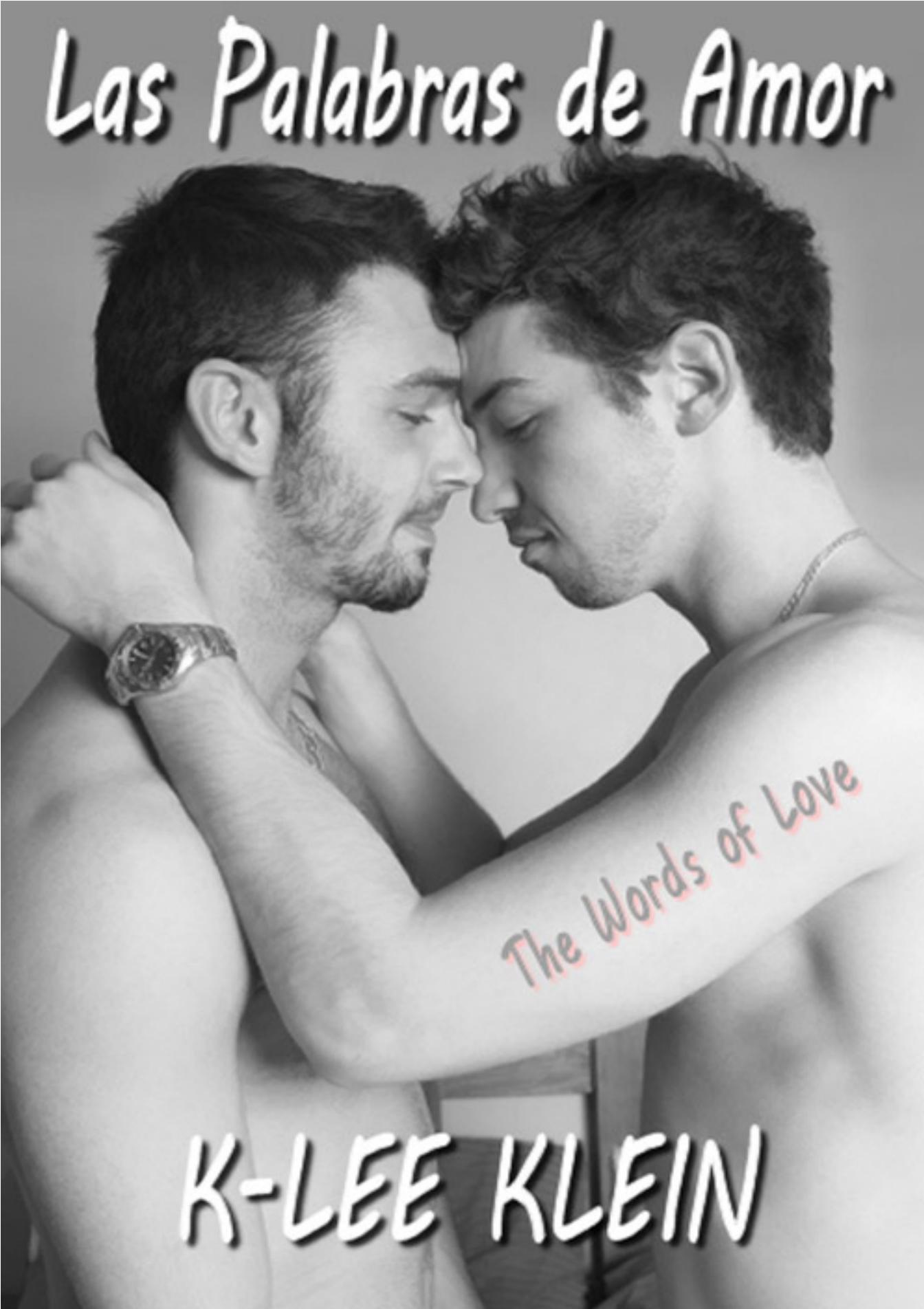


Las Palabras de Amor



K-LEE KLEIN

Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

LAS PALABRAS DE AMOR

(THE WORDS OF LOVE)

By **K-lee Klein**

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what they do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader

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LAS PALABRAS DE AMOR

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Photo Description

Close-up photo of two men's heads, and part of a muscled arm in front of them. One man is facing forward with only half his face showing, and the other is turned to the side. The man on the left is darkly-stubbled, and ethnic in appearance. The man on the right has one eye staring into the camera.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

That's us... Danilo and I, on our last night together. A few hours after I took this photo Danilo got the phone call that his wife had gone into labor, we had agreed that when the baby was born we would finally go our own way. A week later I left for my Peace Corps mission in Africa.

That was two and a half years ago, now I'm back in the neighborhood and it's like it's always been. I'm still the gringo, the only white kid on the block.

Everything is the same... But it isn't. Danilo is raising his son alone, and I am not the boy I was, I am not settling for being his little secret anymore. Ten years of hiding were enough for me. I still love him though... He called me last night and asked if I wanted to meet his son, Lucas. His son who he named after me... I wanted to be strong and say no, but I said yes anyway.

I never could stand to disappoint Danilo.

Sincerely,

Lauraadriana

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, reunited, men with children, self-discovery, coming out, characters with history, multicultural

Word count: 14,963

Dedication

For Lauraadriana who gave me two very interesting characters to write and a plot situation I'd never dealt with before. I hope I did it justice. And for M.L. Rhodes who offered me support, encouragement, and her fabulous editing skills.

LAS PALABRAS DE AMOR

(THE WORDS OF LOVE)

By K-lee Klein

Lucas Winston had only been back in town for a week, arriving from South Africa then heading straight to his grandmother's house. He hadn't told her he was coming, but after a stern lecture and a lot of tears— from them both— she'd taken him in with no questions asked. It wasn't permanent. He hadn't lived with her since he was twenty years old and he had no intention of moving backward in his life instead of forward... until Danilo called.

He'd answered his grandmother's phone without thought or the inkling of an idea that the person on the other end of the line could say something that might alter his plans forever. The voice had immediately unraveled the steel-encased threads around Lucas' heart and threatened to alter his intention of starting over. It was the one thing he hadn't wanted to happen, the only thing that could make him regret coming home to familiar surroundings. And unfortunately, once the politically correct pleasantries of old friends were dispensed with, the news had been far worse than Lucas had even anticipated.

“I want you to meet my son... Lucas.” Danilo's words had been abrupt and determined.

All of Lucas' breath left his body, sucked out by eight simple words he'd hoped never to have to hear. His voice hitched painfully in his throat and he struggled to control himself, despite the moisture that sprung to his eyes. He wanted to say no, wanted to leave well enough alone, just get on with the plans he'd sketched out in his head— apartment, job, hopefully a lover to share his life with.

Danilo Torres did not fit into that equation. Danilo Torres was the past, both good and bad, and Lucas needed to concentrate on the future— his future. And his future did not include sitting on the sidelines of someone else's family.

That, of course, didn't explain why he was standing at the metal front gate of a small, well-kept house, his fingers wrapped around the cold steel while his brain spun in a whirlwind of indecision. A ridiculous stuffed bear hung precariously from the fingers of his other hand, all but forgotten in the shock of standing in front of Danilo's house... the house he shared with his son... and wife. It was surreal and uncomfortable, and Lucas involuntarily clutched the soft animal in his hand tighter so he could feel something other than anxiety.

He didn't act like this. He'd promised himself two years ago that leaving well enough alone was his best course of action. He wouldn't be anyone's dirty, little secret again, but how could he resist meeting the son of the only man he'd ever loved, and one who shared his name no less? And just seeing Danilo again, entwined in his new family life, didn't mean Lucas had to backtrack into the situation that had scarred his heart... did it?

It had only been fucking, or maybe friends-with-benefits was a nicer way to put it. They'd never spoken about it in so many words, never really labeled it or tried to define where they fit into each other's lives. Best friends who fucked summed it up better than any romanticized version of what they did, of what they had.

Lucas had always tried to keep the lines drawn, to stay within the boundaries of what they were to each other—he'd failed miserably right from the beginning. Some days he'd even debated whether he hadn't just loved Danilo all the way back to their childhood— Danilo who had befriended the only white kid in the school, chased away the bullies, made Lucas feel like he didn't need to hide away during lunch and recess. He'd been all Lucas needed to adjust to the insecurities and fears of starting a new school, in a new neighborhood when he was at the sensitive age of ten years old.

Danilo had simply acted like Lucas belonged. And five years later, when, at fifteen, they'd started getting each other, Lucas' heart had already belonged to Danilo... and his body soon after that. He'd fallen fast and furiously, but at the same time had been hyperaware that having anyone find out about their

after-school activities would cause them nothing but trouble and grief, and worse.

They'd been separated in the middle of eleventh grade when Lucas moved from his drug-addicted mother's house to his grandmother's in another area of town. They hadn't kept in touch— things like that weren't cool when you were a tough teenager— but they'd reconnected in community college a year and a half later.

Danilo already had Mira by then, his sweet but wild girl from the neighborhood. Lucas and Mira had become friends simply because they both spent so much time with Danilo, and despite not wanting to, he'd even grown to like her.

Unfortunately— or fortunately, depending on how Lucas looked at it— Mira had usually been too busy with school projects, girlfriends, and an overbearing family, to spend a lot of time with Danilo, giving the former best friends far too much time alone. To be fair, they'd tried to fight their feelings— their lust and the vital connection they'd made so many years before still burning hot and heavy inside them. They managed almost six months until one fateful night, their systems overflowing with alcohol, weed, and untamed thoughts that they could rule the world— they'd lost their battle in a flurry of unfastened clothes, fumbling fingers, and the dingy wall of an alleyway behind their favorite bar.

Danilo had felt so good in Lucas' arms, against his lips, inside him, that he'd forgotten about Mira until the next morning when remorse hit them both hard. Lucas had felt guilty right from the beginning, but obviously not enough to stop. He knew it was wrong, and every single time it had happened, every single time he'd come with Danilo's hand on his dick, Danilo's soft, determined lips sucking him off, Danilo's cock thrusting inside him, Lucas had sworn it would be the last.

They'd stayed together, keeping their secret from Mira and the rest of the world, all the way through college. At least as together as two supposed straight guys from the neighborhood— one of whom had a long-term girlfriend— could be. Danilo had never admitted it to Lucas, but he'd always

suspected Mira was his means of covering up what he really was, and who he really loved. Lucas had never been sure of the love part since confessions or soft murmurings of emotions didn't fit the pattern of their relationship, but it was what he'd told himself to keep his sanity. Besides which, neither Danilo nor Mira really made the effort to spend more time together— something Lucas didn't think too hard on, but appreciated all the same.

During college and the following year, they'd fucked their way through boring classes, menial placements of terrible jobs, a boatload of weed and too much alcohol to think straight half the time. Then the thing they'd always worried about the most had happened in the worst possible way.

Danilo's father was the biggest homophobic bastard in the world, and for some reason he'd been the only one to accuse them of being more than friends. The worst-case scenario occurred one night when Lucas and Danilo were stoned to the gills, their clothes still intact but hands and mouths working hot and heavy over one another. They never indulged their lust in Danilo's house because they knew the repercussions, but that night the pot had made them lazy and horny-as-fuck— and the rest, as they say, is history.

Lucas remembered the door slamming open. He remembered the screams and shouts, the stomping of steel-toed work boots on old wooden floors, then Danilo's father was on him. Lucas woke up sometime later, his head throbbing and an open gash bleeding on the side of his head. His first thoughts had been of Danilo, and once the fog of being knocked out had cleared, he spotted him not three feet away.

Danilo had been unconscious, bleeding from the head, nose, mouth, bruises already blackening his eyes, and the tell-tale sign of a boot print on his forearm. Lucas had panicked, his mind awl with paranoia and confusion as he forced himself to his feet. He stumbled to the door of Danilo's room, shutting it quietly before shoving an old wooden chair under the knob. He'd fallen to his knees besides his best friend, afraid to touch, afraid to hurt him any more than he already was.

Fumbling in his pocket, he found the old beat-up cell phone he'd had for years, quickly dialing for an ambulance while he kept close watch on Danilo,

who never opened his eyes or even flinched when the EMTs came and took him away. They'd taken Lucas along with them, and as he sat in the back of the ambulance, the worker speaking constantly but soothingly the whole time, he reflected on just how he wanted his life to be.

He loved Danilo with all his heart— would do anything and everything for him if he could— but he also wanted him happy and safe. All the bluster of Lucas' complaints of being in the closet for so long with a man who had a girlfriend fizzled out that day as Danilo's broken body lay before him. He vowed to do whatever he could to make Danilo's life better whether that included himself or not.

They'd taken a quick look at Lucas when he arrived at the hospital, with him bitching the entire time about being fine and just wanting to see his friend. A bandage and some pain pills later they'd finally taken him to Danilo's room. Lucas had waited outside until the doctors and nurses finished examining and patching up Danilo, then argued with them until Lucas was blue in the face about him being not considered family. Lucas had won, but he knew they'd kept a close eye on him.

Mira had shown up at the hospital an hour later, claiming she'd been out with some girlfriends, but Lucas had noticed her shirt was inside out and her hair and make-up were ravaged in a way no self-respecting girl would ever be seen in public. He'd never mentioned it to Danilo, and by the next day when he'd finally regained consciousness, Lucas had swept the entire thing from his mind.

He'd been the first person Danilo asked for when he was coherent enough to do so— a fact that made Lucas a little dewy-eyed but able to cover up considering the circumstances. Mira had simply stepped aside— her own eyes dry and seemingly unemotional— letting the two friends sink into each other's arms for what seemed like forever. Lucas had sat with Danilo until he fell asleep then woke up again, Danilo's eyes were hazy with drugs and pain.

“Not her, Lu... love... you... always...”

The words took every thread of air from Lucas' body— despite being slurred and barely audible— then faded away when Danilo passed out again. Lucas had sat as still as possible until his body finally failed him. His emotions burst all at the same time— grief and fear for what had happened, worry for Danilo's recovery, hope and happiness for the words Danilo had finally said, and so much love he thought his heart would simply bust out of his chest at the same time. He bent to rest his head on Danilo's chest, silent sobs wracking his body as the steady pounding of Danilo's heart soothed and warmed him. He should have been afraid that someone would walk in, but in that moment, nothing had been more important than being close to the man he loved and the six words he'd never forget.

They never spoke of it afterwards. Whether because Danilo didn't remember what he said or was embarrassed at doing so wasn't really clear. Lucas hadn't wanted to rock the boat and he'd been content to just let the words float around in his head— in his heart— while Danilo recovered and came back to him. No charges were laid since Danilo had insisted it had been a stranger who'd broken into the house with the intention of robbing the place. It was farfetched, considering the neighborhood and the brutality of Danilo's beating, but Lucas went along with what Danilo wanted— what Danilo thought was best for them all.

They'd been even closer after that, with Mira taking up very little of Danilo's time, but still considered to be his lover of choice. Lucas didn't care. He'd almost lost the man he loved and he was fine to settle for second place or be Danilo's dirty little secret as long as he was able to love him.

A year later the news Lucas had never wanted to hear had been delivered. Mira was pregnant, and despite Danilo's harsh words to the contrary— we barely even have sex anymore, we always used a condom, there was no fucking way it's my baby— a hasty wedding had been planned under the watchful eye of Mira's stern, old-fashioned father.

Looking back on it, Lucas could see how selfish he'd been when Danilo had told him, how belittling and condescending he'd acted in a situation that wasn't about him. He'd ranted and fumed, while Danilo hung his head and just

listened. Lucas had seen the fear and devastation on his best friend's face, had seen the tremble in his hands as he wrung them between his knees, had witnessed the cocky young man he'd always known wilt under the force of his accusations. All Lucas' compassion, his empathy, his common sense had flown out the window, and rather than try to comfort Danilo in what had to be the biggest shock of his life, he'd stormed out.

They hadn't spoken for almost a week after that, and it had been six of the hardest days in Lucas' life. He hadn't even considered what Danilo getting married meant, because in his world marriages were fleeting. They didn't last, but a baby... a baby was forever. Eventually, Danilo had worn him down, or at least Lucas had let himself be coaxed forward with sadness and shame. They'd reunited in a flurry of apologies and promises they both knew could never be kept, but the words were comforting and gave Lucas hope that he hadn't made Danilo leave him for good.

They resumed their relationship as wedding plans were made and baby showers were planned. Lucas had felt an almost desperate desire to be with Danilo during that time, a need to possess him that he'd never felt before. Danilo had even slept at Lucas' place the night before he was to be married. It had been a clingy rush of fumbling hands in too much of a hurry, and releases that didn't quite soothe the burning pain in Lucas' gut— or the steely ache in his heart. They hadn't spoken, just used their bodies to share their feelings, their fear, their lust, their love.

The next day Lucas had stood at his best friend's, his lover's, his heart's side when Danilo kissed Mira and their lives became one— soon to be three. It had been torture, especially after a few drinks had been slung back and Danilo cornered him in the restroom, one hand shoving down Lucas' pants and the other fiercely grabbing the back of his head. They'd jacked each other until they couldn't breathe anymore, lips raw and red from the bruising kisses they just couldn't seem to stop, the inside of their pants sticky and uncomfortable once their orgasms rocked their bodies.

He'd watched with a heavy heart and a mind swimming with alcohol as Danilo whisked his new bride to a waiting car and disappeared into the night.

All Lucas had been left with was a crusty pair of boxers, a stolen bottle of champagne, and a really bad taste in his mouth for what had happened. That was the night the final countdown had begun in Lucas' head—the ticking clock reminder of how much time he had left with Danilo before he let it all fall to the wayside, and ran as fast as he could in the other direction.

A flash of light brought Lucas back to the present. He looked up, cold steel still biting his fingers as he clutched the handle of the gate, and suddenly Danilo was there— five-foot-ten of tousled black curls, tight jeans and a white T-shirt. So much was the same, but there were so many differences, too. The expressive brown eyes, full-red lips, and dark stubble were familiar, but the scruffiness of the five-o'clock shadow was sexier than the well-kept version had ever been.

Danilo's mop of hair that had always been slicked back to within an inch of its life was long and loose, framing high cheekbones. It also covered the scar on the side of Danilo's cheek that he had suffered when his father had beaten the hell out of him.

Unfortunately, the awkwardness was new.

“I wasn't sure you'd show.” The smooth accent was just as Lucas remembered, low, deep, and sexy, the voice he'd kept in his head no matter where or how far he'd traveled.

“I said I would. Nice place... I like the yard.”

“It's good for Luca— for my son.”

It was clear both of them were afraid to make the first move. With Lucas it was a fear of losing himself far too quickly in Danilo's black eyes, of reality seeping into the surreality of the situation, of waking up from a dream he'd never thought would come true. He still didn't know what exactly the circumstances were around him standing in front of Danilo's little cookie-cutter house, but dammit if seeing him again didn't just bring way too many feelings to the surface at the freaking speed of light.

He'd tried so hard to put Danilo behind him, or at least let him live in his memories but not in the forefront of his heart. One glance into his eyes and all Lucas' work seemed for naught.

"You wanna come in or just stand out here?" The teasing grin and lone dimple were familiar, comfortable, exactly what Lucas had been trying to forget. "Luca is down for a nap, but we can sit on the step if you want."

"Luca?" Lucas wasn't sure if he'd heard right.

"That's what we call him."

Danilo looked a little jumpy, but not like the nervousness of his wedding day. It was more of an excited anxiety that Lucas could feel from a few feet away. Danilo's eyes were lit with some smoldering fire and his body grew taut one minute then relaxed the next. Lucas supposed it was good that he wasn't the only one feeling the awkwardness of the situation.

Lucas forced a slow smile, finally hooking his fingers under the gate latch and letting himself in the yard. "I bought... it's stupid, and cliché, but it's all I could think of." He shrugged, pausing with both feet at the bottom of the stairs while he held the stuffed bear out to Danilo.

With a gentle chuckle, Danilo squeezed the animal around its middle. He sat down on the top step, moving over as far as he could to leave room for Lucas. "He'll love it. He's into his stuffies right now... tries to pack them around everywhere."

It suddenly occurred to Lucas— as he sat beside the man he'd loved most of his life, Danilo's familiar scent surrounding his head and heart despite the cool breeze that threatened to push it away— that things would never be the same. Things could never be the same. And perhaps, things were as they should be.

"You look good. South Africa agreed with you, Güerito. You're even blonder than before, and your tan makes it look like we could be brothers."

Güerito— Danilo's nickname for Lucas for as long as he could remember. The word made Lucas' heart ache.

He smiled down at his clasped hands because it was all he could think of doing, and all he could do not to say something completely inappropriate— Are you happy? Did you miss me? Do you regret choosing Mira over me? Holding back his questions was the only way not to show his hand, so to speak, and by the look on Danilo's face, his healthy physical presence, and his soft smile, Lucas was sure he had the answers to all of them.

“Are you all right?” Danilo shuffled so his back rested against the wooden railing of the stairs, his gaze focused and determined as he furrowed his eyebrows. “Nothing happened when you were away, did it? I mean, you didn't get hurt or anything, right?”

“No,” Lucas said quickly. “Nothing like that. It's just good to see you... but I'm not sure why I'm here.”

“Cause we're still friends... aren't we?”

“Of course.” Lucas looked back down at his hands, bunching the bottom of his T-shirt between his fingers until it was nothing more than a twisted ball. “It's just strange, you know? Last time I saw you we were still... last time we were together, you were just becoming a father, and now... everything's different. Not that that's a bad thing, but I... fuck, I don't know what I'm saying.”

He started to look up again when strong arms wrapped around him, pulling him tight and close, and oh-so-damn comfortable, against Danilo's chest. Lucas shuffled his insecurity and fear of getting too close to the back of his mind as he returned the embrace, stepping it up a notch, he leaned into Danilo soaking him up like he was the last drop of water in the desert. He'd missed having Danilo's body against his, the fingers that always twisted in his hair, the scent and rhythm of their bodies when they were tangled around one another.

Lucas clung to him, burying his nose in the nape of Danilo's neck, inhaling him like he'd never get the chance again— and that could definitely be the case. He'd missed the quiet moments of closeness just as much as the heated

ones of passion. Danilo wasn't one to talk about things, but his body always spoke volumes to Lucas.

Reality came crashing back around them when a stuttered cough interrupted the silence.

“G'morning, Danilo. How's the little guy?”

Lucas pulled away so fast he lost his balance and tumbled backwards onto the porch, his shoulders and head connecting against the wood with a loud thunk. Embarrassment at what he'd been doing with Danilo— what they'd been doing to each other outside, in public, where people could see them— colored his cheeks and made him squirm once he righted himself.

“Hey, Fred. He's good. Down for a nap so his papa can entertain a friend.” Danilo winked at him then, and Lucas felt the warmth of his cheeks creep into his ears and neck. “This is my friend, Lucas. Lucas, Fred— the mailman.”

Danilo smiled wide as Fred stepped inside the yard before holding out his hand. Lucas wasn't sure what to do or say so he went with it, rising from his spot, then politely shaking Fred's hand. When he pulled it away, he stayed standing, both hands shoved securely in his pockets. Another awkward situation.

“Lucas? This is the Lucas?” Fred asked, big toothy grin taking over his face. Lucas surmised he was in his late forties or maybe early fifties. He had a pleasant but unremarkable face, and his smile was wide and bright— and maybe a little creepy. “My favorite little boy's namesake? Danilo's told us a lot about you, so it's nice to put a face to the name.”

Lucas wouldn't have been more shocked if Fred had kissed him on the mouth. At some point, Danilo had risen from the step to stand behind him, one hand resting hot and supportive on the small of Lucas' back.

“Fred's wife watches Lucas sometimes. He loves her, and they both spoil him rotten.”

“That's nice. I'm happy to meet you, too, Fred.”

Fred looked like he had something else to say, but instead shifted his bag higher on his shoulder and gave a quick nod. “Okay, well I better get back to earning my paycheck. You still need us to take the little guy tomorrow night? Doris said you needed some privacy?”

If Lucas hadn’t known better he would have sworn his blush had transferred to Danilo, but Danilo didn’t blush—ever. Or was that another one of the changes?

“Um,” Danilo began. He paused to shove a hand through his curls then graced Lucas with a shy smile. “I might have jumped the gun on that... can I let you know... later?”

“No problem. It’s not like we have big exciting plans, though it is *Dancing With the Stars* night. Luca loves that show.”

Danilo laughed, the redness from before washing from his face as his mouth opened wide and he tilted his head back. “You’re gonna turn my boy into a dancer with all your weird ballroom shows.”

“Never hurts to mix it up, son. Just give us a call when you know for sure. Nice to see you, Lucas. Have a good day, boys.”

They stood there for a few pounding heartbeats before Danilo rubbed his fingers against Lucas’ back. “You wanna come in? I’ve got coffee... not good coffee, but it’s coffee anyhow.”

A relaxed grin spread involuntarily over Lucas’ face. “Have you ever had Peace Corps coffee? Sludge would be a better name for it.”

Danilo nodded with a tight smile, his hand dropping away from Lucas’ body, the movement immediately leaving Lucas’ back cold and empty. He opened the screen door for Lucas then followed him inside. Lucas snuck a peek behind him when Danilo shut the door—he looked good, healthy, put-together, and at least a little more relaxed than Lucas felt.

He hadn’t had any expectations of what Danilo’s home would be like—except for the initial surprise that Danilo had settled in the ’burbs in a typical family home complete with white picket fence—well, the fence part anyway.

The tidy living room had a fabric-covered couch, small television and coffee table.

There was a wicker basket in the center of the room placed in the middle of a rug that looked surprisingly like a set of train tracks complete with pictures of trees and buildings. Toys were scattered here and here, not so much in a haphazard manner, but like they were supposed to be in their own messy little sections of the room. It was the exact opposite of the atrocious living conditions Danilo and Lucas had each grown up in— definitely a home, not just a house.

“Luca and I aren’t much for tidying up.” Danilo smiled softly, his dimple popping and winking at Lucas as he slipped past. “Still drink it black?”

“Yeah. Some things never change.”

After being gone for only a moment, Danilo pressed a warm mug between Lucas’ hands, stopping right in front of him, his determined gaze asking permission— but for what, Lucas didn’t know. He found out very quickly when Danilo leaned in and kissed him— soft and lingering, chaste but firm in his intentions. Lucas stepped back quickly, almost losing himself in a moment that should not be happening in the first place, or so he had convinced himself.

“Dani... I can’t.”

Danilo stuffed his hands in the pockets of his jeans, dipping his head and peering up at Lucas through long lashes. “It’s all right. I know that was a little fast. I’ve just... just, you know, missed you so much, Güerito. Two years... with nothing... without you. But you look great. I guess being away agreed with you, huh?”

Lucas whispered, “Thanks,” then stepped around Danilo to sit on the end of the green couch.

He made a point of blowing the steam off his coffee, then taking a slow sip. His logical thoughts were all messed up with the overwhelming emotional turmoil in his head, his rapidly thumping heart and lustful warmth in his pants adding to the overall confusion.

Questions circled his mind, making it even harder to know what he should and shouldn't say, but considering he was saying nothing anyhow and the dead air was too much to bear, he just went for it.

“How's Mira?”

It was a shot in the gut, really—the most important question he needed to ask, but also the one answer he dreaded hearing. As Danilo walked toward the couch, Lucas took a moment to scope out the photos that were scattered around the room— various stages of a child's life, a few of Danilo with the baby, one of Lucas' grandmother with the child (what the fuck?), and finally an old shot of Lucas and Danilo laughing and liquored-up in college. The latter surprised him, along with the fact there appeared to be none of Mira, not even their wedding picture.

Danilo sat down beside Lucas, his body perched in the middle of the couch while he tucked a leg beneath him and turned so they were face-to-face. “She doesn't live here, Lucas. She never has.”

Had Lucas been living in a cartoon world, his brain would have exploded in a stunning rain of red fireworks. As it was, he could only scramble for words. “What? She... I know you weren't living here before, but— oh my God, is she okay?”

Danilo slid a hand to rest on Lucas' thigh, warmth seeping through the heavy denim of Lucas' jeans. Danilo had never been a touchy sort of person, not with Lucas or Mira back in the day, yet it seemed like he'd been constantly touching Lucas since his arrival, and it was more than a little off-putting.

“No, no, she's fine... just doesn't live with me and Luca.”

No Mira?

“Does that mean you're divorced?”

With a shrug, Danilo bowed his head then looked at Lucas with a sad smile. “Not legally yet, but we haven't been together for almost a year and a half.”

Lucas' whole body stiffened and he was off the couch like he'd been set on fire— and that's what it certainly felt like. His coffee spilled over the rim of his cup and he flinched back, barely saving it from a very messy death on the hardwood floor. Danilo grabbed his arm, but Lucas pulled away.

His brain twitched with selfish, angry thoughts. A year and a half? They'd been separated for a fucking year and a half? That meant it had only been the first six months after Lucas left before they weren't together anymore. He wasn't sure how he felt about that, except sorry for himself, angry that he'd left in the first place, and pissed-off that Danilo seemed to have screwed him around... again.

“Six months? You were only together six months?” The words squeaked past his lips before he could stop them— too harsh, too loud, too full of the emotion he was struggling to contain.

Danilo held out a hand, palm raised like he was trying to calm a wild animal. “Sit down, Lucas... please. You look like you're gonna freak. Let me get you some water.”

“No water! Just... just, like, what the hell, Dani... I left so you could be with her. I thought it was what you wanted, so what the hell happened? And why the fuck am I here?”

A rustling sound followed by a single word— *Papa*— filled the room. Lucas glanced over to see a baby monitor sitting on top of the TV. Other words sailed through the speaker— *up, drink, toys*— spaced out with undecipherable babblings.

“That's why you're here. I want you to meet my son. I need you to know my son because I still—”

Lucas couldn't have been sure of what Danilo was going to say, but he didn't want to hear it, or more to the point, he couldn't hear it, not if he was going to walk out the door again. “I do want to meet him, but just don't... I don't wanna talk about us. We need to make this about him, okay?”

The soft look on Danilo's face fell away as he gnawed on the inside of his cheek.

“Sure... yeah. Just give me a minute.”

Lucas' gaze followed him as he left the room, then the sweet sound of a higher-registered voice Lucas had never heard from Danilo sprung from the monitor. “Hey, *hombrecito*. Did you have a good nap? How come teddy's on the floor, dude? How about we get you some juice and you can meet someone special.”

The static of the monitor was suddenly cut off, along with the voices and babbling, but Lucas could still hear the pair cooing at each other from the room beyond. He'd never seen Danilo with a baby or any child, really. Neither of them had siblings or young cousins when they were growing up, so there'd never been the opportunity.

He hadn't even known Danilo wanted to be a father until he got the news Mira was pregnant. Sure he'd been shocked and upset at first, but Lucas had seen the way he looked at Mira when her belly started growing, heard how he talked incessantly about heartbeats and delivery options, knew the unborn baby had already stolen a little piece of Danilo's heart.

There had been times when Lucas thought Danilo was happier about being a father than Mira was at being a mother. He guessed it was a stereotypical way of thinking, that every woman should be, and was, happy about giving birth, or the having a child part, at least. But Mira had spent more time researching how she could get back in shape once she'd popped the baby out, than things they needed to get for a newborn baby.

Danilo had done all the shopping, with Mira's parents contributing both larger items like a crib and car seat, and money for the young couple to further clothe and equip their new grandchild. Lucas had been with him during a lot of those buying sprees, listening to him debate the validity of one diaper company's claim over another, the best safety records for strollers, the perfect color to buy onesies in when they didn't know if it was a boy or girl.

Lucas hadn't had a freaking clue what a onesie even was, and if he was perfectly honest with himself, he didn't care either. He went along on Danilo's little excursions simply to spend time with him since he knew all the fussing

about diapers and colors and onesies was just the beginning of the end— for him and Danilo.

The sound of the toilet flushing, then water pouring in the sink brought Lucas back to the Danilo of the present. “Good boy, Luca. What a big boy you are. Going potty all by yourself. Pretty soon no more diapers for Luca. Should we call *Abuelita* to tell her?”

“Abu! Abu!”

Abuelita. Lucas’ Spanish was rusty but he recognized it as the name Danilo had always called Lucas’ grandmother.

“Lucas... this is Luca.” Danilo’s low chuckle was followed by a gurgly baby laugh.

Lucas turned to see the most adorable baby he’d ever imagined, and it wasn’t that he’d seen a lot, but Luca— baby Lucas— looked just like his papa.

“Luc,” the mini-Danilo squeaked. “Luc. Luc. Luc.”

“Is he saying my name?”

“And his.”

Danilo’s hand caressed over the baby’s head and Lucas suddenly remembered those long fingers touching and stroking him. He hadn’t allowed too many memories to seep into his life away from Danilo, but the savored soft touches and occasional holding of hands had always been close to the surface. He hated that despite the news Danilo had delivered— despite the sacrifice Lucas thought he had made— he was feeling a strong pull to the past that he only wanted to leave behind.

He stepped closer to Danilo, a shaky hand reaching out to brush over the baby’s fleshy thigh. All other thoughts left his head, just disappeared into familiar brown eyes on a much smaller face. “He’s beautiful, Dani. Looks so much like you... his eyes and mouth...”

“They say babies’ eyes change after a while, but his never did. Still have that copper tinge around the edges just like—”

“Yours,” Lucas said. “You look so... I don’t even know... so comfortable with him.”

Danilo laughed, his smile slow and proud as he poked Luca gently in the belly. “Have to be. We only really have each other... for now.”

Something changed in his eyes then, nothing exact or probably noticeable by someone who hadn’t known— and loved— Danilo most of his life. The depth of his gaze shifted, just enough to make the cocky, young man seem vulnerable in a way Lucas had never seen before.

“Do you wanna hold him? He’s usually a little squirmy and he’s getting so big, but after his nap he tends to mellow out a bit. You don’t have to... I just thought...”

“Sure.” Lucas struggled to calm his fluttering nerves. “I don’t really know what to do... He won’t mind a stranger holding him?”

Another chuckle and Danilo moved so he stood in front of Lucas, his sweet fragrance flooding Lucas with more unwanted memories.

“Are you kidding me? He’s an attention whore, man. If I was straight, he’d have me rolling in women by now. He’s got the whole ‘look at how cute and adorable I am’ thing down pat.”

“If you were straight?”

Danilo lowered his gaze at the question, blinking and parting his lips like he planned on replying. Instead, he handed over a wide-eyed, slobbery baby. Lucas took his namesake into his arms, struggling with what the best way was to hold him, where to put his hands, how not to drop him on the floor. In the end, it was Luca who decided, winding one arm around Lucas’ neck while he stared silently into his eyes.

“He likes you,” Danilo said, drawing Lucas from his fascination and reminding him to breathe.

“How can you tell?”

“He’s checking you out. He doesn’t normally do that with strangers... usually wants me to take him back right away.” Danilo pressed a hand

between Lucas' shoulder blades. "Why don't you guys sit down and I'll get my little man some juice."

"Juice... Papa."

Lucas carried him to the couch, carefully sitting down in an attempt to not jostle or upset him. Luca moved his gaze from Lucas to Danilo for a mere moment, then focused back on him. One chubby hand reached for Lucas' cheek, warm soft fingers gliding over his skin. He felt like he should say something, but had no idea how to even talk to a baby. He took his cues from Danilo.

"Hi, Luca. You're a big boy, huh?" Serious but calm eyes met Lucas', the tiny hand still resting against his cheek. "You seem to have your papa wrapped around your little finger."

"Papa, go?" Luca moved his fingers from Lucas' face, pointing in the direction Danilo had gone. "Papa, juice."

"Your papa will be right back." Lucas let one hand wander over Luca's back, then up to his head. His hair was softer than anything he'd ever touched, baby fine on top of a perfectly round skull. "I can see how you'd be pretty easy to fall for."

"Does the same go for me?" Danilo returned, a blue, plastic cup with a spout and handles balanced in one hand. Luca wagged his fingers, clenching and unclenching his fist while Danilo sat down beside him. "Papa's being too pushy, yeah?" His words were obviously meant for Lucas, but his attention was solely trained on his son.

Lucas felt a knot twist in the pit of his belly. "I should probably go. Do you want to... you know, take him or what do I do?"

"You can just put him on the floor. He's probably ready to play." Danilo handed the cup to Luca, the spout immediately engulfed between sucking lips. "I wish you'd stay, Lucas."

Luca toddled off as soon as his feet hit the floor, juice cup clutched in one hand as he headed in the direction of his basket of toys. Lucas watched him,

fascinated by the tiny human who brought out such a gentle expression on Danilo's face. He avoided Danilo's statement.

"You said you weren't straight... makes sense obviously, but the way you said it... I guess I just always assumed you were bi."

"Probably, but Mira's the only girl I ever dated."

"Only takes one to get married and have a child with, doesn't it?"

The bitterness from years of missing and sharing Danilo suddenly crept into Lucas' subconscious. He felt blindsided by things he obviously didn't understand, things that Danilo alluded to, but Lucas wasn't sure he wanted clarification on. He'd tried so hard to move on, move away, move forward without Danilo, and it was so unfair to have more questions crop up than the simple ones he'd been needing to ask for so long.

Somehow *how've you been, how's married life, and what's it like to be a father*, had become less important than *why hasn't Mira been living with you, why did you name him after me, and why do I get the feeling this is more than a casual visit between old friends?* Lucas wasn't sure he wanted the answers since the questions would probably only bring up more. Plus, things were definitely on the uneasy, awkward side at the moment.

Luca appeared at his feet again, one hand gripping Lucas' knee and the other offering up a red, metal fire truck. The toddler smiled and for the first time Lucas saw the rows of perfect white teeth hidden behind the full lips that matched his papa's, the long dark lashes, the wisps of ringlets that were plastered to his head after his nap. He knew the kid could very easily melt him into a puddle of goo. No wonder Danilo looked so happy.

"He definitely likes you... doesn't share his favorite truck with anyone, not even me sometimes. Guess he can tell how much I... love you."

It felt like Lucas had been sucker-punched. It would have been no different if Danilo had walked up to him face-to-face then punched him as hard as he could in the stomach. He felt nauseous and disoriented, his heart pounding fast against his ribs. It was silly. Lucas had seen death and disease and things so disheartening and heartbreaking in South Africa, yet had managed to put his

feelings aside and did what he could to help. But the word love from between Danilo's lips made him feel like he'd been physically broken.

It was no damn fair. Lucas had waited years upon years to hear Danilo say he loved him, but hearing it in the context of his child was a little too much for him to take in. The two were so ridiculously not related, and not how Lucas had ever anticipated it happening, especially when he'd given up the possibility forever. He wanted to tell Danilo to take it back, tell him to man up and quit playing games. And dammit, he wasn't there to think or talk about his feelings with Danilo, that wasn't what old friends did.

The air in the room was heavy and suffocating as Lucas shuffled along the couch until he was free of baby Luca, his fire truck, and Danilo. A hand around his wrist brought his gaze up back Danilo's worried eyes.

"I didn't mean..."

"I gotta go, Dani. I just... your... Luca's awesome. I'm glad you called, but I've just... I can't do this again." Lucas wrenched his hand away, and pushed off the sofa. He paused to pet across baby Luca's head, and was rewarded with an excited "Lucs".

The door seemed farther than when he'd come in, but he made it without tripping over his feet despite feeling like he'd been filled with lead. He didn't understand the panic waving inside him, but he'd have time to question it... later. The screen door was half-open when Danilo called to him.

"Lucas! Can we talk about it... please? I know I hurt you, and fu— I'm sorry. I'm not that screwed-up kid anymore. Can you just stay a little—"

Lucas forced a half-smile, interrupting Danilo before reaching out a hand. He brushed his fingers over Danilo's shoulder. "I'll call you. I promise."

"Come over tomorrow night? I'll explain then. Please... it's important."

He heard the plea as the door closed behind him, his feet already carrying his cowardly ass away from where he really wanted to be. Tomorrow night?

More secrets, Dani?

Margaret Winston—the woman who had taken Lucas in when he was seventeen—was at the kitchen table, a steaming cup of her favorite tea sitting untouched in front of her. She motioned Lucas over when he walked in, patting the spot beside her.

“I need to check the want-ads online, Grams. I’ve gotta find a—”

“Did Danilo upset you?”

“What?” Lucas gave in to the pleading of her eyes as he sank heavily into the chair beside her. “How do you even know that?”

“You got to meet Luca then? He’s so precious... such a good little boy. He’s always happy. Danilo’s a good father.”

“He’s cute and Dani seems different— a good different, I guess. But I’m not upset, not really. It’s all just too weird.”

Margaret brought her mug to her mouth, sipping quietly, but keeping her gaze focused on Lucas. “Nothing weird about reconnecting. You and Danilo were inseparable for so long.”

“Friends grow out of each other.”

“Sometimes, maybe, but his feelings haven’t changed.”

Lucas leaned closer to the table, one hand moving to trace the pattern on the tablecloth. “How do you even know that? Why do you know so much about the baby?”

“Danilo didn’t tell you?”

“He didn’t tell me anything.” That wasn’t entirely true and Lucas hadn’t really given him...

“Did you give him a chance?” Margaret covered Lucas’ hand and he didn’t pull away. “He was so worried when he decided to call you. He’s been scared since he found out you were back.”

What freaking dimension of time had Lucas walked into? He didn’t understand his grandmother’s sudden knowledge when it came to Danilo. “He told you that?”

“You left, Lucas, but Danilo still comes to see me... he’s still family. I look after Luca sometimes. I’m his *Abuelita*, and Danilo is my renter.”

Lucas licked over his lips, the home Danilo had made for himself and Luca prominent in his mind. “That’s your house?”

“Danilo needed a place to go after Mira’s parents kicked him out. I’d always hoped you’d come back and live there, and you still can. He understands it’s not permanent unless... well, that’s certainly not my business. I’ve had the house for a few years. It was empty, so... everything worked out.”

“And you never told me... why?”

“When you left you were clear on not wanting any part of us... Danilo, the baby, me...”

“That’s not true. I was hurting and I just couldn’t stick around. I’m sorry it was so fast” He didn’t like the sadness in his grandmother’s eyes, especially after all she’d done for him, and now for his... for Danilo and Luca.

“Sweetheart, you were broken hearted. All you wanted was to get away. Danilo understood that, and I promised not to interfere.”

“I wasn’t broken... I’m... I’m not broken. You knew about us? But how? When?”

Margaret clicked her tongue at him, just as she’d always done when he’d asked something she thought he should just know. “I’ve known you loved that boy since you moved in with me.”

“But you never said anything.”

“I’m not stupid, Lucas. I know, and knew back then, that you were keeping it a secret for a reason. I know what Danilo’s father did to him, and I understand how he lived in fear that it would happen again to him... or to you.”

“He did, and I could never help with that because I couldn’t be what his father and everyone else thought Danilo needed— wife, child, fatherhood. But what’s changed, Grams. I’m still a man and so is Danilo... goddamn it, I should have stayed away longer.”

“Oh, Lucas,” Margaret said. She squeezed his fingers, pressing his palm to the table like she didn’t want him to get away. “Why? Because you don’t love him, or because you’re afraid of knowing that he’s always loved you, and that he still does.”

“No.” Lucas’ voice echoed through the kitchen. “I left so he could have a normal family... I stepped aside from everything I wanted— then he—”

“He tried, Lucas. You need to talk to him about this. You’re not a teenager who can just stomp his feet and throw a tantrum because things aren’t how you think they should or should have been. He made sacrifices, too.”

“He had a wife and baby— he had everything. What was his sacrifice?”

“You.”

Lucas sat hunched over his laptop, the words on the screen nothing more than strings of letters with no meaning. He’d received a few good letters of reference from various people in the Corps, but he was too distracted to consider any job listing. Instead, he stared blankly at the screen, all his brainwaves turned to Danilo.

In some ways— more than likely juvenile ones— he felt ganged-up on, like he’d been invited late to a party that everyone knew about and were already enjoying. The gifts had been handed-out, introductions made, while Lucas stood in the corner unaware of anything that was going in.

It had been a shock to find out his grandmother had known the true nature of his relationship with Danilo, but knowing he’d confided in her was almost inconceivable. As far as Lucas knew, Danilo had never spoken to anyone about them, whether by unspoken rule or embarrassment, that was just how it had been. They were a secret, an affair on the down-low, a relationship to be kept in the shadows. No matter how much Lucas had felt like the odd man out with Danilo and Mira, no matter how much he’d always loved Danilo, he’d never told anyone— and he’d been faithful the entire time they were together.

He understood that Danilo must have been distraught when he and Mira split-up— upset, scared, freaked-the-fuck-out— and that he'd had no family except an abusive father, but why pick Lucas' grandmother? Danilo had always been welcome in Lucas' home, and Lucas now knew the real reason behind his grandmother's love for Danilo— she'd known all along what the two of them were doing. That she'd never mentioned it, especially if she also knew about Mira, was a question for another time.

Lucas wasn't sure if he was more relieved or angry that neither his grandmother nor Danilo had tried to get in touch with him when the marriage had fallen apart, but he also understood the reasoning. He'd been a mess after his last night with Danilo— the day baby Lucas was born. He'd already had the paperwork filed, his position secure and waiting for him on another continent. All he'd done was gather his things, kiss his grandmother and promise to keep in touch.

He'd spent two days at the airport waiting for a standby flight, too afraid that if he went home he'd never make good on his vow to leave. His time away had given him time to think, to mature and see how his selfish actions could have hurt everyone involved. He'd learned to put others first, to feel what it was like to be the one left out in the cold as he and Danilo had done to Mira with their deception. The ache in his heart and need to call Danilo— just needing him, period— had caused the most pain Lucas had ever known, and though it faded as time went on, he'd still wondered and wished things had been different.

To know now that it had all been an exercise in futility, to hear that Danilo's societally-blessed, religiously-approved family life had lasted only six months made Lucas feel used. It was no different than how Danilo had used Mira to cover up his sexual preferences, and in turn Lucas had let it happen. He hated thinking of it that way, but if Danilo had no intention of staying with Mira why hadn't he asked Lucas to stay? Had there been yet another man, woman, whatever, waiting in the wings? Had Lucas been just as disposable as Mira?

Lucas didn't remember Danilo having any objections to his departure—both from their relationship and from the country— but then again, feelings and emotions hadn't been a subject of any of their conversations. Danilo had actually spoken more about them in a few short sentences today than he'd said for the entirety of their time together, with the exception of his slip in the hospital. It always seemed as if being together was just how it was meant to be, so how they felt and acted with each other didn't need to be attached to any certain words or sentiments. But in the end, Lucas had been hurt by Danilo's silence, and perhaps, it would have made leaving easier had Danilo expressed how he felt— or it could have made it worse.

The change in Papa-Danilo seemed a natural progression from partying young adult to parenthood, and Lucas wished he'd been there to see it. But there was something more—the cocky, I-can-rule-the-world Danilo of the past had been replaced by one who was more comfortable in his skin. And though Lucas had only had a brief glimpse of the new model, it had been easy to recognize the lack of fidgeting and nervous energy.

Danilo had never been able to sit still, always a chorus of tapping fingers, wiggling and twitching limbs, always something in motion. Now calm seemed to radiate from him, the over-confident cockiness replaced by a knowing presence and humility Lucas had never witnessed in Danilo before. And then there was the honesty in his eyes, the old steely look of someone on edge— someone pretending to be something he wasn't— turned to self-awareness and clarity.

It was all so confusing, and suddenly simply missing Danilo didn't seem like such a bad thing anymore, as long as Lucas missed him from afar.

He was on the fence with regards to his feelings, half of him wanting to run back to Danilo no questions asked, but the other part wary of both the questions and the answers— leaning more towards the flight part of the fight-or-flight equation. He'd told his grandmother in no uncertain terms that the subject, and any other subject revolving around Danilo, was closed at least until the morning. He needed a break from his mind, but obviously the online job market was not the right cure.

He must have dozed off with his laptop resting on his knees, back resting comfortably against the headboard of the bed, because he was suddenly startled fully awake. A knock rattled the sleepiness of his brain and he instinctively wrapped his fingers around his computer.

“I’m not hungry, Grams. Thanks.”

“But I brought your favorite, Lu.”

Lucas automatically straightened up, his fingers tightening around his laptop, the voice from the past resonating inside his head. He froze, his breath hitching in his throat and just hanging there, heavy and suffocating.

“Lucas? Your grandmother said you were in there. Can I come in?”

He let the laptop slide from his thighs, his feet touching the floor with a slight wobble. He paused at the door, fingers wrapping around the knob as he inhaled a slow breath. When he finally opened it, Mira’s familiar smile greeted him like another punch to the gut. It took all the resolve he had left not to look away.

“Um... hey. How... how are you? I’m... yeah, I’m surprised to see you.”

With her smile not faltering, Mira wiggled the plastic container in her hands. “Homemade empanadas.”

“With aji sauce?” He couldn’t help but smile back, though his mouth felt more twitchy than happy.

“Of course. Kitchen? Oh, and I’m supposed to tell you your grams went out to sit in the garden so we can have some privacy.”

Lucas nodded, then followed Mira back down the hall. It didn’t seem like a particularly good idea, but he couldn’t send her away, especially since his grandmother knew she was there. He gathered napkins and glasses of water, while Mira set the container on the table and opened the lid. The smell of the old days wafted into the room, hitting Lucas where it hurt the worst— smack dab in the middle of his heart.

“Do you want a fork?”

Mira snorted. “Fingers just like the old days, hon.”

Much like Danilo, Mira had changed but also stayed the same. The wild curls had been cut short, her make-up less dramatic, subtler, and her dress cut to mid-thigh instead of just below her ass. The large expressive eyes were the same, and the full mouth Lucas had seen change from sweet to sailor-profaned in a matter of seconds. She was still beautiful—dark and mysterious in a way he’d always been jealous of with his fair skin and light hair. She’d always matched Danilo perfectly.

They ate in silence at first, the heavy quiet seeming like a duel from some old Western—Lucas drew first, of course.

“I’m sorry about you and Danilo,” he began. After a big gulp of water, he continued while Mira seemed to stop chewing as she waited. “And about... you know, me and him.”

Mira was hugging him from behind before he even realized she’d stood up. “I’m glad to see you,” she whispered into his hair. “I really am. He’s been drowning without you.”

Lucas didn’t understand the meaning of her words, but he wrapped an arm around her head as she squeezed the life out of him. They’d never hugged before, except maybe as she and Danilo were being swept into their waiting wedding car, and Lucas had been almost full-blown blotto with alcohol and grief. When she released him and sat back down, he was the one waiting her out.

“You saw them then? Dani and Luca?”

It all smelled of conspiracy—Danilo’s call, Margaret’s urgings, Mira just happening to show up. “Did Dani call you, too?”

She shook her head, her fingers shredding the napkin in front of her. Lucas understood her nervousness more than he could say.

“Your grams called me.” She wagged her index finger before Lucas could even express his unhappiness. “I wanted to see you anyhow. Was waiting for Dani to get to you first. I imagine he didn’t tell you the whole story?”

Lucas shifted farther back in his chair. “He told me enough. Luca’s beautiful, Mira.”

“Looks just like Dani, right?”

“No mistaking who his daddy is.”

Mira dipped her chin to her chest, her eyes sparkling with unshed tears when she raised her head again. “He’s so good with him, Lu. So natural... not something any of us would have expected, right?”

“He had a softer side on occasion, but not like I see when he’s with Luca.”

“You’re the only one who saw that side of him back then, you know?”

Leaning his elbows on the table, Lucas cocked his head to study Mira’s face. “There has to be some softness to making a baby.”

Mira snorted out a chuckle. “I can count on two hands the number of times we had sex, including making Luca, at least after you came on the scene.”

“What?” Lucas was pretty sure his brain was malfunctioning.

“It’s true, and really weird probably for you to hear. But except for that one time, it was more of an obligation than anything else.” Lucas stared open-mouthed as Mira rose then grabbed her purse from the counter. She took out her wallet, fingering a photo before handing to him. It was a picture of Mira and an older man, both of them smiling widely into the camera. Lucas didn’t think he’d ever seen Mira smile like that. “Neither one of us needed to have sex because we already were.”

Lucas gnawed on the inside of his cheek. “What does having sex out of obligation even mean, Mira?”

“I thought he had someone else and maybe he did, too, but we had to keep up appearances of at least being a little into one another. It was all a damn smokescreen that we were both hiding behind without knowing the other was doing the same thing.”

“Did you know it was me then?”

“I suspected, but it was a pretty weird assumption so I probably just avoided it. But I didn’t care anyhow because I already had Jerry.”

“You had... Jerry?”

“Dani loved you and I loved Jerry... still do... same goes for Dani, too.”

Ignoring the last part of Mira’s sentence, Lucas pushed on. “But... why? Why hide behind Danilo so you could see... Jerry? It’s not like you had to out yourself to do it.”

Mira slipped the photo back into her purse then fixed her gaze on Lucas again. “It was an affair in the true sense of the word, Lu. Jerry was my professor, and he was married. Plus, you met my father. I was supposed to marry a boy from the neighborhood, pop out a couple kids, and live happily ever after.”

“But Luca?”

“Purely an accident of circumstances. We had no intention of getting married... we weren’t even having fake sex anymore.” Mira paused, gnawing on her bottom lip for a while before continuing. Lucas took a bite of his empanada while he waited her out. “Do you remember when you had a girl from your old high school visit you?”

Lucas’ brain worked overtime for a few dozen heartbeats until... “Barb?”

“Blonde and tiny?”

“Yeah, I guess.” Lucas nodded in time with Mira.

“You and she went off to do some catching-up... I think she even stayed here with you.”

“And I slept on the couch... so?”

“Dani didn’t know that. He was angry, and probably jealous. It also just so happened that I’d had a fight with Jerry that day. Dani and I got so drunk we barely remembered having sex, let alone if we used a condom or if it broke or whatever. Anyhow, it wasn’t planned or fuck if we even remember if it was good, but Luca was born nine months later.”

The fact Danilo had been angry because Lucas had spent an evening with a friend stroked something raw inside of Lucas. Hypocritical bastard. “How fucked up is that? I shared him with you for years, but I spent one night with a friend and he freaks out? He knew I wasn’t into women at all. I’m not even sure how to respond to that.”

“Maybe that’s when he realized how much he loved you.”

“I told him I loved him, Mira, maybe not a lot, but as much as possible considering how uncomfortable it made him. But okay, Luca was a very accidental slip. Don’t take this the wrong way but... why keep him then? If you didn’t love each other or want to be a family...”

Mira shook her head. “My father was already after us to get married, but I wouldn’t have had Luca if that was the only reason. Dani wanted the baby, Lu. It was his idea to keep it... didn’t matter that he didn’t love me. I think you can guess who was on his mind when we finally decided on a name.”

“He wanted to be a father?” Had he really known him at all?

“Yeah. I think he decided to give the marriage a shot because of the baby. I know that probably hurts you, and I’m sorry, but from the first time he heard the heartbeat, he sort of threw all his cards in.”

“I know. He talked about the baby constantly. That’s when I made the decision to leave as soon as the baby came. I didn’t want him to feel obligated to see me, and, well, maybe I didn’t want to see him with you and the kid. I am sorry it didn’t work out if it was what you both wanted.”

“It wasn’t... for either of us. I never stopped seeing Jerry, and Dani and I only grew further apart when Luca was born. After you left, Dani focused everything on Luca, but I’d see him sometimes just staring at the phone like he was willing it to ring. It’s no mystery who he wanted to be on the other end either.” She smiled sadly, and Lucas felt compelled to hold her hand. She took it gratefully, giving it a hard squeeze before she spoke again. “I’m still a little mad that you never even said good-bye to me, by the way.”

Lucas sighed, remembering how he’d stood outside the hospital with a stupid stuffed animal in his hands—*déjà vu* for real. He’d really tried to go in

and offer his congratulations, but Danilo's mask of indifference the night before, had made it seem like a pointless gesture. So he'd cut the last thread that was keeping him tied to Danilo, and left without a word.

"I couldn't. It was too hard already. I think if I would have waited, I couldn't have gone through with it. How was he, you know, when I left?"

"A mess, but he held it together. I know he would have gone after you if we hadn't just had the baby. I could see in his eyes how much he was hurting, but I couldn't do a damn thing to help because neither of us had come clean about our relationships."

"Then why did you move out, Mira? And why does it seem like Danilo has Luca more than you."

"Because he does." She smiled sadly, the emotion darkening her eyes. "I tried. I really did, but I've never wanted kids... still don't... and Jerry already has a couple of teenagers. Dani has full custody."

"But how could you..."

"I don't even know how to explain it, but when I look at Luca, I see a beautiful baby, but I don't see or feel part of me. I never felt like his mother, Lu. I had him a few times after I moved out, and I know it makes me sound like an awful person and even worse mother, but Luca is better off with Dani."

"I'm sorry. That must be hard to accept."

"I know he'll always be taken care of. And maybe one day I'll regret not forcing myself to stay in his life. We waited until he was one for me to make my final decision, and even when I've seen him since, I just see Dani in him, none of me. I even see a little of you because once we worked out what had really been going on in our relationship, he talked nonstop about you. He was always so closed off when we were together, you know, but after everything was out in the open, he changed so fast."

"What do you mean? As a dad?"

Mira swiped a tear from her cheek, lips turning up in a half-smile. "Well, yeah, but he's done so much more. He went to his father's place, you know,

and told him he'd never be allowed to see his grandchild because he was a homophobic prick, 'And guess what, Dad? You were right about me and Lucas. I love him and I always have.'"

Lucas was speechless, emotion building behind his eyes that he just couldn't seem to blink away. Mira pressed their hands together harder. "I can't believe he... he never even said it to me."

"Emotionally stunted... he actually talked to me about that, too," Mira replied. "After that, he just chilled out. No booze, no weed. He got a job working nights so he could be with Luca during the day. You know who babysat, right?"

"I met some guy named Fred this morning. Dani said his wife babysat."

"No, it was your grams. That's why she moved him into the house so he was closer, and she could see her grandchild."

If Lucas had heard right, it was beyond ridiculous. "Her what?"

"That baby is probably the closest I'll have to a great-grandson, Lucas." Margaret appeared in the doorway, hands clutched around a binder. "And I'm not telling you that to pressure you or make you feel guilty. I'm telling you because it's true."

Lucas shook his head, taking his hand from Mira's, then threading his fingers through his hair. "Why didn't one of you tell me what was going on?" He had a headache, and it only seemed to be getting worse with all the new information that seemed stranger than fiction.

Margaret moved so she stood between Lucas and Mira. "I hardly ever heard from you, but I understood why. Danilo insisted you needed to come home when you were ready. He didn't want to pressure you."

"What if I never did?"

Margaret grazed a hand over Lucas'. "I think he had a three-year time limit for you. He did some research and that's what he said the average was for being in the Corps."

"It is, but I needed... I dunno. I guess I just needed to come home."

After kissing the top of Lucas' head, Margaret leaned in and placed the binder on the table. "I saved all these pictures for you."

When Lucas looked down at the book, he could have sworn his heart stopped for a minute. The front of the soft blue binder had the words Lucas Winston Torres in bold blue letters.

He felt another wave of shock roll through him. "What the fu— he has both my names? But why? Can he even do that?"

"He only had one until he got full custody, then he legally added Winston. I told him it was stupid... *presumptuous* I think was the word I used, but he said even if you never came back, Lucas would always know who you were. And your last name fits as a middle name, too, anyway."

"I don't even know him anymore, do I?"

Margaret brushed a hand through Lucas' hair. "Maybe it's time you did."

Lucas wondered if she were right. "Are you happy, Mira?"

"More than I've ever been." She waggled a small diamond ring at him. "Jerry and his wife haven't gotten along for years. Their marriage was over before I met him, but they stayed together for the kids, and she liked to keep up appearances. His divorce was amicable and we've already set a date for a small private wedding."

"Congratulations. But you have to get your own divorce first, right?"

"Papers are already in. We're just waiting for the decree."

He smiled at her, taking in the brightness that had returned to her eyes, the hint of a smirk that graced her lips. He could see the woman in the picture now, and maybe he was seeing the real Mira for the first time. Was that how it would go with Danilo, too?

"You look happier than I've ever seen you."

Her smile widened. "Thanks. You probably feel like you've been set up, right? But I swear, you haven't... well, maybe a little just today, but he's done everything for you... everything so you could be together again someday."

“Two years is a long time, and there’s so much I seem to not know.”

Mira stared into Lucas’ eyes, her look changing from joy to determination and concern. “But you still love him, right?”

That right there was the big question, but the answer was more complicated than everything Lucas had just heard. He sighed again, his body suddenly tired and heavy against the wooden back of the chair. “I’ve told myself not to for two years... two years, Mira. That just doesn’t go away overnight.”

“I’m sure he doesn’t expect it to, but your timing is impeccable. Did he mention tomorrow night to you?”

“I don’t think I let him. What’s tomorrow?”

“Tomorrow we both become free agents again, at least for a little while.”

“The divorce?”

“Signed, sealed and delivered tomorrow night. When he found out you’d come back to town he was so excited because he could give you the news. I guess I’ve ruined it now.”

“Naw. It’s still awesome, as long as it’s what you both want.”

“The ring on my finger should tell you I do, and that I have no intention of hitting the singles market. As for Dani, he doesn’t want that either, and he’s got some pretty high hopes that you won’t let him.”

“What did you both say about pressure and setting me up?”

“No pressure,” Margaret said as she and Mira headed for the door. “You do what you have to do to make you happy... we’re just crossing our fingers you’ll head in the right direction.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you didn’t love her?”

Danilo turned away from where Luca was digging in the sand, a surprised expression brightening his eyes and parting his lips. “Couldn’t. You know how my old man was.”

Lucas stepped to the side, crouching down to stroke a hand across Luca's soft head. "Hi, Luca. Remember me?"

"Luc... sand."

With a smile, Lucas moved to sit on the bench beside the bike path, the sandbox only a few feet away... along with Danilo. "But you weren't telling your father, you were telling me."

Danilo's answer was hesitant as he shifted in his crouch, his lips parting then closing before he finally spoke. "I was scared... for you, for me, even for Mira, and then when she got pregnant, everything just fell apart."

"Or fell into place, depending on how you look at it. Didn't think I could take care of myself?"

"You knew him, Lu, and you were there when he gave me my keepsake. He could have killed you that night, could have killed us both. How could I even have considered letting him hurt you?" Danilo paused for a moment, his eyes boring holes into Lucas' before he broke the contact.

Wrapping an arm around Luca's belly, he tugged the toddler closer to the bench, dragging his bucket and trucks right along with them.

"So when Mira got pregnant, you saw a chance to be normal, right?"

"You know that wasn't it."

Lucas tried to soften his voice but the words came out harsher than he wanted. "But it was, Dani. You hated that you were gay, hated that you had to hide who you were, and having a family would just make everything better, right?"

"I never wanted to hurt you... but I was a coward. I took the easy way out. I thought having Luca would make everything okay in my head, and my heart." Danilo sat beside Lucas on the bench as Luca drove his cars over the little piles of dirt. "I swear I thought I... we were doing the right thing when you left and I just... let you."

"But I never left so I could stop being gay, Dani. Is that what you thought, that you could just stop being gay or bi or whatever?"

“Maybe... I dunno. But I also saw an opportunity for you to find someone else—”

“That’s bull— garbage.” Lucas turned to face Danilo, mindful of the little impressionable ears only a few feet away. “I didn’t want anyone else, and there’s no way you couldn’t have seen that. And before you ask or assume, I never found anyone else either.”

Danilo gazed at Lucas, so much pain written on his face it was hard for Lucas to keep his distance, but he had to... for now.

“Can’t lie and say I’m not happy about that. But I swear I thought you’d be better off because... fuck, Lucas...” Danilo paused to clear his throat, his voice leveling out to a hushed whisper. “I know I was an asshole in how I treated you. I know I took advantage, and I know you deserved better.”

Lucas shook his head. “I never thought any of those things, at least not for more than a minute at a time. Did it hurt when you would go off with Mira? Yes. Did it feel like I was being ripped apart inside when I stood beside you at your wedding? Yes. Did I want to leave you when I did? No, because having part of you was better than having none. I never stopped loving you because you weren’t all mine. I couldn’t.”

After dipping his head, Danilo slipped a hesitant hand over Lucas’ knee. “Do you still... or think you can again?”

Lucas sighed as he grazed his fingertips over Danilo’s knuckles. “I’m willing to talk about it, but that’s all I can promise... so far.”

Danilo nodded, his Adam’s apple working hard to swallow down whatever emotion he was trying to hide... again. Lucas cupped his chin, forcing Danilo’s eyes upwards. “Tell me what you’re feeling, Dani. Show me the changed man I keep hearing about.”

The reply was instant. “I love you. I’ve always loved you. You and that little boy are the only things I care about.”

Lucas brushed a finger over Danilo's bristly jaw, trailing it up his cheek to trace over the constant reminder of one of the worst days of both their lives. "Do you know how long I've waited for that? To hear those damn words."

Danilo covered Lucas' hand on his cheek, pressing his fingers against the raised-edges of the scar. "I need you, Lucas. Luca and I need you because you've always been my only family. All I want is another chance, probably one I don't deserve."

Unable to hold himself back any longer, Lucas leaned in and brushed a kiss to Danilo's mouth. It wasn't made of passion or lust. It wasn't an invitation to fuck. It wasn't a secret kiss in an alley behind a bar, and it wasn't a sweet way to say good-bye.

Danilo kissed back, his hand cradling Lucas' head as their lips moved gently, softly, against each other. Lucas could have very easily drowned in the swept-away feeling, the touching, the pressing of their bodies together, but he didn't. Instead, he eased away before pulling Danilo into his arms and hugging him close. He tucked his face into the crook where shoulder met neck, and Danilo did the same.

"So how do we start... again?" Danilo's breath washed over Lucas' neck, leaving pinpricks of gooseflesh. "There's so much history between us. Do you think it'll get in the way... all the baggage?"

Lucas drew back, his fingers still tangling in Danilo's curls. "I can't go backward, Dani. I can't be hiding in the shadows again."

"Then, don't, because that's not what I want. We can go forward together, as slow as you need to. I feel like I've been waiting forever for it to just be you and me, and Luca now. I can wait a little longer because I know it's right. I did so many things the wrong way, but this..." Danilo smiled, tenderly kissing Lucas' cheek before bending down to pull Luca into his lap. "You, me, and our little Lucas, I know it's right."

Luca looked from one man to the other, big grin on his face when he dumped a handful of sand on Lucas' shoulder. Danilo laughed and Lucas joined in.

“I don’t know anything about babies or kids or even how to live in a house with a kid. Hell, I feel like this new you is a stranger, too.” Lucas was mesmerized by the closeness of two sets of identical— beautiful— eyes. He’d never been able to say no to one pair, and he was sure the other would prove to be even worse.

“I’m still me. I just... I know what’s important now, and it’s not getting drunk or letting everyone believe I’m someone I’m not. I’m in love with a man, always have been, but now I want everyone to know. I want everyone to know you. I want my son— our son— to love you as much as I do.” Danilo paused to kiss the top of Luca’s head, then Lucas’ mouth. “If you want we can even make Luca’s room into a room for you, until you’re ready to be in mine.”

“Still a little cocky, yeah?” Lucas raised an eyebrow and Danilo smirked back.

“I have to be. I let you go once, can’t let it happen again.”

“I’m not moving into Luca’s room, Dani. That’s not even an option.”

Danilo frowned, his fingers clenching where they dug into Lucas’ shoulder. “I’m going too fast again, right?”

“You always preferred to run instead of walk.”

“How about I say you can have Luca’s room until... you might want to be with me.”

Lucas tugged Danilo closer so Luca was sandwiched between them. “We could do that... or you could just make room for me in your bed because that’s the only place I want to be.”

He kissed Danilo, feeling Luca’s small hands rubbing and scratching at his neck. Danilo whispered something against Lucas’ lips but it was lost in the cavern of his mouth. He eased back just enough for him to speak.

“Our bed.”

With a nod, Lucas brushed his mouth over Luca’s head. “Our bed sounds good, and I have a babysitter all lined up so we can celebrate your big day.”

“I think that’s our big day, too.”

“I guess it is. No regrets?”

“Only that the last two years happened at all, except...”

“For Luca.”

“Yeah. How about you... regrets?”

“Maybe one.”

Danilo chuckled, his body finally relaxed and loose against Lucas’. Luca lay his head down between them, one hand touching Lucas and the other Danilo. Lucas suddenly realized he had a family. Maybe he’d known all along but the thought was too overwhelming to imagine, let alone come to life.

“One regret?” Danilo asked.

Lucas smiled widely, but the sound of voices approaching tightened his whole body and he tried to put some space between himself and the others. Danilo held him firm. “No secrets.” He kissed Lucas as a family came around the corner, plopping their toddler into the sandbox beside them. “No secrets and no regrets. Now tell me...”

“I haven’t told you I still love you. That’s my only regret.”

“Guess you can tell me now, but if you want to wait until I catch up, I’m okay with that.”

“Catch up?”

Danilo’s mouth moved softly over Lucas’. “I have years of stupidity to make up for, and years of not saying the words.”

“How about a deal? Say it again right now and I’ll call it even.” Lucas smile against Danilo’s lips then eased back.

“I love you, Lucas. I’ve never loved anyone else, and I never will. I want you to be Luca’s daddy, and I swear I’ll tell anyone and everyone who wants to listen. No more secrets.”

With a deep-throated chuckle, Lucas closed his eyes, pressing his chin into the top of Luca's head and his forehead against Danilo's. "I love you... and our little family, Dani."

Lucas Winston had never wanted a family— especially someone else's— but now that that family had also become his, he didn't plan on ever letting them go.

THE END

Author Bio

K-Lee Klein has lived in one part of Western Canada or another for her entire life. She's a doting mother of three now-grown kids, and has had characters and plots running around her head for as long as she can remember.

She lives with an overly-patient husband who totally does not get her thing for gay men, two spoiled but wonderful sons (who don't get it either), two also spoiled but beautiful cats. Her days are also filled with many texts and phone calls with her daughter who has already left the nest, and an abundance of fabulous gay men, large and small, bouncing off the walls of her skull, competing for their turns to tell their stories

After finally throwing caution to the wind, K-lee's first story was accepted and published in December of 2011, and since then she's been lucky enough to be picked up by several publishers. She's thrilled to be substituting her previous jobs as a hockey manager/coach, school band volunteer and overall chauffeur with her passion for writing beautiful, emotional men.

Among her favorite sub-genres to write are rockstars, cowboys, shifters, and opposites-attract relationships. But to be honest, she's open to almost anything if it involves messing around in the heads of her characters. She's also big on series—because she has a hard time letting her characters go—and is usually working on a handful of stories in various stages of completion all at the same time.

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