"Still doesn't change the fact that he's trying to ruin my life," I mutter, taking a sip of my coffee. The bitterness of the drink mirrors my tumultuous emotions. It also makes me more bitter, because now my coffee is room temperature, and room temperature coffee is one of the most awful drinks known to man.

"True," Sera concedes. "But maybe there's more to him than you think. A kind heart to go along with that great butt. We can't always judge a book by its cover."

"Or a man by his tattoos," I add, my gaze wandering over to where Marcus stands at the counter, paying for his order.

As if sensing my eyes on him, he turns and meets my gaze, giving me a brief frown before returning his attention to his

task.

“Let’s just focus on figuring out how to save your job,” Sera suggests, patting my hand.

Marcus finishes paying and collects his order: four coffees in a cardboard carrier and two large bags of pastries. Then he turns and heads toward the door.

“Goodbye, Marcus,” Sera calls after him flirtatiously.

He glances back, giving her a nod before turning his piercing green eyes towards me. The scowl on his face sends shivers down my spine, and I can feel heat rising in my cheeks.

“Maybe you have him all wrong,” Sera suggests. “I mean, I don’t see anything wrong with *that ass*.”

“Please, we need to focus. Somehow, I have to win this town over and get Marcus off my back,” I reply.

“Winning over a town can’t be that hard, right?” she asks, her voice low and conspiratorial, her eyes sparkling with mischief. “I mean, you charmed me, and you were one of those nerdy engineering people.”

“That’s hardly the same thing,” I snort, but her grin is infectious and I can’t help but smile back. “I had that fake ID and was able to ply you with wine. I doubt that’ll work on Marcus. Or the whole town.”

“Seriously, though,” she says, leaning back in our cozy booth, her fingers tapping against her coffee cup. “What if you try something different? Something that shows the town you care about them?”

“Like what?” I ask, curious.

Sera grins, leaning forward again so that her face is only inches from mine. “So, how about this: you could host a community dinner. Win everyone over with your charm—and free food.”

I pause, considering her suggestion. It isn’t a bad idea. The more I think about it, the more I realize it might just work.

Turning the tide of public opinion could sway Marcus, too—or at least keep him placated enough to stay out of my way.

“Alright,” I say, looking into Sera’s eyes. “Let’s do it.”

“Really?” she beams, clapping her hands together.

“Really,” I confirm, feeling a surge of determination.

“Then let’s get planning,” Sera declares, pulling out her phone and scrolling through her contacts. “We’ll need to find a venue, set a date, and organize some catering. Oh, and don’t forget about publicity. We need to make sure everyone knows about this event. Fortunately, I have plenty of contacts with people who help me do my gallery events, I’m sure they can help us organize this thing.”

“Alright,” I say again, more determined than ever. “Let’s do this.”

As I take a deep breath and let it out, I remember Marcus’s piercing green eyes, the heat of his touch that still lingers on my skin.

“Now, what are we going to do about Marcus?” I say.

“Yes, Lia, what are you going to do about him?” Sera asks, her eyes twinkling with mischief.

“I don’t know, Sera. I really don’t know.”

I take a sip of my coffee. My fingers trace the rim of my cup, recalling Marcus’s determination just the night before. His chiseled jaw set with fierce opposition, those piercing green eyes locked onto mine, refusing to back down. The memory sends shivers down my spine, and not all from fear.

But then there’s the other memory, the one that makes my heart race and my cheeks flush. I can still feel the fire of his touch, the way his firm hands explored every inch of my body, sending waves of pleasure crashing over me. Our connection was undeniable, magnetic, cathartic—and yet, he’s become my biggest obstacle.

“But one thing’s for sure,” I murmur, pulling myself back to the present. “If I don’t figure him out, I’ve got a big problem.”

Chapter Nine

Thunder

The flickering fluorescent lights of Bullet's garage, Reid's Repairs, cast an eerie glow over the worn-out tools and grease-stained concrete floor. As I lean against a scratched-up workbench, I tap a flier I hold in my hand.

"Alright, listen up," I announce to the group—Bullet, Rook, Eliza, and Maddy. "The *Mar y Tierra* resort project is hosting a community dinner event tomorrow night to win over the public. We need to sabotage it."

A low murmur of agreement ripples through the group as they exchange glances, their expressions a mix of determination and mischief. Particularly Eliza, who looks downright thrilled.

"Are we sure about this?" Maddy questions, her brow furrowed in concern. "Sabotaging a community event?"

"Trust me," I say, my voice laced with conviction. "We need to make a statement. Show them that Costa Oscura isn't going to be swayed by their shiny, corporate bullshit."

"Marcus is right," Bullet adds, his dark eyes flashing with resolve. "We've got to hit them where it hurts."

"Fine," Maddy sighs, "but let's not do anything too extreme, alright? The implications of getting some bad PR could be damaging for our cause."

"After the shitstorm you put the Covingtons through, we all know you're the expert on that," Rook chuckles. "But yeah, nothing that'll get us all locked up."

"So, how do we do this?" I say.

"Well, what do we know about the event, other than they're giving out free food tomorrow night for a bunch of people?"

"So, they've got Chef Vivienne Marcel cooking for the event," I say, leaning against a grease-streaked workbench. "You know, the Michelin-starred chef?" That I even know who

that is sends an impressed murmur through everyone, though it's just printed on the flier. Hopefully none of them take a closer look at it.

“Marcel?” Rook’s eyebrows shoot up in surprise. “Even I’ve heard of her. She could make MREs taste good.”

Eliza claps her hands together, eyes sparkling. “Oh, I love her! She turned a hospital cafeteria into a gourmet experience on that cooking show. I wonder if I can get a chance to talk to her. Maybe she could come by Costa Oscura General and make our cafeteria serve actual food.”

“Sounds like they’re pulling out all the stops,” Bullet chimes in. “Bet they have a lot of high rollers attending this dinner.”

“Which means we have even more reason to make sure this thing doesn’t happen. Any ideas?”

“We could mess with their generators,” Rook offers. “A little blackout never hurt anyone.”

“How ‘bout loosening a few bolts in the serving tables?” Bullet counters, smirking. “Make their gourmet meals hit the floor.”

“Or create a fake announcement saying the event’s been moved to a different venue?” Maddy suggests, her eyes lighting up with mischief. “No one will show up and it will piss everyone off.”

Leave it to Maddy to come up with an idea that is basically sending out a memo.

“We could hire a bunch of clowns to show up at their party,” Eliza offers.

“Clowns?” I say.

“Yes. Clowns. They’re creepy, they’re weird, and no one likes them. They’ll show up and everyone will be so scared that they’ll just want to go home,” Eliza says.

“Lovely idea, honey,” Rook says. “I vote for the clowns.”

“Fuck no,” says Bullet, Maddy, and me in unison.

“None of these are foolproof,” I say, my mind racing through potential outcomes. “And some of them are just disturbing. But how can they throw a community feast without any food?”

“A food heist it is then,” Rook declares, cracking his knuckles. “I’ve done covert ops; this’ll be a cakewalk.”

“Are you trying to make a pun, Rook?” Bullet teases.

“Shut up, Bullet,” Rook grumbles, but there’s no actual heat behind his words.

“No fighting, Rook,” I say. “We’ve got a job to do.”

“Right,” Rook says, his voice soldier-sharp, all business. “I’ll scope out the venue tonight. We’ll make our move early tomorrow morning. A pre-dawn raid.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Maddy nods, her eyes serious but supportive.

“You’re not going on this one, Maddy,” Bullet says.

“You neither, Eliza,” Rook says. When Eliza frowns at him, he adds, “I don’t want any chance of you getting arrested. Especially for something as petty as this. Save your criminal record for the good stuff, sweetheart.”

“Okay, my love,” she says. “I’ll only get arrested for the big crimes.”

As we finalize the details of our heist, my thoughts turn to Lia. She will retaliate when she finds out what I’ve done. Just what sort of schemes does she have in store?

“Marcus?” Bullet’s concerned voice pulls me from my internal turmoil. “You with us?”

“Always,” I reply, my voice steady despite the storm brewing within me. “Rook, scout the location. I’ll see you and Bullet back here just before dawn. It’s time for us to be the world’s worst dinner guests.”

* * * * *

The deserted streets of Costa Oscura stretch out before me, the inky black sky providing little comfort. It’s several hours

before dawn, and the city is as quiet as a graveyard. We stand outside the community event hall, our breaths visible in the chilly air. The anticipation hangs heavy around us, threatening to choke the life from my lungs.

“Remember the plan, Thunder?” Rook’s gruff voice jolts me from my thoughts. His ex-military instincts have him on high alert, his eyes scanning the area for any signs of trouble.

“Of course,” I reply. This heist isn’t our usual style, but we’ve got no choice. This is war, and sometimes you have to do desperate things to achieve victory.

Like stealing food from a community supper.

“Let’s do this,” Bullet says.

Rook, Bullet, and I make our way toward the back door of the hall, taking care not to make a sound. Each step feels like an eternity, my shoes feel so heavy it’s like they’re made of concrete. The tension between us is palpable, and I can’t help but wonder if they feel the same unease that’s gnawing at my conscience.

This is the right thing to do, but it feels wrong all the same.

“Almost there, man,” Bullet whispers to me, his loyal eyes offering me a brief respite from my inner turmoil. “Don’t fret the rest, just keep your mind on the prize.” That’s one thing about Bullet—he’s always had my back, ever since we were kids.

“I know. We’ve got this,” I say, trying to sound more confident than I feel. We’re doing this for a greater cause. At least, that’s what I keep telling myself.

We reach the door, and Rook produces a lock pick from his pocket. With practiced precision, the lock clicks open, and we slip inside. The kitchen is a treasure trove of gourmet dishes and ingredients laid out in a precise order. Bullet lets out a low whistle, and even Rook emits a grunt that almost sounds positive.

“Damn, these look too good to steal,” Bullet murmurs, echoing my own thoughts.

“Keep your mind on the mission,” I tell him, forcing myself to do the same. We can’t afford any slip-ups now. Not when we’re so close to pulling this off.

“You think we can spare a few minutes so I can have just one of these?” Bullet says, eyeing one of the menu cards set up in front of the rows of plates. “Says they have wagyu steak in one of the fridges. Can you imagine? Let’s fire up the grill. We deserve one of these.”

“There’s time for that later. Hurry, let’s get this stuff loaded and get the hell out of here,” I say.

We work quickly and silently, loading the boxes of food into our van parked in the alleyway behind the event hall.

“Let’s get out of here,” Rook says, his voice strained with urgency. He knows as well as I do that the slightest mistake could bring this entire operation crashing down around us.

“Agreed,” I reply, my heart pounding in my chest like a jackhammer.

This may be for a greater cause, but it doesn’t make it any easier to stomach. I slam shut the back doors of the van and Rook and Bullet both hop inside.

“I’ll go back, take one last look around and wipe the counters down, make sure we didn’t leave any fingerprints.” A cheeky idea strikes me. “Maybe I’ll even write a message for those fucking resort people. Let them know they’re not welcome here.”

No sooner do I step away from the van and toward the entrance to the event hall than a voice shatters the silence like a gunshot.

“Marcus, just what the hell are you doing here?”

My blood runs cold. Every muscle in my body locks up.

I know that voice, and I never expected to hear it here. Not now.

It’s Lia.

Chapter Ten

Amelia

The chill night air stings my cheeks as I storm out the bay doors behind the event hall, vengeance fueling my every step. A furious fire burns inside me as I catch sight of Marcus standing near a van loaded with stolen food. My food. This isn't just about me or my job; it's about the entire community, because he sure as hell doesn't know the full story of who that food is meant for. For a passing split-second, I relish the look on his face when he realizes he's been caught.

Then I storm forward.

Now, in these dead hours of the morning, it's time for war.

"Marcus, what the hell are you doing?" I demand, my voice a mixture of anger and disbelief. "This isn't some petty theft, you goddamned gorilla; you're actively undermining community development. I'm trying to help people, here. Needy people."

His remorseless green eyes lock onto mine, not even flinching at my accusation. If anything, they seem to burn with an even greater intensity, challenging me in a way that sends shivers down my spine. He remains silent, his jaw clenched, causing a muscle to twitch beneath his beard.

"Say something!" I shout, desperate for any kind of response. But Marcus only continues to stare at me, his silence deafening. It's as if he wants me to understand something without him having to say it.

"Is this part of some twisted plan of yours?" I can't help but ask, my voice cracking. "Or do you genuinely believe sabotaging this event and hurting these people will make a difference?"

He grins and turns away.

"Answer me, Marcus!" I insist, taking a step closer.

Then I slap him. With a closed hand.

So, yeah, I punch him.

The impact of my fist against his face hurts like hell; the sting runs up my forearm, past my elbow, and bounces around in my shoulder, reminding me that hitting a man whose face looks like bearded, scowling, grimacing, handsome-as-hell granite is probably not a good idea.

“Community development? That’s what you call this corporate land-grab?” Marcus sneers, his words dripping with venom. “Looks like a fucking party for you and all your rich friends to celebrate ruining this town.”

The tension between us crackles in the air like the static charge before a thunderstorm. I clench my fists, trying to resist the magnetic pull that draws me towards him and debating if I should punch him again. With my left fist this time, because my right one still stings and I don’t want to give Marcus the satisfaction of seeing me shake out the pain.

“Corporate land-grab?” I retort, my voice strained. “We’re feeding people who need it the most, Marcus. How can you be so blind?”

He takes a step closer, our faces mere inches apart. I fight the urge to reach up and touch his jawline, to trace the path of his anger with my fingertips, down the length of his jaw, all the way to his stern, frowning, kissable lips.

“Feeding them lies,” he growls, green eyes blazing with determination. “You think I don’t know what’s really going on here?”

Marcus’ eyes bore into mine, his handsome face etched with determination. The air crackles between us, our heated words fueling an electric storm.

“Marcus, you’re so blinded by your own convictions that you can’t see the reality,” I say through clenched teeth. “You think you’re some kind of hero, stealing food like this? What about the people who are truly suffering? You’re taking all this away from them.”

“Bullshit. Lies and fucking bullshit.” Instead of cowering, he straightens up, defiance written all over him. “You really

expect me to believe that, you heartless, home-stealing corporate whore?”

His words sting. Not just for what he says, but how he says them. To have someone who ignites such powerful feelings in me call me something so debasing strikes me in the heart.

“Is that really what you think? I’ll have you know that most of the guests at this dinner are Costa Oscura’s homeless and disadvantaged families. Most of them aren’t even in the development’s way. Tonight is just a chance for some very needy people to come together, share an incredible meal, and find hope in each other’s company. We’re giving back here, Marcus. Or at least, we’re trying to. Somehow, you seem to hate that fact. Why?”

For a moment, Marcus’ resolve seems to falter, but he quickly regains his composure.

“Even if that’s true, it doesn’t change the reality that you developers are preying on vulnerable people.”

“Marcus, please listen to me,” I plead, my voice shaking with emotion. “We’re trying to help those same vulnerable people. And by stealing from us, you’re only hurting them more. Don’t be such a fucking hypocrite.”

His green eyes search mine, the intensity in them making my breath catch.

“I can’t believe you, Lia,” he murmurs, his voice raw. “Even now, you still defend your precious job, even though you know that there are many people that are going to be hurt by it.”

“Because it’s not just a job!” I shout, my control slipping through my fingers like sand. “It’s my life, my purpose! And I won’t let you or anyone else destroy it.”

The moon casts a ghostly light over the scene, illuminating Marcus’s fierce green eyes. They’re locked onto mine as if he can see straight through me, reading every secret thought that I’m trying so desperately to keep hidden; that I’m scared; that sometimes I regret taking on this project; that sometimes I

wish there were a way out; that sometimes, late at night, I think of him.

We stand there, inches apart, our breaths mingling in the cool night air.

My heart races, torn between fear and a desire I cannot comprehend.

“Give it up, Marcus,” I plead, my voice barely more than a whisper. “You don’t have to do this.”

“Stop trying to change my mind, Lia,” he replies, his voice low and husky, sending shivers down my spine. “You know I’m never going to back down.”

“Stealing food won’t help anyone,” I say, grasping for any argument that could sway him. “And it certainly won’t stop me.”

His gaze holds an intensity that threatens to consume me. And I hate myself for wanting to give in.

But I can’t.

I have to do something, and lost for options, I do the first thing that comes to mind: I hit him again. Even harder this time. Something pops in my left hand and I wonder if I’ve done permanent damage. When I draw my hand back, I wiggle and flex each of my fingers, noting with relief that everything still works normally.

Punching people just hurts. Really bad.

How is it that freaking hulks like Marcus do it all the time and not wind up losing the use of their hands?

Marcus shakes it off like my strongest blow means nothing to him.

“Some argument, Lia,” Marcus grits out, his athletic frame coiled like a spring, ready to unleash his fury. His voice drips with sarcasm. “You’ve really convinced me.”

“Marcus, you couldn’t be more wrong,” I whisper, my heart pounding in my chest. “Give me a chance and I’ll prove it to you.”

He advances. Looms over me. His lips are so close.

“You’re making this so damn hard, Lia,” he says, his face inching toward mine. “Go back inside and let me finish what I’ve started. Now.”

Our lips are almost touching, the tension between us stretched to its breaking point. Every fiber of my being is screaming for me to close the distance, to let the magnetic pull between us take over.

But I can’t—I won’t—give in to this madness.

“Marcus, you’re wrong. You’re wrong and you know it,” I choke out, struggling to maintain control.

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you,” he says, grabbing me by the shoulders and then quickly twisting my arms behind my back. It hurts, but in a way that sends sweet warmth through my body. He dominates me so easily, and there’s a dark part of me that relishes this sensation, of being so at his mercy, so helpless. I melt beneath his touch and curse myself for not fighting more.

Like a prisoner, he leads me back into the kitchen. Then, with his free hand, he searches through drawers in the kitchen until he finds a spool of cooking twine. Drawing a knife from his pocket, he cuts several long lengths of cord.

“You don’t need to do this,” I beg.

“You can’t seem to get the message, Lia. There are people I care about that this project of yours is going to hurt, so I’ll be damned if I step aside and let you ruin their lives.”

“There has to be another way...”

“Someone will find you in a few hours, if you don’t get yourself free before then.” He binds me with the twine as he talks, roughly, without remorse; my ankles, my hands, all tied behind my back like I’m nothing more than livestock. When he’s done, I’m trussed and feeling like a calf on a farm, ready to be sent to the slaughter. “Until then, know that I’m never going to stop until the development is dead. I don’t care what you do or who I have to hurt. I’m stopping that fucking thing.”

He stops in the doorway, nothing more than a shadow in the dark kitchen, and looks down at me.

“Take this as your final warning, Lia: leave my town alone or you will regret it.”

Chapter Eleven

Thunder

Long shadows drape themselves across the garage as we unload boxes of gourmet food from the van. My guilt feels heavier than the packages themselves. I stare at the piles of food, thinking about the homeless people it could help and how Lia's face had looked when I took it. My conscience aches like a freshly beaten bruise.

Rook grunts, setting down a box with a thud. "So, now what, genius? We bag and freeze this so we don't have to cook for the next year?"

I rub my beard, trying to come up with an answer that sits right with me. The others exchange glances, their expressions mirroring my uncertainty.

"Look," Bullet says, breaking the silence, "we all know you're feeling guilty, man. But we can still do some good with this food, right?"

"Maybe we can turn this into a fundraiser," Maddy suggests. "Sell the food and donate the money to the people fighting against the resort."

"Or," Eliza pipes in, "we could host a massive food fight." Her eyes twinkle with mischief. "Charge admission. Make a spectacle out of it. That'll get people talking."

It would get people talking, but I think Eliza just wants to see what Rook would look like after being smacked in the face with a bunch of mashed potatoes. I think I might, too. Still, I shake my head. "That'd just be wasting it."

"You just don't want me to bash you in the head with a T-Bone steak," Rook says.

"That too," I concede. "I know you wouldn't hold back, and getting knocked out by taking a steak to the face is not something I want to experience."

"Still might do it," Rook answers, grinning. His eyes drift alarmingly toward the box of steaks I unloaded a few minutes

ago.

“Seriously, we could probably sell this food, and for way more money than you’d expect,” Maddy says. “It’s prepackaged, pre-portioned. If we took it down to the financial district in San Francisco, I can find you a thousand finance bros who are into meal prep and who would go nuts for this. We could take the money we earned and use it for a legal fund so Eileen and others can fight the resort.”

“Babe, I love you, but that sounds like too much work, and no amount of money is worth it to spend time around those finance guys,” Bullet says. “The last thing anyone needs is to hear a thousand stuck-up assholes talk about how they’re ‘crushing it.’”

“I agree with Bullet,” I say. “Those dudes are the worst.”

“We could create a cooking show with this stuff. ‘Cook with Rook.’ We could put it up on YouTube. People would pay good money to see my man make beef Wellington.” Eliza looks so proud as she says it, and looks at Rook so lovingly, that I allow her a minute of basking before I shake my head.

“I would pay not to see that,” I say.

“And I’d pay not to do it,” Rook adds. “Sorry, love. But you know any cooking show with me involved would just turn into true crime. Probably at least a double homicide.”

“These are all technically ideas,” I mutter. As I stand there, surrounded by my friends and their well-meaning suggestions, the memory of Lia’s face inches from mine flashes through my mind. The heat in her eyes, the tender fullness of her lips, the magnetic pull that nearly had me losing myself in a kiss before reality slammed back into place and she hit me.

“Alright, listen up,” I say, my voice firm as I shake off the memory. “We’re keeping this food, but we’re gonna use it in a way that actually helps people.”

“You’ve got a plan, don’t you?” Bullet asks, knowing me too well.

I flash a grin. “I’m working on it. We’re not backing down from this fight; we’re just changing the rules.”

With that, we continue unloading the food while I rack my brain for a solution. Idea after idea sparks in my skull, but nothing quite catches fire, nothing quite feels right. Every time I think I'm getting close, Lia's face invades my thoughts, challenging me to do better. And I will.

"Hey, maybe we could just host a massive cookout," Maddy suggests, her eyes sparkling. "You know, like a neighborhood potluck or something."

"Or better yet," Rook adds sarcastically, "we could just throw a massive pool party and eat like kings while the world burns."

"Thanks, Rook," I say, rolling my eyes. "Real helpful."

"Anytime, Thunder," he smirks. "I'm always happy to help you out with a good idea, or a steak upside the head."

"Look, relax with the ridiculous for a moment. I really need to focus," I say, shaking my head to clear it. I'm a mechanic and a biker, not a caterer or community whatever-the-fuck, yet I need to devise a plan that benefits the community, harms the resort, and doesn't hurt Lia any more than necessary. It's a tall order, but I owe it to everyone involved—including myself. And her. Especially her.

Fuck, I can't get her out of my head.

As my friends continue tossing out ideas, I pace the length of the garage, my frustration mounting. Then, in a flash of inspiration, it hits me: a plan so perfect, it feels like fate.

"Stop!" I shout, slapping the side of the van. "Everyone, just stop!"

"Damn, Marcus, what's got you so riled up?" Rook grumbles.

"Load it back up," I order.

"Wait, what?" Maddy asks, confusion etched on her features.

"Load all the food back in the van," I repeat, chuckling at their baffled expressions.

“Marcus, what the hell?” Rook warns, but I can see the curiosity in his eyes. “You got the love of my life hauling boxes for you, so you better have a damn good explanation.”

“Trust me,” I say, unable to contain my excitement. “I’ve got a plan. One that will make it all worth it.”

Chapter Twelve

Amelia

I pace the bustling kitchen of the event hall, my heart a panicked animal in my chest. Time is running out and I desperately dial gourmet food distributors, leaving message after message. “I need ingredients for tonight’s event. Please, price is not an object,” I plead in every voicemail box I reach. My voice trembles with urgency. The stolen food weighs heavily on my mind, and the thought of failing this dinner event makes my stomach churn like it’s been stuck in a centrifuge.

“Damn it!” I curse under my breath, hanging up the phone. Another voicemail, another non-answer, another nail in the coffin of my career.

I glance around the kitchen only to find Chef Vivienne Marcel in the midst of a full-blown tantrum. She’s throwing pots and pans across the room, knocking jars of spices around like she wants to make it snow paprika, her face red as she rants and swears like an angry Gordon Ramsay.

“Where the bloody hell is the food?” Chef Marcel screams, her eyes wild as she hurls a saucepan against the wall. “Why the hell am I, Vivienne Marcel, subjected to such pathetic chicanery as being asked to cook a meal without any ingredients? Is this some ridiculous avant-garde art project? Or are you all just utterly incompetent?”

I wince at the metallic clang that reverberates through the air. She’s contracted to be the head chef of the resort once it’s complete, but now, after today, even if everything goes to plan, I doubt she’ll follow through; I’ve never seen her this upset, and I know that it’s all because of me.

“Chef Marcel, I promise I’m doing everything I can to fix this situation,” I say, trying to placate her. But my words don’t seem to have any effect on her rage.

Instead, she kicks a nearby trash bin, sending it flying across the floor.

“Fix it?” she snarls, glaring at me with pure venom. “You’d better fix it, or we’re all screwed. This is an utter embarrassment. What am I to serve tonight? Air? Or, even worse, McDonald’s?”

“I promise, I’ll fix it. We will have everything you need shortly and you will be able to cook tonight,” I say. Swallowing hard, I step away as I continue making calls, frantically searching for a last-minute solution. My hands shake as I dial another number, praying that this time someone will come through for us.

The kitchen door swings open, and my heart drops as I see Mr. Russell, my boss, standing there with a look of utter disbelief on his face. His eyes sweep over the chaotic scene, taking in Chef Marcel’s tantrum and the empty counters where the food should be.

“Ms. Harper,” he says icily, “what on earth is going on here?”

“Mr. Russell, I swear I’m handling it,” I answer hastily, trying to sound confident despite the panic gnawing at my insides. “We had a setback with the food, but I’m working on a solution.”

“Working on a solution?” He scoffs, crossing his arms over his chest. “This entire event looks like a disaster waiting to happen. If you can’t get this figured out, Lia, I’ll have no choice but to let you go.”

My stomach churns violently at his words, and I force myself to meet his gaze. “I understand, Mr. Russell. I won’t let you down.”

“You’d better not,” he warns before pivoting on his heel and leaving the kitchen.

As if on cue, my phone buzzes in my hand, and I eagerly answer, praying for a miracle.

“I’m really sorry, ma’am, but we just can’t fulfill your order on such short notice. I doubt any of the other distributors will be able to help you, either. Like, what you’re asking for, you

better get praying, because only a miracle could help you know.”

His voice is apologetic, but it’s a knife to my already-fragile composure.

“Thank you,” I choke out, hanging up and slipping away from the chaos.

I stumble into the walk-in refrigerator, shutting the door behind me and sinking to the cold floor. The icy air bites at my skin, but it’s nothing compared to the crushing weight of impending failure.

Tears prick at my eyes as I draw my knees to my chest, my entire world crumbling around me. The job I’ve worked so hard for is slipping through my fingers, and there’s nothing I can do to stop it. Desperation and despair claw at my insides, leaving me feeling hollow and broken.

“I’m a failure,” I murmur. “A worthless, pathetic failure.”

Just when I think things couldn’t possibly get any worse, the refrigerator door swings open and light spills into the icy darkness. My heart leaps into my throat as Marcus steps inside, his green eyes piercing through me like a lance. He’s carrying a large cardboard box, one I recognize from the early morning hours, when he was carrying it from the kitchen into the van.

“What the hell are you doing here?” I demand, struggling to suppress my anger and surprise at seeing him again. If my hands still didn’t have the occasional twinge of pain, I’d punch him again. “Come to gloat over my failure?”

He smirks, but there’s something different in his eyes—a hint of vulnerability.

Without a word, he sets the box down and turns to Chef Marcel, who has momentarily stopped her tantrum.

“Here,” he says gruffly, “you can have this back.”

“Marcus,” I hiss, my mind racing with confusion and suspicion. “Why are you doing this? You’ve won, haven’t

you? You stole the food, sabotaged my event, you've probably gotten me fired..."

"Because I refuse to do anything that would hurt the people of Costa Oscura," he interrupts me, his voice firm. "If this dinner helps them, then I want to help too."

His words stun me, and I can feel the icy walls around my heart beginning to crack.

The way he looks at me now, like he's just conquered me, like I am entirely at his mercy, sends shivers down my spine. It reminds me of our night together, a passionate encounter that still haunts my dreams.

"Thank you," I whisper, my voice barely audible above the hum of the refrigerator. "But don't think this changes anything between us."

"Whatever you say, Lia," he replies, his smirk back in full force, maddening me. "Just remember, I beat you, and you're lucky I've decided to be merciful."

"I'm still going to push forward with the *Mar y Tierra* resort project," I tell Marcus, the anger bubbling just beneath the surface. "Don't think that I owe you anything. In fact, no matter what you claim about trying to be noble, it was incredibly stupid of you to bring the food back."

"Whoa, hold on there," he interrupts me, his green eyes locked onto mine. "You might want to hold off on thanking me, because bringing the food back isn't the only reason I'm here."

My heart skips a beat. "Why else did you show up? To gloat?"

"Come with me," Marcus says, taking my hand and leading me outside.

As we exit the event hall, the aroma of barbecue fills the air, making my stomach growl in protest. The Steel Reapers MC have set up a massive party in the parking lot, complete with grills, tables, and banners protesting the *Mar y Tierra* Eco Resort project. Two bikers bearing the name patches 'Rook'

and 'Bullet' are manning the grills, their tattoos glistening with sweat in the afternoon sun.

"Anyone who shows up to your event will first have to walk through our little gathering here," Marcus laughs, clearly proud of his plan. "And I have to be honest with you, our barbecue smells just as good as anything Chef Marcel is going to cook."

"Is this really necessary?" I ask.

The scent of the barbecue is intoxicating, drawing me in despite myself.

Can a good brisket calm my rage? Maybe? I'm tempted to find out.

"Absolutely," Marcus replies. "We will not let the Mar y Tierra project destroy our town without a fight."

"Your little protest won't change anything," I say defiantly, my voice shaking despite my best efforts to hide it. "The resort is a done deal."

"Is it?" Marcus challenges me, his eyes darkening with determination. "We'll see about that."

"Is this everything, then?" I demand, my voice rising with anger as I confront Marcus. "You came here to return my food, and now you've brought your biker buddies and this damn barbecue to make sure I can't succeed?"

Marcus's green eyes meet mine, unyielding in their resolution. "I'm protecting what matters, Lia."

"Fine," I spit out through gritted teeth. "But know this: I'll still win. This protest won't stop me. There's too much money, too much opportunity, too much genuine good that we can do for the community to be put off by a group of bikers."

"Bold words," he says, his face an unreadable mask. There's a pause, and for a moment, we stand there, locked in a silent battle of wills. "By the way," he suddenly murmurs, stepping closer and invading my personal space, "I came back for one more thing."

Before I can react or question him, his lips crash against mine with a passion that steals my breath away. My world narrows down to the feel of his beard against my skin, the taste of him, and the heat that ignites between us. The kiss is long, powerful, and absolutely devastating. It leaves me reeling, my heart so alive it chokes me.

As our mouths finally part, my head spinning from the intensity of our connection, I find myself at a loss for words. Marcus smirks, triumphant, as if he's just conquered something within me I didn't even know was up for grabs.

"Remember this, Lia," he whispers, his voice low and sultry. "No matter how this war ends, no matter how quickly I beat you, remember this."

And with that, he turns and walks away, leaving me standing there, heart pounding and breathless, unable to shake the feeling that my entire world has just been turned upside down by the man who wants to burn it to the ground.

Chapter Thirteen

Thunder

The sky is on fire, hues of orange and red and deep purple bathe the world as we finish cleaning up the remnants of the barbecue. The scent of grilled meat and smoke still lingers in the air, mixing with the smell of gasoline from our motorcycles. I survey the parking lot of the event hall, a sense of accomplishment and pride swelling in my chest.

Accomplishment, pride, and a bit of justified vengeance.

“Damn, we really pulled it off,” Bullet says, wiping sweat from his brow. He grins at me, his blue eyes sparkling. “We got our message out there today.”

“Sure did,” Rook agrees, his voice raspy after a day’s worth of barbecue smoke. His gaze narrows, and an unsettling glint appears in his eyes. “But we still have work to do. We need to keep the pressure on that damn project.”

“Any ideas?” I ask, running my fingers through my dark hair, trying to tame the wildness that seems to envelop me these days. I scan the faces of my brothers, searching for inspiration.

“More protests,” Bullet suggests. “Maybe even some civil disobedience. Anything to make them realize they can’t just bulldoze their way into our town.”

“Sounds good to me,” I say, nodding my agreement. My lips still feel the taste of Lia lingering on them. I need to get out for a ride and clear my head, sort out how I feel about her. “Rook, you look like you’ve got an idea brewing. What is it?”

“Two words: Molotov cocktails. Yes, plural.”

“No. Just no.” Still, I grin at him. It would feel satisfying to hurl a few of them, maybe into the offices of the development company.

“Think about it.”

“Seriously, we are a long way away from burning our enemies alive with homemade explosives.”

“It could be fun. Just think about it.”

Just then, my phone buzzes in my pocket, breaking the camaraderie of the moment. I glance down at the screen and see Owen’s name flashing.

“Owen? What’s going on?” I ask, fighting to keep my voice steady, but I can hear the tremor, the anger that threatens to break free.

“Marcus, it’s Grandma Eileen,” he says, his voice shaking. “She’s taken a turn for the worst.”

My heart plummets like a stone in water, pulling me under with it.

“What happened?” I choke out, my hands gripping the phone tightly.

“I don’t know,” Owen says. “The doctors are still trying to figure things out, but they suspect she may have had a reaction to some of the medicine she received.” He pauses, and I can hear him swallow hard before continuing. “I think someone may have tried to poison her as retaliation.”

“Poison?” I whisper. The thought of someone harming Eileen, that sweet old woman who reminds me so much of the grandmother I lost when I was just a boy, fills me with a rage I’ve never known before. Who the fuck would do that? My phone creaks for mercy in my hand, and I realize I’m squeezing it so hard I’ve nearly broken the damn thing.

“Stay with her, Owen. I’ll be there soon,” I say, my voice a growl.

I hang up the phone, my chest tight with grief and fury.

I had a part in this.

It’s because of what I did here today that Eileen could be dying.

“Thunder, what’s wrong?” Bullet asks, concern etched on his face.

Rook stands silently beside him, his jaw clenched, sensing the storm brewing within me.

“Someone hurt Eileen,” I tell them, my words dripping with venom. “I have to go take care of it.”

“Thunder. Hold on, what do you mean someone hurt Eileen?” Bullet calls out as I swing my leg over my motorcycle, but I don’t answer. The engine roars beneath me, drowning out their voices like an angry beast. My thoughts race, dark and vengeful, as I tear through the streets. All I can think of is hurting whoever did this to Eileen. Making them pay with their life.

Costa Oscura General Hospital looms ahead, its sterile white walls offering no comfort. With a screech of tires, I skid to a halt outside and hurry inside. Owen waits for me in the lobby, his face pale and drawn. He looks like he’s aged ten years since our last meeting.

“Grandma’s stable, but unconscious,” he says quickly, before I can even ask. “The doctors won’t let anyone see her.”

“Then we have to do something,” I growl, my voice thick with anger and grief. “We have to make them pay.”

“Marcus...” Owen starts, hesitating, but I shake my head, cutting him off.

“Whoever did this to Eileen, to your grandmother, they’ll regret it. I promise you that.”

“Let’s hit them where it hurts,” Owen says. “Their offices are on the outskirts of town. They won’t see it coming.”

I nod, the fire of vengeance burning in my chest.

“We’ll make them regret ever coming to this town,” I promise, clenching my fists tightly.

We head back to the parking lot. I slide onto my motorcycle, while Owen gets into his car, and we tear out of the lot, leaving burning rubber in our wake.

In minutes, we’re outside of town. The office building looms before us, its dark windows staring back like soulless eyes. With a glance at each other, then we approach the front

doors, knowing this isn't the time for subtlety, only revenge; we break inside, the sound of shattering glass echoing through the silent halls.

“Let's sweep the ground floor, check for any security. You armed?” I whisper to Owen, who nods in response. We split up and search the ground floor. Finding no one, we head to the higher floors, where the project managers have their offices. If there's anywhere to find information that could sink the project, or even just do maximum damage, that's the place to be.

As we approach one office, I notice a faint glow coming from under the door. My heart pounds in my chest, adrenaline coursing through my veins. I carefully push open the door, and there she is—Lia, working late, her brow furrowed in concentration as she pores over documents spread across her desk.

“Marcus?” she gasps, her eyes widening in fear. “What are you doing here?”

“Owen, leave,” I order, not breaking eye contact with Lia.

“You sure about that?” He replies.

“I've got this. Get out of here.” As Owen steps away, I brace myself for the confrontation to come. A storm rages within me, a tempest of emotions fighting for control: anger, desire, grief, and an undeniable need for justice.

“Tell me why, Lia,” I demand, my voice raw with the weight of my emotions. “Why did you do this to Eileen?”

“Marcus, I don't know what you're talking about.”

“Enough lies,” I growl, clenching my fists. “You can't hide from the truth any longer.”

“Who the hell do you think you are?” Lia hisses.

“Me?” I snarl, my anger boiling over. “You're the heartless bitch, the murderer, the monster!”

“Murderer? I have no idea what you're talking about!” she shouts back, her hands shaking as she clutches a pen tightly in

her grip. “Why are you breaking into my office? I’ll call the cops if you don’t leave right now.”

“Call them. Maybe they can tell us why Eileen’s dying.” The words slip out before I can stop them, and my rage crumbles into grief.

“Marcus,” she says, her voice softening, the concern on her face calming my rage. “What happened?”

“It’s Eileen.” My throat closes up, making it hard to breathe. “The old woman from the community meeting. She’s one of those in your way... I just came from the hospital. The doctors think she might’ve been poisoned.”

“Poisoned?” Lia’s eyes widen, and she takes a cautious step towards me. “I didn’t know, Marcus. I swear.”

“Didn’t know, or didn’t care?” I snap, my body tensing up again. “How can I believe anything you say?”

“Just think for a second, Marcus,” she pleads, her hand reaching out to touch my arm. “You think I’m some murderer who would want some old woman dead just because I’m worried about my job? I’m driven, but I’m not fucking heartless. I’m sorry. I truly am.”

But her words fall on deaf ears.

All I can think of is Eileen, lying there helpless, while the woman responsible stands in front of me. My resolve falters as I look at her, her eyes filled with genuine concern and regret.

“You don’t understand,” I choke out, the words scraping against my throat. “Eileen, her grandkids, Owen and Natalie... they mean more to me than you could ever know.”

“Marcus, I—” she starts, but there are words inside me that won’t be interrupted; emotions I can’t hold back.

“Just let me finish,” I say, my voice cracking as I force out the words. She doesn’t get it, she doesn’t understand the people—the actual people—that the people she works for are so heartlessly destroying. “Growing up, my father and mother were both abusive. They’re the reason I was always out of the house, always getting into trouble. Because I didn’t want to go

home. I'd do anything not to be in my own home. How sick is that? A kid afraid of the place where he's supposed to feel most safe? But my grandmother... She was always nice to me. Sometimes, I'd ride my bike all the way to her house, even though she lived on the other side of town. She died before I turned five, but I still remember her kindness. The way she smiled at me, the way she'd always make sure I was fed, the way she always made me feel safe and loved. That's all I needed, and the only person who gave it to me, who didn't make me afraid, who didn't make me feel worthless, was my grandma. Eileen and her family, they remind me of that. Helping her, I feel like I can finally thank my grandmother for everything she did for me."

She comes closer. Her hand rests on my arm, her touch a cooling fire; her eyes bore into mine, tender, caring, comforting.

"Marcus," she whispers, her body trembling against mine. "Let's talk about this..."

"Shut up. I'm through with talking." I press my lips against hers in a searing, desperate kiss, drowning out the pain and doubts that threaten to tear me apart.

She resists at first but then finally gives in, grabbing my back, pulling me into her, her tongue seeking mine, desperate.

"Marcus," she gasps when we break apart, her chest heaving. "What are we doing?"

"Something we shouldn't," I say, my voice hoarse with need. "But I can't stop myself, Lia."

"Neither can I."

My lips devour her. My hands grip her, push her back against her desk.

"Are we really doing this?" Lia gasps between kisses that set my skin on fire.

"Doing this? No," I reply, my voice enflamed with desire. With a sweeping gesture, I clear her desk, sending papers and office supplies crashing to the floor. I lift Lia effortlessly and

set her down on the now-empty surface. “We’re doing so much more.”

Chapter Fourteen

Amelia

The moment Marcus lifts me up, there's no turning back. He sets me on my desk, his kisses desperate and hungry as he devours my lips. His hands roam every inch of my body, igniting a fire that scorches my resistance to ash.

"Marcus," I gasp between kisses, my fingers gripping at his t-shirt, feeling the hard muscles of his chest beneath the fabric. Yet it isn't enough; I need more. "This is wrong. So wrong."

"Tell me to stop, Lia," he growls against my mouth, his breath hot and heavy. But I can't. My body craves his touch, betraying all rational thought. "Tell me to stop and I will. But I know you want this."

Our mouths collide again, our tongues dancing a reckless tango. My hands find their way beneath his t-shirt, tracing the lines of his muscular chest—the same chest that speaks of danger, loyalty, and a life so different from mine.

As we kiss, my hands slip lower, finding their way to his jeans where his cock strains against the denim. The desire to touch him, to make him lose control, is overwhelming. I massage him through the material, eliciting a deep moan from his lips that sends shivers down my spine.

"God, don't stop," he begs, his voice ragged and raw. It sets my blood ablaze with a surge of powerful desire.

"Tell me what you want," I whisper, teasingly slowing my movements on his throbbing erection. "Tell me, and I'll give it to you. Anything."

"More, Lia. Fuck, I need more," he pants, his desperation only fueling my own lustful desires. "I need all of you. Right here, right now."

"Sit down," I command, my voice husky with desire.

Marcus obeys without hesitation, settling into my office chair. The sight of him—strong, commanding, and vulnerable all at once—sends shivers racing down my spine.

“Let me comfort you,” I whisper, unbuckling his belt and removing his jeans and underwear. I can’t help but marvel at the strength he exudes. That, and how wet just looking at his thick cock makes me. “You look so powerful like this... it feels good to be on my knees for you. Let me give you everything.”

Marcus’s eyes darken with lust, urging me on. My heart races as I take him in my hand, teasing him with feather-light touches that make him shudder. I revel in his reactions—each moan, each shiver, each shake—as if they’re my own. Then I tease the tip with my tongue. A slow lick that runs from base to tip, swirling around the head of his cock, tasting the precum, relishing the sound of his fervent moans. Every moan that escapes his lips feels like a victory. My desire to make him lose control consumes me, and I take him fully into my mouth, sucking him with eager abandon.

“Shit, Lia... just like that,” he groans, gripping the armrests of the chair so tightly his knuckles turn white. It’s intoxicating, the power I have over him in this moment; my enemy is like putty in my hands... or a thick cock in the back of my throat.

“Tell me how much you want me,” I murmur between strokes, my eyes never leaving his as I continue my relentless assault on his senses.

“Fuck, I want you more than I’ve ever wanted anyone,” he confesses, his breath hitching as I swallow his full length down my throat and gently tease his balls with my fingertips. “More than when I saw you the first time, and that first time, fuck, you were so fucking hot, you made every other woman I’ve been with seem like nothing. I can’t stop thinking about it, about how bad I want it, want you... Oh, fuck... Please don’t stop, Lia.”

“Never,” I murmur, sucking harder, my cheeks burning with his compliment, and the rest of me determined to give him what he craves. I lose myself in the act, drowning in the taste of him, the feel of his cock sliding against my tongue, filling my throat, the raw, primal hunger igniting every nerve. “I’m going to swallow your cock.”

“Keep going,” he gasps, and I know we’re close. “I need it. Need it. Oh fuck, I need you, Lia.”

“Marcus, cum for me,” I moan, just before the tension within him reaches its peak.

His orgasm washes over him like a tidal wave, and I swallow every drop of his release, my heart pounding wildly in my chest.

I stand up, thinking that he’s done, that our moment of passion has reached its conclusion. But Marcus reaches out and grabs me by the arm, his green eyes blazing with an intensity that both frightens and thrills me.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he growls.

“Well, I thought—” I stammer, trying to find words that will somehow convey the storm of emotions raging inside me. As good as it feels, I can’t believe I just gave a blowjob to him in my office.

“Did I say we were finished?” he growls, grabbing my arm and pulling me closer.

“No,” I whimper, knowing that I’m powerless to resist him. The thrill of being at his mercy sends shivers down my spine.

“Do you want us to be finished?”

“No,” I repeat.

“Take off your clothes,” he orders, and I comply without hesitation, stripping off my blouse and skirt, leaving me standing in just my bra and panties. His gaze travels over my body, and I feel heat blooming between my legs at his lustful scrutiny.

“God, you’re so fucking sexy,” he murmurs before pushing me back onto my desk. My heart thunders as I watch him lower his head between my thighs. He teases the lace of my panties with his teeth, grinning wickedly up at me, before pulling them aside. “I can’t wait to taste you.”

“Oh my god, Marcus. Please, I want it. I want your lips on my pussy.”

“Fuck, Lia, you’re so wet for me,” he breathes, his hot breath making my clit throb with anticipation. “Do you want my tongue on your pretty pussy?”

“Yes. Yes, I need it,” I beg, my voice barely more than a whisper. “I need you to lick my pussy, Marcus.”

He doesn’t make me wait any longer. His skilled tongue explores every inch of me. He laps at my swollen clit, sucking it gently between his lips before fluttering his tongue against it with a rhythm that takes my breath away. I moan loudly, unable to suppress the pleasure he’s giving me.

“Fuck, Marcus,” I gasp, my nails digging into the wood of the desk. He continues to lavish attention on me with his tongue, but it’s not enough—I need more. As if sensing my unsated desire, he slips two fingers inside me, curling them just so, and I’m lost. “God, Marcus... don’t stop,” I gasp. “That’s it, right there, keep doing that.”

I feel it building. Growing. Unstoppable. My fingers grip the edge of the desk as wave after wave of pleasure washes over me. I’m so close.

“Cum for me, Lia,” he orders, and I obey without hesitation. My body convulses in ecstasy as I climax beneath him, my cries of passion echoing through the room. But he doesn’t stop there. As I shake, he keeps me pinned to my desk, his tongue and fingers continuing to work me just right as he makes me come again and again, each orgasm more intense than the one before it.

“Marcus, please,” I plead, my body shaking from the intensity of it all. I fight just to keep breathing. “I can’t take it anymore. Fuck me. Fuck me now. I need you inside me.”

“Ask and you shall receive,” Marcus growls, his voice heavy with lust.

He bends me over my desk, my breasts pressing against the cold surface as he positions himself behind me. The vulnerability of this position sends shivers down my spine. I’m completely at his mercy, but instead of fear, all I feel is a

desperate need for him to take me. I want his cock inside me, need it, crave it.

“Are you ready?” he asks, teasing his cock at my entrance.

“God, yes. Please, Marcus, fuck me.” My voice is breathless with anticipation.

He doesn't keep me waiting. A moment after my begging words leave my lips, he's pressing into me from behind. His large, powerful hands grip my hips, pulling me back onto his cock as he thrusts inside me. The sensation is overwhelming; he fills me completely, stretching me in ways I've never experienced before. My moans fill the room, echoing off the walls as our bodies collide. He sets a brutal pace, each stroke a delicious mix of pain and pleasure that has me begging for more.

“Fuck, you're so tight,” he groans, thrusting into me with a force that makes my entire body shudder. “What do you want, baby? Tell me.”

“Harder,” I gasp, pushing back against him, trying to meet his every thrust with equal force. “Fuck me harder, Marcus. Fuck me like you hate me.”

“Is that what you want?” he taunts, his voice dripping with lustful intent. “You want me to pound your pretty pussy?”

“Yes!” I cry out, my voice echoing around the room. “Please, don't stop!”

“Fuck yes, for such an uptight corporate woman, you're a dirty girl,” he chuckles, gripping my hair tightly and yanking my head back as he picks up the pace. Each thrust is more powerful than the last, driving me closer and closer to the edge. “Do you like how I dominate your tight little pussy?”

“Marcus, I can't—” My words are cut off by a scream as I come undone, my body convulsing around him as he continues to fuck me through my orgasm.

“Come on, baby,” Marcus growls, his breath hot against my ear. “Ride me.”

He pulls out of me and sits down in my office chair, his cock still hard and glistening with my wetness. My legs are trembling, but I climb onto his lap, positioning myself over him. As I lower myself onto his length, the sensation is so intense that I moan so loud it's nearly a scream.

"Jesus, Lia," he groans, gripping my hips to guide me as I ride him. "You feel so fucking good."

"Fuck, Marcus," I gasp, my fingers digging into his shoulders as I bounce up and down on his cock.

"Give it to me, baby," he urges, his eyes locked onto mine. "I want to cum inside you."

"Take it," I hiss, grinding down onto him harder and faster. "Fill my pussy, Marcus. Cum inside me."

"Fuck!" he cries out, his body tensing beneath me as he erupts inside me. His hot cum fills me, and I revel in the sensation of him claiming me like this.

"Marcus," I whisper, my lips finding his in the aftermath of our fucking. I hold him in a gentle embrace. Our kisses are tender now, a stark contrast to the desperate hunger that had driven us before. The taste of him is intoxicating, and I deepen the kiss, my tongue dancing with his as we explore each other's mouths, as we taste each other on the other's lips, the other's tongue.

"God, Lia," he murmurs against my lips, his hands gently stroking my back, sending shivers down my spine. "You have no idea what you do to me."

I pull back slightly, looking into his piercing green eyes that seem to see straight into my soul. "Show me then," I challenge, a playful smile tugging at my lips.

"Was this not enough? Don't tempt me, Lia, not unless you want to do some explaining to your bosses when they come in the morning and find us still fucking."

Marcus grins and pulls me closer, our bodies melting together as we embrace.

His muscular arms wrap around me, hold me, tender.

We lie there for a while, enjoying the warmth of each other's touch, the intimacy of our connection. It's strange; in this moment, it feels like Marcus is more than just an enemy—he's someone who understands me, who sees me for who I truly am.

"Marcus," I say softly, breaking the comfortable silence that has settled between us. "About Eileen... I'll look into it. I'll see if anyone at the company was involved in hurting her."

"Thank you, Lia," he replies, his voice heavy with gratitude. "That means a lot to me."

Then the reality of the situation seeps in; I've not only crossed a line in sleeping with the enemy, but I'm also about to betray the company I work for. A sense of dread pools in my stomach, threatening to overwhelm me.

What if they find out? What will they do to me if they discover that I'm working against them? If my company is truly responsible for poisoning Eileen, what will they do to me if they discover my betrayal? The thought sends a shiver down my spine, and I cling to Marcus even tighter, seeking solace in his warmth.

What have I gotten myself into?

Chapter Fifteen

Amelia

Days later, I sit at my desk, my mind spinning like a top from the relentless pressures of life: Marcus' intense green eyes demanding answers I don't have, the protest that seems to have overtaken so much of this town, and my boss, Brian Russell, breathing down my neck with his ever-present demands for more progress.

There has to be more to *Mar y Tierra* than meets the eye.

Occasionally, *no, often*, my mind drifts back to the other night. Here. With Marcus taking me right over my desk, and me riding him in the very chair I'm sitting in. My cheeks get hot and I force myself to focus on the problem at hand: whatever is going on behind the scenes at *Mar y Tierra*.

"Maybe Marcus is right," I think to myself, a shudder running through me. I can't shake the feeling that there are sinister forces at play here, hiding in plain sight. "Maybe there really is something here I need to investigate."

Just saying those words makes my heart race.

Some investigator I'll be, if even talking about investigating makes me about to have a heart attack.

As I try to calm my nerves, I think about where I'm most likely to find the information I need to see everything that's going on with *Mar y Tierra* and I recall Brian Russell's office, where every minute detail about the project is stored; he has a highly secure computer system, and accessing it without permission would be both illegal and grounds for immediate dismissal.

Fun.

And then there's Antonio Mancini—the menacing head of security who was sent down by corporate just several days ago. I've seen how he operates, always vigilant about maintaining tight control over sensitive information. I've seen the gun he keeps at his hip, too.

More fun.

“Is it worth the risk?” I ask myself. But the stakes are too high, and the safety of so many people that I care about hinges on what I might uncover. I take a deep breath, steeling myself for what lies ahead.

“Damn you, Marcus,” I mutter under my breath. “You and your eyes and your damn fine ass. Damn you to hell and back, you fucking handsome man. Making me break into my boss’s office.”

Tonight, I find out the truth.

* * * * *

Vibrant moonlight filters through the blinds, casting thin, silvery shadows across the office floor. My heart races as I stand in the darkened hallway of the office building, my fingers trembling with anticipation and fear. The decision to betray my professional ethics is like an elephant sitting on my chest—especially since I’m so young in my career, it should be years before I’m so jaded that this kind of betrayal doesn’t bother me—but I can’t shake the feeling that there’s a murderous truth waiting to be discovered.

I glance down at my watch; the numbers glowing faintly: 2:17 AM. It’s time. Actually, it was time a while ago, but I’ve spent more time than I’d like to admit sitting right here, psyching myself up to betray everything I believe in.

“Alright, Lia,” I whisper to myself, taking a deep breath. “You’ve got this.”

I slip my security card from my pocket and hold it up to the scanner next to Brian Russell’s door. A red light blinks on the device, and I know I don’t have clearance for this level of access. But I’m prepared—using my knowledge of SSR’s systems and some flirting with a very desperate guy in the IT department, I’ve crafted an override code that should bypass the security protocols. Despite being a terrible person that heaven, or whatever is up there, shouldn’t listen to, I pray that my security override works.

“Here goes nothing,” I mutter, keying in the sequence.

A tense moment passes, and then the light turns green. The door clicks open, allowing me to slip inside.

“Damn, I’m good,” I mutter to myself.

I power up Brian’s computer, my fingers flying over the keys as I navigate through the various layers of security.

“Please let this be worth it,” I plead silently, feeling a mix of dread and determination. Then, just as I’m about to access the information I’ve been seeking, a noise from the hallway makes me freeze.

My pulse quickens, my breath hitching in my throat as I listen intently. Footsteps?

No, just the hum of the air conditioning system kicking in.

I exhale, the tension ebbing slightly from my body.

I take a flash drive out of my pocket and continue my digging.

There’s a quiet *beep* as the computer acknowledges my supremacy and gives me access to everything on Brian’s computer. I dig deep into the schematics and spreadsheets that encompass everything about the project.

“Come on, come on,” I whisper, willing the files to load faster. When I finally reach the hidden plans for the Resort, I can hardly believe what I’m seeing. Schemes far more sinister than I could have ever imagined stare back at me from the screen. My eyes widen as I read about a group simply called “Santoro”—they seem to be the puppet masters pulling the strings behind this entire project; the puppet masters and the bank, as well.

“Marcus was right,” I breathe, feeling a mix of relief and horror.

I insert my flash drive and begin copying the files, my fingers trembling slightly with each click.

“Almost there,” I tell myself, watching the progress bar inch toward completion.

But then, I hear it.

Something that isn't the air conditioning.

Footsteps approaching. Panic surges through me like wildfire, and I hastily eject the flash drive, grabbing it and diving behind a bookshelf just as the door to the office swings open.

“Accelerate the plans,” Antonio Mancini’s voice pierces the silence, his tone hushed yet urgent. “Things are getting out of hand.”

I press my back against the bookshelf, my heart pounding in my ears as I clutch the flash drive tightly in my hand. This is it. The end of the line. I know that if Antonio discovers me, there’s no telling what he’ll do. The man carries a gun and has all the calming presence of a grizzly bear with a blood-covered maw.

His footsteps draw closer, and I fight the urge to run.

“Like I said,” Antonio continues his conversation, pacing the room, “the target is still alive. Our ‘corrective action’ didn’t work.” The anger in his voice sends shivers down my spine.

A thought flashes through my mind—Eileen, pale and unconscious in her hospital bed. A quiet gasp escapes my lips before I can stop it.

“Look,” Antonio says, pausing, as if listening. “I don’t care what it takes. We can’t fail again. Things have to move forward. I know I don’t need to remind you what happens to you if you make a mistake on your end. How old is your daughter? Six? Seven?”

“Understood. We’ll handle it. No more mistakes,” comes a muffled voice from his phone. My heart races faster, and I clench my teeth, trying to hold back the fear that threatens to choke me.

“Good,” Antonio replies. “We’ve got too much riding on this. Yes, that’s right, I said ‘we.’ It isn’t all sunshine and fucking roses on my end, either, Gio. I have a wife, and the men above me dangle the same fucking consequences over my head. I got a picture of her sleeping sent to me this morning

because of this shit with that old bitch with the house. Hold on a second.”

His conversation stops. The room goes utterly silent.

I press harder against the bookshelf, willing my body to be pure quiet, praying he doesn't discover me hiding here. The air in the room suddenly feels suffocating, every hushed breath I take labored.

“Damn,” Antonio mutters under his breath, and I hear him pace across the room, his footsteps heavy on the plush carpet.

“Is he onto me?” I think, panic rising in my throat. “Did he hear my gasp?”

Antonio's steps slow, and I feel my entire body tense. He's close—too close.

The scent of his cologne fills my nostrils, making my eyes water; it's sharp, with an unpleasant tang.

I hold my breath, praying that he doesn't sense my presence.

“Something's not right,” he mumbles. His voice sends shivers down my spine. Hesitating for a moment, he finally speaks into the phone again. “I'll call you back.”

He ends the call, slipping the device into his pocket as he takes another step closer to where I'm hiding.

A bead of sweat drips down my forehead, but I don't dare wipe it away.

“Please, just walk out that door,” I plead silently, my heart pounding so loudly I'm sure he must hear it. I can't let him find me. Somehow, I have to escape. My mind spins with all the potential outcomes if he discovers my presence. The consequences—job loss, imprisonment, even death—threaten to consume me, urge me to forsake all reason and just run for the door like a wild animal.

But fear keeps me rooted in place.

As Antonio's hand reaches for the bookshelf, his fingers nearly brushing against the spines of the books that separate

us, mortal terror rushes through me like a tidal wave, and I know I am moments away from being discovered.

Chapter Sixteen

Thunder

It's day *too-fucking-many* of my vigil outside Eileen's hospital room. Not that it's been that many days, it's just that, when you're dealing with an old woman who's been poisoned by a nefarious corporation, *too-fucking-many* is where the countdown timer starts.

This entire situation is insane. Enraging. That a large corporation would resort to poisoning some old woman, just to get her out of the way, is sick. It's also why I'm pacing the hallway outside her room, instead of sitting by her bedside, waiting for her to wake up from the coma she's in; too many thrown pieces of furniture, too many broken glasses, too much shouting.

I'm not taking this situation well. Not even secret visits with Lia at her hotel do much to calm the fires that have enveloped my heart.

I want blood.

"You look like you want to kill someone," Bullet observes from the chair beside me.

I stop my pacing. "I do want to kill someone."

"Not just anyone, but someone here. As in, the first person you can get ahold of."

"Maybe I do."

"You know, Eliza warned us that even she can't keep us from getting banned from the hospital if you keep acting out, brother. Think about what will happen if one of us gets shot. Can you imagine them hauling our asses all the way to the ER, only to be told, 'Oh, sorry, we can't save these two dipshits. They've been banned from this hospital. Take 'em all the way to San Francisco. Maybe they'll help them there.'"

"Bullet, this isn't like the time you got us banned from that Denny's in Oakland because you felt like their Grand Slam

breakfast was less than major league. If we show up with gunshot wounds, they have to treat us.”

“First, my hotcakes were lukewarm. You can’t serve lukewarm hotcakes. Hot is literally in the name. And are you sure about that whole them-having-to-treat-us thing, Thunder? Do you really want to put it to the test?”

I throw my hands up. “Maybe. No. Not like I want to get shot, not like I want to die. But sitting here just feels fucking useless while Eileen is in there, fighting for her life. We need to find out who did this.”

Owen, who has been quiet this entire time—as he has been for most of the past few days—stops staring at the wall with a thousand-yard stare to say, “We get it, Thunder. But what the fuck can we do? The cops aren’t doing shit and you’ve said we can’t go bring justice to SSR’s offices outside of town. You’ve really fucked us here.”

“If they won’t help us, maybe we need to help ourselves and do some investigating,” I say.

“Yeah, Dick Tracy?” Bullet says.

“Fucking dated reference,” I reply.

“Timely reference is more like it. That comic, and the movie, both basically predicted the future. I mean, talking into your watch—*hello, Apple Watch*—that was prescient,” Bullet says.

“Brother, where did you learn that word?”

Bullet looks up at the ceiling sheepishly. “A podcast that Maddy was listening to. They were doing a feature on old media and its inspiration of modern technology. They talked about futurism, too, which was some culture and design movement that originated in the 1920s in Italy.”

“I worry about Maddy’s influence on you. Podcasts, cultural movements, fucking *Italy*, where does it end, brother?”

He laughs and punches me in the shoulder. “Hopefully, with her, it never ends. I love her, man. You know that.”

Owen stands up, fixes both of us with a slightly irritated look. “Do you think you guys could take a break from talking about art, culture, and fucking Italy to think about the fact that whoever poisoned my fucking grandmother is still out there, walking around like a free man when he should be fucking dead? What are we going to do to find this motherfucker?”

“Whatever we do, we need to be careful,” I say. I give Owen a steady look, one that I hope conveys to him the point that he can’t go running off half-cocked. “Not just because we’re messing around with some serious players, but because the police, along with the rest of Costa Oscura, know that we’re the main opposition to this *Mar y Tierra* project. So anything that happens that even slightly affects that project or anyone involved in it, we are going to be the first suspects they come after.”

Bullet clears his throat. “I think I might have an answer. You remember that friend Eliza said she made in the hospital’s IT department? The one who helped her set up all those X-boxes in the kid’s wing?”

“Yeah,” I answer. There’s a tone in Bullet’s voice that I don’t like.

“She’s always had a thing for you,” he continues. “Not Eliza. Her friend, Carol.”

“And...”

No, I definitely don’t like where this is headed.

“And she would probably have access to all the security footage from the night Eileen was poisoned. I think with the right... convincing... she would let us check it and we might find a lead on who poisoned Eileen.”

“Bullet, that’s a good idea, but...”

I don’t even get all the words out of my mouth before Owen interrupts.

“Thunder, I don’t care what you have to say, do, or fucking lick, if it’s going to help us find out who poisoned my grandma, you’re going to do it, or so help me god, I will fucking shoot you.”

I look from Bullet to Owen, both of them staring at me, waiting for an answer. I think of Lia, and how she'd look if she ever found out about my situation. *Probably amused, and she'd probably tease the hell out of me, too. Because it's not like we're anything more than just two enemies on diametrically opposed teams, with one of us wanting to protect the livelihood of some of the families in this community and the other wanting to steamroll them in the name of deluded environmentalism.*

“Fine. I’ll seduce Carol in IT.”

* * * * *

Carrying flowers—a bouquet I bought off the extra-discounted rack at the local grocery store—and wearing what I hope is a repellent amount of cologne, I walk down the back hallways of the basement level of Costa Oscura General Hospital with Owen and Bullet hot on my heels.

I can hear them fucking giggling like schoolgirls the entire fucking way.

I hate this.

This plan is stupid. Embarrassing. Awful.

Which means it will probably work.

I stop outside the door, holding my wilting bouquet and a hundred regrets. “I can’t do this.”

“Can’t, or won’t?” Bullet says.

“Shouldn’t,” I answer. “Shouldn’t, shan’t, shall not fucking ever.”

Owen puts his hand on my arm, squeezes, looks at me with eyes that more than lightly suggest murder. “Are you saying you’re going to put your pride over finding out who poisoned my grandmother? You really must want to be shot.”

The real answer sits right on my tongue, that flirting with someone—especially some woman who works in the basement of some hospital, on the same floor as the morgue, and who spends all her days out of the sun, dealing with computers instead of real people—feels more than wrong now

that Lia is in my life. Even if Lia is a secret that I haven't told the club about yet, other than describing her as my mortal goddamn enemy the night of the community meeting. *Fuck, my life is a mess right now.*

“No. I'm saying I'm going to go in there and flirt with basement-dwelling Carol and get the security footage, but I'm doing so under extreme duress.”

“Well, my grandmother—who is also under extreme duress, being that she's in a fucking coma after being poisoned—would empathize with you. If she weren't in a coma.”

“Damn, bro,” Bullet says. “Ease up a little.”

“Fine. Do your best, champ,” Owen says sarcastically, then he taps me on the shoulder. “We're all pulling for you as you fight through this monumental struggle of having to flirt with a woman.”

I trade a quick, reinforcing look with both Owen and Bullet as I psyche myself up. “Whatever happens, no one tell Rook I did this. He'll never let me live it down.”

Then I turn and open the door to the IT offices of Costa Oscura General Hospital. The room itself is as I expected, smelling like dust, also like dreams of human contact that have died and turned to dust. There's a poster of a kitten dangling from a laundry line on the wall with the words ‘Hang in there’ written on it. It's stuffy from the heat of a large bank of mainframe servers. There's an off-putting mechanical hum in the air. Two people sit at desks at the far wall, their backs turned to me. One's wearing a hoodie with the hood up, has a slender build, but definitely isn't a Carol, if anything I've heard about her is correct; the hoodie's an LA Rams hoodie, there's a miniature football on the desk, and there's a framed photo of Muhammad Ali's famous knockout over Liston. The other person is clearly a woman. She's larger, just barely above average, with unkempt brown hair, poor posture, and no less than seventy Pokemon figurines on her desk. Hand-painted ones, too, from the looks of it.

I sigh.

There's my target.

I approach. Halfway there, I clear my throat to announce my presence, and say, "Hey Carol, Eliza told me how you felt about me and I just had to stop by. I couldn't stay away from you any longer, babe."

The woman turns in her chair. She's pretty enough, and if I'd never met Lia, and if Carol didn't have a disturbing number of fictional cartoon animal figurines on her desk—or whatever the hell Pokemon are, I don't fucking know—I might be into this.

But I'm not.

So I grit my teeth, think of the old woman dying upstairs, and try to feel aroused.

"Who are you?" She says.

"You know who I am. It's me. Marcus. Maybe you know me by my road name—Thunder—but I'm here because I heard what you told Eliza and I can't contain myself any longer. I've been thinking about you ever since, baby."

"Oh?" She says.

I come in closer, slide some of the Pokemon figurines across her desk to make room for myself, and sit down. "Carol, you make my heart rev like I've just taken a hit of nos. From the moment I saw you, I just knew that you were the one I had to have."

"Really? Marcus, I—"

Her eyes drift down to the floor. Maybe it's shyness, maybe she feels overwhelmed by her attraction to me, but either way, I need to keep her focus on me. I put one finger under her chin and lift her gaze to me while my mind races for anything that might keep her interest—computer shit, mainly.

"Carol, I want you like I wanted the iPod touch when Steve Jobs announced it at the 2007 Apple conference—real fucking bad."

"But there's something you need to know..."

“The only thing I need to know is how I can get you and me alone. Look, I get it, you might be afraid of your feelings for me, or of even being with me—I know I got a reputation—but, deep down, I like the same things as you: computers, little fake animal toys, and sex.” She blinks, long, slow, probably utterly overwhelmed at how seduced she’s feeling at this very moment. I’ve got her right where I want her. I bring myself in close, so close that one move will have my lips against hers, rocking her world the way it’s never been rocked before. “You know what really turns me on? What gets me so hard I can’t even stand it? Talking about computers and security footage in a basement room with you, baby.”

“Security footage? What?”

“Like footage from several nights ago. I can give you the day, the time frame, all of that. You give me what I want, I’ll give you what you so desperately need. Understand me?”

“No, I’m finding this very confusing.”

“Carol, you show me this footage, and maybe you and I can make some footage of our own, if you know what I mean.” I pause, looking at her. She still looks so confused. Doesn’t surprise me, if I were in her shoes, being hit on by a guy like me, I’d be overwhelmed, too. Maybe she needs time to get her thoughts together because of how aroused she is.

Finally, she takes a deep breath, then another, then looks me right in the eyes.

“I’m not Carol. I’m Denise. And if you don’t get out of my face with your pervert talk, I am going to hit you in the dick, you weirdo.”

“You’re not Carol? What? Then where’s Carol?”

“Yo,” comes the voice of the person enveloped in the hoodie. The chair turns, the hood comes back, revealing a very petite woman who would take my breath away if Lia hadn’t already stolen it. “I’m Carol.”

“Oh fuck, I feel like an asshole.”

“You should. You should feel like a creep, too. Just coming in here, making assumptions. Denise is married, you know

that, right? And her husband is hot. Like, real fucking hot. You know why? Because Denise is hot, too. She's one of the most beautiful people I've ever met." I look down at her hand and see a very obvious ring. Fuck me. Carol continues, "But, despite all that, I'm going to help you out instead of kicking your dumb ass to the curb. Denise, can you give us a second?"

"Sure, Carol." Denise gets up and leaves.

"Thunder, tell me what has you so desperate that you'd come down here with that raggedy-ass bouquet and smelling like you took a bath in Drakkar Noir."

I quickly explain to her the real reason I'm down here—Eileen's possible poisoning and the time-frame I need security footage for.

Carol nods, a thoughtful look on her delicate, almost otherworldly features.

"OK, now I'm less inclined to think of you as a total asshole. If I thought someone poisoned my grandma, well, there's no telling what I'd do. Actually, there is: it's murder. Definitely murder. Like, really bloody, gruesome murder. Give me a minute and I can pull up the footage."

In just a few seconds and some clacks of her keyboard, one of the many monitors on her desk springs to life with video outside Eileen's hospital room. It plays at a fast forward speed. Figures of nurses and doctors enter, exit, and pass by her room on hospital business.

"Doesn't look like there's anything... oh, wait a second," Carol says, suddenly pausing the video. There's a man in a white coat on the screen. I give her a confused look. The man looks like every other doctor. "I don't recognize him. Give me a second to adjust the picture."

A few more clacks on the keyboard bring the man's face full into view.

He looks like a dirtbag. A muscular, murderous, diabolical dirtbag.

Carol frowns at the screen for a moment, gears obviously grinding within her head, her finger tapping a curious rhythm

against her lips. Finally, she shakes her head. “He doesn’t work here. Everything about him—the coat, the badge on his chest, the clipboard, which, if you look closely, you’ll see is just covered in squiggles—is fake. That’s your man, I’m sure of it.” Before I can say anything else, she taps a few more keys on her keyboard and the printer next to her desk springs to life, printing out several full-size photos of the man on the screen. “I can’t let you take the footage with you. There are all sorts of federal laws involved because this is a hospital, but you can take these. In the meantime, I’ll keep reviewing the footage to see if there’s anything else useful that turns up, and if I find something, I’ll let you know through Eliza. Just make me one promise, okay?”

“Yes. Thank you. Anything,” I say, taking the photos.

“Never come down here with those bullshit pickup lines again, okay? If you want to take me out, take me to a fucking Rams game or out for some beers. None of this computer bullshit. This is just a job for me—one that I’m damn good at, yes—but it’s not my identity. I’m a fucking human being with a fucking multitude of interests.”

“Point taken,” I say, feeling chastened. “Thanks for the help, Carol.” Then, photos in hand, I head to the door.

“Thanks for the view, Marcus,” she says with an appreciative whistle. “Good luck.”

Outside, Bullet and Owen both wait for me with big grins on their faces. They heard every fucking word.

“Don’t say anything,” I warn them.

“We won’t,” Owen says.

“It’s not like I’ve been sending Rook live text updates this whole time,” Bullet says, holding up his phone. There’s a live video feed on there instead, with a very clear picture of a grinning Rook. “Because I haven’t. Rook’s been on video the whole time.”

“I hate you both,” I say. Then I hold up the photos. “But, despite you guys, I was successful. I’ve found our man.”

“You sure?” Owen says, taking one printout from me and looking at it closely.

“Positive. We find that man, we get our answers, and then we teach him a fucking lesson he will never forget.”

Chapter Seventeen

Amelia

I press myself against the cold, hard surface of the bookshelf, my heart pounding in my chest like a wild animal trapped within. Inwardly, I shake as Antonio Mancini's footsteps echo through Brian Russell's office as he carefully searches the room for any sign of an intruder. If he finds me, he will kill me without hesitation.

"Where are you?" Antonio whispers menacingly, his voice dripping with malice. The sound sends chills down my spine and makes it even harder to keep my breathing steady.

As Antonio moves closer to my hiding spot behind the bookshelf, my pulse stops in fear, my breaths come in shallow gasps. Each step he takes echoes like a death knell, and I know I am only seconds away from being caught.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are," Antonio taunts, his sadistic smile audible in his voice.

I bite my lip to stifle a sob, thinking of the people I love and how I may never see them again. Sera, with her boundless energy and her ability to find joy in the smallest moments; Marcus, who maddens and entices me like I never thought possible. Am I really never going to see them again?

A faint memory sparks in my mind—my office is a smart office, controlled by an app on my phone. And on my smart watch.

"Please work," I whisper silently to myself, carefully opening the automation app and shielding my watch with my hand to prevent any light from showing. My hands tremble, but I press a few buttons that send my phone, computer, and lights in my office down the hall into chaos.

The moment the noise starts, Antonio's head jerks up, his focus drawn away from my hiding spot.

"What the hell?" he mutters, eyes narrowing as he stares down the corridor.

He moves cautiously, heading toward my office with alertness in every step. I can see his muscles tense beneath his expensive suit, an elegant predator poised to strike at any moment.

“Thank you, thank you,” I breathe, taking advantage of his distraction to slip out from behind the bookshelf. My heart surges, feeling like it’s going to burst out of my chest as I tiptoe toward the door. I think of Marcus’s green eyes, filled with determination and loyalty, and thinking of him fills me with enough strength that I can keep creeping toward the exit without screaming in terror or vomiting because I was nearly discovered by a man who clearly would’ve murdered me.

The second I see the lights in my office shutting off as Antonio Mancini tries to stop the commotion I’ve created, I run. Stealthily.

I need to get to safety, to analyze the data on my flash drive, to warn Marcus and the others about what I’ve discovered. But more importantly, I need to know what Antonio meant when he said they needed to “accelerate” their plans.

What were they planning?

And why did it feel like I was about to stumble onto something far more dangerous than I ever expected?

“Run, Lia, run,” I tell myself, my legs carrying me down the hallway as fast as they can manage without making too much noise. My body feels like it’s on fire, adrenaline pumping through my veins as I push myself to the limit. The taste of fear lingers in my mouth, a bitter reminder of just how close I came to meeting my end at Antonio Mancini’s hands.

As I round the corner, I risk a glance back toward my office.

There’s no sign of Antonio yet, but I know it’s only a matter of time before he resumes his search and I have to be out of there before that happens. Unless I suddenly have a desire to know what it feels like to be shot in the back of the head.

Just as I’m about to reach the lobby, my smart watch vibrates against my wrist, startling me enough that I nearly trip over my own feet. With a shaky hand, I glance down at the

message displayed on the tiny screen: “We need to talk. It’s urgent.” Marcus.

“Understatement of the century,” I mutter, my fingers flying across the screen as I type out a response. “Working on it. Will call you later.”

“Stay safe,” he replies almost instantly, his concern palpable even through the impersonal medium of text.

“I’m always safe,” I promise aloud, though the words feel hollow, a lie I tell myself to keep from panicking. I can’t afford to let fear control me, not now when there’s so much at stake.

The exit looms ahead, a beacon of hope in the darkness that surrounds me.

“Come on, Lia,” I urge myself on, my legs feeling like they’re made of lead as I sprint toward the door. “Just a little further.”

I burst through the door into the cool night air, my lungs burning with the effort. Trembling, I slide into my car, gripping the steering wheel so hard my knuckles turn white. My hands shake as I start the engine, and I take a deep breath, trying to steady myself.

I’ve never been so close to death.

Yet I feel like tonight is only the first in what may be many close encounters with the grim reaper.

As I drive away from the office building, my mind races. Antonio’s earlier words on the phone about “accelerating plans” echo in my head like a chilling refrain. What are they planning? What had I almost walked into?

And how many people are Antonio and his superiors willing to kill to get what they want?

Chapter Eighteen

Thunder

The sterile light in Eileen's hospital room casts a pale glow on her sleeping form, the creases of exhaustion etched into her face. I can't help but feel a pang of guilt for what she's been through. The air smells like a mix of sick and old people, and machines emit chirps and clicks at odd intervals. Nothing about this place feels right.

Owen, Natalie, and Bullet are with me, sitting on worn chairs that have seen better days. There's a half-eaten tray of food sitting in front of Eileen. Just minutes ago, she ate some mushy peas, stale bread, and something the nurse said was meatloaf, but looked so terrible it probably had Eileen wishing the poison had finished the job, but now, she's asleep, her body giving in to the need for rest. Looking around the room at all four of us gathered around her bed, I can't help but think about the important things in life.

"Nothing matters more than family," I say, my voice cracking slightly as I glance at each one of them. "We look out for each other. No matter what. We're going to beat these developers, and we're going to make sure no one messes with Eileen, or anyone else, ever again."

"Absolutely," Owen agrees, nodding solemnly. His eyes meet mine with a sense of understanding, knowing all too well the importance of unity in shaky times like these. "We're stronger together. We'll beat this thing together."

Natalie clears her throat, drawing our attention to her. She's been quiet a lot lately, but I don't blame her; it's hard to feel comfortable speaking up when the people you're talking to—me, Owen, Bullet—problem-solve with guns and fists instead of words. "You know, that's why I pursued hard-hitting stories as a journalist," she says, hesitant. "I wanted to find information that would help make our town safer and better for the people who live in it. If you guys can get me anything at all about *Mar y Tierra*, I can really make them hurt."

“Sis, we’ll bring you in, I promise, but we have to be careful. I don’t want anyone else to end up like grandma,” Owen says. “Bullet, Thunder, me, we’re all here to take those bullets.”

“Yes, but also, I’d rather not,” I say, grinning.

“We’re soldiers. That’s what we do,” Owen says. “When I joined the military, I wanted to protect my country, my friends... everyone I care about. It’s the same thing here.” He hesitates for a moment before continuing. “My grandfather did the same thing, too. He fought, he’d be fighting if he were still alive. He was in the same Marine unit as me. They called him Striker.”

“Striker?” Bullet asks, raising an eyebrow.

“Yep,” Owen nods. “He never backed down from a fight. Even when it was against someone bigger, stronger, or higher-ranking than him. He got disciplined a lot. I like to think I inherited some of that from him.”

Bullet and I share a brief look of understanding; the Steel Reapers MC could use someone like Owen—someone with a strong sense of loyalty and duty.

“Owen,” I say, holding out my hand to him. “How’d you like to join the Steel Reapers? We could use someone like you.”

His eyes widen in surprise, but only for a moment. A grin spreads across his face as he reaches out and grabs my hand.

“I’d be honored, Marcus. Count me in.”

“Do you have a ride?” Bullet says.

“My grandfather had an old ‘65 Electra-Glide. It’d need some work, but I can get it running again.”

Bullet and I both trade another look. This one says: *if he doesn’t join, I call dibs on his bike.*

“You’re in. Welcome to the family,” Bullet adds with a smile, clapping Owen on the back.

“It’ll be great to have you in the club, brother,” I say. Giving him a hug.

“You know, my grandfather rode for an MC for a time. Kept his name from the Marine Corps as his road name. If you guys don’t object, I’d like to carry on with that name. Honor him.”

“No problem, Striker. But only if you can tell me how he earned his nickname. You said he punched one of his commanding officers?” Bullet says.

“He did more than punch him,” Owen begins. “He beat the snot out of him. It all started when...”

As Owen continues with his story, I can feel—no, *see*—the bonds between us growing stronger; smiles, shared looks, shared laughter. It feels good to expand our circle, to bring in others who share our values and understand the importance of loyalty, unity, and family. But there’s still something missing from this moment—a piece of my heart that longs for Lia’s presence.

Her laugh, her intelligence, her passion... I can’t help but think how much more complete our family would be with her in it. As if pulled by an invisible thread, my hand drifts to my pocket, where my phone rests.

“Marcus,” Bullet says, snapping me out of my thoughts. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” I reply, forcing a smile. “I was just thinking about how amazing this all is—having Owen join us, growing our family. But there’s someone I should call first.”

“Who?” Natalie asks, curiosity lighting up her face.

“Rook. You’re right. We can’t bring Owen in without him having a say,” Bullet says, being both completely right and completely wrong at the same time.

“I’ll take care of it,” I answer.

Stepping out of Eileen’s hospital room, I pull out my phone and dial Rook’s number. He picks up after a few rings.

“Rook, it’s Thunder. Listen, we’ve got someone new joining the Steel Reapers—Owen. You have any objections?”

There's a brief pause on the other end before he replies, simply, "No."

"Great," I continue. "We're having an induction party for him at Reid's Repairs later. You in?"

"Will I have to pretend to like people?"

"Unfortunately, yes," I reply with a chuckle. "It's a party."

"Then no," Rook says flatly.

"You sure? It should be a good time."

"Let me ask you something: is Eileen doing okay? And, if she is, is she chatty or is she mostly silent?"

"She's alive, awake sometimes, but mostly she sleeps."

"Perfect. You enjoy the party. I'll take the next guard shift watching over Eileen instead."

"Alright, man," I concede. "Take care of her. We'll catch up later."

He hangs up without saying goodbye.

Typical Rook.

* * * * *

The atmosphere at Reid's Repairs is a stark contrast to the dim, sterile environment of the hospital room we've left behind. Here, warmth radiates from every corner, chased by the mouthwatering scent of barbecue and the rich sounds of music blasting from a large stereo system.

Bullet, Maddy, Eliza, Natalie, Owen, and I fill the space, all of us drinking, eating, and enjoying each other's company. Laughter ripples the air as we share stories, most of them coming from Owen and Natalie, who are both overflowing with stories about their grandfather; we share, tease one another, and celebrate the newest addition to our family.

"Hey, Owen," Bullet calls out, clapping him on the back. "You ready to ride with the big boys now?"

"Born ready," Owen replies, his eyes shining with enthusiasm. "Hope you can keep up once I get my bike on the

road. Because I sure as shit won't slow down just so your lazy ass can keep up."

"Good," I say, grinning. "Because we're definitely going to put you through your paces. There will be hazing. Serious hazing."

"Bring it on," he challenges, raising his beer at me and laughing. "Because I figured you would say that. I bet you've just been waiting for an excuse to spank me, Thunder."

"He has," Bullet says, winking at me. "Thunder called me right after he returned your grandmother's car. He said he could not stop thinking about how good you looked in your jeans, Striker. The way he described your ass, fuck, it was like he had x-ray vision or something."

"Here's to our newest member," I announce, lifting my drink and cutting off the talk about my non-existent obsession with Owen's ass. Which, I'll admit, is a pretty good ass; he takes care of himself and doesn't skip leg day at the gym. "To Owen—may you ride fast and free with the Steel Reapers."

"Cheers!" everyone echoes, clinking their glasses together before taking big swigs.

As the party continues, I find myself lost in thought, reflecting on everything that's transpired recently. Despite the happiness and camaraderie surrounding me, there's an undeniable void—one that can only be filled by Lia's presence.

"Marcus," Bullet says, snapping me out of my reverie. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I was just thinking about how amazing this all is, having Owen join us, growing our family. But there's someone I wish could be here with us."

"Who?" Natalie asks, curiosity lighting up her face.

"Thunder, do you have a new girl to pester? Because Carol told me all about the other night," Eliza says, smiling.

"Whoever it is, call her," Owen says. "Invite her to join us."

Still, I hesitate. No one here knows about my connection to Lia, but everyone knows about her connection to the development project that's about to rip our town apart.

"Seriously, Thunder, you can't just mention some mystery woman and then go silent like that. Get her here now," Maddy says. "We need to meet her."

"And judge her," Eliza adds.

"That's a given," Maddy says.

"Fine, fine, just go easy, all right?" I say. Then I head outside, pull my phone from my pocket and dial Lia's number.

"Hello?" Her voice sounds through the phone. It's tired, worn, afraid.

More than ever, I want her by my side. Even if just to hold her in my arms and make her feel safe. I don't know how the fuck she's managing showing up to work every day, now that we know just the tip of the iceberg about the vile shit that the development company, SSR, is willing to do just to get its way. I never knew engineers could be so brave.

"You all right?"

"I'm fine," she answers, sounding absolutely not fine.

"Yeah?"

"It's been a long few days and I've had a lot on my mind. What's going on, Marcus? Is there a reason you're calling me this close to midnight? Because some of us have to work in the morning and... Sorry. Sorry. It's been hard."

"Look, you sound like you need to forget about whatever's on your mind. There's a party going on at our shop, Reid's Repairs. We're celebrating Owen joining the Steel Reapers. I know it might seem a bit out of the blue, but I really want you to be here with us. With me."

"Marcus, I don't know..." she hesitates, worry clear in her tone. "Your friends only know me as someone who works for *Mar y Tierra*. They might see me as an enemy."

Might?

No, they definitely see her as the enemy.

But I'll stand between her and them just to have her here. Especially now, hearing how she sounds over the phone.

“Trust me, Lia. They’ll like you. I want you here, and they’ll understand that. Please come.”

“Okay,” she agrees after a moment, her voice still tinged with uncertainty. “I’ll come.”

“Thank you,” I say, relief washing over me. “See you soon.”

The minutes tick by as I return to the party and we all continue to eat, drink, and laugh together, but I can’t help glancing toward the door every so often, eager for Lia’s arrival. When she finally steps into the room, my heart leaps in my chest—it’s as if everything suddenly feels more alive. With her dark hair cascading down her back, eyes shining like the ocean, and a smile that makes an equal one on my lips; she’s everything I’ve ever wanted and more.

“Hey, everyone,” Lia says hesitantly, offering a small smile. “Marcus invited me. I hope that’s okay.”

“Thunder, what the fuck is she doing here?” Bullet says.

Owen doesn’t speak. He simply leaps to his feet so fast it’s only Natalie’s quick thinking, and even quicker reactions, that stop him; her hand darts out and seizes him by the arm. “Bro, don’t.”

“I’ll kill her. She’s one of them. Is this some kind of sick joke, Thunder?” Owen shouts.

I step up and stand between them and her. Every one of them—Natalie, Owen, Bullet, Eliza, Maddy—I look right in the eyes. Unwavering. Unflinching. Unafraid. Whatever it takes to get them to understand.

“She’s not one of them. She’s one of us.”

“Thunder...” Bullet starts.

I raise a finger, cutting him off. “Don’t start. She’s helping us from the inside. I care about her, Bullet. Deeply. You know

me, since when have I said that about any woman? You know what that means.”

The rage in his eyes stills, as does the anger in Maddy’s. Eliza lets out a sigh of relief and sits down.

But Owen stays standing, fists clenched, eyes on fire.

I lock eyes with him. “Sit down. You know I care about your grandmother, too, and you know I would kill anyone that’d do anything to hurt her. But Lia had nothing to do with that. She’s a good person. She’s on our side.” Owen relaxes, just a little, and sits down. I turn away from him and move to Lia, slipping an arm around her waist. “Welcome to the party, Lia.”

“Thanks,” she replies, her smile growing a bit more confident.

“Let’s get you something to eat,” Eliza suggests, leading Lia to the grill. She senses there’s still an overwhelming amount of tension and is doing the smart thing by leading Lia away. “You must be starving after all this excitement.”

“Thank you, Eliza,” Lia responds gratefully, following her towards the food.

The second she’s gone, Bullet comes to my side, his voice low.

“Are you sure about this, Thunder?” Bullet asks, his eyebrows knitted together in concern. “We all know she works for those resort developers.”

“Bullet, trust me.”

Owen joins us. “I can’t believe you. I think you’re letting your cock do the thinking, Thunder.”

“You still have your doubts about how I feel about her? About how she feels about me?” I say. I don’t even wait for his answer—the doubt is so clear in his eyes—I storm over to where Lia is loading her plate with food, grab her around the waist, pull her close, and capture her lips with mine, pouring every ounce of passion and conviction I have into the kiss. The world fades away, leaving only the two of us locked in a

moment that seems to stretch on forever. When we finally break apart, I look back at Bullet and Maddy, my eyes blazing with determination.

“How’s this for an answer? Are things clear to you now?”

Eliza gasps, and then claps her hands delightedly.

Maddy looks at Bullet and nods.

Bullet laughs, a hint of admiration in his eyes. He comes over and extends his hand. “Alright, man. If you trust her, we trust her. You’re one of us now, Lia.”

“Owen?” I say.

He nods. “If you’re sure, I’m sure.”

“Good,” I say firmly, my gaze sweeping over the rest of the group. “Now let’s enjoy this fucking party.”

Soon enough, laughter and conversation fill the room once more. My friends begin to mingle with Lia, getting to know her beyond her connection to *Mar y Tierra*. I watch as they see what I’ve known all along—that she’s incredible, strong, and fiercely loyal. And as they accept her, an immense sense of pride and belonging swells within me.

“Marcus,” Lia whispers, her fingers brushing against my arm. “Thank you for bringing me here. I really needed this. I can’t talk to anyone at work... I don’t know who I can trust. And Sera, well, I can talk to her, but I don’t want to. I don’t want to bring her into this, put her at risk. This is all just so... really fucking scary.”

“You’re safe here,” I reply, pressing a soft kiss to her forehead. “You’re a part of my life now, Lia. And that means you’re a part of this family. We look out for each other.”

She smiles up at me, her eyes shimmering with unshed tears, and I know in my heart that I’ve made the right decision. This is what it means to be a Steel Reaper—to have a family who stands by you, no matter what.

And with Lia by my side, I couldn’t be happier.

Chapter Nineteen

Amelia

The party at Reid's Repairs is in full swing, laughter and banter filling the air and surrounding me with an atmosphere of boisterous camaraderie. The night is alive with the crackling sounds of a bonfire just outside the garage, its light casting a warm glow through the windows. Inside, the stereo fills the room with a mix of classic rock music, the thumping beats driving everyone to dance.

Bullet and Maddy are entwined together, half dancing, half just making out, their bodies moving in sync with the rhythm. I can't help but smile at how perfectly they fit together, lost in their own world as they sway to the music.

"You're looking too good to just be standing there while music is playing. Come on, give me your hand," Marcus says, grinning.

My heart swells as Marcus takes my hand, pulling me close to him on the makeshift, oil-stained dance floor. We move together, our bodies finding harmony as if we've done this a thousand times before. I feel almost overwhelmed by the warmth and acceptance that radiates from these people, so different from the cold, calculated world I'm used to at work. Nearly the moment Marcus vouched for me, I became family.

Marcus' green eyes meet mine, his gaze intense, consuming, warm, and I know that I'm not just imagining the connection between us. This is real.

"Having fun?" he shouts over the music, grinning down at me.

"More than I ever expected," I admit, my voice barely audible above the din. His smile grows wider, and I can't help but think how lucky I am to share this moment with him. "I was scared to come here at first, but I really, really needed this. You have no idea."

We continue dancing until the song ends, and a slow song comes on next. A love song by Sinatra. Marcus and I lock eyes

for a moment, both of us feeling it, yet neither of us wanting to speak it aloud.

“Want a drink?” Marcus asks, his voice close to my ear.

I nod, and he leads me off the dance floor towards the makeshift bar set up near the workbenches. We grab beers and clink bottles together. I sip mine. It’s bitter, cold, and makes me think about an open grave, which is what will be waiting for me if Antonio ever finds out it was me who raided Brian’s office.

No, I remind myself, there won’t be a grave waiting for me. If I’m lucky, I’ll be wrapped up in newspaper and thrown in a ditch.

“Hey,” Marcus says, sensing my change in mood and probably seeing the thoughts about imminent death dancing across my very-creased forehead. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing. Just enjoying the moment.”

“You look like someone just told you that you have brain cancer, lung cancer, and your dog got run over, all at the same time.”

“Shit, that’s dark,” I say, smiling, realizing there could be worse situations to be in than at a bonfire party surrounded by people who care about me. “I mean it, though. Thank you for inviting me. Tonight’s been great.”

“Good,” he says, leaning in closer to me. “Because I want you to know how much it means to have you here with us. You’re stronger than you give yourself credit for, Lia. I know what we have to face is scary, but there’s no doubt in my mind that we’ll figure it out. Together.”

The sincerity in his eyes makes my heart skip a beat, and I reach out and take his hand.

“You mean that?”

His hand squeezes mine, offering comfort and strength.

“I’ve noticed how passionate you get about this whole thing, and it’s great that you’re on our side now. I gotta say, I

love how fiery you get when you're talking about the environment."

The word 'love' catches me off guard, and my heart skips a beat. Without thinking, I stammer, "I—I love you too."

We both freeze, the weight of my confession settling between us. But before I can apologize or take it back, Marcus speaks.

"Look, Lia, there's something you should know. I've been trying to fight it, but the truth is, I feel the same way about you. I started off hating you because you work for the enemy. But I can't stop thinking about you. About how damn good you look, even in a stiff work suit. About how you make me feel, which is so incredible I can't even describe it. Every other woman I've been with, I forget about them the moment they leave the room. But you? You're stuck in my brain, in my heart, everywhere. When I'm with you, it's like nothing else even matters. I love you, too, Lia."

"Marcus," I whisper, my voice thick with emotion. "I'm scared."

"Of what?" he asks quietly, his green eyes searching mine.

"I did some research, some digging. There's this thumb drive I have and... I'm scared of what I might find on it. Of the danger it could bring to us both—and to everyone here. There's more behind this than we know, and the people backing this project, they're serious. Deadly serious."

"Whatever it is," he says fiercely, his grip on my hand tightening, "You're not alone in this, Lia. You've got me, and you've got the Steel Reapers. We're a family, and we take care of our own."

"Thank you," I say, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes. "For everything."

"Hey," he smiles, using his free hand to brush away a stray tear. "That's what people who love each other do for each other."

"Thank you, Marcus," I whisper, my voice overflowing with emotion. "Being part of this, even for a short while, has

been incredible. I needed to feel like there were people around me who care about me, who will protect me, instead of people who might murder me for asking the wrong questions. You, and everyone else here, you're saving me right now."

He smiles, his eyes shining with warmth, and in this moment, surrounded by the laughter and love of the Steel Reapers MC, it feels like anything is possible. Even survival.

Marcus suddenly clears his throat loud enough to draw everyone's attention.

"Cheers to new love and unforgettable memories," Marcus says, raising his bottle in a toast.

"Cheers," I echo, clinking my bottle against his. We drink, and as the music starts up again, Marcus pulls me back onto the dance floor. As we move together, our bodies pressed close, it's clear this is where I truly belong—with him, and with this family I never knew I needed.

The song ends, and then Marcus gives me a funny, unreadable look. The air seems to thicken between us, charged with an intensity that sends shivers down my spine.

"Follow me. Now."

He grabs my hand, threading his fingers through mine, and leads me further away from the party. My heart races as we leave behind the warm glow of the bonfire and the distant laughter of party-goers. We reach the parking lot where the club's motorcycles are parked—gleaming chrome, leather seats, and the smell of oil and rubber filling the air.

"Marcus," I whisper. "What is it?"

"Shh," he murmurs, pulling me closer by the hand he still holds. The distance between us narrows until I can feel the heat radiating off his body. "Don't say anything."

Unable to resist the magnetic pull between us, I lean in, my lips meeting his in a passionate kiss. It's as if everything I've ever wanted—love, security, belonging—is contained in this single kiss; our connection deepens, our emotions pouring into one another, unspoken words passing between us.

This is love.

“Let’s go.” Marcus pulls away, his eyes searching mine. “Do you want to get out of here?”

“Yes,” I stammer, my voice barely audible. “My hotel isn’t far.”

With a knowing smile, Marcus leads me to his motorcycle, its chrome reflecting the flickering light of the bonfire we’re leaving behind. My heart gallops as we approach the bike, anticipation coursing through my veins like liquid fire. Marcus’ words—*I love you*—echo in my head in time with my racing heartbeat.

“Are you sure?” he asks, pausing before swinging his leg over the seat. There’s a teasing smile on his face. “It’s going to be a hell of a party. I heard Eliza say she might even get Rook over here. Just wait till you meet him.”

“I’m sure. Just as sure as I love you,” I reply, unable to keep the grin from spreading across my face. “I’d rather be with you than at any party.”

“Good,” he says, turning the ignition key. The engine roars to life beneath us, its powerful vibrations sending shivers up my spine. “Get on.”

Chapter Twenty

Amelia

He loves me.

Through the dimly lit parking lot, the motorcycle purrs beneath me as Marcus and I pull up to my hotel, just as my heart purrs inside my chest, that one thought—*he loves me*—setting me aflame. The vibrations from the engine send a shiver down my spine, igniting my anticipation for what lies ahead. I hop off, feeling the cool air against my flushed skin as Marcus kills the engine.

I'm bouncing on my toes. Bouncing and smiling. Giddy.

But then, he just said he loves me.

“Couldn't wait any longer?” he smirks, pulling me into his arms. Our lips crash together, our tongues dancing in a fiery embrace. The taste of him is intoxicating, like a shot of whiskey that burns and soothes all at once.

“Never,” I breathe into him as my hand slips past the waistband of his jeans, teasing his cock with feather-light touches. He groans, his fingers working deftly to undo the buttons of my blouse. My chest rises with goosebumps as the cool night air kisses my exposed skin. “I want you always. At all times.”

“God, you're beautiful,” he says, his green eyes filled with desire as he lowers his head, kissing and licking my breasts. The sensation sends a jolt of pleasure through me, making me crave even more of him. “I love how your tits taste. I love them, and I love you, Lia.”

“Come on. Enough talk,” I urge, tugging him toward the hotel entrance. “It's time to put words into action. Which, in case that went over your head, I'm talking about sex.”

We dash through the lobby, giggling like teenagers, our clothes half undone and ruffling in the breeze. The thrill of being caught only adds fuel to the burning fire inside me. I feel like a naked Superwoman, blasting through the hotel on my

way to a thrilling conquest. Or whatever she did. I never really got into comic books.

We sprint up the stairs, our laughter echoing off the walls as we reach my room.

Once inside, I push Marcus against the door, our mouths lock in a searing kiss. With every touch, every heated whisper, I fall deeper under his spell.

“Let me see all of you,” I say, my voice husky with lust. “Strip for me.”

“Only if you do the same,” he retorts, his grin wicked and inviting.

“I’ll help you, if you help me, how about that?”

“Deal.”

We slowly undress each other, each article of clothing discarded like an inhibition shed. Our eyes linger on one another, drinking in the sight of our exposed bodies. I can see the loyalty etched into his tattoos, the raw ferocity of his gaze, the heat and power of his muscles. Marcus is a man who knows what he wants and isn’t afraid to chase it, who’s willing to give everything he’s got to protect the people he loves, which only makes me want him more.

“Damn, Lia,” he murmurs, his fingertips tracing the curve of my hip. “You’re incredible.”

“Look who’s talking,” I retort, smirking as I take in the sight of his muscular form. “I don’t think I could draw curves and lines that perfect even in AutoCAD.”

“Did you just drop an engineering pickup line on me?”

I grin, my cheeks going red. “Maybe. Yes. Shut up.”

“Bold move, nerd, assuming that your overall hotness and how much I love you would make me overlook you dropping such a geeky pickup line,” he says. “A bold move, but a correct one.”

“Shut up and kiss me.”

Our lips meet again. I feel the heat of his body against me. It sets a fire inside me, a burning conflagration of lust. I want more, and I want it now.

“Let’s take a shower together,” I suggest, my voice filled with a sultry promise. The idea of us cleansing each other, surrounded by steam and heat, is too enticing to resist.

“Sounds perfect,” Marcus agrees, his green eyes glinting with anticipation.

We step into the spacious hotel bathroom, and I turn on the water, adjusting the temperature until it’s just right—hot enough to steam, but not unbearable. The steam rises, filling the room and fogging the mirrors. Marcus pulls back the shower curtain, gesturing for me to enter first.

“Such a gentleman,” I tease, stepping into the shower’s warm embrace.

“Only when it counts,” he replies, following behind me, the muscles in his body rippling with every movement. “But really, I just wanted an excuse to check out your ass.”

I roll my eyes at him.

The water cascades over our bodies, slickening our skin, as we press close together. I reach for the soap, lathering it between my hands before sliding them over Marcus’ broad chest, delighting in the contrast between the smoothness of the suds and the firmness of the slabs of muscle. Then my hands go lower, foamy fingers grasp his cock and give him a very vigorous cleaning that draws a deep moan from his chest. With a final squeeze that makes him shudder, I release his cock and smile at him.

“Your turn,” I breathe, handing him the soap.

He grins, accepting the challenge, and soon his strong hands glide over my curves, washing away the remnants of the day, leaving only the raw desire that has been building between us. The way he touches me, teasingly slow and deliberate, sends shivers down my spine.

“Marcus,” I moan softly, feeling his erection growing against my thigh.

“Patience, baby,” he whispers, his lips brushing against my earlobe. “I want to enjoy every inch of you.” He touches and teases me in ways that drive me wild, and he lathers me like he’s got a bubble fetish.

“You know, you can wash parts of me other than my tits,” I say.

“Eventually. Maybe. Let me do my thing.”

“Is your thing just giving me foamy tits?”

“Maybe. Or maybe I just really enjoy touching you.”

“Then let me do the same,” I say, dropping to my knees under the spray of water, looking up at him through my wet lashes.

“Please,” he rasps, as I wrap my fingers around his cock, feeling its hardness and heat in my grip.

I trace the tip with my tongue, tasting him, before taking him into my mouth.

The sounds he makes—deep, guttural groans—fuel my desire to pleasure him even more. I focus on the rhythm, slow and sensual, completely giving myself over to this moment.

“Fuck, Lia,” Marcus gasps as my lips glide along his length, teasing him closer to the edge. His hand cradles the back of my head, urging me on, but never forcing. It’s a dance we’re performing together, each movement driving us further into the depths of our passion.

“Lia, you’re incredible,” he breathes, his voice thick with lust. “Keep going, I’m so fucking close.”

His hardness grows in my mouth. Thickens. I tighten my grip just enough on his hard shaft. I stroke it harder, faster, and in moments, he gives me what I want. Moaning, shaking, his hand gripping the wall for support, he cums in my mouth and I swallow every drop with hungry abandon.

“And we’re just getting started,” I reply, releasing him from my lips with a wicked smile, water dripping from my chin. “Don’t think I’m anywhere near being done with you, Marcus.”

Our eyes lock, and in that moment, it's as if the world outside has ceased to exist. All that remains is the steamy heat between us and the promise of a night neither of us will ever forget.

“Now it's your turn,” Marcus murmurs, his eyes glinting with desire as he gently lifts me onto the edge of the bathtub. I feel the cool porcelain against my heated skin, and it sends a shiver down my spine.

He kneels between my legs, his firm hands on my thighs.

“Spread your legs for me, beautiful,” he instructs, his voice low and commanding. I comply immediately, allowing him to see all of me, my vulnerability laid bare before him.

He takes his time.

Kissing my thighs, stroking my legs, running his tongue everywhere but where I most desperately want it.

The anticipation is maddening, as if every nerve ending in my body is pulsing with need.

Marcus leans in, his breath hot against my sensitive skin. “You're so wet for me,” he whispers, running his tongue along my labia, the barest touch teasing me mercilessly.

“Please, Marcus,” I beg, my voice strained with urgency. “I need you.”

He grins wolfishly, green eyes locked on mine as he delves deeper, tasting and sucking, teasing my pussy, then licking it, each time a little harder, a little faster, until he finds himself at my clit. Each flick of his tongue sends electric jolts of pleasure coursing through me, leaving me gasping for more.

“God, you taste amazing,” he growls, moving lower, his beard brushing against my inner thighs. I moan loudly, unable to contain my excitement as he explores an area even more intimate—my ass. “I could do this all night.”

“Fuck, Marcus,” I whimper, gripping the sides of the tub as he teases the tight rim with his tongue, making me squirm with delight.

“Let go, Lia,” he encourages, redoubling his efforts, his fingers now joining in, slipping into my slick entrance, exploring my pussy while he tongues my ass. The pressure builds within me, reaching a fever pitch that threatens to consume me entirely.

I can hardly breathe. It’s as if every pleasure and desire I’ve ever had fills my chest, pressing on my lungs, gripping my heart, driving me to explode.

“Marcus!” I cry out, my orgasm crashing over me like a tidal wave, leaving me breathless and trembling. My hand smacks against the tiled wall, the sound echoing through the steam-filled bathroom.

A loud bang answers it, coming from the other side of the wall.

“Damn it!” a voice yells from the other side of the wall. “I’m happy you’re getting laid, but can you keep it down in there? Some of us have to work in the morning.”

I smack the wall in reply.

“Sorry, not sorry,” I shout with a wicked grin, my body still tingling from the aftershocks of pleasure.

“Seriously, keep it down in there,” comes the voice, along with another hard bang against the wall.

I frown at the wall, shaking my head.

“Are you alright?” Marcus asks. “Want me to go pay that asshole a visit?”

“No. I’ve never felt better,” I assure him, pulling him up for a searing kiss. It’s true—never in my life have I felt so alive, so connected to another human being. And as our lips meet once more, I know that this night is only the beginning of something truly unforgettable.

Then I separate, look into Marcus’ deep green eyes and smile. An idea’s struck me.

“Marcus, what do you say we give our neighbor a real show?” I tease, pulling him towards the bedroom.

“Sounds like a plan,” he grins, his green eyes sparkling with mischief. We tumble onto the bed, our lips crashing together as if they’re magnetically drawn to each other. His beard tickles my cheek as he whispers hot and dirty things into my ear, and I can’t help but giggle.

“Fuck me louder, babe,” I moan in response, loud, feeling the heat rise between us.

“Oh, I’m going to fuck you just how you like it, baby,” Marcus growls, positioning himself above me. He slides into me effortlessly, the perfect blend of rough and tender. Our bodies seem to fit together like pieces of a puzzle.

“Fuck me harder, Marcus!” I scream, egging him on.

The sound of our bodies colliding echoes through the room, and I momentarily wonder if our neighbor is growing increasingly frustrated with the noise, or if they enjoy the show and are too embarrassed to admit it.

“Damn, Lia! Your pussy feels so good wrapped around my cock,” Marcus groans, almost shouting, his voice strained from the pleasure. “I love how wet you get for me.”

“Only for you, babe,” I pant, gripping the headboard for support as he drives himself deeper into me. We smack the wall deliberately, our laughter mingling with the sounds of passion filling the air.

The wall smacks back, and our neighbor shouts some wordless threat.

“Are you ready to cum for me, beautiful?” he asks, his strokes quickening. “I want to feel you cum on my cock. I love the way your pussy grips my cock so tight when you’re cumming.”

“Please, Marcus,” I beg, feeling that familiar pressure building up inside me. Even if we weren’t putting on a show for our neighbor, I’d be this loud—my entire body feels so electrically alive. “Make me cum again!”

“Then let it out, Lia,” he urges, his thrusts becoming more powerful, hitting me deep, just right. “Scream for me.”

“Fuck, yes!” I cry out, my orgasm washing over me in waves of ecstasy. “I’m cumming, Marcus! I’m cumming!”

“Me too, baby,” he grunts, his release following in a heated spasm that makes me shut my eyes and relish the sensation of him, the man that I love, cumming inside me. As we lay tangled in each other’s arms, spent and satisfied, a mix of contentment and anticipation floods through me. Marcus has awoken something within me, revealing a side of myself I never knew existed.

“Marcus, I need more,” I gasp, my body still trembling from our previous escapades. He grins wickedly, understanding my insatiable desire. “Can you?”

His answer is to kiss me deeply, his hands wandering my body, caressing my tits, gripping my ass; inside me, I already feel him growing hard again.

“I can give you what you need, Lia. Get on top of me,” he commands, lying back on the bed, his green eyes full of lust and anticipation.

“There’s something I want, first. I want to sit on your face again,” I say, recalling how powerful I felt on our first night together, as I sat on him and dominated him. I want that feeling again.

“Then take a fucking seat,” he says, tapping his cheek.

I straddle his face, feeling his warm breath on my sensitive skin. As Marcus’ tongue teases and worships my pussy, I moan loudly, wanting our neighbor to know just how good this feels.

“Can you taste it, Marcus?” I moan. “Can you taste how wet I am? Can you taste your cum inside me?”

“I love it all, Lia,” he moans between lavishing licks. His tongue flicks expertly against me, driving me wild with ecstasy. Then his fingers grip my ass, slip closer to my asshole. One slips inside me, gently, and it’s like he’s flipped a switch, delivering a sensation I’ve never felt before.

I come alive.

Furiously alive, and beautifully break as an orgasm overcomes me.

“Marcus, I’m cumming. I fucking love how you tonguefuck my pussy. And your finger in my ass? Oh fuck, yes!” I scream as another orgasm washes over me, making my vision blur and my heart race.

“You like that? You like how I finger your tight asshole, Lia?”

“I want more. I want your cock in my ass. Hold still.”

Eager for more, I slide down Marcus’ body, mounting him cowgirl style. Slowly, I lower my ass onto his cock. His cock slips inside me, filling me up completely. Marcus grips my hips, helping guide my movements as I ride him.

“Oh fuck, I love how your ass feels,” he shouts. “Ride my cock, Lia. Take my cock deep up your tight ass.”

I laugh at his enthusiasm, and moan louder. We continue our passionate dance, both determined to bring the other to the brink once more.

Both determined to make our neighbor regret ever banging on our wall.

Just as I feel my next climax approaching, the phone rings, the shrill sound pulling us out of our lustful haze.

“Ignore it,” I moan. “Keep fucking my ass.”

But just as the ringing ends, it begins again.

Damn it.

Reluctantly, I reach for the receiver.

“Hello?” I pant, trying to catch my breath.

“Uh, this is the front desk,” a timid voice says on the other end. “We’ve received some noise complaints... Could you please try to keep it down?”

“Fuck,” I mutter under my breath, glancing at Marcus, who smirks in response.

“Sure, we’ll keep it down. We’re almost done, anyway. He’s about to cum, and so am I,” I reply sweetly, before moving to hang up the phone.

“Wait, let me talk to them,” Marcus insists, snatching the phone from my hand. “Hey, it’s the couple in the noisy room. We’re almost done fucking each other’s brains out. It’s been a rough damn day, so give us another half hour. That’s it. Any other fucking we do outside that half hour, I swear it’ll be quiet. But if you keep calling, I’m gonna come down there and show you what it really means to get fucked.”

He slams the receiver down, a wicked grin plastered on his face. “Now, where were we?”

“Right here,” I purr, rocking my hips.

He moves his in time with mine, filling me just right, taking me so deep my vision swirls with pleasure.

“Harder, Marcus, please!” I beg, my nails digging into his muscular arms as I ride him with abandon. He grips my hips, thrusting up to meet me with a ferocity that leaves us both breathless.

“Fuck, Lia...” he groans, his emerald eyes locked onto mine, filled with unbridled passion and desire. “You’re so incredible...”

“Make me cum again, baby,” I plead, feeling the familiar knot in my stomach tighten once more. “One more time.”

“Anything for you,” he promises, slamming into me with renewed vigor.

Our bodies intertwine, sweat mingling and heavy breaths filling the air. The room is a cacophony of our moans, cries, and gasps. All that matters is this moment, the fierce connection between us that only grows stronger with each passing second.

“Marcus!” I scream, my vision blurring as I reach my peak, the pleasure shattering me, consuming me. His own release follows closely behind, his muscular arms pulling me down into his embrace as we both shudder and cry out in ecstasy.

“God, Lia,” he pants against my skin, the heat of his breath making me shiver. “That was so fucking good, I feel like I’ve died.”

“Perfect,” I whisper, pressing my lips to his in a tender, lingering kiss. As we lay entwined on the rumpled sheets, our hearts pounding in sync. This man, this love, this passion—it’s everything I’ve ever wanted and more.

Yet, an old saying echoes in the back of my mind, tugging at my heartstrings: You never know you’re living in the good days until they’re over.

How much longer will my good days last?

What if this beautiful, raw connection we share is fleeting, doomed to end in darkness?

“Hey,” Marcus murmurs, his fingers brushing a stray lock of hair from my face. “What’s going on in that pretty head of yours?”

“Nothing,” I lie with a smile, not wanting to burden him with my fears and doubts. “Just... thinking about how lucky I am to have you.”

“Damn right,” he teases, nipping at my bottom lip playfully. “And don’t you ever forget it.”

As we drift off to sleep, wrapped up in each other’s arms, I can’t shake the nagging feeling that our time together is precious and limited.

Our enemies are circling, and they’re more dangerous than we ever imagined.

Chapter Twenty-One

Amelia

The pre-dawn horizon stretches out before me, serene, sublime, painted in soft, ethereal hues that make the entire world feel like some magical dream. The only sound disturbing the stillness is the distant, soft crash of waves against Costa Oscura's rocky coastline, and the persistent crunching of Sera's boots against the gravel. Birds chirp, eagerly greeting the day that's slowly waking around me.

Sera's flashlight paints a path ahead of her, her stride sure and purposeful. I trail behind, doing my best to keep up, though with considerably less finesse. A treacherous root clutches my foot, causing me to stumble. I catch myself just in time, shooting a glare at the offending obstacle.

"Sera," I groan, a sound that clashes with the gentle beauty around me. "Why are we out here at this ungodly hour? My alarm doesn't even think it's time to rise."

Without breaking stride, she laughs, a light sound that floats back to me. "Oh, come on. You'll thank me when you see the light. There's nothing quite like the golden hour for painting."

By the time I formulate a witty retort, we're at our destination. The scene that greets us is pure magic: an expansive, shimmering ocean hugged by rugged cliffs, all under the pastel canvas of dawn. I'm momentarily speechless.

Sera unpacks her art supplies with a flair of showmanship, declaring, "Welcome to nature's own studio! No better place to paint than surrounded by inspiration and perfection."

I chuckle despite myself. "Only you could make waking up this early seem glamorous."

As we set up and start painting, it becomes painfully obvious that my mind isn't entirely on the task, and not only because I haven't had nearly enough coffee to cope with this crazy hour. Every stroke feels uncertain, every color blend feels off. My 'sunrise' looks more like I've accidentally spilled paint on the canvas.

Sera glances over, eyebrow raised. “Babe, that’s... a unique take on a sunrise.”

Flushing, I defend my smudged mess. “It’s abstract?”

She grins, not fooled in the slightest. “You’re a million miles away. What’s going on?”

I sigh, defeated. “It’s Marcus. I might’ve mentioned the ‘L’ word to him.”

Sera’s eyes sparkle with mischief. “Love or loathe?”

I playfully swat at her with my brush. “Love, you dork!”

“Really? That’s a big word. Well, this calls for a celebration.” In a flourish that can only be pure Sera, she produces a bottle of wine and two glasses.

I blink, astonished. “On a hike? Really? And this early in the morning?”

She pours the wine with a smirk. “Expected anything less from me? Lia, after all this time, how little you know.”

We clink glasses, letting the moment wash over us: the rising sun, the surrounding beauty, and the sheer joy of being alive. Despite the wine and the early hour, everything feels clearer.

Sera’s eyes sparkle with genuine curiosity as she sips her wine. “So, this Marcus... it seems like you took this detective thing to heart. Tell me everything. And I mean everything. Every detail. Every, uh, pertinent inch.”

“You’re awful.”

“I’m your best friend and I give you free access to my art studio and all the supplies you want. You owe me.”

“Just because you give me free paint and canvas?”

“Do you know the price of paint and canvas?”

“No, because you give it to me for free.”

“Well, now you get to learn: the price of paint and canvas are details about my best friend’s new boyfriend. Spill it.”

I take a deep breath, my mind flooding with memories of our time together. “I hated him at first. Can you believe that? We were like oil and water, always clashing. I mean, I literally punched him multiple times.”

“Love it. You have to show them who’s boss right from the start.”

“Sera!”

“It’s true. It’s the way it works in nature—establish dominance, or whatever those bullshit manosphere people say,” she chuckles, finishing her wine and pouring herself another glass. “I’m kidding. And jealous. Please, continue.”

“But then,” I continue, “I started seeing the layers beneath the surface. Because, one minute, he’s completely ruining my day and making me question everything about my career, and the next, he’s like, making me feel like I’m a queen sitting on a throne.” *Or my man’s face*, I think, pausing for a moment to take a calming breath. “The bravery, the selflessness. He loves so fiercely, Sera, and he’d go to the ends of the earth for the people he cares about. He’s got this unwavering conviction, a sense of right and wrong that I can’t help but respect, even though it’s made me so mad sometimes.”

Sera’s gaze is fixed on me, taking in every word. “He sounds wonderful. So, what does this paragon of virtue do for a living?”

I feel my cheeks warm up, and I look down at my wine, twirling it a bit. “He’s... well, he’s a mechanic.” I pause for dramatic effect and add, “And an outlaw biker.”

Sera chokes on her wine, laughter spilling out between her coughs. “Oh, Lia! My straight-laced, master’s-degree-wielding, career-driven friend, falling for a rebel mechanic and biker?” She smirks, her eyes full with amusement. “I never saw that one coming.”

“Hey!” I feign indignation. “There’s more to him than that, you know. And he makes me happy.” My smile, my love, they make my voice so warm I can hear it. “He makes me feel safe

in a way I've never felt before. And believe it or not, he respects me. Truly respects me."

Sera nods, her teasing demeanor replaced with a sincere smile.

"I can see that. And I'm genuinely happy for you, Lia. Everyone deserves a love that makes them feel that way."

"Thank you. It means a lot hearing that from you, Sera."

Then, with a mischievous glint returning to her eyes, she says, "So... does Marcus have a brother? And is he single?"

I burst out laughing, shaking my head. "You're incorrigible! Always looking for the next adventure."

She winks at me, raising her glass in a toast.

"To love, unexpected adventures, and..." Her eyes dart to my painting, which is less a painting and more a collection of paint splotches inelegantly arranged on canvas. "...abstract art."

I clink my glass with hers, a broad smile stretching across my face. "And to mornings like this, with friends like you."

As the sun climbs higher in the sky, I return to my canvas, adding the final touches to my 'abstract' painting. I infuse every brushstroke with emotion—love, hope, and newfound clarity. It might not be a masterpiece in the traditional sense, but it's a perfect reflection of this moment in time. I smile at my 'masterpiece' as we pack up for the return hike. The smudges, once sources of frustration, now seem just right.

Yes, things can get messy. Will get messy, even, especially dealing with everything going on at SSR and with the development, but even messy things can be beautiful.

"We can hang that up at the gallery," Sera nudges me playfully. "Maybe Marcus will bid on it."

"You know," I say, "He loves me so much, I bet he would. I bet he'd get in a bidding war just to buy it and hang it on the wall at his garage."

Sera laughs. “Well then, that’s true love. Because, honestly, Lia, you’d have to be blind to appreciate that painting.”

“You bitch!” I playfully punch her in the shoulder. “I love you, too.”

Chapter Twenty-Two

Thunder

The night sky rumbles above me, the engine of my bike echoes like rolling thunder beneath me. The wind whips at my face, tugging at my beard as I weave through the winding streets. Neon signs flicker to life, splashing vibrant colors across the pavement. For a moment, I feel free—but that sensation is fleeting. My thoughts are a battlefield, waging war between light and shadow. Memories of Lia’s touch—her skin warm and soft against mine, the way her laughter dances in the air—clash against the haunting image of Eileen confined to a hospital bed. The photograph in my pocket feels heavier with each passing moment, a symbol of the retribution I swore to deliver. An obligation. A promise. A hopeful murder.

“Keep your eyes on the road, dumbass,” I mutter to myself, tightening my grip on the handlebars as a passing car nearly swerves into my lane, separating my head from my body. My knuckles turn white as my jaw clenches. This isn’t just about me, it’s about family, about keeping the people you love safe and earning them justice when anything threatens them; Bullet and Rook would do anything for their loves, Madison and Eliza. Our love for each other runs deep, forged by loyalty and trust. We’d all lay down our lives for each other without hesitation.

Now, our family’s grown.

Now, we have Striker; we have Natalie; we have Eileen; we have Lia. And all of them—all of us—are in danger because of the man in the photograph in my pocket.

As I navigate the labyrinth of streets, darkness swallows the city whole. The wind howls its mournful cry, echoing my internal struggle, and rain falls upon me. My heart pounds in my chest, driven by the relentless pursuit of vengeance. Each mile brings me closer to the answers I seek, the truth hidden within the shadows of Costa Oscura.

“Almost there. It’s almost time. Justice will be served,” I vow, speeding through the night on my bike, the roar of the

motorcycle drowning out the cacophony of thoughts within my head. The photograph burns like a brand, searing the weight of responsibility into my very soul. It won't be long now. Soon, I'll confront the poisoner who ruined Eileen's life, who dared to try to kill a member of my family.

Soon, I'll have revenge.

Amidst the twilight cityscape, my eyes lock on the bar sign I've been hunting for. A dive bar near the development company's offices, just the place where a lowlife like the man who poisoned Eileen would hang out, probably where he sips bottom-shelf whiskey while planning which old lady he's going to poison next.

I deftly park my motorcycle and march inside.

A gust of stale air greets me just inside the door. Inside, dim lights unveil an uninviting cross-section of society—exhausted office workers drowning their sorrows, hardened regulars clutching their beers as if they're lifelines. The air carries the heavy scents of better yesterdays: beer, fried food, and stale tobacco. It's grimy in here, filled with as many secrets as there are patrons.

My first inclination is to turn around; this place is too damn depressing and I feel like I need some damn Prozac just to step inside, but I also need answers, and I won't leave without them.

“Can I help you?” a gruff voice asks, pulling me from my thoughts. I turn to face the bartender. His eyes narrow as he takes in my appearance.

“Maybe. I'm looking for someone.”

“Who?” he snorts, clearly unimpressed by my vague response. “Someone to give a damn? Because they don't pay me enough to do that shit. If you need someone to ‘listen’ to you, you'll have to wait till Cindy gets back. She's in the alley with a customer right now.”

“Fuck, dude, how do you live with yourself, working here?”

“It's a struggle,” he says, his voice cracking. “Every night, at the end of the shift, I put my gun in my mouth and I wonder

if this will finally be the time where I have the courage to pull the trigger.”

“Shit, man, that’s dark. I wish I could help,” I say, thinking. Then I reach into my wallet and put a handful of twenties on the bar. “I’ll take a beer. Keep the change.”

He sets a beer in front of me and slips the money into his pocket.

“Thanks. You know, I should tell you: I actually love my life. I love the hours and I make great money. Enjoy your beer.”

“Oh, fuck you.” I take the photo out of my pocket and slap it on the bar. “If you don’t want me to start some shit here, you thieving dick, I suggest you tell me if you’ve ever seen this man here.”

“Never seen him,” he lies, turning away to pour a drink for another customer.

Disappointment gnaws at my insides, but I refuse to give up. I have come too far to leave empty-handed.

“Look again,” I insist, my eyes narrowing. There’s no way I’m leaving without answers. Not when Eileen is suffering because of this bastard.

“Sorry, pal,” the bartender grunts, not even bothering to look back at the photograph. “Can’t help you. Unless you want to buy another drink?”

“Fuck you, you think I’m made of money?”

My clenched fists tremble with frustration. With a heavy sigh, I snatch the photo from the bar and turn to leave. But just as I’m about to leave, a gruff voice behind me says, “Hold on there, buddy.”

I whirl around to face a rugged man in a battered leather jacket. Tattoos snake up his arms, disappearing beneath his sleeves. His challenging gaze meets mine, and something in his eyes tells me he knows more than he’s letting on.

“Seems like you’re pretty interested in that guy,” he says, nodding toward the crumpled photograph clutched in my hand.

He's got a funny accent, an odd mishmash of New Jersey and something vaguely European. Listening to him feels like having spoiled marinara pumped into my ears. "What's your deal?"

"None of your business. But if you know something, I suggest you spill it."

"Or what? You'll beat it out of me?" He smirks.

"Let's hope it doesn't come to that." I take a step closer to him. "This man poisoned someone I care about. I won't stop until I get answers."

"Is that so?" The man's voice is level, but I can see a flicker of something dark in his eyes.

"Listen, if you know anything—" I start, but I'm cut off by the sudden flash of silver in the dim light of the bar. The man's feigned indifference vanishes as he swiftly unsheathes a switchblade from his pocket.

"Sorry, pal. Can't help ya," he growls, lunging forward with lethal intent.

Time slows as the blade arcs toward me, its path as clear as the resolve in my heart.

The switchblade slices through the air, mere inches from my face. My heart races as I instinctively kick a nearby barstool, sending it hurtling toward my assailant. The heavy collision of wood and flesh echoes in my ears, reminding me just how close I am to death's door.

"Is this what you want?" I spit out, my voice laced with venom. My eyes lock with his, fierce determination burning within both of us.

"You're in way over your head, fucking with shit way above your pay grade," he snarls, brandishing the weapon. "You were dead the second you started asking questions."

This isn't just about finding answers anymore, this is about pure survival.

Panic erupts around us like a violent wave, sweeping through the bar and leaving chaos in its wake. Glass shatters,

chairs topple, and the cacophony of screams and curses fills the air. My heart races as I watch people scramble for cover or shove their way towards the exits, desperate to escape the violence unfolding before them.

“Fucking bring it,” I growl, my voice low and dangerous. “I’ll fucking beat you until you’re begging to give me answers.”

“You’re nothing but a dead man,” he hisses, lunging forward once more.

I narrowly dodge his attack, feeling the breeze as the blade whistles past me.

“Better men have tried,” I laugh, my pulse pounding in my ears. I can almost hear Bullet’s laugh, urging me on, and Rook’s gruff words of encouragement... or his sarcastic, well-intentioned warnings that I’m probably going to die. They’re with me, in spirit if not in body.

“Your funeral,” he sneers, his eyes glinting with malice. He charges again, the switchblade slicing through the air with terrifying precision.

As we circle each other like predators, I know that one thing is certain: this fight will end with one of us broken and bloodied on the floor, and I’ll be damned if it’s me.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Amelia

I sit at my desk, the sterile, professional place adorned with blueprints, permit approval forms, and digital models related to the Eco Resort project. The walls are decorated with conceptual drawings and renderings that, on any other day, might make me smile—my visions brought to life. Well, close enough. But today, the usual, comforting professional ambiance has taken a turn towards the surreal.

Because I feel trapped, like an animal about to be put down.

My chair is a snare, its comfortable cushioning no longer offering any relief. Despite the chill of the air conditioning, a sheen of sweat forms on my forehead. I've always been one to keep a cool head under pressure, I sailed through my tests in college and always finished ahead of time, but there's something different about today.

Something unnerving.

I can't shake this feeling, like I'm a mouse in a cage observed by invisible eyes. Eyes attached to a snake or a cat or some other mouse-consuming predator. It gnaws at me, making it impossible to concentrate on my work. The sensation of being watched lingers, disquieting me more than the invasive chill of the office air.

"Stop freaking yourself out, Lia," I mutter to myself as I erase a stupid typo in a memo I was about to send out, trying to focus on the task at hand. "You've got deadlines to meet."

I try to dive into my work—calculations and plans that could make *Mar y Tierra* an incredibly carbon negative project, which, even just a couple weeks ago, would have me vibrating with an insane amount of excitement—but the feeling won't go away. It haunts me, reminding me of some stories I heard the other night about the Steel Reapers and their conflict with the Covington family; the danger, the adrenaline, the risks they took—all part of a life so different from mine. A life that both fascinates and terrifies me.

Those are the stories that swirl through my mind right now, drowning my rational thought with blood, gore, and more blood.

My phone vibrates on my desk, cutting through the oppressive atmosphere like a beacon of light. It's a text from Marcus. Just seeing his name on the screen brightens my mood, but it also deepens my unease.

"Hey babe, how's your day going?" His message reads.

I want to confide in him, tell him about this gut-wrenching feeling that something's not right. But I'm afraid—I know all too well the danger Marcus and his friends have faced in their past, and any message from me hinting that I might be in danger will bring Marcus here in an instant. If he comes here, there's no doubt in my mind that somebody will get hurt, probably many somebodies, and I can't bear the thought of putting him in harm's way. Or getting either of us arrested for murder.

"Everything's fine," I type back hesitantly. "Just another busy day at the office."

It feels sickening lying to him, even though I know it's for the best. I feel so overwhelmed, not just with the threats that seem to lurk in every shadow, but in the dangerous data that sits on the flash drive I stole from work; there's so much information there, and even though I've been digging into it with every spare moment I have, it's a daunting web of deception, of financial transactions and accounting ledgers that make my head spin just thinking about them. There's so much there, and though I know it's important—because why else would it be hidden within the deepest reaches of Mr. Russell's secured computer?—it feels so undecipherable that it might as well be in a foreign language.

"Alright. Stay safe, Lia. I'll see you later," he replies, his concern palpable even through the impersonal medium of text.

"Stay safe" echoes in my head as I stand up from my desk, restless.

That's when I catch movement from the corner of my eye: strangers in the hallway, men in sharply tailored suits and carrying leather briefcases. They exude a tense air of urgency unlike anything I've ever seen in this building. They're not architects, developers, or investors—I can tell just by looking at them. These men have a hardened, dangerous look to them, and it sends shivers down my spine.

“Who are they?” I wonder, my heart pounding in my chest. The fear is almost paralyzing, but I force myself to breathe, reminding myself that I need to stay focused, stay vigilant.

I focus.

Or I try to.

But focusing is easier said than done when every instinct inside me screams that these men don't belong here, that some sinister, suffocating cloud follows them around, and if I don't act immediately, this office will be listed on the police report about my disappearance as the last place anyone saw me alive.

“Stay safe, Lia,” Marcus' words echo in my mind once more, and I know what I have to do. I need to find out more about these men. Are they really a threat, or am I just jumping at shadows?

I stand and leave my office.

“Hey, Sarah,” I say, approaching the receptionist's desk as nonchalantly as possible. She looks up from her papers with a friendly smile and I force one of my own. “How's your day going?”

“Can't complain, Lia,” she replies, setting down her pen. “Just the usual paperwork. And you?”

“Same here. A bunch of schematics and math and... stuff,” I say, trying to sound casual despite the knot of unease coiling tighter in my stomach; unease that makes me talk like I have no fucking clue what I'm doing. “Working on the Eco Resort project. You know, the hotel, uh, thing we're building. Hey, um... speaking of work, have you noticed all these new guys around the office today?”

Wow, if these new guys aren't here to kill me, I just might die anyway. From embarrassment.

Why am I talking like I'm both drunk and stoned at the same time?

Sarah's eyes flicker towards the hallway, and she lowers her voice. Thankfully, she seems too excited by these new guys and the opportunity to gossip to take notice of the fact that I'm talking like I've been hit in the head with a baseball bat every day for the last ten years. "Honestly, I have no idea who they are. They're apparently some big shots; even Mr. Russell seems concerned. He's been locked in 'urgent' meetings with them all day. Him and Mr. Mancini, they're both just, like, so preoccupied with all this."

"Really?" I say, barely holding back my alarm. "That's... interesting."

"Tell me about it," Sarah mutters. "I've never seen so many suits in one place before. You'd think we were being audited or something."

As if on cue, one of the suited men passes by, and I can't help but stare. There's a distinct bulge under his jacket that sends a jolt of fear through me.

Could that be a gun?

I swallow hard, noticing several tattoos on his hand and neck, which tells me that either auditors lead much more dangerous lives than anyone gives them credit for, or these men are here for darker business than checking our books.

"Uh, I should get back to work," I stammer, my heart racing.

I return to my desk, my mind spinning with unanswered questions and growing terror.

This is bad.

Real bad.

No, it's worse than that—it's terrible, and I need to figure out what I'm going to do, fast, or else I'm going to be dead.

As I sit at my desk, pretending to work while keeping an eye on the strangers in the hallway, I feel like a hunted animal; there's only one thing that matters now: surviving whatever nightmare is unfolding before me. My focus lasts only fifteen minutes before my instincts overwhelm me; instincts that scream at me to leave, to get out of this place that now feels more like a prison than an office.

Work be damned—I need to escape.

“Going for some fresh air!” I call out to Sarah as I stride toward the exit, my voice barely concealing the panic bubbling up inside me. The click-clack of my heels on the concrete echoes through the empty parking lot, heightening my sense of urgency.

The rows of cars seem to close in around me as I hurry to my car, parked alone in the far corner. It's as if they're trying to trap me, just like the suffocating walls of the office. My heart is a relentless drumbeat urging me to go faster.

“Come on, come on,” I mutter under my breath, my heels clattering frantically against the pavement.

Every second feels like an eternity as I race toward safety.

That's when I hear it—the softest of sounds, almost imperceptible. Footsteps that aren't my own, like ghostly whispers suggesting that I'm not alone. My senses heighten, and I can practically feel the hairs on the back of my neck standing on end.

“Damn it, Lia, move! You are not being executed at work,” I tell myself, my pace quickening even more. The footsteps grow louder, closer, and I know I need to reach my car before they catch up to me; I curse myself for never taking any crappy electives while I was in college—there was even a course on power walking; I even debated taking it with Sera, but decided against it because it seemed like a waste of tuition dollars. Which it was. But now, oh it would be so useful.

If I can make it to Marcus, he can protect me. I have to get to him. He is my salvation.

My lungs are burning as my car finally comes into sight.

My hand fumbles in my purse for the keys, fingers trembling as I try to hold on to them.

Just a little further, Lia. You can do this.

The footsteps are closer now, and I fumble with my keys as I reach my car. The metallic jingle of the keychain mocks my frantic movements, and I curse under my breath.

“Come on, come on,” I whisper, jamming the key into the lock and twisting it as hard as I can. Relief floods through me as I hear the click of the door unlocking, and I practically throw myself inside, slamming the door shut with a loud thud.

I pull out my phone, desperately needing to reach Marcus.

“Hey, it’s me,” I mutter into it, barely audible even to myself. I’m too shaken to trust my fingers with typing a text. I need to use my nearly-as-shaky voice. “I need to see you. ASAP. Something feels very wrong. Meet me at your house.” My thumb hovers over the send button before I finally press it.

Message sent, I grip the steering wheel to steady my shaking hands. The fake leather feels cool against my sweaty palms, grounding me for a moment. I squeeze it so hard that it cheaply squeaks beneath my wet hands.

I have to get out of here.

I start the car and guide it out of the parking space.

As I merge into the street, I glance in my rearview mirror, praying that the pursuer from before has given up.

But what I see chills me to my core—a car with tinted windows, following right on my tail.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Thunder

The dive bar's dank ambiance is shattered by the sudden flash of cold steel. Patrons freeze mid-drink, eyes drawn to the confrontation playing out between two determined souls—a knife-wielding assailant and me. It feels like we're in another dimension, the background noise of old-school rock from the jukebox fading into insignificance against the pounding of my heartbeat.

Then someone screams and all hell breaks loose.

I barely see the blade glinting under the neon sign until it's slicing through the air, aimed straight for my heart with skill that tells me this isn't the first time this man's stabbed someone in the heart.

Why the fuck did I have to bump into this guy?

Reflexively, I dodge, the blade biting into the backrest of a wooden chair instead. The room is a dangerous dance of shadows and deadly, neon-lit possibilities. I grab the nearest barstool, and with all the force I can muster, swing it toward the man's legs. He moves with trained agility, evading a direct hit, but it still clips him, causing him to stagger slightly.

An opening.

Adrenaline surges, I seize on it.

I snatch a heavy beer mug from the counter, sending it flying in his direction. It shatters on impact, casting a spray of amber liquid and jagged shards. Blood sprays, mixing with beer to form the world's nastiest cocktail. He spits crimson and foamy beer at me and laughs, his icy gaze never leaving mine.

“That all you got?” He says.

Suddenly, he moves—the sound of bottles being brushed off the bar draws my attention. A cascade of glass and alcohol fills the air. I curse inwardly as the sharp sting of liquor meets the fresh gash on my forearm.

He charges. Knife ready.

Fuck this guy. He sucks.

My hand reaches out, gripping a pool cue, using it as a makeshift weapon. The pointed tip is aimed at his face. He slices at me with his knife and I retaliate with a strike that knocks the blade from his hand. Our fierce exchange takes us from one end of the bar to the other, every item becoming a potential weapon—pool balls, cues, even an old dartboard that he hurls at my head like a dart-filled Frisbee. Failing to kill me with the murder-Frisbee, he grabs a beer bottle, shatters it, and lunges at me, the sight of him—bloody, smiling, holding a knife in one hand and a bottle in the other—pure nightmare fuel.

I dodge, the jagged glass missing me by mere inches.

Without warning, he overpowers me, pinning me against the bar's polished counter, glass digging into my back. His breath is hot and rancid, cheap whiskey and blood, his eyes filled with malice. Desperation fuels my next move as I fold a coaster and jam it into his eye. A scream rips from his throat, and I take that chance to free myself,

Fire ignites in my belly. I'm ending this.

Grabbing a fork from a table, I snatch it up and jam it into his throat. Blood sprays in three elegant arcs across the room as his life leaves him. Sputtering, mewling, he clutches at his bleeding throat, a look of confusion and hatred in his eyes.

No, scratch that, confusion and hate in his eye.

Then he hits the ground, dead.

Breathing hard, I survey the aftermath—overturned tables, shattered glass, the scent of spilled alcohol permeating the air. And the smell of a freshly dead man, a smell that confirms what they say about you when you die and everything your body releases in that unfortunate event.

I pull out my phone, intending to send a warning to Lia. That these assholes working for the resort would escalate their tactics like this means we are close to total war.

There's a message for me waiting on the screen. She needs me.

* * * * *

The comforting familiarity of home is a stark contrast to the night's chaos. Everything hurts after that fight in the bar; every step feels like a lifetime, every bruise a painful reminder. I sink into a chair, exhaustion evident in every line of my body. I'm still trying to process the reality of it all when the front door slams open, announcing Lia's arrival.

Her silhouette is framed in the doorway, concern etched across her features.

"Marcus!" Her voice is frantic, eyes scanning every cut, bruise, and abrasion. She rushes to my side, her fingers softly tracing the most prominent gash on my forearm. "What happened?"

Tears brim in her eyes as she takes in my state; she's strong, but I can see the cracks in her facade, the terror at seeing me hurt.

"I had to find answers," I confess, voice raw, "but I walked into more than I bargained for."

Lia's face pales, her fingers tremble as they touch my wounds.

"Wait here," she says, rushing to the bathroom. Moments later, she's back with a first aid kit, carefully cleaning and bandaging my injuries.

There's a tenderness to her touch, a depth of care that speaks volumes.

"Answers about what?" She says, eyes down, focused on securing a bandage.

"About who tried to kill Eileen. We went through the security footage from that night, thanks to a contact Eliza has in the hospital's IT department, and we were able to get an image of the guy I think may have slipped her the poison. I was asking around, trying to see if anyone knew him, when I ran into some guy who didn't like my questions."

“Did you kill him?” She says, quietly.

I grunt. “Yes.”

“This is bad.”

“If you’re worried about the police, don’t,” I say. It’s her first time being party to a murder, probably, so her concern is only natural. “With the people this guy is connected to, it’ll probably all be swept under the rug. These guys are some serious players. It’s going to take more than a dead body or two to take them down.”

“Thank you for that information, but that actually wasn’t as reassuring as you probably hoped it would be.” In between ministrations, our eyes meet. A myriad of emotions pass in fleeting glances; concern, fear, love. My hand reaches up to cup her face, feeling the warmth of her skin. Her eyes drift away from mine, to the floor, and she frowns.

“Lia,” I whisper, “there’s something you’re not telling me.”

She hesitates, lips parting, but no words come out.

Instead, she shakes her head, her eyes glistening.

“I need to focus on taking care of you right now,” she murmurs.

Each bandage gets applied, checked, and double-checked with the exacting precision of someone who both cares for me, and cares about avoiding questions. I let her have her silence, because I don’t have the energy to interrogate her.

Still, it’s when she’s quadruple-checked the final bandage and almost seems distraught that there are no more injuries requiring treatment that I decide I have to do something. I pull her close, wrapping my arms around her.

For a moment, we simply hold each other, seeking and offering comfort in equal measure.

“It’s going to be okay. I know today’s been scary, but we’ll make it through. I love you, Lia, and I don’t let the people I love get hurt.”

“It’s not that, Marcus, it’s...”

“What?”

Breaking our embrace, she looks at me, a war as fierce as my recent bar fight going on inside her stunning blues. “After everything I’ve seen today, I have an idea about who did it. Show me the photograph.”

I pass it to her, watching as her eyes widen in recognition. She gasps, and the photograph falls from her hands.

“Yes. It’s him. I know him.”

Chapter Twenty-Five

Amelia

My pulse races erratically as I study the image. It's Antonio Mancini, head of security at my office. Fear and recognition wash over me like a tidal wave. That face—it's everything I dread, a connection to an underworld that I'm only just beginning to understand. A visage like my personal Grim Reaper.

"Marcus..." My voice trembles along with my hands as I hold the photograph, feeling as though it could detonate any second. The photo slips from my grasp, floating to the floor as quietly as a feather but landing with the force of a hand grenade. Memories of men at the office flash before me—their sinister atmosphere, the bulge in suits that looked suspiciously like guns. A shiver runs down my spine, thinking about how deep and dangerous this might be.

Summoning courage, I lock eyes with Marcus.

"His name is Antonio Mancini. He's the head of security at my work. I've been in the same room with him, Marcus. He's had meetings with my boss, Mr. Russell." The widening of Marcus's eyes tells me that a piece of the puzzle has clicked into place, even if the entire picture remains unsettling.

"You're certain about this?" he asks.

"Positive. Something's going on, Marcus. I can feel it. It's... it's bigger than we ever imagined."

"Then we'll figure it out together," he says, his voice laced with determination and loyalty. "Figure it out, and tear it all down."

I gather my thoughts, feeling the weight of what I'm about to say. Each word feels like I'm inching closer to opening a door that, once opened, cannot be shut.

"As certain as I am that something deeply criminal is happening, I'm also certain that Antonio is dangerous, Marcus. Beyond dangerous. He's not some low-level thug; he's high up

the chain. Antonio's connected to something that is so much bigger than us." The words fall from my lips like lead, heavy with the knowledge of just how precarious our situation is.

Marcus runs a hand through his dark hair, his green eyes filled with concern and determination. "We'll handle this, Lia. Together. We've got the club with us. The Steel Reapers can protect our own."

"I don't know how deep this rabbit hole goes, but if people like Antonio Mancini are involved, and if he's brought in a group of killers to handle the situation, then it's darker than either of us can fathom." My voice softens, vulnerability bleeding through my words. "This project is about far more than protecting the environment or putting some people out of their homes. There's an insane amount of money involved, more than enough that these people are going to kill for. This might be more than just the club can handle."

Marcus pulls me closer, his eyes a molten mix of fear and conviction.

"Then we'll be even more careful, because I can't afford to lose you, Lia. Not now, not ever."

His brawny arms wrap around me, pulling me close, and I feel a warmth blossoming in my chest despite the fear that still lingers.

"We need to tread carefully. I'm not sure who I can trust, but I'm going to figure this thing out. There are people at my office who are armed. I'm afraid of what could happen to us... to you."

"Hey," Marcus says gently, tilting my chin up so I'm looking into those piercing green eyes. "I love you. I'll do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

I pull him down to me, our lips meeting in a kiss that is equal parts urgency and tenderness. We're aware of the looming threats, but we refuse to let them mar the beauty of the moment. His hands wrap around my waist, fingers digging into my flesh as if anchoring himself to me.

A low moan comes from him. Not one of pain, but desire.

Briefly, I toy with the idea of turning our kiss into something more, of the lovely distraction that would come with exploring his body.

But now isn't the time.

"No one on earth is taking you from me," he murmurs against my mouth, and I can feel the truth of his words warming me from the inside out.

"Promise me," I whisper, needing reassurance, needing to know that the bond between us will never waver, no matter what darkness we may face.

"I promise," he says, his voice laced with conviction. "You and me, it's us against the world."

His arms tighten around me, and I cling to him, drawing strength from the fierce determination coursing through his veins; to know that I am not alone, that we are in this fight together, is a lifeline.

But those are just feelings; they're no good to anybody if they're not followed up with action.

And what comes next is an action that only I can perform.

I pull away from Marcus, our lips parting slowly, and clear my throat.

"There's something I have to do. Something that could really help us break this whole thing open," I say with determination. My thoughts turn to the thumb drive nestled safely inside my purse. I keep it with me always, concealed in a small, hidden pocket in my purse because I can't risk leaving it unattended—not in my hotel room or my car. I feel Marcus's eyes on me as I step away, an unspoken promise of support exchanged between us.

"Is this something you need to do alone?"

I nod.

"Be careful," he says, his voice soft yet strong, and I nod, my pulse quickening.

"Always."

Stepping out into the night, cool air invigorates my senses. My heels sound a march to war on the pavement. I slide into the driver's seat and wrap my fingers tightly around the steering wheel. The fake leather feels comforting beneath my grip, anchoring me to the moment.

The Eco Resort project was always morally murky, but now... now, it's a breeding ground for something much worse; for destruction, for danger, for murder. The weight of the thumb drive presses against my consciousness, both a burden and a catalyst.

"Shit," I murmur under my breath, feeling the enormity of what lies ahead.

This is bigger than any of us imagined, and I know that if we don't act soon, it could spiral out of control.

As if things aren't already out of control. Murders in a bar? The head of security at my work poisoning an old woman?

This is all fucking bonkers.

"Focus. Focus like you've never focused before, Lia," I tell myself, taking a deep breath and steadying my resolve. I've been through tough tests before, and some of them involved math so hellacious I felt I had to go to a church—any church—afterward just to cleanse my soul. Murder and mayhem are nothing compared to math that uses signs and symbols in multiple languages, and where a fuck-up can cost millions of dollars in construction overages. "You can do this."

As I sit there, gripping the wheel, I realize that this is it.

This is a war.

There's no turning back, no hesitation, only all-out, fight-for-your-life combat.

With a final sigh, I turn the key in the ignition. The engine roars to life, drowning out the cacophony of thoughts swirling in my head. Whatever secrets those files hold, I'm ready to face them—to use them. A burning resolve has replaced my fear, my anxiety overtaken by adrenaline-fueled courage. Love and loyalty propel me forward, driving me to protect the ones I care about most.

“Marcus, I won’t let you down,” I promise, gripping the wheel tightly, knuckles turning white. “I love you, and I’ll do whatever it takes to keep us safe.”

As I merge onto the highway, the night envelops me like a protective cloak, shielding me from prying eyes. The road stretches out before me, a dark ribbon leading me to the heart of the storm.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Thunder

The sun is just peeking over the horizon, casting long shadows across Reid's Repairs. I lean against my motorcycle, my entire body radiating tension like a coiled spring, a coiled spring that's been beaten and stabbed to hell and back, courtesy of that fucking lunatic in the bar, when my phone buzzes in my pocket.

"Unknown number" flashes on the screen. Could be a scam, because whoever these jokers are that keep texting me, they don't know that I already have an extended warranty on both my motorcycle and my home. I think about ignoring it, but something in my gut tells me to open it.

The message reads: "We want the same thing. We can help each other. If you want the truth about the Eco Resort, meet me at the old Solverson Warehouse. Come alone."

"Shit," I mutter under my breath. Rook and Bullet glance up from their bikes, sensing the sudden shift in my mood.

I stalk over to them, thrusting the phone in their faces.

"Check this out," I say tersely.

"If this is some stupid meme, Thunder, I swear I'll punch you," Rook says.

"It's not. It's nothing to do with a meme. And besides, do you have a problem with the funny shit I show you?"

"It's not funny," Rook says.

"You only think that because you gruesomely murdered your sense of humor at the age of five," I retort.

"Watch it or I'll gruesomely murder your face."

"Look, just read the fucking text, okay?"

I tap my phone screen, accidentally open Candy Crush, swipe a few more times to get the text back, and then hold it out, watching their eyes flick back and forth as they read the text.

“Could be a trap,” Rook drawls, his voice gravelly and dark.

“Or it could be someone who wants to help,” Bullet counters, raising an eyebrow at me.

“Help? Or murder?” Rook smirks, and I can feel my blood beginning to boil. “I’ve thought about doing that myself, you know. Lure Thunder out with some mystery text. Take him to some deserted location... In fact, I’ve even thought about using the Solverson Warehouse. Scouted it, noticed they’ve got some excellent floor drains there, which is crucial if you’re going to chain someone to the ceiling and slowly bleed them out, and then—”

“Enough, Rook,” I snap, cutting him off before he can finish describing how he’d torture and murder me. “This isn’t about torture. I want your honest opinion on this thing.”

“I was getting to it. You know, there’s an art to this, Thunder. You’d do well to learn a few skills.”

“Shut up, Hannibal Lecter,” I snap.

“Got you all riled up, huh?” Rook chuckles, clearly enjoying himself. “All I’m saying is that we don’t know who sent this. It could be a trap, or it could be legit.”

“Either way, I’m going in,” I declare, shoving my phone back into my pocket. “If it’s a trap, these assholes are going to regret putting themselves in range of my gun. If it’s the information we need, if it can help end this shit with the resort and free Lia from having to deal with these criminals, I’ll take the risk.”

“Damn, risking your life for a lead,” Bullet says, shaking his head. “You really feel something for this one, huh?”

“Like I said, she’s not just ‘this one,’” I respond, my voice rough with emotion. “She’s Lia, and she’s ‘the one.’”

“Love is great and everything. Trust me, I know with my sweetie, Eliza, I’d do anything for her. I’d kill you both and make pinatas by inflating your bladders and stuffing them with candy, but there’s more you need to consider, Thunder. Like violent, merciless death,” Rook says, raising his hands in

mock surrender. “All I’m saying is that it could be a trap. If it is, I’m not bailing your ass out.”

“Or it could be the break we’re looking for,” Bullet insists, trying to diffuse the tension.

My fists clench involuntarily, nails digging into my palms. The uncertainty of this situation grips me like a vice: part of me wants to believe it’s a genuine lead, but another part fears the worst—that it’s a trap set by cold-hearted killers.

“Either way,” I say. “I have to find out. For Lia. I have to end this, to get her out of this mess. That means I have to go in.”

Bullet nods.

Rook just shakes his head, smirking.

“Fine, Thunder,” he says, dark amusement dancing in his eyes. “But remember what I said about not bailing you out.”

“Wouldn’t expect anything less from you, Rook,” I reply, the anger simmering beneath my words. “You lovely old horse’s ass.”

“I love you, too, Thunder,” Rook says. “And if you get in trouble, I’ll come and help you. If Eliza tells me to.”

“You asshole.”

Bullet studies me for a moment, concern etched across his face. “You want backup?”

“It says to come alone,” I reply. “So I’m going alone.”

As I pocket my phone, Bullet and Rook exchange worried glances. This text has the potential to change everything—or destroy it all.

But I’m ready to face the risk, whatever it takes, because even if I’m not sure of how much I can trust the anonymous message, I’m sure of one thing: that Lia is the only woman for me, and I’ll risk everything to keep her safe.

I head to the staff fridge we keep in the garage, pulling out a trio of beers and passing them around. If I’m going to die because of some anonymous text, I’m going to have at least a

bit of alcohol in my veins. I take a long drink. The taste of vengeance lingers on my tongue, a bitter-sweet reminder of the hell I'm willing to unleash upon those who dare harm her.

"Be careful, man," Bullet whispers, his eyes filled with genuine concern.

"Always am," I reply, offering him a half-hearted grin.

"Your funeral," Rook grumbles, looking away. I can't tell if he's trying to hide his own worry or if he's simply fed up with my stubbornness.

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," I retort, rolling my eyes.

He grumbles something inaudible.

"What was that?" Both Bullet and I say.

"I said: 'Come back safe,'" Rook says.

I head into the lot, beer in hand. I crush the rest and toss the bottle toward the bin, nailing a long distance shot. The roar of my motorcycle drowns out every other sound in the air, fueling the storm of emotions brewing inside me—hope, love, revenge. I tear out onto the road, my bike screaming between my legs. My grip tightens on the handlebars, knuckles white, as I push the bike faster. Thoughts of Lia fill my mind, her smile like sunshine cutting through the darkest clouds.

"Stay safe, my love," I whisper to the wind, hoping it carries my words to her. "This nightmare will be over soon. I promise."

Then my thoughts turn to the matter that awaits me at the Solverson warehouse.

Eileen and her family deserve better; they need this risk to pay off. As I blaze down the deserted highway, I envision Antonio Mancini's face contorted in pain when I finally get my hands on him. He'll beg for mercy that will never come. He'll scream, he'll weep, he'll cower, he'll piss himself—because I've learned from experience exactly where to punch someone to make that miserable little feat happen—and then,

once the Steel Reapers have extracted every bit of bloody justice from his mangled body, we'll end his miserable life.

"Justice is coming, you son of a bitch," I growl under my breath.

Turning onto a gravel road, an industrial area looms ahead, rusted warehouses like skeletal remains of a forgotten time. It's the perfect spot for an ambush—or, if spy movies have taught me anything, a crucial exchange of information.

"Here goes nothing," I mutter, pulling into the bony remains of the warehouse and killing the engine. Eerie silence washes over me.

Empty, dead silence.

I scan my surroundings, over and over again, wondering just what the hell I should be expecting. Is some nerdy guy with glasses, a briefcase, and a conscience going to come up and hand me an encrypted disk? Is a femme fatale going to seduce me and then crush me with her indomitable thighs, like Xenia Onatopp in *Goldeneye*? All the likely possibilities run through my head as I survey the empty surroundings.

Just as doubt creeps in, a van appears in the distance, headlights casting long shadows across the barren landscape. It parks, the lights shut off, and it sits there, ominously. It is neither a nerdy whistle-blower with a briefcase nor a psycho-killer with fit thighs. It's something much worse: a Dodge Caravan.

"Showtime," I say, steeling myself for whatever comes next.

I take a deep breath and flick on my bike's headlight, signaling the mysterious van. It responds almost instantly, flashing its own lights back at me.

I stand there, waiting, wondering.

What comes next?

Do I need to flash my lights again, like some Morse code thing?

So I do.

They flash back, then do nothing. Real helpful.

“Alright, you bastards,” I mutter, swinging my leg over the bike and dismounting. My boots crunch on the gravel as I draw my gun, scanning the surroundings for any signs of trouble. The place feels deserted—just me and that damn van.

My heart races as I approach. This could be the break we need—or the end of the line. I cautiously stalk toward the van, every muscle in my body taut and ready to spring into action.

“Come out and play, boys,” I whisper under my breath, feeling like a predator stalking its prey. “Because, seriously, even I’m not desperate enough to approach some random van with darkened windows in some deserted parking lot. Especially one that isn’t advertising free candy.”

Just as I get within shooting distance, the van’s doors fly open. Men in masks emerge, carrying something heavy between them. It’s wrapped in black plastic, and the sight of it sends a shiver down my spine.

“Shit,” I hiss, ducking behind some rusted barrels, gripping my gun tightly. My instincts scream at me that I’ve walked into a trap, but I’m not about to back down now. There are only a few of them, and I can handle a fight. Hell, part of me is even looking forward to it—these men work for my enemies, and I want nothing more than to tear them apart.

This is just damned convenient.

I got in a pleasant ride on the way here, the air was fresh and the landscape beautiful, and now I get to shoot some evil motherfuckers.

Lucky day.

It might even make up for all the shit that happened between me and that knife-wielding psycho in the bar.

“Bring it on,” I growl to myself, watching their every move from the shadows. If they want a war, I’ll give them one. And if they have information that can help me save Lia and the others, I’ll rip it from their cold, lifeless hands.

My finger hovers over the trigger as I watch the men in masks set up in formation. In my head, I plot which one to shoot first, and visualize how the rest of the combat will play out and how good it will feel to turn the concrete floor red with their blood.

Though Rook was right, the floor drainage in this place is amazing, I note, seeing grate after grate, all nicely spaced, all hinting that, even if I make this place into an utter slaughter, whoever the city coroner's office sends to clean this place up won't actually have that hard of a job ahead of them.

Just then, my phone vibrates in my pocket, the screen lighting up the darkness around me like a beacon. *Shit*.

I glance down, my eyes widening as I see Lia's name flash across the screen. "Marcus, where are you? We need to talk NOW."

Damn it.

As much as I want to respond, I can't risk giving away my position. My heart aches at the thought of leaving her hanging, but right now, survival comes first.

My phone beeps again, and as I reach for my phone to silence it, the sharp sound of a gun cocking behind me freezes me in place.

A muffled voice cuts through the tense silence, making the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end.

"Don't move. Drop your weapon and put your hands behind your head. Now."

My heart sinks, the cold barrel of the gun presses against the back of my skull.

"Alright," I say, dropping my gun and then raising my hands slowly. "Take it easy."

"Good boy," the gunman says, his voice cold and devoid of emotion. "Now get on your knees."

"Look, I've seen this movie, and you're not getting a blowjob. You have to take me out to dinner first. Somewhere nice, too, like better than an Applebee's."

“Do I sound like I’m fucking around here?”

With a sharp blow that leaves colors spinning in my vision, the man behind me reminds me he is not, in fact, fucking around.

I hesitate, weighing my options; do I fight back and risk getting killed? Or do I comply and hope for an opportunity to escape—preferably one that doesn’t involve a blowjob.

“Now!” He barks

“Alright, alright,” I say, lowering to my knees, the cold promise of the gun hard against the back of my skull.

“Fucking finally,” says the man behind me. “It’s nice to finally meet you face to face, Marcus. Or such as it is. I hear you’ve been looking for me.”

I can’t resist a partial turn; a turn that ends with the butt of the man’s gun smacking the side of my head and reminding me not to fucking move.

“You mean you’re...”

“Antonio Mancini. The man you’ve been hunting for. The man who’s going to kill you.”

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Thunder

There's a riot in my chest as I kneel on the cold, damp ground of the abandoned Solverson Warehouse. A riot fueled by regret, by anger, by the cold, sickening feeling that I might never see Lia again. Antonio Mancini has me right where he wants me—at the mercy of his gun pressed against the back of my head. This is it. I'm a dead man. Just my luck that I'm going to die in a warehouse for what used to be a medical supply company.

When Rook finds out about this, he's going to nearly die from a laughing fit.

Maybe he'll actually die.

At least then something good would come from my death.

A gunshot rings out, and I flinch, bracing for the impact. But it never comes. Instead, I hear Antonio curse behind me, clearly distracted.

“Who the fuck?!” Antonio shouts, turning away from me for a split second. “Come out. You're a fucking dead man.”

I seize the opportunity and spring into action. My muscles tense, adrenaline surges through my veins as I lunge at Antonio, catching him off guard. Our bodies collide, fists flying. I land a hard uppercut on his jaw, immediately followed by a swift kick to his ribs, and finally, a knee to his face. The satisfying crunch of bone against bone echoes in the empty warehouse. Blood sprays, and for once, it's not mine.

“Damn it, you biker piece of shit!” Antonio snarls, wiping blood from his mouth. He bashes me in the face with the handle of his gun, pain exploding through my skull. For a moment, everything goes black—but I shake it off and raise my fists. As Antonio aims the gun at me again, I counterattack, bashing him square in the face with all the force I can muster.

“Motherfucker!” he spits, and a busted tooth drops from his bloody mouth as he staggers back and falls to the ground.

I leap on top of him, my fists raining down on his battered face like a storm.

“This is for Eileen, you son of a bitch!”

“Oh, that old cunt? I’ll visit her before your body’s even cold in the ground,” Antonio growls, trying to shove me off.

“Like hell you will,” I retort, letting my anger fuel every punch. It feels good to finally make him pay for what he’s done. I pull a heavy fist back, ready to deliver the final blow to his broken face, when suddenly, a hail of gunfire erupts from behind me.

“Shit!” I curse under my breath.

It’s the men from the van. They’ve closed in and they’re shooting at me.

“Looks like you forgot about my boys,” Antonio smirks through bloody teeth.

“Sorry, asswipe,” I snarl at Antonio, “but we’ll have to finish this another time.”

I punch him once more, this time in the throat, and then shove his limp body aside and scramble to my feet, desperation fueling every movement.

“Damn it!” I mutter as I snatch up my gun. Haphazardly, I fire off a few rounds in their direction, buying myself a precious few seconds. “I’m not dying here today. Not without taking these bastards down with me.”

An answering hail of gunfire sends me diving for cover and gives Antonio the opening he needs to flee to safety.

“Good luck with that, you prick,” Antonio yells, laughter lacing his voice despite his pain.

“Fuck you, you creep,” I spit back, then bolt towards my motorcycle.

My heart races, adrenaline and anger pumping through me, and the urge to pursue Antonio rages inside me. As I swing my

leg over the bike, I take one last look at Antonio's fleeing figure. I could chase him down, could end him, but at what cost?

"Next time, Antonio," I vow under my breath. "Next time."

The engine roars to life beneath me, and I gun the throttle, my bike spitting smoke and burning rubber as I race out of the parking lot. Bullets whiz past my head, so close I can feel their heat. But death isn't catching me today.

With a firm crank of the accelerator, I urge my bike to full speed, weaving between abandoned cars and dodging more gunfire. The wind whips against my face, and for a moment, I feel almost invincible.

Gaining distance from the warehouse, I spot a well-concealed motorcycle in the bushes and Rook, decked out in camouflage gear and carrying a rifle.

He raises his hand, grinning.

"Thunder! I told you not to be a dumbass this time!"

"Go fuck yourself, Rook!" I yell back, slowing my bike as I approach.

"Looks like I was right about it being a trap."

"Like I said—fuck you. And thank you."

"Watch your six, Thunder," Rook warns, suddenly serious. "I'm heading to Eliza. You keep Lia safe, alright?"

"Damn right I will."

"Good. Don't be a fucking moron this time," he adds, revving his engine. "I won't be there to save your ass."

"Wasn't planning on it," I reply, smirking. We speed off in different directions, the sound of our engines tearing through the air.

As I race away, my heart pounds like a drum. Whoever's behind this is organized, ruthless, and determined to wipe out their opposition with bloody, overwhelming force. They'll be going after everyone I care about.

A face flashes in my mind—Lia.

“Stay safe, love,” I whisper, urging my bike faster. “I’m coming.”

I whip my bike to a frenzied speed and point it towards her hotel like a missile locked on target. Dread and apprehension fill me; my heart hammers against my chest and each breath is a struggle, despite the air whipping past my face.

All I can think about is her: the woman I love, she’s in danger.

I must get to her.

I weave through traffic, speeding between cars with inches to spare. The wind whips my face, stinging my eyes, but I don’t care. Time is running out.

The roar of the engine drowns out all other thoughts except the overwhelming urge to protect the woman who holds my heart. I can feel her drawing me in like a magnet.

“Almost there,” I tell myself, feeling the tension coil in my muscles, ready to spring into action. “Just a few more blocks.”

As the hotel comes into view, a sinister sight stops my heart: a van, just like the one from the warehouse ambush, parked right next to Lia’s car.

I leap off my bike, and I race through the lobby, my heart pounding and my gun already in my hand.

I pray that I’m not too late.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Amelia

I sit on the edge of my hotel bed, surrounded by my laptop, my cellphone, and my fears. My cell feels like a ticking time bomb in my hand, and I can't decide whether or not to send a text to Marcus. I've dug up some seriously concerning information about the Eco Resort project—stuff that could put us both in danger. Do I send it? Or maybe I should just call the cops? Or the FBI? Hell, I could hop on the first plane out of here to somewhere nobody would think to look for me, like Tajikistan, Zambia, or New Jersey.

Ugh. New Jersey.

Awful, but maybe necessary. Because this is big. And terrifying. The information glows menacingly on my laptop screen, daring me to act. A hidden link in my boss's files led me to a secure, encrypted server, and what I found there... it chills me to the bone.

Taking a deep breath, I stare at my phone, fingers hovering over the screen. Screw it. I hit send. The message races towards Marcus, and I hope he'll know what to do.

Maybe he'll come with me to New Jersey. As they say, misery loves company.

Just then, there's a knock on the door. Fear grips me like a vice, and I tiptoe to the door, peering through the peephole. It's Brian Russell, my boss.

"Mr. Russell, what are you doing here?" I choke out, clutching my canister of mace tightly.

"I know what you've been up to, Lia," he replies, his voice tense. "You're in over your head, but honestly, so am I. I'm here to help you."

Help me? Is he serious? I debate letting him in, remembering that he's always seemed like an upright, honest person. But after what I found, can I trust him? Can I trust anyone right now?

“Listen, Brian,” I say, my voice barely above a whisper, “I don’t know if I can trust you. But I need help, and I’m desperate. If you’re serious, then come in.”

“Why do you think I’m here, Lia? You’re not the only one who’s desperate. We can help each other.”

I unlock the door. It creaks open, and Brian steps inside, his face flushed and perspiring despite the room’s air conditioning.

“So tell me, Brian. What’s really going on? What really is the *Mar y Tierra* project?”

He begins pacing, his eyes darting around the room like a caged animal.

“May I sit?” he asks, his voice a notch higher than usual.

“Of course,” I reply, gesturing to the room’s lone armchair.

He takes a seat but is visibly uneasy, his leg bouncing nervously.

The silence stretches between us like taut wire. The intensity of his gaze sends shivers down my spine. I slip my hand back into my purse, clutch my canister of mace for comfort.

“So, Lia,” he starts, wringing his hands together, “how are you finding the project? All going smoothly?”

“It’s challenging, but that’s what makes it interesting,” I reply cautiously, keeping my grip on the mace hidden in my coat pocket. His questions feel probing rather than conversational. Panic rises in my throat as I try to piece together what he knows—or suspects—about my discovery. “But you’re really not here to run a survey on my job satisfaction. Talk to me, Brian.”

Brian leans forward, his eyes narrowing, his tone going cold. “You understand your role in all this, right?”

The room’s atmosphere becomes oppressive, the tension thickening like quicksand. I need to be ready for anything. Things with Brian are not as they seem.

“I believe so,” I reply, choosing my words carefully. “Why do you ask?”

“I need to know you’re committed, Lia,” Brian says, suddenly standing up.

“I am, Mr. Russell. What makes you think I wouldn’t be?”

“You left work early today. Why? What, exactly, have you been up to?”

“Everything’s fine. I’m fine. I just needed a break.” I swallow hard, the lump in my throat growing. “What is this all about?”

Without warning, his hand reaches behind his back and reappears, holding a sleek, black pistol. My stomach drops like a stone, and I release my grip on the can of mace—useless against a gun.

“You’re digging into places you shouldn’t,” he warns, his eyes turning icy. “You think I wouldn’t find out? That we wouldn’t know the second you accessed that server? What an incredibly stupid move, Lia, making yourself into a liability. I had such high hopes for you. That someone with your talent and ambition, you could be brought into this business gradually. That, maybe with the right mentoring and the right incentives, you could really become an asset.”

Both flattered and repulsed, because it is, on a sick, twisted level, a compliment to be thought of as an asset to a massive criminal scheme, I take a step back. My heart races like wildfire, breath catching in my chest, my focus suddenly narrowing to the pistol in my boss’s hands.

“Brian, please,” I whisper. “We can figure this out. Just put the gun down.”

He laughs bitterly. “Oh Lia, it’s too late for that.”

I don’t want to die. Not like this. Not at the hands of a man I once respected. If only Marcus were here. He’d know what to do. He’d save me.

But he’s not. I have to save myself.

“Please,” I say again, forcing strength into my voice. “There has to be another way.”

“Maybe there was before,” he says, his eyes glinting with something dark and cruel. “But you went digging, Lia. Now you know too much.”

“Let me go,” I plead, tears welling in my eyes. “I won’t say anything. I promise.”

“Sorry, Lia.” The gun feels like an icy blade against my temple. “But I don’t believe you.”

My breath hitches in my throat as I brace for the deafening roar of the gun.

“Any last words?” he asks, a twisted smile on his lips.

“Go to hell.”

“How trite. For someone with your credentials, I expected something better. Just another way you’re a disappointment, you stupid bitch,” he says, and I close my eyes, praying for a miracle.

The air freezes around me, and I can feel death’s icy fingers reaching out. My life hangs by a thread, a single moment away from being snuffed out.

The gun rests against my head, held in shaky, fearful hands.

Why hasn’t he pulled the trigger yet?

“Brian,” I choke out, fear strangling my voice. “This isn’t you.”

“Shut up!” he snaps, the gun shaking in his hand. “You shouldn’t have poked your nose where it doesn’t belong. This is all your fault.”

“Please,” I beg, letting my eyes well up with tears. “We both know you’re not a murderer. We both know you don’t want to do this. I won’t tell anyone. I swear on my life. “

“Your life isn’t worth much right now,” he sneers, his voice rising. “Certainly not what it’ll cost me if I don’t do what they want. Don’t you understand who you’re messing with, you stupid bitch?”

As his voice hits a crescendo, there's a sudden thud from the wall next to my bed and a loud voice next door yelling, "I fucking told you, keep it down in there."

My neighbor. That awful, whiny, wonderful asshole.

Brian turns, distracted.

In a heartbeat, I lunge forward, adrenaline fueling every movement as I claw at the gun. Chaos erupts, the world blurring into a frenzy of motion. We grapple, knocking over furniture and scattering belongings across the room.

The gun slips from Brian's grip, skidding across the wooden floor like a lifeline thrown too short. We both dive for it. My fingers brush against the cold metal, only for Brian's foot to kick it away at the last second. He scrambles, reclaiming the weapon and aiming it back at me, his breath ragged from the struggle.

"Stupid girl," he spits, fury flashing in his eyes. "Get on your knees."

Panic floods my veins, but I force myself to keep my eyes locked onto his as I kneel.

"See?" he sneers, sweat beading on his brow. "I told you, you shouldn't have meddled. This project was supposed to be easy. We were all supposed to get paid, not dragged into this shit."

"Please. You don't have to do this."

"Of course I fucking do!" he snarls, pressing the gun against my head. "Do you think I want to do this, Lia? No. But you're fucking making me, and if I don't... if I don't... they'll..."

His voice trails off, but I know what he means. If he doesn't kill me, someone else will, but only after they've killed Brian and everyone he loves. We're both trapped in this nightmare together, and only one of us is getting out alive.

The gun shakes against my forehead, tremors that give away the struggle taking place within Brian's heart. Even though he knows the consequences, he's still wavering. He's a project

manager, a number cruncher, a productivity nerd, not an executioner.

I have to seize on that if I want to survive.

“Then kill me,” I say, surprising myself with the steel in my voice. I refuse to beg for my life from a man who would so easily take it away. My heart slams against my ribcage, pleading for mercy, but I know there’s none to be found here. I have to push him, break him, remind him exactly what he’s going to do and what the consequences will be. “Shoot me. Right in the head. Do it, Brian. I’m sure everyone in this hotel would love to hear you blow my brains out. I mean, have you even fucking thought about this? Have you thought about what it’s going to look like to have my blood, my bones, my fucking brains spray everywhere? I’ll tell you how it’s going to be: gross. So fucking gross that you’ll never forget it, never get over it. And then what? How are you going to deal with my body? You’re fucked, Brian.”

There’s a moment where I think I’ve won. A moment where the cold barrel of the gun leaves my skin, where his breathing nearly stops, held in suspense, while a monumental struggle plays out within his glassy, wild eyes.

Then he takes a deep breath.

Then the gun presses so hard against my head that it hurts.

I yelp.

“Fine, you bitch, you can have it your way.” His finger tightens on the trigger, and I brace myself for the end.

At that heart-stopping, knife-edge moment, another knock cuts through the tension-filled air. This time from the door.

Time freezes.

Both Brian and I are paralyzed, our eyes locked in a chilling silence.

My mind races: who could it be? Is it Marcus? A hotel staff member? Whoever it is, they’re oblivious to the mortal danger lurking in this room.

“Get rid of them,” Brian hisses through clenched teeth. His voice is raw, menacing. “Or they’ll die with you.”

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Thunder

The scream of my motorcycle cuts through the air as I pull up to the hotel, wheels crunching over gravel and leaving burnt black streaks on the asphalt. A dark weight sits in my gut, a haunting feeling that grows every step I take toward the hotel.

I race through the lobby, ignoring the stares from staff and guests alike. My boots thud against the carpeted stairs as I ascend to her floor, heart hammering in my chest like a war drum. As I approach her door, my hand tightens around the grip of my gun, cold steel providing an anchor amidst the storm raging within me. I've never been in this situation before—never had to be so careful. It's always just been me or me with Bullet and Rook, people who can defend themselves. But Lia... if she were to get hurt, I'd never forgive myself.

I hesitate for a moment outside her door, conflicting emotions warring inside me. Then I knock.

There's a shuffling inside, a scuffle I can only imagine.

"Who is it?" Lia's voice drifts out from behind the door, laced with tension and fear.

"It's Marcus. Open the door, Lia."

"No, Marcus, you should go," she replies, her words strained and shaking. "This isn't a good time. I'm busy here with work. I'll catch up with you later. I'm fine. Don't worry about me."

She's lying; I know her better than anyone else: the sound of her voice, the feel of her skin, all engraved on my heart; she's in trouble, I can sense it.

"Open the door, Lia," I insist, gritting my teeth.

"Marcus, just go!" she snaps, a sob catching in her throat.

"Lia, I need you to open the door. It's important. I have to know you're okay."

“Marcus, this is important. You need to go,” says, her voice walking the fine line between determined and broken. “Just... go.”

“Damn it, Lia! I can’t leave you like this!” My voice cracks, raw emotion lacing each word. There’s no way I can walk away from her when I know she’s in danger; my loyalty to her runs deeper than anything.

“Please, Marcus. If you love me, you’ll go. Just... go.”

“Fine, Lia. I’m leaving,” I say, though my heart wrenches with unease.

For a moment, I go quiet, listening to her hurried breaths. It’s then I hear her crying—furious, choked sobs that echo through the door. The sound is agonizing, and it pierces me to the core. My heart shatters at the sound. It doesn’t matter if she’s telling me to leave; if she’s crying, I’m there for her. With resolve burning in my veins, I step back and deliver a powerful kick to the door. Wood splinters, hinges groan, and the door bursts open.

I take in the scene before me, time slowing to a crawl: Lia, trembling and tear-streaked; a man—Brian Russell—looming over her, gun in hand. Rage ignites within me like wildfire, an inferno that cannot be contained. In an instant, I lunge at him, fist connecting with his jaw and sending him reeling back.

“Get away from her, you piece of shit!” I snarl, fury coursing through every fiber of my being.

I swing again, and Brian ducks, my punch going wide.

Brian recovers quickly, aiming the gun at me now. I dodge just as it fires; the bullet embedding itself into the wall behind me. My heart thunders, adrenaline pumping through my veins like fire.

“Son of a bitch!” I roar, launching myself at him.

We collide like titans, our fists flying. Grunts fill the air as we exchange blows, each desperate to emerge victorious. Our fight carries us across the room, crashing into furniture, shattering glass, and toppling chairs.

“Marcus, look out!” Lia screams, her voice a mix of terror and urgency.

I barely dodge an improvised weapon—a broken lamp that Brian swings at me with brutal force. The fury within me escalates, and I charge at him, driven by the need to protect Lia from this monster.

“I’ll fucking kill you for even daring to touch her!” I bellow, unleashing a stunning series of punches that leave Brian reeling. Blood sprays from his broken nose, spit, bile, and a broken tooth shooting from his busted mouth.

A wild swing with the jagged ceramic lamp creates distance between us.

“You’re both in way over your fucking heads. It doesn’t matter what you do to me, you’re both dead!” he spits back venomously.

“Shut your fucking mouth!” I growl, sending another punch crashing into his jaw.

“Give it up, you fool,” Brian taunts, smirking despite the blood dripping down his face. “You’ll never be able to protect her. You want to make this easy? Just let me shoot you both. That’s your only way out.”

The fight continues, each of us giving and taking vicious blows.

But it’s the thought of Lia, of keeping her safe from harm, that keeps me going. I won’t let this bastard hurt her, never again. And I’ll make damn sure he knows it.

“Remember this, you piece of shit,” I hiss, my fist connecting with his face, breaking flesh and bone beneath my rage. “No one—and I mean no one—hurts the woman I love.”

I draw on every ounce of strength, every lesson learned from wars survived fighting alongside Bullet and Rook, and unleash a torrent of punches against Brian; lefts and rights, uppercuts and jabs, I give him no chance to recover. My heart is on fire, fueling my muscles with pure rage even though they scream at me in exhaustion.

“Stay the fuck down,” I growl between gritted teeth, landing one final knee to his face.

Brian crumples to the ground like a rag doll.

But I’m not done.

I don’t hesitate, following up with a series of savage kicks to his head. The satisfying crunching sound echoes through the room, drowning out the ringing in my ears.

Fuck him.

Panting, sweat dripping from my brow, I turn to Lia.

She’s trembling but unharmed. Our eyes lock, and it’s as if time stands still. Relief floods me, followed by gratitude and a profound love that threatens to consume me whole.

“Marcus...” she whispers, her voice shaking. “I was so scared.”

“Lia, you’re safe now,” I say, rushing to her side, pulling her into my arms. Her body trembles against mine, and I hold her tighter, refusing to let go. Our lips meet in a deep, passionate kiss.

“Thank God you’re here,” she murmurs against my mouth.

“Always,” I breathe, pulling back just enough to look into her eyes. “I’ve got you, and I’m never going to let you go.”

“Marcus, I love you,” Lia whispers, her lips crashing into mine with a need that steals my breath. Our tongues dance together, a sensual battle mirroring the chaos of moments ago.

A low groan interrupts our passionate exchange, and we both turn to see Brian stirring on the floor, his battered face a testament to my unyielding rage.

“Shit. How the hell is he still conscious?” Lia gasps, her eyes wide with concern. “We need to tie him up.”

“No, I need to finish what I started,” I growl.

Lia shakes her head, tightening her grip on me.

“No. Marcus, he has the information we need, and you and I are going to make him talk.”

“Fine. I’ll take care of him. Stay back,” I warn her, pushing her gently behind me as I stride toward Brian. I drag him to his feet, wincing at the sticky blood coating my hands. With a quick glance around, I spot an extension cord and snatch it up, swiftly binding Brian’s wrists together.

“Think you can walk?” I snarl at him, my fury simmering just beneath the surface. Then I laugh, bitter, when he shakes his head. “Think I fucking care?”

“Fuck you both,” he spits out, his words slurred.

“That’s no way to speak to your captors,” I shoot back, tightening the makeshift bonds. “Not unless you want to turn this interrogation into an execution.”

“Marcus,” Lia calls softly from behind me, her tone urgent. “We have to find out what he knows.”

“Right,” I agree, turning my attention back to the man whose life now rests in our hands. This is it, the moment when everything changes. I shove him into a chair and stand over him. From my pocket, I pull a knife, let the blade shine in the dead glow of the overhead fluorescent lights. With the tip of the blade, I trace a thin line against his cheek, so light it’d make the kiss of a butterfly seem like a punch in the face. “It’s time for you to tell us everything you know about *Mar y Tierra*, or I’ll make you wish you’d never been born.”

Chapter Thirty

Amelia

This room, once my peaceful, after-work sanctuary, once the blush-inducing place where I first made love with Marcus, now feels like a prison. Cream-colored walls close in on me, suffocating me like a tightening noose; shards of shattered glass from the lamp Brian broke catch the light, shimmering ominously; specks of red—blood—decorate the walls and my bed with an almost artful spatter print.

“Stay behind me, Lia,” Marcus commands, his voice low and measured. He stands between me and Brian, who is securely bound to a chair with a power cord, his face an unsettling blend of blood and defiance. “You don’t need to watch this.”

I nod, swallowing hard as I try to keep my fear at bay. My heart races, adrenaline coursing through my veins.

“What are you going to do?”

“Find out who sent him,” Marcus says coldly, his piercing green eyes locked on Brian’s bruised face. “And make sure they never come near you again.”

“Good luck with that,” Brian sneers, his gaze flickering between Marcus and me. “You really think you can protect her?”

“Watch me,” Marcus snaps, his fist connecting with Brian’s jaw.

The sound of bone meeting bone reverberates through the room, making me flinch.

“You’re in over your head, you arrogant prick,” Brian says.

“Enough of your games,” Marcus snarls, his green eyes blazing with fury. “You’re going to spill everything, Brian. Now, who the hell sent you?”

He throws several punches to Brian’s chest and stomach—blows that make me wince but are clearly meant to soften him

up for interrogation.

Brian gasps, blood spattering his lips.

“It’s not as simple as just giving a name,” he manages, coughing. “These people... they’re like ghosts. Murderous, ruthless ghosts. They’ll get you when you least expect it and kill everyone you love.”

“You’re not answering my question. Tell me: who sent you?”

“Does it matter? You’re dead anyway, you just don’t know it.”

Then he laughs, rolling his head from shoulder to shoulder, blood dripping freely from the wounds to his face.

“Stop fucking around and tell us!” I shout, surprising even myself with my newfound courage. In a fit of rage, I come forward and hit Brian. Once, twice, each blow impacting with his face. When I stop, he stares at me, shaken. “Tell us who’s behind all of this!”

For a moment, Brian hesitates.

And then, slowly, he smiles; a chilling, sinister smile that sends shivers down my spine.

“You want to know?” he taunts. “Fine. But don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

I force my voice to stay steady. “Don’t underestimate us. We can be pretty dangerous, too.”

Brian smirks, blood still staining his teeth. “Oh, I don’t doubt it, especially considering my current situation. But you don’t understand the scope of the project, Lia. Which doesn’t surprise me, you’re so young. Still naïve. The Santoro Crime Syndicate is behind the resort. The entire project is a labyrinth of illegal operations, money laundering being one of them. Whatever it costs them to wipe you out and continue the project, it’ll be more than worth the price. You two have no idea the hell you’ve unleashed on yourselves and everyone you love.”

Marcus narrows his eyes, muscles rippling beneath tattoos that tell stories of survival and tenacity. “What are they planning? What else do you know?”

At that moment, I notice Brian’s demeanor shift; his shoulders relax, his mouth twitches into a half-smile. There’s a slow exhale and all the weight—all the fear that Marcus had beaten into him—disappears. It’s as if he’s settling in to watch a movie, suddenly unconcerned with the impending consequences.

“Something amusing you, pal?” Marcus growls, catching the change in attitude.

Brian chuckles darkly, a chilling sound that crawls up my spine.

“You could say that. You two think you’ve cornered me, but you’re just a couple of fish swimming with sharks.”

“Is that a threat?” I snap, furious.

“More like a warning,” Brian says, his grin widening. “You’re both running out of time.”

“Enough with the cryptic bullshit,” Marcus roars, his voice echoing through the room like thunder. Before I can blink, he lunges at Brian, his fist connecting with Brian’s jaw in a sickening crunch. The force of the blow sends Brian’s head snapping back, a thin trail of blood dribbling from the corner of his mouth.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” Marcus demands, breathing heavily, his green eyes blazing with barely restrained fury. “Speak in fucking English, or I swear to god, I’ll rip your tongue out.”

Brian spits out a mouthful of blood, then leans forward, his eyes locked on mine. The intensity of his gaze twists my stomach into knots.

“See, the bosses knew I was coming here. Antonio and the crew, they’re meticulous, always have backup plans. I was supposed to update them after Lia was... disposed of.” His pause is deliberate, malicious even. “No update from me

means they're on their way. How long do you think you have?"

My heart feels like it's made of lead, sinking deep into my chest.

Panic threatens to overtake me, but I grip onto all the love and courage I feel from simply being around Marcus, refusing to give in. Marcus senses my distress, and his hand reaches for mine, squeezing tightly. The touch grounds me, giving me strength.

"Let them come," Marcus snarls, pure venom in his voice. "We'll be waiting."

"Is that so?" Brian smirks, unfazed by Marcus' threat. "You think you can take on an entire crime syndicate? Like I said, you're just fish swimming with sharks. Listen. Do you hear that?"

Marcus and I both go silent, ears straining.

I hear it.

Hear death above my hammering heart, each beat echoing the sound of multiple car engines outside. The noise grows louder, vibrating through the glass of the still-broken window. They're here.

They're here, and there's a lot of them.

Many more than Marcus and I can handle.

"Shit," Marcus mutters. "Lia, lock the door and find a place to hide. Now!"

I nod, springing into action, my hands trembling as I bolt the door. My blood turns to pure adrenaline; every part of me, every nerve, every synapse, every cell burns with fearful energy. I've never felt so alive, yet on the brink of annihilation.

"Where are you gonna be?" I ask, my voice barely a whisper.

"Right here, with him," Marcus replies, jerking his head towards Brian, who smirks from his chair. "I'll hold them back

as long as I can. If they get past me, you go out the bathroom window and you run like hell.”

“Be careful,” I plead, my eyes meeting Marcus’s for a moment.

His gaze holds a mix of reassurance and intensity that both terrifies and comforts me.

“Always am,” he murmurs, flashing me a quick, fierce smile before turning his attention back to Brian.

“I love you,” I choke out, my voice wavering with emotion.

“I love you, too. Get in position, Lia. We don’t have much time.”

“Give them hell,” I add, trying to muster some bravado despite my trembling hands and the dread coiling in my stomach.

As I duck into the bathroom and take shelter in the tub, I swallow down the lump in my throat, trying to steady my racing thoughts. I take a deep breath, gathering every ounce of courage within me. The sound of heavy footsteps approaches the door, and I clench my hands into fists.

This is it.

Chapter Thirty-One

Thunder

Lia's hotel room is a far cry from a defensible position; one flimsy front door, and the bathroom window are the only exit points. Our odds are shit, we're outnumbered, and the men outside are trained killers. I scan the modest space, looking for some way to fortify it against the coming storm. Hell, I'd give anything to be back at the Solverson warehouse, or better yet, an open field where I could see my enemies coming. But we're here, and there's no turning back.

I look at Lia and a sickening weight settles in the pit of my stomach, like a lump of molten lead threatening to burn through me. I've faced fights and showdowns before, but never with so much on the line. Before, it was just me. If I died, that was it. But now... Now, the love of my life is caught in the crosshairs, and every fiber of my being screams to protect her at all costs.

"Marcus, what are we going to do?" Lia asks, her voice trembling with fear.

I force a smile, trying to maintain some semblance of confidence.

"You've got a way out, babe. And I've got a few asses to kick. Trust me, you'll be fine."

My fingers tap out a desperate message on my phone, pleading with Bullet to get here as soon as possible. I need a miracle, and my brothers in the MC are the closest thing I've got.

"Bullet's on his way," I tell her, though I'm not sure how much comfort that brings either of us. Time is running out, and we both know it.

Lia's eyes fill with tears, but she nods, determination steeling her features.

"Just tell me what to do to help you. I can fight. I don't want to just sit here, Marcus. If I die, I want to be close to you."

“Stay low in that tub, keep quiet, and when the time comes, you get the fuck out through the bathroom window and you run like hell, that’s how you can help me the most,” I reply, gripping my gun tightly. Every instinct in me wants to shield her, take her far away from this nightmare. But there’s no escaping it now. One of us has to stay, to buy time, and there’s only one of us who makes the world a better, brighter place: her.

“Promise me you’ll make it out too,” she whispers, her hands shaking as she grabs my arm.

“I promise,” I lie, though we both know the cost of her freedom, of her very survival, will likely be my life. Fair trade, if you ask me. Hell, better than fair; Lia’s smart, dedicated, has ideals about making the world a better place; her survival is more than worth the cost of my life.

My phone buzzes with Bullet’s reply: ‘Calling the other Reapers. We’re coming for you, brother. Hold on.’

“Bullet’s close. We’re gonna be okay. I’m going to buy us some time.” Then I turn away and get to work. I can’t let her see the dread gnawing at my insides. I’ve faced death before, but not with her life on the line.

Dragging the coffee table across the floor, I upend it against the door, tossing a chair on top for good measure. My phone buzzes—Bullet’s response: ‘10 minutes out. Hold on, Thunder.’

“Ten fucking minutes,” I mutter under my breath. It feels like a lifetime.

Footsteps echo in the hall, mingling with muffled Italian curses and laughter. The bastards are right outside, confident they’ll soon tear down that door and rip us both to shreds. Silence descends like a guillotine, slicing through the air. My finger hovers over the trigger. This is it. No room for hesitation or fear. Just instinct and the primal drive to protect what’s mine.

“Come out, come out, wherever you are,” Antonio taunts from the other side of the door. “You’ve escaped twice before,

Marcus, but you know what they say: third time's the charm."

"Go fuck yourself," I hiss back.

"Quite the gentleman, aren't you?" he sneers. "We'll see how charming you are with a bullet in your skull."

"Bring it on, you piece of shit," I spit as I aim my gun at the doorway, my finger hovering over the trigger, ready to unleash at the first opening. I know I'm outmatched and outnumbered, but I'll be damned if I go down without a fight.

"Marcus..." Lia whispers, her voice trembling.

"Stay put, Lia," I say, my eyes never leaving the door. "There are only two things you need to know: I'm going to get you out of here, and I love you."

Silence returns. A ghostly, damning quiet, like the world taking a deep breath before it emits a primal scream.

It inhales.

It holds.

And then, all hell breaks loose.

The silence shatters like glass, a cacophony of bullets ripping through the door and walls. Wood and plaster splinter around me, and instinct takes over. I dive flat against the floor, squeezing off shots through the disintegrating doorway. Each deafening blast feels like a punch to the gut, a battle cry in the face of death.

Then a break. A breath. A reprieve from the onslaught of murder. Our enemies reloading. That, or simply wanting to taunt us some more.

"Marcus, you can't hide forever. We'll smoke you out like the fucking rat you are," Antonio snarls, his voice oozing with venom.

"Really? You keep saying that you're going to kill me, yet you keep disappointing me," I shout back, anger fueling each word. "When are you fucking mob guys going to give me a real challenge, huh?" My heart races, but my hand stays steady as I fire round after round at the door. I hear the men beyond it

scramble for cover, curse, and I laugh. “Do I need to tie my hands behind my back? I’ve gotten pretty good at knots. Learned a lot, mostly while fucking your mother.”

“You fucking son of a bitch.”

More bullets.

A lot more bullets.

Mostly from one particular point on the other side of the door: Antonio Mancini. *Apparently, he’s a momma’s boy. Typical for a mobster.*

Then the others unleash a storm of bullets that blasts the hotel room door. The door groans, straining under the relentless assault of gunfire, threatening to give way any second. Gritting my teeth, I squeeze off a last volley of covering fire before launching myself toward the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind me.

“Marcus!” Lia gasps, her eyes wide with terror. Her vulnerability only fuels my determination to keep her safe. “Are you hurt?”

“Stay down, Lia,” I order, mind racing to find some way to hold back the attack. Our chances of survival grow slimmer by the second. “Stay down, but keep ready. You’ll be running any second.”

I press my back against the cold tiles, gun aimed at the door like it’s an old enemy. Heavy breaths escape me, each one a reminder of the adrenaline surging through my veins. I risk a glance at Lia, lying face down in the bathtub, her body trembling like a leaf about to fall from a tree.

“Shit,” I mutter under my breath, taking a moment to check the clip of my gun. Four bullets. That’s fucking it. Four bullets against an army of bloodthirsty mobsters. “God, if you’re listening, now’s the time to cut me some slack,” I think to myself. “You never did before. You’ve always taken the good people from my life too soon, but now you fucking owe me.”

A morbid thought races through me; if I die now, if there is an afterlife, at least I’ll see my grandma again. Now that I’m

grown up, maybe I'll find the words to express to her how grateful I am that she was in my life.

"Marcus," Lia whispers. "We should run now. Both of us. We can make it."

"Just calm down, Lia, I'm working on it," I tell her, trying to sound confident. "We'll get out of this, I promise." But even as the words leave my lips, I know they're more for me than her. I need something to believe in, something to hold on to as the world crumbles around us, so why not cling to the best thing in my life: her?

"Listen," I say to Lia, my voice low and urgent. "They're about to break through the door. It's fucking cheap wood and it won't hold long. When they get close, I'm going to make a distraction, and then I want you to run. Don't look back, don't hesitate. Just fucking run."

"Marcus, I—"

"Promise me, Lia," I interrupt, my eyes still glued to the door. "Promise me you'll run."

"Okay," she whispers, barely audible. "I promise."

I glance over at Lia, smile despite the sight of her curled up like a frightened child; in these last moments, I have to take what I can get, and even the sight of a frightened Lia is still *Lia*. Still the woman that awakened my heart in a way that I'd never thought possible. No other woman on earth that could make me feel ready to die, as long as it helped them. Before, I was always the one ready to cut ties and run on to the next conquest, the next one-night stand. Now, I'll give every breath in my body just to keep her safe.

"Listen," I choke out, throat tight. "Lia, it doesn't look good. There's something I need you to know—"

"Don't say it like that, Marcus," she interrupts, her voice trembling.

"Listen, I love you, Lia. Like I've never loved anything or anyone. I've been a selfish asshole before with women. They've come and gone and I've never given a damn. But you, I love you and I need you just like I need air to breathe. You're

it for me. That's the truth. So, however this ends, I need you to remember that."

Tears well up in her eyes, and I see the love she has for me reflected in their depths.

I wish I could hold her, comfort her, but there's no time. The pounding outside grows louder, heavier, the bathroom door ready to give way.

My phone buzzes like a warning siren. It's Bullet: 'One minute. Hang in there.' Sixty seconds stretch before us, each one a lifetime.

"Get to the window, Lia. Don't argue, don't hesitate, just go."

The bathroom door groans under the force of the men outside, its hinges crying out in protest. Time's running out.

"Hey, Antonio!" I shout, my tone mocking. "You sure know how to knock. Maybe you should try something more subtle, like a bulldozer!"

"Fuck you, Marcus!" Antonio snarls from the other side, his voice dripping with venom. Laughter bubbles up inside me, even as my heart hammers against my ribs. "You're dead, you know that? Fucking dead. I'm going to chop your fucking corpse to pieces in front of your weeping little bitch. How's that make you feel, you pathetic piece of shit?"

"How kinky. Still not even close to the shit I did with your mother. That bitch knows how to bang," I retort, focusing on the door, waiting for it to give way.

The door creaks and groans, cracking, splinters of wood flying like confetti at a twisted celebration. It's time. Time for Lia to run; time for me to die. At least for once in my life—the last time in my life—I can do something selfless. Maybe that'll be enough to get me into heaven. Maybe I really will get to see my grandmother in the afterlife.

"Go, Lia! Now!" I shout, as I fire off another round, the sharp crack of the gun echoing in the small space. *Three shots left.* A pained roar erupts from the other side of the door.

Lia doesn't hesitate. Leaping to her feet, she races to the window with all the grace and ferocity of a gazelle.

"Marcus, you'll pay for this!" Antonio roars, his voice contorted with agony.

I smirk, the taste of defiance sweet on my tongue.

"Maybe," I admit, firing again. "Maybe I will pay. But you know what? I didn't have to pay when I fucked your mother."

I watch as Lia leaps through the broken window, her body disappearing into the night. A surge of relief washes over me, followed by a renewed determination. I won't let them win. Not while there's still breath in my lungs and fire in my veins.

The door gives way. I take one last breath and I smile. It's time to die.

"Come on, you bitches," I challenge, my voice laced with grit. "Show me what you've got."

Chapter Thirty-Two

Amelia

The cold metal of the fire escape presses against my bare feet as I land with a thud. My breath comes in short, frightened gasps, and I feel like a cornered animal. I glance around, eyes darting between the shadows cast by streetlights below and the dark corners where threats may lurk.

I could run, slip away into the night and find safety, but the thought of leaving Marcus behind is unbearable. His words of love still echo in my ears, and I know this might be our last moment together. I can't just leave him to die.

"Is this it?" I think, clutching at the railing. "Is this how we go? One of us running, one of us trapped like a rat in a bathroom, waiting for the end?" Desperation creeps up on me, threatening to consume me whole. There's so much more I wanted to do with Marcus—a lifetime's worth of possibility. I want to have him by my side as my career takes off; I want to see him proud of me; I want to share every morning, every afternoon, every night with him; now, I won't have any of that.

I hear the bathroom door splinter, shatter, surrender. Marcus screams a final war cry and I cling to the cold railing of the fire escape, my heart threatening to burst from my chest. The icy night air bites at my exposed skin, but I barely notice it; all I can think about is Marcus, trapped inside that bathroom, and the fear and remorse that paralyzes me.

I should run.

I need to run.

But I can't.

I know what I'm going to do, too—I'm going to stay here until the last moment, just to be present, just to be nearby, when the man I love dies.

Just when hopelessness threatens to engulf me, a distant but unmistakable sound reaches my ears—the roar of motorcycle engines. My pulse quickens, excitement and anticipation

welling up within me. I break out in laughter as hope overwhelms me.

Shouts of confusion break out inside.

Suddenly, there's a heavy crash and I hear familiar voices screaming in vengeance—family coming to save their own. Gunfire erupts, this time in the other direction. It's as if a dam has broken and chaos floods the room. The Steel Reapers have arrived.

I creep to the window, drawn by the sounds of struggle.

“You motherfuckers are in for it now!” Marcus lets out a ferocious cry, propelling himself into the enemies like a human cannonball. His green eyes are bright, fierce, and full of raw determination. I stare, transfixed by his wild strength.

“Rook! Bullet! Striker! So glad you could make it to the party,” Marcus bellows, his voice hoarse but commanding. I strain my ears and hear them both screaming on the attack.

“Hang on, Thunder. We got you, brother,” Striker shouts, his voice taut with adrenaline.

“Second damn time I'm saving your ass, Thunder,” Rook yells between gunshots. “You owe Eliza and me a nice dinner!”

“Deal,” Marcus roars back, his fists flying, connecting with the faces of Antonio's goons. “Your next trip to McDonald's is on me.”

“You son of a bitch, I will turn right back around,” Rook says. “That damn angel deserves better than McDonald's.”

“Fine. Burger King. Final offer,” Marcus retorts, fists flying as he lays into another of Antonio Mancini's men.

I can't tear my gaze away from Marcus; he moves with the lethal grace of a predator, each strike calculated, precise, and devastating.

“Get down, Lia. This isn't a fucking movie,” Rook shouts at me.

I instinctively drop to my knees. The deafening sound of gunfire fills the air, and I press my body flat against the metal of the fire escape. When it fades, I rise to my knees, carefully peeking through the window, and I see Marcus engaged in a furious fistfight with Antonio. Their faces twisted in rage and insults spill from their lips with vicious vehemence.

“Is that all you got?” Marcus taunts, dodging a vicious swing from Antonio. “Your mother hit harder when she was slapping my ass the other night.” Marcus swings, a staggering combination of lefts and rights hitting Antonio in the face, the stomach, the ribs.

“Pathetic,” Antonio snarls back, landing a brutal hit on Marcus’ face.

I shout, sensing the pain he must feel at the heavy blow. Blood oozes from his split lip, but he doesn’t back down. Instead, he strikes back, his fists connecting with Antonio’s body like gunfire.

I grip the windowsill tightly, the metal cold and unyielding beneath my fingers. Every punch, every kick, sends a shockwave of fear and adrenaline surging through me. But I can’t look away.

“Go to hell, you bastard!” Marcus yells, driving a hard knee into Antonio’s stomach. The wind is knocked out of him, and he doubles over, gasping for breath.

“Already been there, sweetheart,” Antonio wheezes, straightening up and slamming Marcus into the wall. Antonio’s nose is visibly broken, blood streaming down his face, but he grins through the pain—a feral, wicked grin that chills me to my core. “And I’m not going back alone.”

“Sorry, seeing your mother once was enough for me,” Marcus growls, launching himself at Antonio with a primal yell.

They grapple, muscles straining, sweat and blood mingling as they clash like titans. The room around them has become a battlefield—shouting, punching, furniture splintering, bullets flying. It’s chaos incarnate.

“Enough with the fucking talk about my mother,” Antonio snarls. “She’s actually a really nice woman.”

“Would you rather hear what I have to think about your face?” Marcus snaps. “Because it ain’t going to be pretty.”

There’s a whirl of action—one of Antonio’s men tries to sneak up behind Marcus—and I cry out. “Marcus!” I scream. “Behind you!”

He whirls, kicking the other man in the groin and then kneeing him in the face once he doubles over. Seeing Marcus distracted, Antonio tries to seize on the opportunity. But, like he has some sixth sense, Marcus dodges Antonio’s blow and retaliates with a heavy right hand.

“Told you I’m always careful, Lia,” he pants, catching Antonio’s arm and twisting it behind him. The mafia enforcer howls in pain, his face contorted with fury. Marcus shows no mercy, driving a punch into Antonio’s throat that rips a jagged, wheezing gasp from his bloody mouth and then delivers a knee to his face that finally topples him to the ground.

With their boss down, those of Antonio’s men that are still standing break for the exit.

The room goes quiet, and sensing safety, I pull myself up into the bathroom, my body shaking from a mix of relief and fear. Marcus runs to me and his arms wrap around me, our bodies pressed together in a desperate embrace. His green eyes search mine, his voice ragged and raw as he says, “Are you alright, my love?”

“I’m fine,” I assure him, my voice trembling. My fingers brush over the drying blood on his forehead, my heart aching at the sight of his injuries. “But you’re hurt. Hold still, let me take care of you.”

“You can be a sexy nurse later, Lia,” Marcus murmurs, his breath hot against my ear. “We have to go. The cops will swarm this place soon. Let’s get to my home. We’ll be safe there.”

With a nod, I follow him out of the bathroom and into the chaos that once was my hotel room. The air is thick with the

scent of gunpowder and sweat, the floor littered with shattered glass, splintered wood, and broken men.

“Wait.” My voice is resolute. I plant my feet on the bloodstained carpet, unwilling to be dragged away from this place just yet. Marcus raises an eyebrow at me, puzzled. “We have to take Brian with us. He’s our key to exposing the Santoro Syndicate.” I pause, my mind racing as I look at Brian, who lies cowering on the floor, shaking, still tied to the toppled-over chair. It’s a miracle he survived, and I intend to take full advantage of that fact. “There’s someone I need to call and have meet us at your house. If I’m right, this could put an end to the Santoro Syndicate’s reign of terror once and for all.”

As we leave the battlefield that was once my hotel room, Marcus throws a nod of gratitude towards Bullet, Striker, and Rook. The bikers, bruised and battered but alive, embrace each other in a bloody hug.

“Stay safe, you guys,” I call out to them, and Bullet flashes me a grin that’s equal parts cocky and endearing.

“As if we’d ever do otherwise,” he replies, smiling. “We’re model citizens, remember?”

“Take care of yourselves,” Rook adds, gruff and grudging as ever. But there’s a warmth in his tone that betrays his true feelings. He may not be the most expressive man, but I know he cares about us just as much as we care about him. “And, Thunder, don’t think I’m ever going to forget that you owe me.”

“Yeah, yeah, I love you, too, Rook. And thanks again for saving my life or whatever,” Marcus says, grinning. With that, he kneels down and hefts Brian to his feet. “Come on, you lucky son of a bitch, time to go.”

With one last glance at our friends, we step out into the night, hearts laden with love and minds set on justice.

“Are you ready?” Marcus asks, his eyes steady and unwavering as they meet mine.

“No, I’m not,” Brian murmurs. “I’d rather go home.”

“Didn’t ask you, dipshit,” Marcus says, shoving Brian forward. “Now, march.”

“I’m ready,” I reply, my voice steely with determination.

Marcus’s lips find mine in a searing, passionate kiss.

“Then let’s go take these bastards down.”

Chapter Thirty-Three

Amelia

Sheer exhaustion wraps around me like a suffocating force, pressing every fiber of my being into the worn leather of the armchair. My mind flits back to the past few hours—every scrape, bruise, and terrifying moment when Marcus and I narrowly escaped death, our pursuers' shouts echoing through the blood-humid air—they all torment me, even in memory.

Across from me, Natalie O'Connell meticulously arranges her audio equipment in the living room of Marcus' house. I've known her only a short time, but I have to admire her dedication to her craft, her determination to take on a story that—by my very bloody appearance—she has to know is dangerous.

Tied to a chair in the corner, a stark reminder of the battle that led us here, is Brian Russell. My former boss's defeated expression betrays a hint of remorse, but it's overshadowed by his fear. He knows that his part in this sinister puzzle, willingly or not, has repercussions—jail or death waits for him. Possibly both, depending on just how vengeful the Santoro Syndicate feels.

“You're certain about going public with this, Lia?” Natalie asks, her voice laden with heartfelt concern. “Once this story gets out, there's no turning back.”

I squeeze my eyes shut for a moment, the sharp pain in my palm grounding me as my nails dig deep. “Absolutely,” I reply, determination seeping through. “People need to know the truth. And all this violence, it has to stop. This is the only way.”

She holds my gaze for a moment, nodding in quiet admiration.

As if sensing the tension creeping in, Marcus enters the room, three cold beers in hand, their condensation leaving wet trails on his fingers. Setting them on the table, he takes his place behind me. The warmth of his hand settles on my

shoulder, its steady weight reassuring. Marcus has been my anchor in this storm, my refuge, my savior.

Without breaking the comforting silence, our eyes meet. No words are needed—our journey, our bond, speaks volumes. We share a gentle kiss, and then Marcus takes a seat, silent but supportive.

Natalie clears her throat gently. “Shall we start the recording now?”

“Let’s do it,” I whisper.

Once the recorder clicks to life, I dive into the story. “For years, I’ve wanted to fight for what’s right, to make a difference, even if it’s in my own nerdy, engineering way,” I start, my voice quivering but steady. “But the depth of corruption and deceit surrounding the *Mar y Tierra* resort project took me by surprise.”

Natalie’s pen moves swiftly across the paper, her eyes occasionally darting up to meet mine, waiting for the details.

“It’s not just an ordinary construction project,” I continue. “The *Mar y Tierra* resort was supposed to be a symbol of sustainable luxury, a beacon of hope for Costa Oscura’s tourism. But beneath its facade lies a dark secret.”

Leaning forward, I lock eyes with Natalie.

“It’s a front, a smokescreen for a much larger and dangerous operation. The resort construction is merely a cover-up for money laundering on a massive scale. And the puppet masters pulling the strings? The Santoro Crime Syndicate.”

A gasp escapes Natalie’s lips, her pen pausing mid-sentence. Then, like the professional she is, she resumes writing.

“They plan to use the vast expenses of construction to funnel and legitimize their criminal revenues,” I explain further, the rawness of betrayal evident in my voice. “But it’s not just about the money. The environmental repercussions are catastrophic. The pristine waters, the unique biodiversity of Costa Oscura—it’s all at risk. All the schematics I made to have *Mar y Tierra* be an ecologically beneficial resort, a place

that would protect and preserve the land it's built on, they've corrupted it. I've seen the suppliers they plan to order from, the materials they plan to use. It's all wrong, all awful, so terrible they might as well just dump toxic waste right into the sea."

I can see the wheels turning in Natalie's mind, the implications of the story unraveling before her. "The public needs to know," she murmurs, echoing my sentiments.

"There's so much more," I start. "All this information from these files I found hidden deep within their computer servers. Here, let me show you..." I take out the flash drive and slip it into Natalie's laptop, loading up mountains of information, all of it dark, disturbing, and deeply criminal. "It's all here. It's all so... sick."

Her eyes scan the screen with the rapid speed of someone who lives for data and information.

"It is. It's sick, but it's more than enough."

An intense, pregnant silence settles between us. But it's a silence filled with understanding and determination, and the glint in Natalie's eyes tells me she is just as committed to the truth as I am.

"More than enough for what?"

She looks up from her notes, her fingers tapping a restless rhythm against her pen.

"Lia, what you've uncovered... it's monumental," she begins, her voice shaking ever so slightly. "When this story breaks, the police, even the FBI, will have no choice but to intervene. You're not just going to save my grandmother's house, you're going to end that entire twisted project and hit a criminal organization right where it hurts."

The weight of her words threatens to pull me under, the magnitude of the situation becoming clearer with each passing second. The thought of the FBI getting involved is both terrifying and comforting.

"But," Natalie continues, leaning forward with an intense look in her eyes, "you need to understand that things might get

even murkier before they get clearer. The Santoro Syndicate is notorious for its ruthlessness. Their first reaction will be to squash the story, to eliminate any potential witnesses or threats.”

Memories of the chase, the bullets, and the narrow escapes flash in my mind. We are walking a perilous tightrope. Marcus seems to sense my apprehension. His fingers tighten around my shoulder. His voice is firm and protective.

“We’ve taken everything they’ve had to throw at us. Whatever happens, we’ll face it head-on. No one’s quashing anything on our watch.”

Natalie nods. “Once the story is out, and especially once the FBI steps in, the syndicate will be cornered. Their vast network, their operations, everything will be under scrutiny. We just have to weather the storm until then.”

Drawing strength from Marcus’s unwavering support and Natalie’s tenacity, I say, “I think we’re more than capable of lasting a little longer, don’t you, Marcus?”

“They can bring it on, for all I care. I’d love another crack at all of Antonio’s buddies,” he says, grinning.

Natalie goes quiet for a moment, her fingers dancing across the keys of her laptop. Finally, with a look that’s both proud and apprehensive, she says, “I’ve just sent the rough cut of this interview to my editor. Just to be safe. Oh, I can’t wait to finish this thing. It’s going to be huge. So fucking huge.” Natalie’s smile lights up the room. This story isn’t just big for me, for Marcus, and for saving Eileen’s house—this story is going to send Natalie’s career into orbit. “They’re done for, Lia. You’ve beaten them. You’ve won.”

I look out the window, see the sun casting its glowing rays over the landscape, and feel the weight that’s been on my shoulders ever since this nightmare began suddenly disappear, replaced by hope, by gratitude, by love.

I take Marcus’s hand in mine and squeeze it.

“We’ve won.”

Epilogue: Amelia

Weeks later

The thick, enveloping aroma of oil paint and turpentine fills my nostrils. These scents, which once were nothing more than fond memories of my college days with Sera and the occasional day where I allowed myself to indulge in my hobby, now fill most of my free waking hours. The backroom of Tide & Palette, Sera's art gallery in Costa Oscura, is a labyrinth of my emotions, with canvases strewn everywhere, echoing every shade of my soul.

I stand before an easel, brush in hand. The canvas in front of me is a riot of colors, each brushstroke trying desperately to make sense of the storm raging inside me. Love, confusion, betrayal—my emotions blur into one another, much like the paints on my palette.

The door creaks, pulling me out of my reverie. Sera, ever the radiant gallery owner with an impeccable sense of style, steps in. Her heels make a soft clickety-clack as they touch the wooden floor. Her gaze flits from one painting to another, each glance seeming to dissect and understand the stories behind them, before finally resting on me.

"Wow, you've been busy," she notes, her voice a mixture of surprise and admiration.

"It keeps my mind off things," I reply. There's a lot I'm trying to keep my mind off of: a lost job, a lost purpose, an evil criminal empire trying to make me lose my life.

Sera walks over to a landscape I'd worked on last week, her fingers brushing gently over the textures. "The way you've captured the ocean—it's like it's alive," she observes. "You've got a gift, Lia."

Her words touch me, unexpected and warm.

"You think?" I ask, a vulnerability seeping into my voice.

Sera nods, her eyes holding mine. "I know so. These aren't just distractions. They're masterpieces."

Despite the flood of compliments, doubt creeps in.

“They’re just hobbies, you know? It’s not like anyone else would want them. They’re just things taking up space in your back room. Which, I promise you, as soon as I get another job, I’ll pay you back for all the paint and canvas.”

Sera’s eyes soften, her voice tender. “You’re going through a lot, I get it. But maybe, just maybe, these aren’t mere distractions. Maybe this is a sign, nature’s way of pointing you to a new beginning.”

“A new beginning sounds nice, but it’s hard to see it now.”

Sera’s laugh, light and melodic, fills the room. “That’s because you’re too close to the canvas. Sometimes, you need to step back to see the bigger picture. Or, at the very least, step back, look at your art, and realize that you’re really fucking talented. You could sell this stuff, Lia.”

“You’re joking,” I say. Her words, so simple yet profound, pull a genuine laugh from me. For a fleeting moment, the weight on my shoulders feels a tad lighter.

“I’m not. I’m really not.”

“Well, maybe someday,” I say.

There’s a soft creak as the door to the studio opens again, and Marcus enters. Every time I see him, my heart does this funny little dance that chases my worries away. Today is no different.

He steps in, Steel Reapers MC cut on his chest, his gaze searching the room before settling on me.

“Hey there. How’s my artist today?” He says.

“Hey, you,” I reply, trying to mask the warmth that bubbles up every time I see him. Our lives are worlds apart, I feel so adrift and he has the MC, the garage, so much going on, yet somehow, with him, everything feels right in my life.

He strides over, and as his arms envelope me, I’m immediately comforted by his familiar scent—a heady mix of leather, cologne, and that unnameable essence that’s just him.

He kisses me, and for a moment, I feel anchored.

“You look like you’re caught up in your head. How about we go for a long ride?” he suggests. The idea of the wind in my hair, the open road ahead, is irresistible. The feeling of freedom, even if short-lived, beckons.

“I’d like that.”

“Good. Sera, I’ll have her back to you in a few hours. At least three,” he says, and he and Sera trade a momentary look.

“Are you two planning something?”

“Lia, you know I’m not the planning type. Come on, let’s ride.”

Taking my hand, he leads me outside and then helps me onto his motorcycle. In minutes, we leave the city behind for the incredible stretch of road that runs along the California coast. The world becomes a blur as Marcus accelerates down the coastal road, the motorcycle’s engine roaring beneath us. I cling to him, my fingers digging into the supple leather of his cut, feeling the firmness of his torso beneath. The wind whips through my hair, sending tendrils flying wild and free, and I feel it pulling away all the cares and worries that weigh down my heart. Every breath I take is a gulp of salty sea air, each exhale ridding me of the tension that has held me down for so long.

To my right, the vastness of the ocean stretches out, its waves rhythmically crashing against the cliffs, sending sprays of white foam into the air. The azure of the sea melds seamlessly with the sky, their vastness making my troubles seem so minuscule in comparison—even the looming threat of the Santoro Syndicate’s retaliation. Every curve Marcus takes, bending the motorcycle just so, sends a new rush of exhilaration coursing through me. The mundane realities of life all fade into nothingness.

In this moment, there’s only Marcus, the hum of the motorcycle, the call of the sea, and the promise of the wide-open horizon ahead.

This is what I want.

Freedom. Surrounded by beauty. Living in it with the man I love.

I shout for joy. A shout that fills me with more peace and happiness than I've felt in so long. The ride goes on for hours, nothing but a rumbling between my legs, my arms around the man I love, and the world nothing but beautiful, open serenity.

Then it ends.

And when we return, the gallery is unrecognizable.

It's buzzing with life, filled with faces I've grown to love: Eileen, Natalie, Eliza, Bullet, Maddy, Rook, even Striker is here, looking dapper in his uniform. The space I'd come to see as a sanctuary of solitude is now transformed. Alive. Elegant fairy lights hang from the ceiling, casting a warm, golden glow over the gallery. Tables draped in white are positioned strategically around the room, each topped with delicate vases holding fresh lilies. Their fragrance mingles with the soft notes of jazz playing in the background. Servers navigate the crowd, carrying trays of champagne and appetizers.

In the center of this spectacle stands a podium, where an animated auctioneer is warming up a growing crowd. To the podium's left, there's a showcase of my best paintings, each one illuminated by a spotlight, their vibrant hues even more pronounced against the dimmed ambiance. I recognize a few faces in the crowd—local artists, gallery owners, and some influential members of the Costa Oscura community.

“What's going on?” Surprise gives my voice a sharp pitch. I'm shaking, vibrating, so overcome with emotions that I feel ready to start jumping.

Marcus and Sera exchange mischievous smiles.

“You tell her,” she says.

“I thought some folks might want to buy those ‘splashes of color,’” he says.

“You did this for me?”

“There's nothing I wouldn't do for you.”

“Shh, you two, the auction is about to begin,” Sera whispers. “Take your seats, because I have a feeling the bidding action is going to be intense. You should hear the way some of these people are talking. They’re like sharks and the water has just been flooded with chum. Or whatever the fuck fishermen say, I don’t know. All I know is that I’ve had three glasses of champagne already and I am so excited to watch people bid on your art, Lia.”

“No way. This can’t be real.”

“It is,” Marcus says. “It’s real, and it’s all for you.”

I watch as they bring the first painting forward—a canvas filled with swirling blues and greens, capturing the tumultuous beauty of Costa Oscura’s waves crashing against its rugged cliffs. The bidding starts slowly, but soon, a fierce competition erupts. My heart races. Each increasing bid feels like a testament to my worth, my talent, my future.

“Going once, going twice, and sold to the gentleman in the back!” The auctioneer’s voice resonates throughout the room, sealing the painting’s fate and making me grin like a lunatic as a euphoria unlike any other washes over me; my work, which I’ve always seen as just an emotional outlet, is now valuable. Valuable. And to someone other than me or my extended, chosen family.

Marcus gently nudges me, drawing my attention to the next piece, a personal favorite. It’s a vibrant depiction of a sun setting over the Costa Oscura harbor, a medley of fiery oranges, purples, and deep blues. And some cute tiny boats that drift in the calm current, because I love cute tiny boats.

“Remember that evening?” he murmurs, reminiscing about the inspiration behind it. We sat on the shore, hands intertwined, losing ourselves in the breathtaking beauty of the world around us. Meaning, I painted the landscape, we kissed a hell of a lot, and then made love in the grass. Twice.

It was a great night.

The bidding for this one is even more zealous, and my smile gets so wide my face hurts. With every raised paddle, every

nod of acknowledgment, the fragmented pieces of my confidence meld back together. This isn't just about the money; it's an affirmation, a resounding chorus that speaks of my worth.

Throughout the night, the pattern continues; throughout the night, my sense of self-worth grows.

My paintings, my dreams displayed on canvas, are appreciated and cherished. I feel a pride that had been elusive for so long; I'm not just Lia, the unemployed woman caught up in the whirlwind of the Santoro Syndicate scandal; I'm Lia, the artist whose work speaks to the souls of those who witness it and makes them want to pay a lot of money to own it.

Sera sidles up to me, grinning like the drunken, lovely lunatic she is, and she hands me a flute of champagne.

"See? I told you," she says. "Your art isn't just a hobby; it's a calling."

The room fills with the sound of applause, drawing my attention to Marcus, who now stands at the podium. He raises a glass in my direction, his eyes speaking volumes, his form a commanding, love-inspiring vision.

"There's just one painting remaining, and I promise I'll let you all get to bidding on it in a moment, but first, I want to take a second to acknowledge the reason you are all here tonight: Lia. Let's all raise our glasses and toast to Lia, the talented, beautiful woman whose art has touched all our hearts tonight."

Tears well up in my eyes.

Surrounded by those who genuinely care, supported unconditionally, I've found a sense of purpose. The road ahead, though uncertain and scary, is filled with promise.

Promise, family, and love.

Epilogue: Thunder

I stand surrounded by family, by camaraderie and laughter and love, with a fire burning in the fireplace in Eileen O'Connell's living room, the roaring flames keeping at bay the coastal evening's chill. The faint smell of the Pacific wafts in now and then, bringing with it a touch of salt.

Eileen's culinary magic fills the dining room, a rich aroma that hints at the home-cooked feast laid out in the dining room; a pair of roasted chickens, their skin dark brown and crackling, roasted potatoes, gravy, caramelized Brussels sprouts with crisp bacon, a loaf of fresh baked bread.

Bullet, slightly drunk, his face red and beaming, is deep in conversation with Owen, now aptly named "Striker," regaling the newest member of the Twisted Devils MC with stories about his fight against the ruthless Covington family. They're all stories I've heard a hundred times before, but they still make me grin to hear them, and I grab a beer and settle into a chair next to him while he retells the tale of the time we ambushed Alexander's car on the freeway and abducted Maddy.

Across the room, Rook and Maddy are entrenched in a drunken debate, about whether capitalism will save or destroy the planet. Rook seems to think it'll destroy it, though it isn't because he's anti-capitalist, he's just anti-everything; Maddy's firmly of the belief that innovation and market forces and other terms she spouts off—terms that I have no fucking clue what they mean—will save us all. Eliza, like a hummingbird, darts between groups, making sure everyone's glasses are full, plates are heavy, and that Rook doesn't hurt anyone. She's mostly successful.

Then there's Lia. Her curly, chestnut hair cascades gracefully down her back as she talks with Eileen and Natalie O'Connell. Her presence is magnetic, pulling my gaze and thoughts toward her every time.

How did I get so lucky?

But with that thought, a pang of anxiety courses through me. The weight of the little box in my pocket, and the surprise it holds, feels heavier than ever.

Eliza's voice breaks through my musings.

"Can you believe it? All the permits for the resort have been canceled, and the big shots are getting arrested."

Rook shrugs and grumbles. "Yeah, but don't kid yourself. The Santoro Syndicate is like a hydra; cut one head off, another appears."

Maddy rolls her eyes. "You don't need to be so grumpy all the time, Rook. Enjoy the moment, savor the win."

"It's a lifestyle choice. Called living in reality. You should try it sometime."

"Maybe I'll try slapping that frown off your face. How about that, you old grump?" Maddy says, grinning.

"Rook, dear, let's not ruin the night. Eileen's house is safe, and that's what matters." Eliza, ever the loving peacekeeper, sighs as she puts a calming hand on Rook's shoulder.

Eileen looks my way, her eyes filled with gratitude. The room falls quiet before she speaks. "Thank you, all of you. Especially you, Marcus and Lia. We fought hard, and we've earned this happiness. Even if I spent every one of my remaining days telling you all how grateful I am for your help, it'll still never be enough. I owe you all more than you'll ever know, and you'll always be welcome under my roof as family."

Pride swells in my chest, making the nervousness ebb for a moment. Seeing her gratitude, it sends my heart soaring; I like to think that somewhere up in heaven—a place that, honestly, I'll probably never make it to, unless there really is a way to break in—my grandmother might be watching and she might be proud of me.

This one's for you, grandma.

Suddenly, I feel Bullet's gaze on me. Meeting his eyes, I see understanding there. He knows something's on my mind;

there's a reason he's been my closest friend for all these years. He motions with a nod to follow him outside.

The chill of the coastal night wraps around us on the porch. Bullet breaks the comfortable silence, putting his hand on my shoulder.

"I've known you long enough, brother. What's eating you?"

I hesitate, looking for the right words. "I have something on my mind. A big question that could change everything. A serious question that's way different from any question I've ever had to consider."

"Is it whether you should start using deodorant? Because, brother, the answer is yes, and we've all noticed how you've been lacking in that department."

"This is serious, Bullet."

"I know, Thunder. I know what's going through your head." A perceptive smile forms on Bullet's face. "How sure are you about this?"

Before I can reply, the door behind us opens, revealing Lia, a soft frown of concern on her face. "Is everything okay? You both seem serious. Has something happened with the Santoro Syndicate?"

Bullet chuckles and slaps me on the back, easing the tension.

"All good, Lia. Just two old friends having a moment."

With a wink in my direction, he leaves us alone.

Lia steps closer, her gaze probing. Those eyes bore into me, through every defense, in a way that I've never known before. I couldn't fight her eyes, even if I wanted to. "Marcus, you're making me nervous. What's going on?"

Heart in my throat, I take a deep breath. The words sit on my tongue, words that I've rehearsed a dozen times before, yet still feel so inadequate. "Everything's perfect, Lia. But there's something I need to ask you."

Time seems to stand still.

The air gets sharper, fresher, and the sound of the distant sea seems crystal clear. With a swallow and another look deep into her soul-touching eyes, I reach into my pocket, drawing out the small velvet box, and drop to one knee.

“Lia, we’ve been through hell and back together and I feel like it’s only made us stronger. Made me realize what’s truly important: you. I want you now, want you tomorrow, want you for the rest of my days. Will you be my ol’ lady and my wife?”

The world narrows to just her. Just how I want it.

Tears gleam in her eyes as her lips curve into a radiant smile.

“Marcus, are you serious? Like, really serious?”

I don’t blame her for asking; she’s heard stories about my past, she knows who I am, there’s not a damn thing about myself that I’d ever hide from her. I smile, the words coming right from my heart. “I’m more serious about you—about us—than I’ve been about anything in my life. I want you, I need you, I love you.”

“Yes. Yes, I’ll be your ol’ lady. Yes, I’ll marry you. Oh my god, yes.”

Pulling her into my arms, relief and joy wash over me. The future feels bright and brims with possibility. Her lips meet mine again and again, and, with my heart thudding in my chest, I press her up against the shut door, my hands roaming her body and her happy moans urging me for more. Minutes pass as we enjoy each other, with our hands, with our lips, with a new chapter in our lives about to begin.

“Shall we go break the news?” I murmur, my words hard to hear because it’s impossible to take my lips away from hers.

“I suppose if we take any longer out here, someone will come looking for us. Let’s go tell them.”

As we reenter the house, Eliza catches sight of us and the new ring on Lia’s finger. Her eyes go wide. She emits a sound that’s something between a squeal of joy and a shocked gasp; it sounds like a chipmunk dying in the happiest way possible.

“Oh, my god. Did he really ask her? Are they really engaged? Rook, where’s the champagne? We need it. Now!”

Laughter erupts and, hand in hand, we join our loved ones, our lives forever changed, forever tied together by love, knowing our journey together is only just beginning.

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