



Mi Alma

BY DALE CAMERON LOWRY



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Lowry

Thank You Gift for Readers

Mi Alma

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MI ALMA

WANTED, THE AD SAID. BARTENDER for office holiday party. Should be easy-going, LGBT-friendly, and have server's license and great references. Competitive remuneration.

Damian clicked on the show contact info link at the end of the Craigslist ad. Up came a phone number, email address and the name Alma.

“Alma,” Damian said out loud, enjoying how the Spanish consonants moved in his mouth. It had been too long since he’d spoken the language at length, but it still felt right on his tongue. He could almost hear his mother’s voice as he repeated the word: “Alma.”

“Hijo de mi alma,” she would call him when he had needed it most—*child of my soul*. When he was small, he’d been plagued by night terrors and nightmares, often waking up in pitch blackness to the sound of his own blood-curdling screams. His mother would pull him to her lap, whispering into his feverish scalp, “Hijo de mi alma, no te preocupes. Mami está aquí.”

*Child of my soul, don't worry.
Mommy is here.*

He never doubted her love, not for one minute—not until he was twelve and it suddenly dawned on him what his fascination with Francisco Pimentel down the street actually meant. He let this knowledge about himself simmer, his fear growing every Sunday when she dragged him to mass for the sacrament. But it was too much for a boy to hold, and his lid blew off one Saturday afternoon when she teased him for the umpteenth time about the cute gordita who lived next door and made swoony eyes at him whenever he walked by.

“Why you always so mean to Elena? She’s such a sweet girl, and

smart. Nice curves, too. You'd think a boy would notice that." She looked down at the cutting board of plantains she'd just finished slicing. "Hand me a spoon, would you?"

Everything inside Damian was roiling. It had roiled before, set his lid to shaking. But he'd held on, managed to keep it tight and locked in place. He tried so hard to hold on again this time. He pulled the wooden spoon from the drawer.

Something inside him burst.

"Shut up about Elena already!" He slammed the spoon against the counter. "Don't you get it? I don't care about her curves! I don't care about any girl's curves. I'm a—" He choked on the word, started to cry like a little

boy. “I’m a fag, Mami. Soy cundango.”

He couldn’t even look at her, but it didn’t matter. In two seconds flat she had her arms around him, pulling him close, her hands messy from the plantains but her body warm and comforting. “Tu eres el hijo de mi alma. Te quiero por siempre.” *You are the child of my soul. I will always love you.*

None of this meant the Alma lady who’d placed the ad was Latina. He’d read a book once about pioneers in 1800s Montana with an Anglo heroine who inexplicably had Alma as her name. Maybe this Alma was white, too, named for some such ancestor. He pictured a sturdy old dyke with strong arms and knobby hands, arthritic from

years of manual labor.

In the end, it didn't matter who she was or what she looked like, as long as she paid what she promised. Damian had just started work at a new place—a swanky joint that was a move up from his previous job. But with the lowest seniority, he hadn't managed to snag any of the most lucrative shifts yet. Mostly he'd be working days, a crappy time for tips even at Christmas. He could use the money.

He picked up his phone and dialed the number.

“Hello, this is Alma Larsen,” a voice said on the other end of the line. Damian startled. The voice was deep, and not a womanly deep. Not Nina Simone or a grandma who'd smoked

three packs a day her entire life. It was Barry White deep, the kind of voice that made a man's balls stir and his big toe shoot up in his boot.

“Y-yes, hello,” Damian stammered. Damian *never* stammered. He was smooth and collected. Nothing could blow his top. That was how he had become such a good bartender. “My name's Damian Banks. I'm calling about your ad on—”

“Please leave a message and I'll call back as soon as I can.”

Voicemail. Damian had gone all aflutter over a goddamn voicemail message.

He didn't trust himself to sound any smoother the second time around. He hung up and sent an email.

Alma called Damian to set up a time to meet. Thank heaven Damian recognized the number when it flashed across the screen. It gave him time to breathe deep and adjust his nutsack before answering.

“Your references were terrific,” Alma said, his voice just as sonorous and big-dicked as it had been on his outgoing voicemail. “Could you meet up in the next few days to talk about the details? Just a half hour or so?”

“Sure,” Damian said. He again adjusted his nutsack, which had started to shift despite his best intentions. “Mornings are good, and

I'm not working Thursday or Saturday."

They agreed to meet about halfway between them, at a coffee shop on Spring Street. Alma said he'd wear pink sunglasses and a Utah Jazz T-shirt just to make sure he couldn't be missed. Damian pictured a hairy bear of a man with a giant rib cage and belly to match the giant voice.

But when he arrived at the coffee shop, the only person in a Utah Jazz shirt was a boyish white man, thin and strawberry-blonde, with no facial hair to speak of and pretty beige freckles dusting his nose. The shirt was pushed up past his elbows and the pink sunglasses perched on top of his head. He removed them as soon as Damian

sat down across from him. “You must be Alma,” Damian said, brushing the flakes of snow that had fallen on his coat as he’d walked over.

“Yup. I’m assuming you’re Damian?” Alma reached out his hand. Damian took it. Up close, Alma didn’t seem as boyish as he had from afar. He was probably only a few years younger than Damian. He had the barest hints of crow’s feet forming at the outside corners of his eyes, and his forearms were sinewy and muscular, producing a firm, solid grip when he shook Damian’s hands.

And there was his voice, of course—not boyish at all, but heavy and rich like cream sauce.

“Yes, that’s me,” said Damian,

breathing deep so he wouldn't stammer like he almost did that first time on Alma's voicemail. He didn't usually go for skinny white boys, but apparently he was going for this one. "Nice to meet you. I hope I didn't keep you waiting."

"No, I was here way too early. An old habit from my missionary days that I never was able to break."

Damian wasn't sure he'd heard right. "Missionary days?"

Alma's cheeks turned rose-pink to match the sunglasses that had been on his head earlier. "Sorry, I spent too long living in Utah. I forget not everyone—" He heaved a sigh and started over. "You heard of Mormons?"

Sounded vaguely familiar. Damian nodded as if he understood.

“The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints? They send nineteen-year-old boys out in pairs to convert people all over the world. We all had ‘Elder’ on our name tags even though we were wet behind the ears.”

“Oh!” Damian remembered some guys named Elder coming to his apartment complex back when he was a kid. His mom sometimes let them stand in the door and read a few Bible verses to her, but when they told her they didn’t believe in praying to the Virgin she stopped answering their knocks. “The guys in the white shirts and ties?”

Alma smiled. His cheeks went an

even deeper pink. “Yup.”

Damian nodded. “So you’re a church guy. That’s cool.”

“Um, no. You can’t really be gay *and* Mormon. They basically teach a man can’t get to heaven without marrying a woman.”

“Wait. Seriously?”

Alma nodded and rolled his eyes, a good signal that Damian could let go of the laugh he was holding back. Alma started to laugh, too, a low chuckle that made a thrumming sort of *boom-boom-boom* against Damian’s breastbone. “There were a lot of good things about growing up Mormon,” Alma said. “But that wasn’t one of them. I wasted a lot of time denying who I really am. I’m kind of an atheist

now.”

“I get what you mean. I was raised Catholic. My mom loved me just the same before I came out to her and after, but not everyone did. She was the only thing that kept me going to church, but after her funeral I never went back.” Damian cursed himself. “Sorry. Weird to mention my dead mom right off the bat. It’s been—” He stopped to do the math in his head. It had been his sophomore year of high school, which meant he’d been fifteen, so that made it—“fourteen years. Water under the bridge. I’m plenty used to it.”

“Still. That must have been hard.”

Damian shrugged. “I try not to dwell on it.”

There was a lull during which neither of them spoke. Alma took a sip of his coffee and studied Damian's face over it. "So you're gay, too, huh?"

"It's not obvious?"

Alma shrugged. "I got a vibe, but I wasn't sure. I have the world's worst gaydar."

"Mine's not great, either, unless I'm in a gay bar," Damian said.

Alma laughed again, holding Damian's gaze for what would have been a little too long under other circumstances, and maybe was a little too long even under these, the way it made Damian's cock jack up in his jeans. Alma's eyes were gorgeous—multicolored with green and blue and hints of gold, as full of texture as his

voice.

Alma looked out the window and cleared his throat. “Not like I’m interviewing you to be my boyfriend, though, so I guess it doesn’t matter. I suppose we should talk about the party?” The syntax didn’t make it a question, but his intonation did.

“Yeah, sure,” Damian said, though he kind of wished they could put it off a little longer. Because the longer they put it off, the longer Damian could sit in this coffee shop staring into Alma’s eyes.

Alma bought Damian a coffee and