

# Weathering the Storm

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# Weathering the Storm by Kelley Vitollo

Stephanie Bridges stopped and looked at the sky before making her attempt to sneak into Luc's Hardware store unnoticed. The deep gray clouds brewing above matched her current mood. One minute she's humming and pounding away building the Johnson's new shed, the next, her beloved sunshine disappears, and she realizes she's running low on supplies.

Low supplies meant a visit to the hardware store, a trip she dreaded more than laying her naked butt on the cold gynecologist chair for her annual check-up. Luc was worse than the dreaded clamp.

The downside to living in a small town where, as the "Cheers" theme song stated, "everybody knows your name" was the fact that the only hardware store in town just happened to be owned by her ex-boyfriend.

The same ex that kicked her to the curb without a backwards glance. Somehow her hormones had yet to catch on to the fact that he booted her. The man happened to be Hot with a capital H. Unlike her hormones, his brain definitely caught on and he enjoyed every minute of it. Luc loved the attention women gave him.

Ding. Ding.

The high-pitched dinging of the bell over the hardware door alerted her someone wanted out while she stood gathering the nerve to go in. Reaching out, Stephanie grabbed the cold, metal handle for the elderly woman, Mrs. Holland to step out.

"Good afternoon, missy. Working hard today?" Mrs. Holland asked.

Working hard on going into Luc's without trying to jump his bones. That man really knows how to work his...snap out of it, Steph. "Yes ma'am. I'm heading in to pick up some more supplies."

"You're not going to work today are you? There's a storm coming in. I'm heading home right now, as is everyone else I'd imagine."

"No ma'am. No more work for today. I just had to pick up a few things before I head home." Stephanie leaned against the wall while they spoke.

"You know, I always thought it a shame you and Luc broke up. Everyone in

town thought for sure the two of you would get married and have a whole gaggle of little ones."

Mrs. Holland must be crazy. Did she really think Luc would ever settle down with a girl like her?

She really didn't want to talk about Luc right now. Changing the subject, she said, "you better be on your way before the storm comes in. I'd hate to think of you caught out in it."

"I know a hint when I hear one. You better hurry in there, so you can get your supplies." Mrs. Holland turned to walk away, giving her a quick wink before she left.

What the heck?

Stephanie took a couple deep breaths to prepare herself for seeing Luc.

You don't want this man anymore. He doesn't turn you on. He doesn't make you hotter than an inferno.

She tried closing her eyes and meditating. She calmed herself, channeling her inner strength to build a shield against the villain that was Lucas Carr.

You're the most reliable carpenter in town. You have no choice in coming to Luc's. It has nothing to do with the man himself... Yeah, right!

Today's date brought with it an urge to see him. She doubted he remembered, but she did. Stephanie inhaled a deep breath; the familiar smell of the coming rain, thick in the air, temporarily soothing her. The smell of rain reminded her of starting over — fresh and exhilarating.

Judging by the continually darkening clouds, the storm on the horizon wouldn't be your typical spring shower. *Better get this over with*. Stephanie took one last deep breath before she pushed the thick glass door open and walked right into the lion's den.

\* \* \* \*

Scanning the store for Luc, Stephanie began to tip toe towards her destination. *So far, no visual of the enemy*. She half expected to hear the familiar sleuth music from TV

shows playing in the background. The music never came, nor did Luc. Only in a small town did someone leave the sales floor with no one to watch it. Here, in River City, everyone knew one another. There was no fear of someone coming in to steal.

She made her way to the back to scope out the selection of 2x4's. With her expert eye she examined the wood. Man how she loved working with her hands — the smell of freshly cut wood, the magical feeling of creating something from nothing or building the old into something new.

Dirty hands and faded jeans were Stephanie's trademark. Nothing compared to the euphoric feeling from a job well done. Okay, being honest, one thing did compare to that feeling. One person actually had that feeling beat a hundred times and his name was Luc.

Don't go there. Not right now. Not here.

Stephanie knelt on the floor and ran her hand across a smooth piece of wood.

"You always did know good *wood* when you felt it," came the smooth, masculine voice that was her undoing.

"That I do. Unfortunately, you don't carry the good stuff," Stephanie said as she rose to her feet. "Never have."

Luc leaned his six foot, two inch frame over to whisper in her ear. "I seem to remember a time when you were very fond of what I carried."

A shiver swept down her spine. Luc's distinct, earthy scent swirled around her attacking her senses.

"You couldn't get enough, sugar. I'd be willing to give you a sample. You know, for old time's sake."

Luc nipped at her ear before he eased away from her face. Then he smiled that naughty smile and Stephanie had to hold in her moan, fighting the urge to take him up on his offer. The familiar tingling that he always caused at the apex of her thighs attacked in full force.

"Get over yourself, Carr. I moved on a long time ago."

"If you say so, Stephy. I just thought I'd offer." Luc winked at her in his sexy,

confident way that had Stephanie's mind reeling between kissing him and punching him.

"You can keep your offers to yourself from now on. I'm not interested." *Please. I* don't know if I have the strength to turn you down next time.

Thunder clapped loudly outside as a hard steady rain began to pelt the roof. "You should be home right now. It's going to be ugly out there."

Stephanie's heart rate accelerated wildly. His concern felt touching and disconcerting at the same time. Did he think she couldn't take care of herself?

"Thanks, Luc, but I can take care of myself. I don't need you to do it for me."

"You haven't changed a bit have you? You know it isn't the end of the world if someone worries about you. It usually means they care." Luc turned and started walking to the front of the hardware store.

"Give me a break, Luc. You don't care about anyone but yourself. You never have."

He stopped walking. "And you never pay attention."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Never mind, just forget it." His voice fumed with anger.

"Listen, it's getting really bad out there," his tone calmer than before. "If you want something, you need to hurry up and pick it out. I'm ready to get out of here."

"I'll just be a few minutes." Stephanie turned back to the wood when Luc continued his trek to the front of the store.

Thank God.

She glanced down at her hand to see it shaking uncontrollably. Why did he have the effect on her?

Stephanie lightly touched the ear he had his lips on. Her body called out a silent plea for Luc to return and finish what he started.

A tidal wave of memories bombarded her as she knelt at the wood once more. The way his chocolate hair tickled her face when they snuggled at night, the feeling of his rough, calloused hands touching her, caressing her soul at the same time they

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touched her body.

Moving her hand across a 2X4, she caught a rough edge of the wood she explored. Ignoring the pain, she continued to think of Luc. With him she felt beautiful and feminine, not like the petite, no curves, small breasted tomboy carpenter she really was. Luc made her feel desired, sexy.

But the feelings never lasted. After the high of their lovemaking, reality always hit.

Luc was strong, sexy, and drop dead gorgeous. He left a trail of lusting females wherever he went. Naw, he couldn't really feel those sentiments about her. He couldn't really want her the way she imagined he did.

Luc proved that point when he dumped her. She knew they wouldn't last, but it still hurt like hell when he used her up and threw her away.

The year they dated had been the best of her life. They fought like cats and dogs but laughed just as much. The bedroom was the only place they consistently got along. There they were magical, at least from her point of view. She didn't have anything to compare like Luc did. She had been a virgin for twenty four long years, but Luc had taken care of that in one delicious night.

Need tickled her skin causing goose bumps to snake their way up her arms at the thought.

Rain pelted the roof above relaxing her, creating a form of wild music that sang to her soul. The wind howled and thunder clapped, yet she didn't move. She really should get going. Luc was right about one thing, it was going to be an ugly storm and she had no desire to get caught in it, but her feet stayed firmly planted to the floor like aged roots holding her down.

Her nearness to Luc held her with the force of a magnet. It was hell being around him, but torture being away. She *needed* to see Luc today, again wondering if the day affected him like it did her.

No, he probably doesn't even remember. Mr. Macho flirt wouldn't be affected by today's date at all.

Guys were like that. Luc is like that.

A loud crash splintered her thoughts.

"You better come up here," Luc called. "You aren't going to be happy."

Stephanie rushed to the front of the store and peered out the window beside Luc. Her beautiful F250 truck was still where she parked it, but the heavy wooden sign for the diner next door wasn't where she had last seen it. The sign was now an extra for her truck that she hadn't ordered.

Crap! It went straight through the windshield.

"Damn it! What the hell am I supposed to do now?" Closing her eyes, Stephanie leaned her forehead against the rattling window in frustration.

When she looked up, Luc gave her a sexy little smirk. "Looks like you're stuck here – with me."

Panic shot through her body. She couldn't be stuck here with Luc. She'd go crazy. He would drive her crazy and enjoy every second of it. If she'd let herself, she'd enjoy it, too.

"I'm not stuck here. I'll call someone to come and tow me." Determination fueled her words, a slight smile tugging at her mouth.

"Get a grip, Steph. Would you really make old man Wilson venture out in this weather? He's in his seventies. I don't even want to drive home. If I can stay here, you can too."

Luc's comments wiped the smug expression off her face in an instant. Need bubbled in Stephanie's body. She truly couldn't stay here with Luc. She'd end up doing something she regretted. The chance to reopen old wounds that hadn't fully healed was something she couldn't allow to happen.

"Just because you're scared to drive in this weather, doesn't mean I am. Let me take your truck. I'll bring it back to you tomorrow."

Luc had the nerve to laugh heartily in her face. The rich, smooth sound turned her on and pissed her off at the same time.

"I'm not scared. I'm smart. I think you're the one who's scared."

"Don't be ridiculous. If I was scared, why would I ask to take your truck?"

"I don't think you're scared of the weather. I think you're scared of me. Scared of what you'll want to do with me if you stay here." He again bent, his face close to her ear before whispering, "I'm right. You still want me."

An aching arousal flowed between her legs, but instead of giving in to that want, she hauled off and punched Luc in the arm.

"Get over yourself, Carr. If I wanted you, I'd have had you by now." Stephanie turned on her heals and headed for the phone behind the counter. "I'm calling someone to come and get me. Find someone else to feed your ego for you." Picking up the phone, ready to dial any number she could think of, Stephanie raised the phone to her ear and checked for a dial tone.

*Surprise, surprise. Nothing.* Silence greeted her ear.

"You really didn't expect the phones to be working in a storm like this, did you?" Luc sauntered closer to her. "Listen to the wind and rain out there. What we need to do is quit arguing and board up the windows."

"Aren't you supposed to board the windows from the outside, genius?" Stephanie mocked.

"I know that smarty pants, but the inside is better than nothing. At least if the windows do break, we'll be protected from the wind, rain, and flying glass."

Turning serious she asked, "You really think it'll get that bad?" *Please Lord; don't let it get that bad. Let it miraculously ease up so I can go home.* 

"Maybe, maybe not. I'm not going to risk it."

She listened to Luc exhale a deep breath and watched him run his hand through his chocolate brown hair. He seemed to do that a lot around her.

Did she frustrate him as badly as he did her?

Luc turned and headed back to the piles of wood, lifted what had to be a heavy load on his shoulder, and headed towards the front door. Stephanie watched the muscles bulge underneath his tight black t-shirt. She remembered running her hands along those very same muscles and those arms of his wrapped tightly around her sated

body after he made love to her.

Stephanie thought about what his bare chest looked like; firm, golden skin sprinkled with just the right amount of hair. He had washboard abs she loved running her fingers across. Luc loved it, too. He had told her it brought him comfort. *What a lie that probably was.* No matter how many lies he spoke, Luc was beautifully masculine, and she missed him.

"Yoo-hoo. Did you hear me? You going to help or what?"

That's exactly what she needed. Working with her hands brought her joy. No matter how large or small the job, she loved it. Work gave her a sense of accomplishment, fueling her self-esteem.

The perfect distraction.

Working side by side with Luc brought back memories of the jobs they worked on together while dating. Luc didn't take many because he was so busy with the store, but when the mood struck, he signed on. They worked, fought, made love, worked some more, fought again, but make love again even stronger.

Forget about that, Steph. Concentrate.

"Snap out of it, Stephy. I'll hold the boards up and you nail them in," Luc directed her to the windows. Stephanie agreed and, like always, working together, they knocked the job out efficiently in no time flat.

"You have anything else we can do?" she asked.

Luc raised an eyebrow and offered a naughty smile. "I can think of a few things we can do. All of which we'll both enjoy immensely."

"Geez, Luc. I'm sorry I asked. Can you get your mind out of the gutter for one stinking minute?"

"Not with you around I can't."

Stephanie rolled her eyes and headed to the stock room. She knew this store inside and out. She had helped Luc here countless times when they were dating.

"Why don't you make yourself at home, Stephy," Luc followed her too closely for comfort.

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"Why don't *you* quit calling me Stephy?!"

"I've always called you that." He sounded truly dumbfounded. Men could be such idiots sometimes.

Turning around to look at him, Stephanie walked backwards slowly before saying, "When we were dating! It's entirely different now."

"So people are only allowed to have nicknames for someone they're dating?"

"If so, you must have a nickname for every woman in town," Stephanie said with anger coursing through her words.

Luc's jaw clenched in obvious frustration before he reached out a strong hand and stopped her from walking away from him.

"You have no idea what you're talking about. Keep you opinions to yourself from now on." He stormed past her towards the stock room.

"You forget I live in this town, too! I know how many women you've gone through since we broke up. You can't hide that from me." Tears threatened her eyes, but Stephanie held them at bay.

"First of all, I didn't hide anything from you. Second, just because I've gone out with a few women, doesn't mean I've slept with them. Give me a little credit, Stephy." Luc immediately corrected himself, "I mean Stephanie." Then he headed into the stock room closing the door behind him.

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Stephanie's argument with Luc, like always, left her mentally drained. The throbbing in her head matched the thundering sky that kept her here. How could she take hours of this?

Stephanie made her way down the paint aisle to the long wooden counter in the front of the store. Unfortunately, she couldn't see what was going on outside but heard the loud roar of the wind and rain banging against the building.

Her eyes gazed around the store she had dreamed of one day running with Luc.

The rows of tools, equipment, and wood called her name. The mixed scent of paint, wood, and screws surrounded her, welcomed her.

She and Luc made a great team. Both being determined, and enjoying nothing more than working with their hands, made them unstoppable together. Why couldn't they get along elsewhere?

Stephanie looked down at her tattered, faded blue jeans and dirty work shirt. They couldn't get along because she wasn't Luc's type. She had a boyish frame, where the other women he dated were curvy and womanly. Her blond hair was always tied in a knot on top of her head instead of the shampoo commercial vixens who usually hung on his arm.

She had fought to get on the boys soccer team in high school and Luc had dated cheerleaders. They had been doomed from the start. Why didn't her heart understand that?

Trying to shake the thought from her head, Stephanie got to work.

\* \* \* \*

Luc sat behind the glass window he had installed in his stock room wall so he would know if customers came in while he was working. Now he watched Stephanie. Damn, he loved watching her work. He had never met a woman who matched his love for carpentry until he met Stephanie. That had been what first attracted him to the feisty woman.

She was so stubborn. Why she thought she had to haul the pieces of lumber she planned to purchase to the front of the store right now was beyond him. But she did. One by one she dragged the wood to the front of the store. He could think of a much better way to work out both their pent up frustration.

Watching her hips sway as she strode back towards the wood section, Luc smiled. Stephanie was much more feminine than she realized. They had countless fights while dating about her supposed lack of feminine appeal. She didn't think she had any, whereas he thought she exuded it.

She really was the best of both worlds; a woman who didn't shy away from working with her hands and getting a little dirty, while at the same time she made his dick rock hard with need. They would have been perfect together if she would have just trusted him.

She second guessed him each time he told her of her beauty. Each time he tried to get close, she pushed him away, treating their relationship like sex and work were the only things that mattered.

While he enjoyed the times when he had extra help in the shop and could go out and work with her, he wanted more than that. For the first time in his life he had wanted it all, marriage, family, even the damn picket fence.

"Damn, fiery woman," Luc said to himself as he sat on the bench.

He would have given her the world, but instead she forced him to break it off with her. All because she had absolutely no faith in the man he was. Her earlier comment about him sleeping around only confirmed it.

## Forget about her man.

A slight chill raced across his skin causing him to reach for an old flannel shirt on the bench and put it on. He turned around at the precise moment Stephanie bent over to try and haul another heavy piece of wood — her sexy little ass beckoned him.

## Down boy.

Reverting his attention to less dangerous places on her body. Luc watched a blond curl fall from her ponytail and into her face. He itched to touch that curl; to wrap the silky strands around his finger. His achingly hard dick throbbed with desire. How could she doubt he wanted her?

Luc longed to tuck her cute little curl behind her ear, but she did it before standing up and locking eyes with him. He saw longing in her gaze and wondered if she would give in to the magnetic draw between them.

# *There's only one way to find out.*

Luc pulled the heavy steel door open and strode towards Stephanie. He could

hear the howling wind and pounding rain around them. The glass in some of the windows rattled and clanked but right now he didn't care.

He was on a mission. Staring hard at Stephanie while he walked, Luc watched her suck her bottom lip into her mouth and bite gently. He yearned to nibble on those succulent lips himself. He just hoped to God she would let him.

Luc reached his destination and lowered his mouth to Stephanie's ignoring the look of apprehension in her eyes. He started the kiss lightly, his lips pleading with hers to open and let him in. Prayers answered, he moaned with the immediate pleasure. His tongue explored her warm, wet mouth reveling in the familiar flavor. She intoxicated him.

Luc pulled her tightly against his body before moving his hand up to cup the back of her head. Her hair was slightly wet due to her physical activity, but he didn't care. She wasn't afraid of a little physical work and that made him damn hot. Man he'd missed this, the world right once again.

Deepening the kiss, he felt a little nip on his lips alerting him that Stephanie enjoyed herself as much as he did. Good to know he still affected her.

At least that's what he thought.

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Luc's kiss felt so incredible, Stephanie almost let herself get carried away. Luckily, she came to her senses, pulling out of his arms in a rush.

"What the hell do you think you're doing?"

Staring at her, a confused expression on his face, Luc said, "I would have thought that was pretty obvious."

"Don't be a smartass." Stephanie pushed her way past Luc's oversized body and headed to the counter to try to use the phone again. It still wasn't working. "I have to get out of here." Stephanie picked up a hammer and headed for the boards on the front door.

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#### Weathering the Storm

"I don't think so," Luc said as he pulled the hammer out of her hand. "You hear that wind whistling out there? I know damn well you can't miss the heavy clattering on the roof. You aren't going anywhere."

"You have no control over where I go, Luc."

Raising an eyebrow, he said," Try me, sweetheart. I'll use force, if necessary."

Stephanie rolled her eyes at his male superiority complex.

"I'm not trying to be a jerk here, Stephy. It's pretty damn dangerous out there, and if you aren't going to keep yourself safe, I'll do it for you."

Stephanie fought the urge to tell him she felt safer in the storm than she did with him. Luc didn't need to know he had broken her heart, and it still hadn't healed. He didn't need to know she didn't trust herself with him.

Stephanie looked into his green eyes that swirled with a honey-yellow near the pupil. Her heart rate accelerated at the intense looked he returned.

She loved every part of his gorgeous face, his strong jaw line, crooked smile, and chipped tooth. Who knew a chipped tooth could be so damn sexy? Luc's smile widened as though he read her thoughts, and for a quick second, Stephanie realized she was smiling, too.

As if on auto pilot, she quickly turned that smile into a frown, sat down in the blue swivel chair behind the counter, and pouted.

"Is it really that bad being stuck here with me, Stephy?"

She almost asked him not to call her by the nickname, but she knew it was a lost cause. "Yes," she answered simply.

His gaze turned dark. Stephanie decided to change the subject. She really didn't want to know what that look meant. "I'm starved. You have anything to eat in this place?"

"I have a sandwich, chips, and cookies in my cooler. I didn't have time to eat lunch earlier today."

"Well break it out, Carr. We can split it if you don't mind."

"You'll owe me," he said with his wicked grin.

"I've got a couple bucks in my pocket. How will that do?"

Stephanie reached in her pocket pretending to grab money for Luc. She knew he didn't want it, but she tried to beat him at his own game.

"Get your hand out of your pocket, Stephy. You know I don't want your money."

She smiled as they headed to the lawn and garden section, sharing a ham and cheese sandwich at a patio table, under a large sky-blue umbrella.

"Isn't this like the one you wanted to buy for your house?" Luc asked between bites.

"Actually, I did buy it," she responded. "I went over to Hillside and bought one."

A look of confusion washed over Luc's face. "Why'd you drive forty miles each way to pick up a table when you could have driven five minutes and bought the same one from me?"

Men really were dense. "It happened right after we broke up, Luc. I was afraid it might be too hard on you to see me that soon," Stephanie rushed the words from her mouth before taking her last bite of sandwich. In reality she was the one who couldn't handle seeing him when she was so raw from the recent break-up. Pride pushed the lie from her mouth.

"I see," the right side of Luc's mouth rose in a half smile that made her want to jump his bones right there.

"You remember that job we did together over in Hillside?" he asked, eyes gazing at hers.

"Yeah, I remember," she said with a small laugh. "You wouldn't listen to me about the measurements being off. We got about half way done before we had to start over because I was right."

Stephanie smiled and exhaled a deep breath. "You always were too stubborn for your own good."

Luc let out a loud, bellowing laugh. She felt his breath brush across her skin,

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leaving warmth in its wake.

"Now that's the pot calling the kettle black, don't ya think?"

"I am not stubborn, Lucas Carr!" She knew she didn't sound convincing. Hell, she knew she was stubborn as a mule.

"Of course you aren't. I don't know where that thought came from."

God how she missed this —talking work and laughing with him, joking and giving him a hard time. They could talk for hours, arguing half the time, but now that she thought about it, they had been meaningless arguments. They were a part of them and what made their relationship, well, fun. Funny she should think of it now.

"We had some good time, didn't we?" Luc's green eyes sparked sincerity.

"Yeah, I guess we did."

They were each silent for the next few minutes. The only sound, the howling wind and loud banging drum of rain on the rooftop. Stephanie briefly wondered what other damage the storm had done besides that done to her truck. There would no doubt be fallen trees and flooding of some of the properties by the river.

She tried with no avail to keep her mind off Luc and his intense stare. A moment later it became damn near impossible as she felt the warmth of Luc's leg brush up against her own.

"We were good together, Stephy. I miss touching you." Luc reached out and brushed his calloused fingers across her cheek.

Stephanie felt the familiar throb between her legs that always accompanied Luc's body touching hers. Her nipples puckered and it became obvious there was no way around this. She wanted Luc and he wanted her; at least for today he did.

She let her mind grasp the concept of what he had just said to her. He didn't miss her; he missed touching her. She knew they were good together sexually, so it didn't surprise her that Luc would bring it up now. Her heart wanted them to be good together in everyway, but now, at this moment, sexually was better than nothing.

Her strength waned as she realized she could deny him no longer. She closed her eyes in a silent confirmation to herself and to Luc.

"I miss touching you, too, Luc. I miss being touched by you." She opened her eyes in time to see desire brewing inside his. His eyes darkening, he offered his best bad boy smile, and she came undone. "Touch me now, Luc."

Standing up, Luc's strong arms wrapped around her petite body and lifted her up, his lips seeking hers for a heart-stopping kiss. He started walking, where to, Stephanie had no idea, but she enjoyed the ride and the seductive play of his lips. Luc was a master kisser and didn't lose a step as he moved a little farther to the back of the hardware store.

Their tongues danced erotically as if to beautiful music. She wasn't sure when she wrapped her arms around Luc's neck, but her hands were now tangled in his dark, mussed hair. Luc bent and laid her down on some kind of cushioned lawn chair. He pulled his lips from hers.

"Damn I'm glad I added this lawn and garden section. You have no idea how fucking bad I want you."

Stephanie looked down to see a wooden reclining lawn chair covered with burgundy cushioning. "Will it hold?" she asked.

"For now it will. When I'm buried inside you, we might have to move to the floor."

"Sounds promising."

"It will be," he said before grabbing the bottom of her sweatshirt and pulling it over her head. Below her sweatshirt she wore a simple white tank top with no bra. She looked down to discover her own nipples puckered and straining against the tight tank top.

Luc growled in what she could only hope was appreciation before he lowered his mouth to her left breast and sucked through her shirt. Stephanie dropped her head back, allowing herself to drown in the sensations Luc had coursing through her body.

His mouth nibbled and sucked at her left breast while his hand expertly pleasured the right. As if that wasn't enough for him, Luc stopped and roughly pushed her top off so he had access to her bare breasts, but did nothing. Stephanie lay there

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expectantly while he stared at her chest and waited.

\* \* \* \*

"God, you're so fucking hot." Luc said as he looked down at Stephanie's dusty brown nipples and moaned deeply. Her breasts were small, but they had an effect on him that he couldn't explain. In his heart, they were perfect, and tonight, they were his. He hoped they would be his to please forever.

Luc rolled each nipple in his finger tips while he watched pleasure wash over Stephanie's face. She was beautiful. The love he had always felt but never shared, for her exploded to new heights. All it took was one euphoric moment of Stephanie in his arms to bring it all back in one flooding tidal wave. He needed Stephanie with an allconsuming force, not just her body, but her heart, and soul.

His beautiful, stubborn, hard-working, Stephanie, lay under him, moaning in delight as he touched her. Her hazel eyes were now squeezed shut preventing him from visually connecting with her as he needed to.

"Look at me. I want to see what I'm doing to you. I want you to see how much I enjoy touching you."

She opened her eyes and watched him knead her breasts. Her watching made Luc even hotter. Everything about Stephanie made him hot. She had perfect little freckles that danced across her nose and lightly speckled her shoulders. Her blond hair was an adorable mess. As if she could read his thoughts, she pulled her ponytail out and let her hair grace her shoulders. Luc growled in delight at the sight.

"I missed watching you come. I'm going to make you do it for me right now." Luc dropped his mouth over one bare nipple and sucked it hard into his mouth. He licked, teased, sucked, and bit at her sensitive skin. Stephanie moaned enthusiastically. He knew her body, knew she was almost there just from his mouth on her breasts.

"Come for me," he urged against her eager breast. Luc passionately drew her nipple deep into his mouth savoring her taste. He felt her slightly stiffen in his arms. Stephanie pushed his head tightly against her chest and called out his name in release.

The sweetest sound he ever heard.

"You're beautiful to watch Stephanie. You close yourself off so much." Luc continued to tease her breasts, "but not when you're having an orgasm. You're completely open to me. I'm going to make you do it over and over before this storm is over."

"Please, Luc," Stephanie said between pants. "I need more."

"I'm just the man to give it to you. Always." Luc moved his hands to her center. He felt her heat through the layer of worn blue jean. "I missed touching you here, too, Stephanie."

Luc stroked her through her jeans while still lavishing her nipples. Stephanie squirmed in pleasure, and Luc's cock swelled in anticipation for what was to come.

"Lay back. I have to get these pants off you." Stephanie did as she was told and Luc smiled. The only time she never argued with Luc was during sex. As strong as she was, she melted under his touch, and he couldn't get enough of that.

Luc unbuttoned her pants with shaky fingers. It had been a long time since he'd made love to a woman. He hadn't wanted anyone else since their break-up the year before.

Slowly, he unwrapped her hidden treasures. She wiggled her hips to help him ease her jeans down her legs. Luc groaned at the sight of her blond curls. Laying his face against her sex, he inhaled deeply. "God you smell good, so feminine and sweet. I could take in your scent for hours and never tire of it." Luc eased his eyes up to see Stephanie flush pink. "Don't be embarrassed. You don't ever have to be embarrassed with me."

Luc parted her slick, pink folds and licked. "You taste even better than I remember," he said before returning his mouth to her core. Luc's tongue dove inside her body, licking her into ecstasy. He felt her hands buried in his hair, telling him she wanted more, so he gave it to her. He gave everything to her, licking, tasting, and teasing her sweet body.

"I've dreamt about tasting you again," he said pulling briefly away from her. "I don't know if I can stop now."

At the sound of his words, Stephanie rode out her pleasure with a final scream.

\* \* \* \*

Stephanie lay across the lawn chair with Luc's head in her lap, spent. So far, he had been even better than she remembered, and they hadn't even made love yet. Her heart burst with the love she had felt but denied for two long years. It scared her.

He enjoyed her sexually, but that's about it. *Remember Stephanie, he dumped you. You aren't woman enough for this man.* She was rough, where the other women he dated where refined, outspoken and hard to get along with, where they were soft and easy going. Which is why she never let him know she loved him.

Even though now, the words were on the tip of her tongue, as always, she made herself hold back. Her pain would be so great later, but she needed him now.

"Are you cold?" Luc asked her. Not waiting for an answer he continued, "Damn, I'm sorry. I didn't even think about that."

"You're keeping me warm, Luc. The body heat we generate is enough to keep anyone warm," she said with a smile.

"I guess we better get started creating some more heat. I wouldn't want you to catch a chill." He plucked her puckered nipple as he waited for a response.

"You took the words right out of my mouth, Carr." Stephanie pushed Luc off of her and stood up.

"It's my turn to drive, Luc. Lay down." Pushing aside her fears, Stephanie decided to take full advantage of this moment while she had the chance. Luc had always been able to bring out the animal in her, and today was no different.

"Yes ma'am," Luc said while saluting her. She looked down at his crotch and realized he saluted her in more ways than one.

Stephanie unbuttoned Luc's flannel shirt before she moved to the five buttons on

his jeans. "You think you could have anymore buttons, Luc. Jesus, it's going to take me half an hour to get them all undone."

"Hurry up then, smart-aleck. I can't wait much longer."

"Me either." Stephanie unbuttoned the last button and pulled the pants down his legs. At the same time, Luc pulled off the shirt she had left hanging from his body. His t-shirt came next.

Stephanie took in the sight of a naked Luc, and she couldn't breathe. He was beautiful—lean, hard muscles, dark hair and a throbbing erection that was hers for the taking.

"The chair?" she asked. "Should we move?"

Hunger filled his eyes as he tweaked her nipples, "No. It's fine. If not, you'll fall on me. We'll be okay."

She sensed his urgency as strong as her own. Ready and willing to give herself to him until a light bulb went off in her head. "Shit, do you have any condoms?"

"You aren't on the pill anymore?"

"No, I am. I just didn't know. We aren't dating anymore. I thought since you've been dating a lot, you'd have condoms."

Luc's jaw clinched visually and anger creased his brow. "If you don't want to make love with me without a condom that's fine. I understand, but I want it to be for the right reasons. It's time we get one thing straight. I haven't slept with anyone since we broke up. I haven't wanted anyone else. You don't have to believe me, but it's true."

Stephanie could see the sincerity in his eyes. It burned brightly, and she knew he told her the truth. She didn't know why he hadn't been with another woman, but she knew he hadn't. Luc wouldn't lie about something so serious. She knew that with absolute clarity. Still, she felt they should take every precaution. They weren't likely to stay together after this.

"I believe you, Luc, but..."

"Shhh." Luc placed his finger against her lips. "I would never do anything to make you uncomfortable. Maybe we'll be lucky and I'll still have one tucked away in my wallet. I just need to know you really do believe me."

"I do, Luc," she said against his finger before kissing it lightly.

Luc grabbed his jeans anxiously, hoping like hell he still had a condom in it.

"Thank God," he said as he kissed the condom wrapper like an eager child given candy. He handed the package to Stephanie. After two tries she opened the condom wrapper and placed it on his impressive erection, he was long and thick. Straddling him, she sank down.

Stephanie gasped as Luc filled her -body, heart, and soul. She would never love another man like she loved him. The only way she knew how to say it without words was to show him.

Stephanie rode him hard, digging her short finger nails into his chest. She felt his large hands grasping her waist, and it fueled her on more. Luc surged inside her matching the rhythm she set. They were perfectly in harmony all the way through to a powerful orgasm that shook her to the core.

Stephanie fell against Luc's chest drawing short, panting breaths. Their bodies were still connected, and she wished to God the connection would never be broken. The sound of their breathing drowned out the storm outside. Nothing mattered but the two of them and this moment.

Luc's hand came up tickled her back, rubbing sensually. "Do you know where I really want to touch you?" He didn't wait for an answer before putting his hand between them, directly over her heart. "Right here. I love you. God, I love you so much."

Stephanie leapt off his chest like he had electrocuted her. "What did you just say to me?"

"I said I love you. I've always loved you."

"But- you broke up with me. You left me, Luc."

"I left you because it was obvious you didn't feel the same way about me. You never opened up to me. You never showed me you cared. Anytime I tried to tell you how I felt, you blew it off. I tried to tell you how hot you made me, what you did to me,

but you always implied it was just about sex. You didn't trust that I wanted you and only you."

Stephanie's face softened. "Did you hear what you just said, Luc? How hot I make you? What I do to you? That isn't love, Luc." Her lip trembled but she continued, "I can see that you want me physically, but not for the long haul. How could you want me? I'm not the type of woman who's going to cook you dinner every night, I'm not going to bake cookies for PTA meetings. I'm not the type of woman that tames a man like you."

"You already have. I don't want those other women. I want someone who is feisty enough to fight me as hard as she loves me. I want someone who can fix the leak in the kitchen if I'm not there to do it. I know you aren't perfect, but neither am I. I can be cocky and stubborn as hell. We may not be perfect, but we're perfect together."

"I may not have used the right words before to tell you how I feel, but I'm trying to use them now. I love your messy hair," he said fingering a curl. "I love when you get grumpy with me. I love arguing with you because it means you have your own opinions. I love *you*."

Stephanie fought the urge to believe him. Old habits died hard and she needed proof. "Do you know why I came in to see you today, Luc?"

"Yes," he replied in his husky tone. "Today's the anniversary of the day that changed my life." He reached up and tickled her side. "It's the anniversary of the first time we went out, the first time we made love. I could never forget that."

"Me either." Stephanie closed her eyes and thought about all the things she said to Luc today and for the past year. Her sarcastic words and accusations had been her defense mechanism. Though she hadn't been easy to get along with, Luc was sitting here caressing her sweetly and telling her he loved her. And damned if she didn't believe him.

"I'm so sorry I've been so terr..." she attempted to say terrible but Luc silenced her with his mouth. Kissing her senseless and telling her it was all okay. Pulling away to leave a meager inch or two separating them, he grasped her face and their eyes locked. The look they exchanged said everything. They loved each other, they were sorry for their mistakes, and they forgave as well.

Luc loved her for who she was. He didn't care that she had no breasts, couldn't cook, and came home just as dirty as he did after a long day at work. He wanted her. He loved her.

"I love you too, Carr. I've loved you since the first time I saw you." Then she kissed him. Their tongues intertwined the way their lives would from now on. Together.

"Oh, one more thing," Stephanie said after their lips parted. "You need to know I might want to fix the leak in the kitchen sink whether you're home or not."

They both laughed joyously, knowing from now on, they could weather any storm as long as they did it together.

# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

# Kelley Vitollo

# http://kelleyvitollo.com

Kelley Vitollo has always been a writer. Publication came later, but the joy of writing, creating characters, and always finding that happily ever after was always there. Finally getting the opportunity to share the stories running around in her head, Kelley thanks her lucky stars everyday. She feels if she can bring the same joy to her readers that she receives when picking up a book, she will have truly succeeded.

Kelley was fortunate enough to marry her very own soul mate. Her husband is the stuff romance heroes are made of. They are the proud parents of a beautiful daughter who can always put a smile on their faces. She tries to live life to the fullest and makes sure to count her blessings everyday

Other books by Kelley Vitollo:

Dream Man

Weathering the Storm



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