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Southern Flames

Covers Series – Book 3

Kirk Adamson

Chapter 1: The Heat Returns

POV: Luca Voss

Buenos Aires in January hit like a fever.

Luca stepped out of Ezeiza International Airport into a wall of heat so thick it felt like the city was breathing on him. The air smelled of grilled meat, exhaust, and something sweet he couldn’t name. Even at night the pavement still held the day’s warmth. He stood for a moment with his bag at his feet, letting the city press against him.

He had not seen Sofia in four months.

Four months of text messages that grew shorter as their contracts pulled them in opposite directions. Four months of almosts that had finally, in Singapore, become something real. And now here he was again — arriving in another new city while she was still finishing her last weeks in Bangkok.

He took a taxi into Palermo. The driver played loud cumbia and talked the entire way. Luca answered in broken Spanish and mostly listened. When they reached the small apartment he had rented for the month, he paid, nodded, and stepped out into the humid dark.

The street was alive even at midnight. Couples walked arm in arm. Music spilled from open doorways. The smell of *asado* drifted from somewhere nearby. Luca unlocked the door, dropped his bag, and stood in the small, clean room with its high ceilings and peeling paint.

He opened his phone.

No new message from Sofia.

He typed one anyway.

Luca

Landed. It's hot here. Feels like the city is trying to seduce everyone at once.

He didn't expect an answer tonight. She was probably still in service.

He showered, changed into a clean shirt, and stepped back out into the street. He walked without direction, letting the city pull him. After twenty minutes he found himself standing in front of a restaurant with its doors open to the sidewalk. Inside, the lights were low and golden. A long parrilla glowed behind the pass.

He didn't go in. He just stood there for a while, watching the rhythm of the room through the open windows — the way the servers moved, the way the guests leaned toward each other across tables, the way laughter rose and fell like breathing.

He thought about Sofia.

He thought about the bench by Marina Bay and the way she had looked at him when she said, *I don't want to keep almost-building something with you.*

Luca turned and walked back toward the apartment. The heat clung to his skin. Somewhere in this city, in a few days, she would arrive. And this time, neither of them would be leaving the next morning.

He didn't know yet that the city would also bring him something else — a man who believed the old ways were the only ways, and who would become the clearest proof yet of why the thing they wanted to build actually mattered.

For now, there was only the heat, the dark, and the quiet certainty that after two years of crossing paths, they were finally going to stop missing each other.

Chapter 2: Don Julio

POV: Alternating

Sofia arrived three days later.

She stepped out of the taxi in front of the small apartment in Palermo and stood for a moment on the uneven sidewalk, looking up at the building with its wrought-iron balconies and faded pink stucco. The heat was different here than in Bangkok — drier, sharper, and somehow more alive.

Luca was already waiting at the top of the stairs when she reached the second floor.

They didn't speak at first.

He took her bag from her hand and set it down. Then he reached for her, and she stepped into him like she had been holding her breath for four months. His arms closed around her. She pressed her face into his neck and felt his heartbeat against her cheek.

When they finally pulled back, he looked at her for a long moment.

"You're here," he said quietly.

"I'm here."

He kissed her then — not the careful, almost-kiss from Singapore, but a real one. Slow. Certain. The kind that said they had both stopped pretending this was still something they could walk away from.

They stayed in the apartment that first night. They didn't go out. They ordered food from a place down the street and ate it sitting on the floor with the windows open, the sound of the city drifting in. They talked until the sky began to lighten — about the contracts they had taken, about the months apart, about how strange it felt to finally be in the same place with no immediate flight waiting.

The next morning, Sofia started at **Don Julio**, the famous parrilla in Palermo. Luca had already been placed at a high-end restaurant three blocks away. They were close enough to walk to each other after service.

On her third night, Luca came to Don Julio after his own shift ended. He sat at the bar and watched her work.

She was extraordinary.

He had always known she was good, but watching her in this room — the way she read every table, the way she anticipated needs before guests knew they had them, the way she made even the loudest, most demanding Argentinian families soften — it hit him differently now. This was not just skill. This was the thing William Daniels had seen in Paris all those years ago.

After service, they walked the quiet streets of Palermo together. Sofia was still buzzing from the night. Luca listened as she described the tables, the small moments, the way the kitchen moved like a single organism.

Halfway down a narrow street lined with jacaranda trees, she stopped walking.

"What?" Luca asked.

She looked at him, eyes bright from the long service and something else.

"I missed this," she said. "Not just you. This. Talking about the floor with someone who actually understands what it costs."

Luca stepped closer. He reached up and brushed a strand of hair from her face, letting his fingers linger against her cheek.

"I missed watching you," he said.

She leaned into his touch.

They kissed again under the jacaranda trees, the heat of the day still rising from the pavement. When they finally broke apart, Sofia rested her forehead against his.

"We're really doing this," she whispered.

“Yeah,” Luca said. “We are.”

They walked the rest of the way home with their hands linked, the city warm and alive around them, neither of them in a hurry to let go.

Chapter 3: The First Night

POV: Sofia Vale

They didn't make it to the bedroom right away.

The apartment was small — one main room with high ceilings, a bed pushed against the far wall, and tall windows that let in the night air. Sofia had left the windows open earlier, and the sound of distant music and voices drifted in from the street below.

Luca stood near the door after they came in, watching her. The way he looked at her made something low in her stomach tighten.

She walked to him slowly.

When she reached him, she didn't speak. She simply placed her hands on his chest, feeling the steady beat of his heart beneath her palms. He covered her hands with his own, then slid them up her arms to her shoulders, pulling her closer.

The kiss started slow and deepened quickly.

Sofia had imagined this moment in pieces over the last four months — in the quiet hours after service in Bangkok, on the plane to Melbourne, in the long silences between texts. She had imagined the way his hands would feel, the way his mouth would taste, the way her body would respond after so long of wanting and not having.

Reality was better.

Luca's hands moved over her with a kind of reverent attention, like he was memorizing her. He kissed the corner of her mouth, then her jaw, then the place just below her ear that made her breath catch. Sofia's fingers found the buttons of his shirt and worked them open one by one, her knuckles brushing warm skin.

They made it to the bed eventually.

Afterward, they lay tangled in the sheets, the windows still open, the city sounds softer now. Luca traced slow circles on her bare shoulder with his fingertips. Sofia rested her head on his chest and listened to his heartbeat slow.

“I was afraid it would feel strange,” she said quietly. “After all this time.”

“Does it?”

She lifted her head and looked at him. His hair was messy. His eyes were soft in a way she had never seen before.

“No,” she said. “It feels like we finally stopped running.”

Luca was quiet for a moment.

“I keep thinking about what William said that night at Opus,” he said. “About the server in Paris who saw people. I keep thinking. . . I finally understand why he remembered you all those years. It’s not just how good you are at the job. It’s the way you make people feel like they matter.”

Sofia felt her throat tighten.

She didn’t answer with words. She simply leaned down and kissed him again — slower this time, deeper, the kind of kiss that said everything she didn’t have language for yet.

Outside, Buenos Aires kept moving. Inside, for the first time in two years, neither of them was anywhere else.

Chapter 4: What We’re Building

POV: Luca Voss

They started talking about it properly after that night.

It began small — late-night conversations while they lay in bed with the windows open, or over coffee at a small café near the park in the mornings before their shifts. Sofia would describe something that had happened on the floor at Don Julio, and Luca would tell her how he would have handled it differently, or how he wished someone had taught him that exact thing when he was starting out.

One night, after a particularly brutal service, Sofia came home and dropped her bag by the door.

“I had a new girl on the floor tonight,” she said, kicking off her shoes. “She’s good. Really good. But no one’s ever taught her how to read a table before she gets there. She’s learning by getting yelled at.”

Luca was sitting on the edge of the bed, still in his work shirt. He looked up.

“That’s how most of us learned,” he said.

“I know. And it’s bullshit.”

She sat down beside him and leaned her head against his shoulder.

“I keep thinking about your friend William,” she said. “The way he runs his company. The way he makes people feel like they belong there. What if we could bottle that? What if we could teach new servers not just how to carry a tray, but how to make people feel seen the way he does?”

Luca was quiet for a long moment.

“I’ve been thinking the same thing,” he said finally. “Every time I watch a new person get broken down instead of built up. Every time I see someone with real talent leave because the culture is toxic. We’ve both worked in enough places now to know what works and what doesn’t.”

Sofia turned to look at him.

“So what are we saying?”

Luca met her eyes.

“I think we’re saying we want to build something that actually fixes this.”

They talked for hours that night. They talked about the notebook she had been keeping since Florence. They talked about all the small, practical things they had learned the hard way — how to de-escalate

a difficult guest without losing dignity, how to read the energy of a room before you even step into it, how to protect your own energy so you didn't burn out by year three.

By the time the sky began to lighten, they had filled three pages of Sofia's notebook with ideas.

It still didn't have a name.

But it had a shape.

And for the first time, it felt like more than a late-night dream.

Chapter 5: A Day in the City

POV: Alternating

They took a Sunday off together.

It was the first full day they had both been free since Sofia arrived in Buenos Aires. They slept late, then walked to a small market in Palermo Viejo. Sofia bought fresh figs and cheese. Luca bought bread still warm from the oven. They ate standing at a counter while the city moved around them.

Later, they walked through the Recoleta Cemetery, wandering between the marble mausoleums and angel statues. Sofia took photos of the light filtering through the trees. Luca watched her more than he watched the cemetery.

In the afternoon they found a quiet café with tables outside. They sat for hours, sharing a bottle of Malbec and talking about nothing important — childhood memories, favorite cities, the ridiculous things guests had said to them over the years. Every so often their hands would brush on the table, or their knees would touch underneath it, and the conversation would pause for a moment while they remembered they were allowed to touch each other now.

That evening they went back to the apartment. Sofia cooked simple pasta while Luca opened another bottle of wine. They ate on the small balcony as the sun went down, the city lights coming on one by one below them.

After dinner, Sofia stood at the railing, looking out at the lights. Luca came up behind her and wrapped his arms around her waist. She leaned back into him.

"I could get used to this," she said quietly.

"Me too."

She turned in his arms and looked up at him.

"I'm scared of how much I want this," she admitted. "Not just you. This life. Being in the same city. Building something together. It feels like tempting something."

Luca brushed his thumb across her cheek.

"I'm scared too," he said. "But I'm more scared of going back to the way it was before."

Sofia searched his face for a long moment, then nodded.

"Okay," she said. "Then we keep going."

They went inside. The wine sat forgotten on the counter. The city kept moving below them. And for one full day, neither of them thought about the next contract or the next city or the distance that had always come between them before.

They simply let themselves have this.

Chapter 6: The Visa Question

POV: Sofia Vale

The email came on a Tuesday morning.

Sofia was sitting on the balcony with her coffee when her phone lit up. She read it twice, then a third time, hoping the words would change.

Her visa for Argentina was only valid for another six weeks. The restaurant had applied for an extension, but there was no guarantee it would be approved in time. If it wasn't, she would have to leave the country and re-enter on a new visa — which meant leaving Buenos Aires. Leaving Luca.

She didn't tell him right away.

She carried it through her shift at Don Julio, smiling at tables, recommending wines, doing everything exactly as she was supposed to. But the email sat in her chest like a stone.

When she got home that night, Luca was already there. He took one look at her face and knew something was wrong.

“What happened?” he asked.

She handed him her phone without speaking.

He read the email, then set the phone down on the table. For a long moment he didn't say anything.

“How long do we have?” he asked finally.

“Six weeks. Maybe less if they don't approve the extension.”

Luca ran a hand through his hair. He looked out the window at the dark street below.

“I just got here,” Sofia said quietly. “We just started this.”

“I know.”

She sat down on the edge of the bed. Luca came and sat beside her. He took her hand.

“We knew this would happen eventually,” he said. “The industry doesn't care about timing.”

“I'm tired of the industry deciding when we get to be together.”

Luca was quiet for a long time.

“So let's stop letting it,” he said.

Sofia looked at him.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean we start making decisions based on what *we* want, not what the next contract says. If the extension doesn’t come through, we figure out the next city together. Not separately.”

Sofia felt something shift in her chest.

“You’re serious.”

“I’m serious.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder.

“I don’t know how to do this any other way,” she said.

“Neither do I,” Luca answered. “But I think we’re about to learn.”

Outside, Buenos Aires kept moving. Inside, for the first time, they started talking about the future not as something that would pull them apart, but as something they might actually get to choose.

Chapter 7: Sydney

POV: Luca Voss

They left Buenos Aires together.

Sofia’s visa extension was denied. There was no drama, no last-minute reprieve. Just a short email and a polite request that she leave the country within thirty days.

They had four weeks left.

They spent those weeks working, talking, planning, and being together in every way they could. When the time came, they flew to Sydney on the same flight.

Luca had taken a short contract at **Quay**, the iconic restaurant overlooking the harbour. Sofia had found a position at a high-volume, high-profile spot in Surry Hills. They rented a small apartment in Potts Point with a view of the water.

Sydney was cooler than Buenos Aires, sharper, more dramatic. The harbour stretched out like a promise every morning. But the pressure was already building.

One night after service, Luca came home to find Sofia sitting on the couch with her laptop open, staring at the screen.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

She turned the laptop toward him.

It was a job posting for a restaurant in Melbourne. Six-month contract. Strong team. Good money.

“They want me to start in eight weeks,” she said.

Luca sat down beside her.

He didn’t ask her not to take it. He knew better than that.

Instead he said, “What do *you* want?”

Sofia closed the laptop and looked at him.

“I want to stop doing this,” she said. “I want to stop choosing between you and the work. I want to build something that lets us do both.”

Luca reached for her hand.

“Then let’s start treating it like it’s real,” he said. “Not a someday dream. Something we’re actually building.”

That night they stayed up until three in the morning, filling pages with ideas. They gave it a working name — **ServeMaster** — though neither of them was sure it would stick.

For the first time, it felt less like a fantasy and more like a plan.

But the clock was still ticking.

Melbourne was waiting.

And neither of them knew yet what — or who — would be waiting for them there.

Chapter 8: The Harbour

POV: Sofia Vale

They walked along the harbour one Sunday morning when neither of them had a shift.

The sun was bright on the water. Ferries moved slowly across the bay. The Opera House gleamed white against the blue sky. Sofia had her hand in Luca’s as they walked, their steps falling into an easy rhythm.

“I’ve been thinking about William Daniels,” Luca said after a while.

Sofia looked at him.

“What about him?”

“About the way he talks about his people. About how they stay because they feel like they matter. I keep wondering what that would look like in a restaurant. Not just one restaurant. Across the industry.”

Sofia was quiet for a moment.

“I think it would look like what we’re trying to build,” she said. “Something that teaches people how to create that feeling instead of just demanding it.”

They stopped at a railing overlooking the water. Luca turned to face her.

“I’m scared this is going to fall apart when we get to Melbourne,” he said. “I’m scared we’re going to get pulled in different directions again.”

Sofia reached up and touched his face.

“Then we don’t let it,” she said. “We make the plan bigger than the contracts. We decide that ServeMaster — or whatever we end up calling it — is the priority. Not the next job. Not the next city. *This.*”

Luca searched her eyes.

“You really believe we can do this?”

“I believe we’re the only two people I’ve ever met who actually understand what it would take,” Sofia said. “And I believe we’re done almosting.”

Luca smiled then — small, real, and tired in the way that only someone who had been running for years could be tired.

“Okay,” he said. “Then we keep going.”

They stood there for a long time, the harbour moving below them, the city bright and loud around them. For the first time, the future didn’t feel like something that would happen to them.

It felt like something they were finally going to make happen.

Chapter 9: Melbourne

POV: Alternating

Melbourne was colder than they expected.

They arrived in late autumn, the air sharp and the skies often grey. Luca had taken a short contract at **Attica**, the acclaimed fine-dining restaurant in Ripponlea. Sofia was at **Gimlet**, the vibrant, high-energy spot in the city centre. They found a small apartment in Fitzroy and tried to settle into a rhythm.

It was harder than Buenos Aires had been.

The contracts were demanding. The hours were long. They saw each other less than they had hoped. But they protected the time they did have — early mornings before shifts, late nights after service, one full day off together each week.

It was during one of those days off that Sofia first heard the name.

They were sitting in a café in Fitzroy when a server at the next table mentioned it in passing.

“Marcus Hale’s looking for people again,” the woman said to her friend. “He’s opening another spot. Traditional. Old school. Says he wants people who understand how it used to be done.”

Sofia didn’t think much of it at the time.

Two weeks later, she met him.

Marcus Hale was in his early fifties, with a neatly trimmed beard and the kind of posture that suggested he had spent his life expecting to be obeyed. He owned two restaurants in Melbourne and was known in certain circles for running a tight ship. Some people called it discipline. Others called it something else.

Sofia met him at a small industry event. He was charming in a polished way, and when he learned she had worked at Don Julio and in Tokyo, he became interested.

“You’re exactly the kind of person I’m looking for,” he said. “Someone who understands real service. Not this modern nonsense where everyone’s trying to be friends with the guests.”

Sofia smiled politely.

“I think there’s room for both,” she said.

Marcus laughed like she had said something charming but naïve.

“You’ll learn,” he said. “The old ways work for a reason.”

Sofia didn’t argue.

But she remembered the conversation.

And when she told Luca about it later that night, he went very quiet.

“I’ve heard of him,” Luca said. “He’s got a reputation. Breaks people down to build them back up his way. A lot of good people have left his restaurants.”

Sofia looked at him.

“Then maybe someone should show him there’s another way,” she said.

Luca didn’t answer.

But something in his expression shifted.

Chapter 10: The Table We Want

POV: Luca Voss

They sat in the Royal Botanic Gardens on a rare sunny afternoon, a blanket spread on the grass, takeaway coffee cups between them.

Sofia had her notebook open on her lap. Luca was reading over her shoulder.

They had been working on the outline for weeks now — not just ideas, but actual structure. Modules. Lessons. The kind of practical, floor-tested knowledge that no one ever wrote down because they assumed you had to learn it the hard way.

“What if we started with the thing William talked about?” Luca said. “The part about making people feel seen. That’s the foundation everything else should sit on.”

Sofia nodded and wrote it down.

They worked for two hours, the notebook filling with pages. When they finally closed it, Sofia leaned back on her elbows and looked up at the sky.

“I keep thinking about what this could actually become,” she said. “Not just an app. A real shift in how the industry treats its people.”

Luca was quiet for a moment.

“I saw what Marcus Hale does to people,” he said finally. “I’ve worked for men like him before. They believe the only way to make someone strong is to break them first. And then they wonder why everyone burns out or leaves.”

He looked at Sofia.

“I don’t want to spend the rest of my life working in places like that. And I don’t want new people to have to learn the way we did — by surviving it.”

Sofia reached over and took his hand.

“Then we build the alternative,” she said. “We build the thing William showed you was possible. The thing we’ve both been chasing without knowing how to name it.”

Luca squeezed her hand.

“We’re going to need help,” he said. “Money. Time. People who believe in it.”

“I know.”

They sat in silence for a while, the afternoon light filtering through the trees.

Then Sofia turned to him.

“We’re really doing this,” she said. It wasn’t a question anymore.

“Yeah,” Luca answered. “We are.”

He leaned over and kissed her — slow, certain, the kind of kiss that said they had finally stopped waiting for permission to build the life they wanted.

The gardens were quiet around them. Somewhere in the city, Marcus Hale was running his restaurants the way he always had. But here, on a blanket in the grass, two people who had spent years crossing paths were finally, deliberately, choosing to walk in the same direction.

Chapter 11: The Parting

POV: Alternating

The offer for Sofia came on a Wednesday.

A high-profile restaurant in Singapore wanted her for a six-month contract. The money was excellent. The reputation was better. It was the kind of opportunity most servers would kill for.

She stared at the email for a long time before showing it to Luca.

He read it without speaking.

When he finally looked up, his face was carefully neutral.

“You should take it,” he said.

Sofia felt something crack in her chest.

“I don’t want to.”

“I know. But this is the work. This is what we do.”

She sat down on the edge of the bed.

“I’m tired of the work deciding for us.”

Luca came and sat beside her. He took her hand.

“Then we make the decision together,” he said. “You take the contract. I finish mine here. And we keep building. Every night. Every spare hour. We don’t let the distance win this time.”

Sofia looked at him for a long moment.

“You’re sure?”

“I’m sure.”

She leaned her head against his shoulder.

“I hate this.”

“I know.”

They sat there for a long time, the weight of another separation settling between them. But this time it felt different. This time they had something they were building toward — something bigger than the next contract.

When Sofia finally stood up, she looked calmer.

“I’ll tell them yes,” she said. “But I’m not starting until I’ve finished here. I want every day we have left.”

Luca nodded.

They had six weeks.

They made the most of every one.

Chapter 12: The Seed

POV: Luca Voss

The night before Sofia left for Singapore, they walked through the Royal Botanic Gardens one last time.

It was late. The gates were closed, but they found a quiet spot near the edge where they could see the city lights through the trees. Sofia had her bag already packed. Her flight was at dawn.

They didn’t talk much.

They had said everything that needed to be said in the weeks leading up to this moment. They had made their promises. They had built their plan. They had decided that this time, the distance would not be the end of something — it would be the space in which they built it.

When it was finally time to go, Sofia turned to him.

“I’ll see you in the next city,” she said. It had become their phrase.

Luca pulled her close and held her for a long time.

“No more almosts,” he said against her hair.

“No more almosts.”

She kissed him one last time, then picked up her bag and walked toward the waiting car.

Luca stood in the dark garden long after she was gone.

He thought about William Daniels in the Opus courtyard, cigar smoke curling under the maple leaves. He thought about the young server William had never forgotten — the one who made every guest feel

seen. He thought about the notebook Sofia had carried across four continents, and the pages they had filled together in Buenos Aires and Sydney and Melbourne.

He thought about Marcus Hale and the old ways that broke people instead of building them.

And he thought about the thing they were going to build — the thing that would carry William’s philosophy into every kitchen that needed it.

Luca took out his phone and opened the note titled “Sofia.”

He added one line at the top:

We’re going to build it. And we’re going to make sure it lasts.

Then he put the phone away, turned, and walked back toward the lights of the city — carrying the seed of something that had started with stolen glances on bridges and in rainstorms, and was finally, after three long years, beginning to take root.

End of Book 3: Southern Flames