

## A Lifetime Commitment

I was fifteen the first time I ever saw somebody get killed. Really killed, not the accident kind where somebody gets hit by a car or slips and hits their head and the life just goes out of them, fault directed at nobody. No, this time was unmistakably deliberate, because this man probably would've had a long life ahead of him if it weren't for my older brothers. Well, that was before he got on the bad side of Boss Man, so I guess after he went and ratted to the police that aforementioned long life was crossed out of his book.

I still remember how my oldest brother, Hugo, shoved the man to his knees. He barely had time to cry out "*Putá*" – really, for your last words, think of something more original – before Hugo unleashed metal death into his head. Two bullets for good measure. I watched his brains splatter on the baking pavement of that unholy-Dios-hot day. Right next to a mural of the Virgin Guadalupe. Hell of a backdrop.

Back then, that mess on the pavement had my stomach churning. My brain was scrambling to make sense of the horror spread out in front of me. I forced myself to stare at the woman painted on the wall, a brightly colored beauty, all swirls of pink mixed with blue and green and red, because I couldn't bear to look at the body. That version of me thought he'd never get used to something like that. I wish I could say the same years later. I'd seen so much worse. Hell, I'd *done* so much worse.

"Vamanos," my other brother Tomás said. Leaving me no chance to consider the horrible thing I'd just witnessed. So we just walked away, stepping over the bleeding corpse. We walked past the elementary school, its bright walls painted with yellow, blue, and red flowers that seemed to mock me with their cartoonish cheeriness. That kind of thing fucks you up. But hey – what other choice did I have? The truth is, it didn't matter

if I felt sick. I kept moving, because it was either toughen up or end up being the guy on the street, sans brains.

Fucked-up, right? I guess this might explain a little bit of why I was so messed up. Rotten inside. My life was like one chronic disease, waiting to take me out when I was at my weakest. And take me out it did, because in the end it was my own fucking fault for ruining the best thing that ever happened to me.

I first saw her in a dim, crowded bar off Carrera Séptima. It was a birthday party for Javier Rojas, my boss, AKA drug lord extraordinaire. The music in the bar was loud, and it stank of stale beer. The summer air was hot and thick. I was sweating like a pig and hoping nobody would notice.

I was three beers deep, arguing with my brother Tomás over a card game when she walked in – red dress, wild curls, sunflower behind her ear, smile on her face, like she couldn't care less she was in a room full of the nastiest people you'll probably meet in your entire life. Looked like she'd just drifted in from some sunshine-soaked postcard. Who is this woman, I thought, and what is she doing here?

Now, I'll admit, my type usually came with shorter skirts and a lot fewer questions. But this woman had this fire about her, this light. She smiled like she'd never been fucked over by life, which was a seriously new concept to me. Which, sure, yeah, I probably should've known right then that we were doomed. Because if there's one thing about the guys I ran with, they were seriously fucking other people over. Like majorly. But I was doing what I had to to survive, I told myself, so I tried to push that out of my mind while I watched her dance.

When the song slowed, I walked right up to her and asked her if she wanted a drink, still halfway in a trance because of how beautiful she was. I almost didn't even

expect her to say yes, but she grabbed my hand and led me over to the bar. I was surprised to feel that her hands were calloused, and her nails were unpainted. Her dark eyes glimmered as she watched me in the darkness. She was almost my height, which would've scared some men away, but not me. I was already too far gone to let matters like height bother me.

Being so close to her was intoxicating, more so than anything I drank that night. She grabbed the back of my neck and pulled my ear to her lips to speak over the noise of the party. "What's your name?"

"Marcello," I said weakly. She smiled.

"Lucía," she whispered back to me. Suddenly we were the only two people at that party, really, the only people on earth, when she whispered like that, like her name was a secret that I was lucky enough to know.

I was a little drunk, and searching for something to say because she was looking at me so expectantly. It was making me nervous. "So, you know Rojas?" I asked. She looked amused.

"No," she said. "That guy is a piece of shit. I'm just here because I want to dance." She ran a hand over her curls, smoothing them down. She eyed me. "You work for Rojas, don't you?"

I considered lying. Shitty, I know. But I wanted this woman to like me so fucking much, so bear with me. I could tell she was smart by the calculating way she looked at me, not in a bad way, but like she was taking everything in. Not gonna be fooled. "Yeah," I admitted. "Just security stuff. Nothing crazy. And you?"

She was from Bogotá, just like I was, and she was twenty. She had no siblings. She lived alone, really not too far from where I was. She had finished high school, which

in my book pretty much put her up there with Einstein and the greats in terms of intelligence. She was poor, just like the rest of us. Lived alone, parents already six feet deep, just like mine. She worked as a nurse's assistant in Hospital San Juan. They saw a lot of patients nowadays, what with the growing violence from cartels going on. Perhaps the fault of yours truly, Escobar, but definitely helped by Rojas. I kept my mouth shut on that matter.

She really wanted to make enough money to move out of Bogotá and into a small town. Less violence. Or maybe even none. What a serene existence, I thought. And how impossible it all sounded. But if anybody could do it, it was that woman. She spoke with the most passion, with the most hope of anybody I'd ever met.

I spent my days with men so beaten down by life – and fair, some of them had probably been through the most horrendous shit imaginable – that they were missing that light in their eyes. This kind of lifestyle fucked you up. It made people like that forget that they ever had something to look forward to.

I watched her as she spoke, my chest aching at how beautiful she was. The satin of her dress was shiny even in the dim light, the folds reflecting the soft glow from the neon beer signs on the wall. I'll never forget looking at her for that first time. Like I could only see her. Everything else faded away, and I could see my whole life ahead of me in that one moment.

Then she asked me about my life, and it was my turn to speak. I was at a loss for words, kind of, cause I really couldn't just dump my whole tragic existence on somebody I just met. Especially the beautiful creature that was sitting next to me. I didn't want to say anything that would stop her from smiling like that. I racked my tipsy brain for what to say.

Here's the completely honest version of how I came to be. I guess you could say that I was born into it. Doomed from the start, from the moment my brothers and I were left parentless and alone in the world. Not my parents fault, really, seeing as they were dead. As excuses went for being absent parents, that one was pretty solid.

Anyway, they were victims of a bombing. Not that they were important enough to be targeted personally, they just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time. May 25, 1980 was a bad day to be out to lunch in Bogotá. They walked past the wrong car at the wrong time, and boom. Literally. There were suddenly a million tiny bits of mama and papa, not even enough to bury. And three kids, alone at home.

The day my parents died, something inside me cracked wide open. One minute they're there, and then the next – bam – they're fucking gone. No warning. No goodbye. Just a bomb, one that wasn't even supposed to explode right then. Suddenly I was an orphan at eight years old. After that, everything felt like walking through a bad dream. Like a cruel joke life was playing on me.

I was eight when that happened. I still try to hang onto the memories of my mother, playing with her long, brown hair in the kitchen of our tiny concrete house. How when she smiled with her crooked teeth, looking at her was the happiest I ever felt. The portrait of Jesus in a chipped wooden frame, hands clasped in front of his chest, looked down upon us from his perch in the windowsill. The way the afternoon light peeked through the bars on the window, illuminating the dusty floor. How when my father came home from work as a taxi driver she'd light up as soon as she heard the front door open, and he'd stroll in, eyes weary and heavy, but brightening at seeing his wife and children.

That wasn't my life anymore, so I tried my best not to think about it. I was raised by my brothers, Hugo and Tomás, from then on. Hugo was the oldest at fourteen years old, and Tomás was twelve, so. Any household headed by a fourteen-year-old is definitely going places, right?

Me and Tomás actually did manage to stay in school for longer than I thought we would. Poor Hugo got a job – details yet to be learned by me – a little while after The Incident. School was out of the question for him, but he wanted me and Tomás to stay in school. I still don't know how nobody cared that we were three children living in a house alone, but when your house doesn't even have electricity, I guess there's not too many bills to pay. And, hey, it was the 80s in Colombia. Law enforcement definitely had bigger problems.

The year I first saw somebody get killed, when I was fifteen, I finally dropped out of school. Tomás had been working for several years, Hugo for even longer. I was old enough to be useful, and I had no interest in school anyways. College was so far out of the question – it was laughable, even, so I figured, what's the point?

The only special star on Tomás' and Hugo's jobs was that they weren't exactly the legal kind. Obviously, putting a bullet through somebody's head on a Tuesday afternoon wasn't your average tomato-picking job, but I had no idea how much deep shit my brothers were in until I was old enough to pitch in and earn my own salary.

They'd been working for a man named Javier Rojas. He'd been the one to offer Hugo a job way back when – I still have no idea how he found him, but he always needed kids for his odd jobs, posting up on street corners and rooftops as lookouts or riding bikes filled with cargo. Rojas had a smaller-scale drug operation going on in Bogotá. Nothing like Pablo Escobar – the man was a cocaine legend. We all knew not to

ever fuck with any of Escobar's men. That was asking for it. Rojas let him take the top trade, sell internationally, make all the money, while we took up the spaces he didn't inhabit. But even Rojas, with his second-rate cartel, was a cruel man. It didn't take much to do something to offend him, and my poor brothers were sometimes tasked with taking care of business.

Hugo had long since graduated from standing around with a walkie talkie into doing much more questionable things. Tomás, too. Yeah, it was awful, and yeah, they did some things that I don't even want to talk about. But at the end of the day, they were still my brothers. And we had absolutely nothing outside of this, no education, not even a high school diploma. There were no jobs in sight for us, nothing that would give us a better life than the one the ever-generous Rojas was offering. We actually had some money, crazy. We could afford to buy food and clothes. Plus the ticket out of a place like this was usually death, so. All the more reason to stay.

We worked our asses off, always finding ourselves in all sorts of nasty situations. I'd get calls in the middle of the night – Rojas had actually paid to install electricity in our house so we could have a phone – and I'd have to drag myself out of my bed in the dark to go drive to God knows where in the truck they'd given us.

But if it was a night where I didn't have to work till some ungodly hour, my brothers and I tried our best to enjoy ourselves. It wasn't all bad. We were young men after all, at this point being eighteen, twenty-two, and twenty-five. In the prime of our lives. I'd been working for Rojas for three years at this point, since I was fifteen. I was a man. I really didn't have any friends, my job not really being conducive to team bonding, so I spent all of my time with my brothers, or by myself.

So, yeah. How could I possibly condense all that into a respectable answer to her question?

“I...Uh,” I started lamely. Nice one. I steadied myself. “I’m from Bogotá, too. I have two older brothers, Tomás and Hugo. We all still live together. They’re my best friends, really.” She nodded, listening, interested.

I decided to tell her about the good things. Things I liked. That’s always a good place to start. I told her about how sometimes when I was tired of the stink of the city I’d walk a mile to the outskirts, the terrain growing more greener the further out I walked. It was all hills around us, coated in trees as far as I could see. I’d take a deep breath of the muggy air, smelling the fresh rain and leaves and dirt and rot. On days like these I’d think of my mother, how she would always bring back purple wildflowers to put in the old tin can on the windowsill in the kitchen. I could see the purple climbing up the mountain whenever I was there, sprinkling the green with its royal hue.

She still was listening silently, so captivated. I got careless and let my guard down a little, told her some more.

I explained how my mamá and papá’s faces had already left my memory at this point, it’d been so long since they died. Ten years, but in kids years, basically eternity. Messed up, I know, but anybody who claims the opposite is probably bullshitting. Sorry. My heart ached just the same even without a clear image of them, maybe even more. I mourned for the childhood I lost. My brothers were great, but they weren’t exactly the epitome of maternal comfort. Sometimes, I just wanted somebody to put their arms around me and tell me it was going to be okay.



And you know what she did? She set her drink down, wrapped me up in her arms, and told me it was going to be okay. Right there in the middle of the bar, surrounded by loud music and people dancing. That was pretty much it for me. I was a goner.

I knew even that night that I'd fallen too far. That I was headed into dangerous territory. Lucía was a dream that I was stupid enough to believe in. I was stupid to think I could have one thing in this world that was untouched by Rojas. We started seeing each other whenever we could. She'd tell me stories from the hospital, about patients who came in bleeding, terrified. She'd cry when they didn't make it. The amount of people who had died in her arms astonished me.

She had no idea what she'd gotten herself into. With me, I mean. She had no idea that I was poison. She was a balm for the wreck I was becoming. It was getting hard, hard to balance it all. Being Mr. Perfect, untouched, normal, dare I say, with Lucía. And then going back to work and doing things she'd surely leave me for if she had any clue. She was innocent, untouched by the ugly. Only a witness, never guilty of crimes, my Lucía was. Maybe that's why I kept going back. Why I was so in love with her. Because when she looked at me, I felt like I could be a little bit like her. Even if I was fooling myself.

She'd only brought it up once. We'd been seeing each other for almost a year, so. Pretty serious. She wanted to do it. To move away, to a little town in the South of Colombia where none of this shit with cartels was a problem. She wanted me to come with her. And the truth was, I wanted to. I wanted to so badly. But it wasn't that simple, you have to understand. This life? It didn't let you go that easy. You didn't get to walk away. You either died or got so old you couldn't work anymore. And nobody lived that long.

Rojas was breathing down my neck, more than ever before. He had big plans, he claimed. Stay in your territory, I thought. You don't need to be the next Pablo Escobar, I wanted to scream. I knew he wanted me to take on more work. Bigger jobs. I guess he was expecting me to be honored, so I plastered a fake smile on my face. Acted like I was excited for the chance to prove myself. But I really could only think about Lucía, my luz, my light. How she could be caught in the crossfire if things got worse.

One night, as I was sneaking back into our house, Hugo was waiting outside the front door, smoking a cigarette. He watched me, black eyes unreadable, but with a frown on his face that told me he knew exactly where I'd been.

"You've been spending a lot of time with that girl, hermano," he said, his voice low.

I froze, but tried to play it off. I crossed my arms and looked him in the eyes. "Yeah. So?"

He shrugged, exhaling smoke. "Rojas isn't too happy about it. Talked to me personally," he said. "I don't want to fucking talk to Rojas more than I have to. He said you're distracted. So get your shit together."

"*Que se vaya al diablo*<sup>1</sup>," I murmured, eyes towards the pavement. My voice shook. He could tell, he wasn't stupid. Neither of us were.

He stubbed out his cigarette on the windowsill. Looked back at me. Sad look in his eyes. "Marcello, you want out, you'd better get that thought out of your head right now. There's no 'out'. Not for us. Not for you. You think Rojas gives a damn about your girl?" He paused, taking a breath. "He doesn't give a shit about anybody but himself. Remember that before you make any stupid decisions."

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<sup>1</sup> "He can go to hell"

He opened the door to go inside. Over his shoulder as he disappeared inside, he said softly, “I love you, Marcello. Don’t forget about me and Tomás.”

I tried to go to sleep. But that night I couldn’t, lying in the muggy air in our tiny house. All I could see was Lucía, smiling at me in the dim light of a bar, or walking next to me in the street, or leaning in to whisper a story to me. I was wrecked, so far gone. I barely knew who I was without her anymore. This was deep shit, I knew. If there was anything my life had taught me, it was to not get too attached, and here I’d gone and gotten myself absolutely obsessed with this woman. It scared me, the way I felt. I couldn’t shake the feeling that sooner or later, everything would blow up in my face. Good things didn’t happen to me. I didn’t *deserve* good things. I didn’t deserve *her*.

A few days later, Rojas finally cornered me, calling me into his house. He wore that fucking creepy fake smile, one that he probably thought was a game-winner but really just made him look insincere. He leaned back in his chair, looking me over. I fidgeted, playing with the little strings hanging from the upholstery of the chair I was sitting in.

“Marcello,” he said smoothly. Greasily. “There’s a little something I need you to take care of.” He slid a photo across the table of a man. “This is important. A doctor. Works at the San Juan hospital. Word is, he’s been talking to the police. We can’t let that slide.” He smiled. “I know you have your connections in the hospital. Should be easy, no?”

My heart was pounding. I hoped he couldn’t see the panic in my eyes. I was trapped. And how dare he bring Lucía into this, how dare he mention her. I wanted to reach across that table and claw his beady eyes out for that. But instead I nodded.

Refusing wasn't an option, not if I wanted to stay alive. But if I went through with it, this time it would directly affect Lucía. I didn't know what to do.

As I left his house, I felt like I was being squeezed on every side. All of these half-truths I'd been telling Lucía, all of the times I'd been ordered to do things I regretted since meeting her, replayed in my mind. She was going to figure it out, of course she was. She was the brightest person I knew. But if I tried to leave, I'd be putting her in danger.

They come for the ones you love first. Even if you've lost your will to live and you don't care if they put a bullet in your skull, you better make sure that's what your mom and your sister and your cousins want, too. Because sure as hell that's what was coming for them if you jumped ship. Problem was, if I did this job she'd never forgive me. You can imagine the state that I was in that day.

I went to see her that night, my head a mess. I wondered if I should just tell her everything. Beg her to run away with me. I knew she would. It was what she wanted, after all. But when I saw her standing there in her apartment, wet hair dripping onto one of my old t-shirts, I couldn't. I couldn't drag her any deeper into this hell with me.

So I kept my mouth shut. I held her extra close that night. Trying to memorize every detail of her body. Every smile, every laugh, every time she pressed her lips to mine. I knew it was a matter of time before it all went up in flames, before Rojas ripped everything good in my life away. But I held on anyways, stupid, desperate, pretending for one last night that I could have a normal life.

The next day was the big day. Rojas called me in the morning, laying out the plan. Go in. Simple. Security had already been paid off. Take care of the target. Leave. As plans went, it sounded pretty easy. Needed to be done as soon as possible. But I was

terrified. What if Lucía saw me? I didn't want to do this, you know. Of course not. Nobody enjoys killing other people. But I had no choice.

It went pretty seamlessly. All I had to do was walk in the front door, pistol tucked in the waistband of my jeans. It honestly seemed like a cruel joke, the job I'd dreaded the most ending up being the easiest yet.

The poor guy was alone in his office. It was in the empty part of the hospital, on the hallway lined with offices. The other doctors must've been overwhelmed, like they were every day, so I didn't even walk past anybody in the hall. The door was already propped open, and he was sitting at his desk quietly, doing paperwork. I silently stepped in the doorway, looking straight at him. I'm sorry, I thought. I raised my pistol and pointed it straight at his head. He didn't even have time to cry out, and then he was dead. I was in and out in less than fifteen minutes. It was almost cause for celebration.

I felt a knot in my stomach as Hugo's words echoed in my head. *"Don't forget about me and Tomás,"* he'd said. I hadn't. We were a package deal. If I wanted out, they were dead. It was impossible to forget them under those circumstances. I'd just solidified my loyalty, you're welcome brothers.

I turned away from the office, away from the life I'd just ended. I began to walk down the hallway, but a few seconds after I'd turned around I heard a voice.

"Marcello?"

Oh. My god. I turned around, lightning speed. It was Lucía. My head pounded. She had tears dripping down her face, too fast to wipe away. She stood far away from me, too far away for me to reach for her.

"Lucía, what are you doing here?"

“Marcello,” she repeated, disgust in her voice. Betrayal flashed in her eyes. “You lied to me...*Dios mio*, you just murdered him,” she said. “All this time, I thought...” A sob escaped. “You told me you were doing security!”

“Lucía – I started, my voice breaking. She cut me off.

“No.” She stepped back, her face twisted with grief. “All I wanted was a life away from this. I told you that. And you just murdered my coworker in front of me. I was behind that fucking door! Did you know that?”

I tried to walk towards her, but she backed away. “Don’t,” she said. “Don’t you fucking touch me!”

“Lucía, *please*.” I cried. “I had to. They would’ve killed both of us if I didn’t.”

“Marcello, *don’t*.” She said, “It’s over. I’m leaving. And don’t come with me. You *chose* this. There was a way out. You could’ve just left it all behind. But you didn’t.” And with that, she turned on her heel and was gone, running down the long hospital hallway. I didn’t even have time to shout or beg or fall apart. She was just gone. I sank to my knees, watching her slip away.

In the silence, Hugo’s words felt like a prophecy. She was technically free to go. Without me. As long as she didn’t take me with her, Rojas wouldn’t care if she left town. There really was no way out. I was more trapped than ever.

I needed air. Outside it was damp, dark. Too fucking quiet. I took a breath, but it didn’t do a thing to calm me down. All I could see was Lucía’s face, the look she’d given me. Like she’d finally realized I was too far gone, too neck-deep in this shit to crawl my way out. There was no pretending there was another way out now.

I pulled out a cigarette. Lit it with my shaking hand. I walked, leaving the mess behind, but no matter how far away I got, I couldn’t shake the weight in my chest.

The streets stretched out. I walked aimlessly, numbly. Before I knew it my feet were taking me back to the place I swore to myself I'd never return. But I didn't really mean it. How could I? I was heading straight to Rojas' place. Back to the pit, the source of evil. I kept walking, realizing one ugly truth at a time. There wasn't any leaving, not really. I'd been a fool to delude myself into ever thinking there was really a choice. I dug my own grave years ago. Now all I had left to do was keep going. Step by step, one foot in front of the other, straight into the fucking darkness and to report back to Rojas.