



THE
TRUTH
ABOUT

Forever

Piper
VAUGHN

THE TRUTH ABOUT FOREVER

When they were teenagers Jonny and Marco promised each other forever. Marco had the word etched in his skin to seal their vow. He thought they'd always be together. Three weeks later Jonny dumped him.

Now, after six years, Marco's finished college and worked his way up to head chef at his family's popular Mexican restaurant in downtown Chicago. He's found his calling, and he finally has his life where he wants it. Then Jonny reappears, throwing Marco's emotions into chaos.

Jonny demands a chance to explain. Marco doesn't want to hear excuses, not from the man who left him without a backward glance. Yet Jonny claims to still love him, and he won't be denied. Marco wants to believe him, but will the truth be enough to mend the damage Jonny did when he broke Marco's heart and walked away?

Table of Contents

Blurb	2
Love is an Open Road.....	4
The Truth About Forever – Information.....	7
Author’s Note.....	8
The Truth About Forever	9
Prologue	10
Chapter One	13
Chapter Two.....	20
Chapter Three.....	28
Chapter Four	39
Epilogue	48
Author Bio	50

Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

THE TRUTH ABOUT FOREVER

By Piper Vaughn

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 these authors 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 is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, 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 review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

The Truth About Forever, Copyright © 2015 Piper Vaughn

Cover Art by Natasha Snow

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

THE TRUTH ABOUT FOREVER

By Piper Vaughn

Photo Description

A muscular man sits on his haunches, his lower back and buttocks braced against a stone wall. He's bare-chested, wearing sports pants and running shoes. His entire left side is covered in tattoos, the most visible one being the word "forever" on his rib cage.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

He told me it'd be forever, a forever I had permanently inked into my skin. I thought I'd always want the reminder of a love as incredibly perfect as we had together. The passion and our connection was overpowering, but apparently his idea of forever and mine were two different things. Yet, no matter how painful it is I haven't been able to let go of the memory of him in my heart. I'm trying to live my life again, trying to find a rhythm in a world that doesn't seem to balance for me anymore. I've covered more and more of my body in the tattoos of a life lived, but somehow even though I've surrounded it with other images, I can't quite make myself cover up and paint over that one word.

Note: I love reformed bad boys, more than a little snark, and a HEA is definitely a necessity. Everything else is up for grabs and have some fun. I can't wait to see what you come up with!

Sincerely,

Shelby

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: second chances, chef, blue collar, military men, multicultural, reunited, tattoos

Content Warnings: mentions of drug use (not shown)

Word Count: 16,851

Author's Note

Thank you to Natasha Snow for the fabulous cover, my beta readers for their invaluable help and advice, and all the volunteers in the M/M Romance Group who helped organize and run this event. This is dedicated to Shelby. Thanks for the awesome prompt. Hope you enjoy the story!

THE TRUTH ABOUT FOREVER

By Piper Vaughn

Prologue

“We’re done.”

I turn to Jonny, but he’s not looking at me. His eyes are trained downward, on the street that snakes like a river between parked cars and evenly spaced lampposts. In the darkness, lit windows draw attention. Sometimes we spy on people from up here on the roof of my building, watch as they settle in front of their TVs for their crime shows or news programs, watch them fight and fuck and a thousand other things. We recount their lives as if we’re the omniscient narrators, seeing and knowing all.

But not tonight. Jonny’s been quiet since we met up an hour ago. It’s late and too cold for anyone to be outside if they don’t have to be. Except for us. We’ve run these streets together for years, no matter the season, no matter the time. At night, we pretend this is our own little kingdom. Our land, our neighborhood, and we’re the royalty lording over the peasants below.

“Done with what?” I ask, because his statement came out of nowhere.

“This. Us.”

I snort in amusement. Of course I do. “Very funny. Don’t joke about shit like that, man.”

“I’m not.” Jonny faces me. The night is bright, the moon a crisp, perfect circle, huge and seeming close enough to touch. I can easily read his expression.

I’m expecting to see the familiar glint of humor in his eyes, the smart-ass smirk, or the quiver at the corner of his mouth when he’s trying to hold back a laugh. Instead, he’s a blank wall, shuttered gaze, emptiness.

I’ve seen him give that look to plenty of people over the years—cops, teachers, the old man who owns the grocery store on the corner, his drunken grandfather. But never to me. Not even at the beginning.

My stomach drops. “Come on, Jonny. Don’t fuck around.”

He shakes his head. “It’s over, Marco. I don’t love you anymore.”

He could’ve punched me and shocked me less. Hurt me less. The words rip through my rib cage and slash at my heart. Jonny’s never supposed to say “I love you” with a “don’t” in between. Not to me.

“This really isn’t funny, asshole.” My voice trembles. I don’t try to disguise it. I don’t try to act hard. He’ll see right through any front I try to put up. He knows me that well.

I thought I knew him too.

“Don’t make it some big thing,” he says with a dismissive shrug.

I ball up my fists. I’m breathing faster now. My chest throbs like I’m dying from terminal pneumonia, and he’s standing there with that *look* on his face. That vacant, empty-eyed look, devoid of emotion, as if he’s staring at a goddamn stranger. “It is a big fucking thing. What about this, huh?” I lift my shirt to show him the tattoo on my side. The one that says “forever”—because that’s what he promised. What we both promised.

I’ve only had it for three weeks.

He shrugs again, casual. It’s clear this isn’t killing him the way it’s killing me. Six years we’ve known each other. Five we’ve been together—since we were thirteen. He was my every first, and I figured he’d be my every last too. And he can shrug it off like nothing?

“You know they say never to get a tattoo for someone else. If you break up, you end up looking like a sucker. Guess this time, that’s you.”

For a second, I stand there, stunned. Then I’m on him, and I’m swinging for all I’m worth. My heart is breaking and he’s stomping on it. I can’t think. I can’t breathe. All I hear and see is fury, blinding red. A clip to my jaw knocks me flat. I barely feel it. I know he didn’t put his full strength behind it. If he had, I might be missing teeth. He just wanted to get me off of him.

He doesn’t have to hit me again. The agony in my chest is enough to keep me down. It’s not the kind of pain I can ignore or push through. Not when it’s so unexpected, on what should’ve been a night like so many others we’d spent. Maybe we would’ve smoked some weed, made out in Mrs. Rodriguez’s greenhouse. Nothing special. It didn’t have to be for me to have fun with him. To be happy. But it wasn’t supposed to be like *this*.

This was never supposed to happen, not between him and me. He’s been my everything for so long I can’t imagine life without him.

Jonny walks away without another word.

Why? Tell me why! I want to call after him, demand answers, but I can’t get my tongue to work. It lies still in my mouth, a perfect imitation of a thick, dead slug.

I don't know how long I stay there with my eyes streaming. The tears are fiery hot compared to the cold March air. I feel them soaking into the hair on either side of my face. Snot coats my upper lip, and all I taste is salt, but I can't stop crying.

After a break up, I've often heard people say "It's not the end of the world" or "There are other fish in the sea."

Those words sound so paltry now. Fucking meaningless. *It is* the end. If not of the world, then of me and my stupid heart.

There's nothing left in the sea except for me, drowning.

Chapter One

Six years later

There's something about the chaos of a restaurant kitchen that brings me peace. Sounds like an oxymoron, but it's true. There's order to the madness. The clack of knives hitting cutting boards, the clatter of pots and pans, the spray of water from the industrial sinks, the buzz of music from the radio, the shouts and squeaks of slip-resistant shoes—they come together to form a symphony of sorts. “*Sinfonía cocina*,” as my mother's favorite composer, Carlos Chávez, might have titled it.

After spending the majority of my childhood in and out of my parents' restaurants and the last two years working my way up to head chef of their most popular location in Chicago's South Loop, the noise of a busy kitchen is comfort. I lose myself in it, and everything else fades away—the burns, the heat, the ache of my feet by the end of the night, those are inconsequential. The days breeze by, and I prefer it that way. Doesn't leave me much time for wallowing in regret and heartache. I need that. If left to my own devices, I can brood with the best of them. It's one of my biggest faults. Even under ideal circumstances, I'm a moody bastard. Admitting you have a problem is the first step to recovery, or so they say.

My father doesn't understand the sense of harmony that comes from a well-operated kitchen. His only concern is the bottom line. *Can we be doing things faster, cheaper? Where can we cut corners while still maintaining quality?* I tell him those two things are by nature contradictory. But at heart he's a businessman. In his view, there's always a way. If you haven't found it, you're not trying hard enough.

Ever since I was a teenager, he's been attempting to groom me to take over the management of Salinas, our downtown location, and our other two restaurants in the nearby suburbs. We made an agreement before I started college: he'd pay for my culinary degree if I minored in hospitality management. I did, but the reality is I have no interest in business operations outside of the kitchen. This is where I feel at home. I'm not the suave, congenial type who can mingle with the customers and strike up conversations. I don't want to be responsible for hiring and firing. I care only about providing people with the best meal possible. I want them to leave Salinas thinking it's the best Mexican food they ever had.

So far, if I can judge based on reviews and local, even national, commendations, we've achieved that goal and then some. Yet my father can't comprehend that I'm happy where I am, that I don't aspire to be anything more. I've already achieved my dream. I'm content in chef's whites instead of a three-piece suit.

My cousin, Pablo, is working toward his bachelor's in business management. He'd love to take on my father's role once he retires. And why shouldn't he? He already supervises our servers. Family is family. It's not as if we'd be giving up ownership of the restaurants. The name of Rafael Salinas would still be on all the paperwork that matters.

"Marco?"

I look up from the slab of pork I'm seasoning for our *tacos al pastor* to see Nancy, one of the waitresses, holding a plate of our popular salmon entrée. It's grilled, topped with a chunky mango-papaya-jalapeño salsa, and paired with caramelized plantains and cilantro-lime rice.

"What is it?" I ask.

"The customer is complaining his salmon is too dry. He wants a new fillet."

I use a towel sitting on the prep table to wipe my hands before grabbing a fork. One poke and the salmon starts to crumble, confirming the customer's claim. I sigh. "Dump it. I'll make a new one myself."

Nancy nods and turns away.

I pull a salmon fillet from our seafood fridge, sprinkle it with salt and pepper, and make my way to the grill. It's only been in place for a week, but it runs hotter than the last one. Our line cooks haven't quite perfected the timing yet. This is the third complaint about overcooked meat we've had in as many days.

"Guys, we need to be more vigilant," I say, brushing a section of the grill with a bit of olive oil before tossing on the fish. "*Pongan atención y escúchenme*. Listen up. If you leave the meat on as long as with the old grill, it'll be overcooked. We get another complaint this week and heads will roll, *entienden?*"

"*Sí, jefe*. Let me bow down and kiss your boot while I'm at it. Maybe I'll give you a spit-shine too."

I turn to give Raúl a dark look, to which he responds with a brash grin and mock salute. Behind him, Manny guffaws but keeps his attention on the *carne asada* he's grilling. I shake my head. Bunch of smart-asses in my kitchen.

Normally people are cowed by my scowl and general surliness. Those who don't know me edge away on the street. The attitude, the muscle, the tattoos—they see me and think about drive-bys, ex-cons, and gang violence, even though I never got involved in that shit. I've lost too many friends to that life, and in my opinion, there's nothing more pathetic than an aging gangbanger still trying to run the neighborhood with the young bloods. Sadly, there are plenty of those fools around. But the Salinas' staff knows me far too well to be intimidated. Looking the part and acting the part are two very different things, and some of them have been around since I was a snot-nosed punk with scraped-up knees from wiping out on my skateboard. They feel safe joking with me.

Raúl grips my shoulder. “Don't worry, boss man,” he says more seriously. “We got you.”

I nod and allow a small smile. In a few minutes, I'm plating the salmon and spooning salsa over the fillet. A scoop of rice topped by a sprig of cilantro, a couple of plantains, and a wedge of lime complete the dish. Nancy is at my elbow to take it almost before I'm finished.

I'm about to return to the pork marinade when I notice my cousin Stella standing near the prep station. She's one of our hostesses, always cheerful and laughing. She's also one of my best friends, and I can read her better than just about anybody. Her shoulders are tense, her expression strangely worried. Cautious. Right away I know I'm not going to like whatever news she's brought with her.

“Marco,” she says in an undertone. She opens her mouth, then hesitates.

My stomach tightens. “What?”

She bites her lip, her eyes darting toward one of the exits to the front of the house. Finally, her gaze meets mine. “Jonny's here.”

It takes me a few seconds to process the words. *Jonny's here.*

Jonny.

My Jonny. Because if it wasn't, Stella wouldn't have that look on her face, that anxious, pitying look. We've been close since we were kids. She knows what hearing that name does to me. She's fully aware of the significance of this moment.

Jonny D'Amato. I haven't seen him in six years. Not since the night on the rooftop when he crushed my fucking heart and took half of it with him when he

walked away. And now he's *here*? Here at my Zen place, where I'm in my element and centered, where I forbid memories of him to enter.

He's not supposed to be here. He's not *allowed*. Not after what he did.

My pulse roars in my ears as a storm builds inside me. My hands shake, betraying the riot of my emotions, the burn of rage and anguish. I clench them in my chef's jacket to hide the weakness. How can he affect me like this, even now? He shouldn't have this kind of power over me anymore, and the fact that he does infuriates me. I want to pound his face in.

"He's asking for you," Stella says. "Should I tell him to leave?"

I manage to shake my head, a swift, jerky movement. "I'll tell him myself."

Stella nods and squeezes my upper arm, offering support before she vanishes back to the dining area.

I take a moment to collect myself, try to calm my breathing. Queasiness slithers in my belly, and I swallow the excess saliva pooling in my mouth. I'm on the precipice, the razor-edge of control. One false move and I'll lose it completely. I can't afford to do that here. I may consider some of these people friends, family, but as executive chef, I'm in a supervisory role. When we're on the clock, they need to respect me, which means I can't lose my temper or humiliate myself in front of them—and especially not in view of the customers.

When I feel like I can keep it together, I go into the break room to shrug off my jacket and remove my head wrap. My hair drops around my face in a messy curtain. Properly styled, the layers in the front help keep it out of my eyes while the rest falls a few inches past my collar. Now it's a disaster, flattened by hours under the sweaty material of the wrap. I finger comb it, which proves to be useless. In seconds, it's in disarray again, sweeping over my forehead. I debate looking for an elastic to slap it into a ponytail, but then I catch myself.

What the fuck am I doing? Primping? Why do I give a shit what I look like? This isn't a goddamn reunion. I'm not trying to make a good impression. We're not on a fucking date.

Growling at myself, I toss the head wrap on a table and storm to the front of the restaurant. I'm not minding my steps or the people in my path. If they don't want to get mowed down, they'll move the hell out the way. I want this over. I want him gone. *Now*.

Except I lose a lot of steam when I spot him in the waiting area. Stella is watching me, her forehead creased with worry, but no one else seems to be paying attention to our little drama. Or what I'm sure will be one.

The first thing I notice is his hair. The lack of it. He kept it longish when we were younger, a halo of dark waves around his face. It's only a couple of inches now, a buzz cut in the process of growing out. It makes sense. I heard from his grandfather he went into the army after leaving me. Maybe he just got out. The timing fits.

It doesn't explain why he's *here*. Here with those dark eyes that see straight into my soul and the same cocky smirk, the one that irritates everyone else but never fails to make me weak. He's still leaner than me, wiry and strong under his tight T-shirt and snug, low-riding jeans. His jaw is scruffy, and a hint of a mustache and goatee surround his mouth. He looks different, yet so heartbreakingly familiar my chest constricts.

Breathing becomes almost impossible as we stand there staring at each other. Part of me wants to drop to my knees at his feet. He'd had me infatuated since the day he swaggered into my seventh grade class at age twelve, all arrogance and attitude, right around the time I was figuring shit out, realizing boys got me going, not girls with their curves, glossy lips, and sweet-smelling body sprays. Jonny walking into that room jolted me like touching a live wire. From then on, I had tunnel vision. I was gone on him, to the exclusion of everything and everyone else.

That was a long time ago.

Now, the bigger part of me wants to launch myself at him and beat his ass into the ground. It's terrifying. I'm not a violent person. If backed into a corner, I'll defend myself. I'm not a coward. I'll end fights, but I don't start them. It's not my style. I'm more the type to glare and try to incinerate someone with my eyes. Combined with the ink and the muscles, that usually does the trick. I'm quickly categorized as "not to be fucked with." But few people can provoke the kind of rage Jonny does in me. Thin line between love and hate? Probably. It doesn't change the fact.

"What the fuck are you doing here?" The words tumble from my mouth in a pissed off rush.

Jonny doesn't look surprised by my greeting. He can't have expected anything different. "I'm back. We need to talk."

"You're back," I repeat. Once again, my hands are trembling. "Why the hell do you think that should matter to me?"

He tips his chin and his expression is knowing, his mouth a smug slant. White noise floods my head, muddling my thoughts, and suddenly I have him

by the upper arm and I'm dragging him outside. It's a warm, sunny day in downtown Chicago. It's also lunch hour. The sidewalks are packed. I ignore the tourists and business-types strolling by as I pull him into the alley beside the restaurant. Once there, I release him roughly.

"You need to leave," I tell him, my voice tight with strain. "I can't see you right now. Actually, I don't ever want to see you again."

"You do want to see me," he says, confident as ever. I used to admire that about him. He never second guessed himself. It made me want to follow him wherever he led. The only reaction it incites in me now is anger.

"*Fuck* you. You have the balls to come here and say that to me? You walked away. *You*. And I'm over it. We don't need to talk. There ain't shit to say."

Jonny's jaw tightens. "Oh, there's plenty to say. You're gonna hear me out. You owe me that much."

My eyes fly wide at his nerve, then narrow dangerously. My heart gallops in my chest, and a tremor of fury runs through me. I can't suck in a full breath. "I don't owe you a goddamn thing," I grit out. Even those seven words are a struggle.

He takes a step toward me. "Marco..."

It's the first time he's said my name since the night he left me, and something inside me breaks at the sound of it on his tongue. I recoil, stumbling back as he advances. In a second, he has me pressed against the stone of the building, an arm on either side of my shoulders.

"Listen," he says. "I'm sorry. *Fuck*, I'm doing this all wrong. I... I wanted to tell you—"

"Marco? Is everything okay?"

Jonny ignores the interruption and doesn't take his eyes off me. I turn my head to see Devlin, my ex, standing at the mouth of the alley. His forehead is creased in concern, and he looks about a second from pushing his way between me and Jonny, which would be the mother of bad ideas. Body wise, they're fairly matched, though Devlin is slender grace to Jonny's sinewy muscle. But in a fight Devlin doesn't stand a chance against Jonny. He'd get his ass handed to him. Not that I'd ever let Jonny hurt him.

"Everything's fine," I say, hoping to defuse the situation. "He was just leaving."

Jonny grinds his teeth, but he drops his arms and retreats.

I move toward Devlin, not questioning his sudden appearance. He's a graphic designer, and the advertising firm he works for is situated in a building about ten minutes from Salinas. He often drops by for lunch, even now, months after we broke up. We're trying to work our way back to the friendship we shared before we became a couple. He's still nursing wounded feelings, and I think, beneath that, some vague hope we'll end up back together. I don't want to lead him on, but I can't cut him off either. I don't want to cause him any more pain. He was my bedrock throughout college. It would kill me to lose him entirely.

"I'll be back," Jonny says behind me. When we were kids and sharing a joint on the roof of my building, he might've said those words in his best Arnold Schwarzenegger impression to make me laugh. We'd loved those cheesy movies and marathoned them in his bedroom sometimes when his gramps was out on a bender.

There's no humor in his tone now. The words are a threat. A promise. Despite myself, I shiver. But I keep my eyes forward. Let him watch *me* walk away this time.

Devlin throws a proprietary arm around my shoulders and steers me toward the restaurant door.

Chapter Two

I spend the next couple of days in an angst haze. Every minute, every hour, I waver between dread and anticipation. I want to see Jonny again almost as much as I want him to stay away. In my distraction, I burn myself twice, drop a whole tray of oven-fresh enchiladas on my foot, and nearly take off the tip of my left pinky with one of our crazy-sharp butcher knives.

I'm worried Jonny's reappearance is nothing more than straight up mindfuckery, that it's all some twisted game with me as the butt of the joke. But if I'm honest with myself—which is a rare thing, no lie—I can admit there's a side of me that's relieved, even excited, to know he's returned.

We have so much history. I used to be down for whatever he wanted, no questions asked. He had me spellbound. We were like blood, best friends and lovers, and despite how things ended, I know there was a time, a *long* time, he felt the same way. I've never doubted that.

I'm terrified he won't come back. I'm stressing about what'll happen if he does, what excuses he might make and whether or not I'll be able to keep my head.

I think I need this, whatever it is. I can acknowledge now, with distance and the sort of introspection I typically try to avoid, the lack of closure between us is probably the main reason every relationship I've had since Jonny had failed.

I've loved a couple of other men. I've fucked a helluva lot more, which I blame on my fit of insanity after he left. I went out and shoved my cock into any willing hole, let myself be used and degraded and hurt, until I realized I was spiraling toward self-destruction, and if I didn't end the cycle, it would end me. That was around the time I met Devlin in my second year at ILIA—The Illinois Institute of Art. His friendship is part of what saved me, and I'll always owe him for that.

Over the years, I told him about Jonny. Only bits and pieces, but Devlin isn't stupid. He figured out Jonny was the root cause of my nosedive into recklessness. Of course, he's not the only one. My parents may have feigned ignorance when we were kids, but they knew what Jonny was to me even then. It's why they've been blowing up my phone and trying to waylay me at Salinas ever since they heard he sauntered back into town.

I've shut down their attempts when I'm at work and ignored their calls when I'm at home. It worries my mother and annoys my father, but I'm not ready to discuss him with them yet. I know what they'll say, and I don't want to hear it. Not again.

Tuesday is my day off. I usually get Monday too, but one of my kitchen supervisors is on vacation this week, which left me to cover the extra hours. When I can't stand to stay in bed any longer, I spend the afternoon cleaning my apartment. It's a small one-bedroom unit in Little Italy, maybe about ten minutes away from the Pilsen area and the building I grew up in. My parents offered me a place there when I graduated college and announced my intention to move out. I declined—politely, because “hell fucking no” would've gone over like a lead balloon with my conservative Hispanic parents. You're never too old to get a *chancla* thrown at you, and as it was, my mother cried. But after twenty-two years, I was more than ready to get out from under my father's oppressive thumb and my mother's constant fretting, prayers, and saint candle lighting. I swear if I never see another picture of *La Virgen de Guadalupe*, it'll be too damn soon.

Besides, that was right when Devlin and I became an official thing. I wanted to have my own place, somewhere respectable—and more importantly, *private*—to bring my boyfriend instead of sneaking around the way Jonny and I had been forced to do when we were teenagers. The night I moved in we got wasted, and I railed Devlin on every available surface to celebrate. I have the occasional flashback when I look at my couch, and it always makes me grin.

The grin feels shaky today. Ready to crumble. I've built so many good memories here—great ones—but the best are of the time before I moved here, of me and Jonny. Every kiss, every touch, every second we spent together. Back then I thought I couldn't live without him. When he left, I proved I could... but I never wanted to. From the moment he told me he loved me, I planned to stay by his side forever.

I still have that goddamn tattoo. I've debated covering it a dozen times. When I look in the mirror, it mocks me, and his words about me being a sucker echo in my head. But whenever I go in, swearing to myself this'll be the time I get it done, I can't do it. I add more ink instead. Now my entire left side is decorated, all black and gray, and I have sleeves from shoulder to wrist on both arms. There's even a second one for him, low on my abdomen. It reads “*juntos*

para siempre”—together forever—with a star on either side. I got it the day before he dumped me, intending to distract him with blow jobs and handies so I could surprise him once it healed. It was only luck my jeans hid it from view when I angrily hiked up my shirt to show him the other “forever” tattoo that night on the roof. Saved me some humiliation.

After he walked away and I finally accepted he wasn’t coming back, I took every sad reminder of our relationship and shoved them into an old Nike shoebox. I don’t know why I kept it, why I brought it to this apartment when I moved. It sits under my bed, untouched. I haven’t opened it in years.

And before the thought even fully crosses my mind, I know that’s about to change.

I go into my bedroom and dig the box out. It’s covered in dust, and it takes me a second to raise the courage to pull off the lid. There isn’t much inside. A few books he’d left in my room at my parents’ apartment—*The Hobbit* and the first two in Robert Jordan’s Wheel of Time series. He liked reading fantasy and sci-fi, though he hid the habit from our friends because he thought being a book nerd would damage his rep. A White Sox hat. The necklace he gave me for my sixteenth birthday that held our entwined initials. A stupid friendship bracelet from seventh grade. And a T-shirt smattered with rust-brown stains.

Blood.

I reach out to touch it with tentative fingers. I should’ve thrown it away ages ago. It’s beyond washing, and I knew at the time it was morbid as hell to keep it. But like my inability to cover the “forever” tattoo, I can’t bring myself to toss this either.

My fist closes around the fabric, and that night comes rushing back to me...

“Run, Marco!”

I feel a shove to my shoulder and stumble, just barely keeping my balance. Footsteps pound the pavement behind us. My breaths saw in and out of my lungs, coming so quick my chest is aching. There’s a stitch in my side, but I can’t afford to stop. The guys chasing us are Latin Kings, and Jonny pissed them off by interfering when one of them was harassing and groping a young girl in the alley around the corner from my building.

I hear them shouting and low pops, like roman candles going off in the distance. I realize it’s gunfire when something strikes a brick to my right and sends sharp fragments flying.

“Fuck!” Jonny grabs my arm and yanks me around a corner.

I’m blinking, amazed they’re shooting at us over something so trivial. I’m not sure why I’m surprised. There’s no sense to the gang violence in my neighborhood, and people have gotten killed for less, but I can’t make it compute. If it was one of their sisters or mothers being harassed, they would’ve thanked Jonny for stepping in. Since it was one of their own being an asshole, they were hunting us through the streets.

Jonny releases me to jump and pull down the ladder of a fire escape. It’s well-maintained and lowers to the concrete with only a soft, metallic groan. “Go, go.”

I obey without thinking twice, my heart pounding, sweaty hands slipping on the rails. When we reach the first level, I keep going. He stops to pull the ladder back up, and then he’s behind me, urging me to move faster. I recognize where we are now. We’ve used this fire escape to get to the roof before, the times Mrs. Rodriguez was working in her greenhouse and we needed somewhere else to go.

When the guys flood the alley, Jonny shoves me against the side of the building and presses his hand over my mouth. I’m panting hard into his palm as we watch the guys look around. After seconds that seem to stretch for eons, they move on.

Jonny slumps and presses his forehead to my temple, his breath gusting over my cheek. We stay still for another minute just in case. When we’re sure they’re gone, we finish climbing to the roof. I’m prepared to hide out all night, and I’m praying they’ll calm down and be more rational by morning. Pilsen is like its own small village within Chicago, and sometimes it has that nosy, claustrophobic vibe where everyone is in everyone else’s business. Those guys recognized us. They know our names and where we live. We can only hope they won’t hold a grudge.

It’s then I notice the blood. It’s streaking down Jonny’s arm and dripping from his fingertips.

“Holy shit!” I’m at his side in an instant. “Oh God, you’re fucking bleeding all over. Were you hit?”

Jonny winces when I touch his upper arm. “Yeah, but it ain’t nothin’. Just grazed me. I’m fine.”

Carefully I push his sleeve up. It's soaked and clinging to his skin, and he cringes when I pull the material away from where the bullet hit him. The gash is a couple of inches long and bleeding steadily. Even to my untrained eye, I can tell it needs stitches.

The sight of it sends a violent twist through my stomach, and nausea makes my head swim. "Holy shit," I say again. "You're not fine. We need to get you to the hospital, man."

Jonny shrugs off my touch. "Fuck that. We're not going back down there. They're still looking for us."

I reach out to grab his chin, force him to meet my eyes. "Listen to me, cabrón. We're going. I'm not gonna let your stubborn ass get an infection. You want them to have to cut your arm off? Hell no!"

Jonny stares at me for a moment then drops his gaze, his jaw clenched. "You know I ain't got no insurance."

Yeah, I knew. Jonny lives with his alcoholic Italian grandfather, who's off on benders about ninety percent of the time. He's lucky if they have food in the house. In his mind, health insurance is a luxury for rich people.

"We'll use my card and pretend you're me," I say. "They won't know the difference. My parents won't rat you out. Besides, they can't refuse to treat you if you show up at the ER. That shit's illegal."

"Whatever. Don't be a drama queen. You sound like your ma." He rolls his eyes and huffs, but I can tell he's in pain. He's shaking, and whether he realizes it or not, he's leaning his face into my touch. "We'll wait a few more minutes. Then we'll go."

I nod. "Let's wrap your bandanna around it at least."

Jonny pulls it from his back pocket and hands it to me. He hisses when I tie it over his wound but doesn't protest. With that done, I press my forehead to his and sling my arms around his waist.

"I was so fucking scared," I whisper. "Still am."

Jonny holds me back and sucks in an unsteady breath. "Me too." The words are a hint of sound, and I know how much it costs him to own up to them.

In the next second, he's kissing me. I taste his desperation. I know if he wasn't hurt, he'd push me down to the rooftop and drill into me until we

couldn't think. We'd gotten good at it, four years after we started fooling around at thirteen. But there's no room for lust right now. This is comfort in the aftermath of an adrenaline rush. We cling to each other, trembling, exhilarated, overwhelmed by lingering fear and relief.

"Love you," I murmur into his mouth.

His shaky exhalation washes over my lips. "Love you too."

"Let's go now."

He nods, and I grab his hand to lead him to the edge of the roof.

The sound of my apartment buzzer pulls me from my memories. I shake my head, stuff the stained T-shirt back into the shoebox, and shove it under the bed.

I haven't thought of that night in a long time.

Jonny eventually talked it out with those guys, and we formed an uneasy truce. They left us alone—we weren't part of the gangs anyway—and we minded our own business. I know Jonny would've stepped in again if he ever needed to, but we never found ourselves in a similar situation. Not that we hadn't stumbled our way into plenty of other trouble.

I walk to the intercom panel and press the button. "Yeah? Who's there?"

"It's me."

Devlin's voice makes me sigh. I'm really not in the mood to talk to anyone, but I buzz him in anyway. I know he won't budge from the front steps unless I do.

He's at my door a minute later. When I open it, he offers me a bottle of tequila. I accept because Devlin never buys the cheap shit. Life's too short, he claims, to waste it on inferior liquor. Normally I'd rather cook with it than drink it, but today I'll indulge. Going to work with a hangover tomorrow will be a small price to pay for a few hours of oblivion.

"Stella called me."

Figures. I grunt and back up so he can step into the apartment.

"She's worried about you," Devlin says as he shrugs off his suit jacket. He must've come straight from work.

"Fuck, even I'm worried about me."

Devlin snorts and drapes his jacket over the back of one of the stools that line the breakfast bar separating my kitchen from the rest of the apartment. “You need to talk about it. I’m here to offer my services.”

He rolls up his sleeves, revealing lean forearms sprinkled with dark-blond hair, then goes to the cabinet where I keep my shot glasses. He knows where everything is, of course. There was a time he practically lived with me.

I watch him as he opens the bottle of tequila and pours for both of us. “I’m not sure that’s a good idea.”

He arches a brow at me. “Oh?”

I hesitate. I’ve tried not to delve very far into the subject of Jonny with Devlin—or anyone—over the last six, nearly seven, years. Now that we’re broken up, I’m not sure if it’ll be too sensitive a topic for Devlin to handle. “Are you sure you want to hear about him?” I ask. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

Devlin drops his attention back to what he’s doing. I know him well enough to recognize the flash of pain in his blue eyes and the tension in his stubbled jaw. He’s silent for a moment, then says quietly, “We were friends first, Marco. You’re still my best friend. I want to be here for you. Tell me.”

So I do. We get plastered on that bottle of Casa Dragones, and I spill the entire story of me and Jonny D’Amato from when it started at age twelve until it ended when we were eighteen.

When I finish, Devlin turns away, but not before I see the anguish on his red face. He’s too drunk to hide from me. “I guess now that he’s back, there’s really no hope of us getting together again.”

I reach out to cover his hand. I don’t want to admit there’d been no hope of that even before Jonny showed up. We’re not right for each other, not that way, and deep down, I know he’ll realize it soon. “I’m sorry, Dev. But just because he’s back doesn’t mean we’ll be hooking up. There’s too much shit we’d have to work through.”

He shakes his head and gives a wet-sounding laugh. “Are you kidding me? You’re meant to be with him. He’s come to get you back.”

“You don’t know that.”

Devlin looks at me. “I do. It’s why your voice shakes when you say his name. It’s why you still have those tattoos. You can’t cover them because that chapter of your life isn’t over yet.”

I swallow hard. Because he's seen through my bullshit and called me out. And yet I still can't confess it aloud. "I'm sorry, Dev," I say again. It's not enough, but it's all I can offer.

He flips his hand under mine and squeezes my fingers. "Me too. I wanted to support you. I didn't plan on doing this." He doesn't have to continue for me to understand what he means. He hadn't planned on making this about him and me.

"I know." I lean in to kiss him on the temple, and his chest trembles as he sighs.

I wish so badly I could be what he needs me to be. I hate the sadness in his eyes, the fact I put it there. He still loves me, I know. A part of me will always love him. We were great together, both in bed and out. But he wants commitment. He wants the house, the dog, the arguments, the make-up sex, for richer or poorer, in sickness and in health—and he wants it with me.

I can't explain that "forever" isn't in my dictionary anymore, not when my soul is so intrinsically tied to the man who promised me a lifetime and then walked away without a backward glance. Dev is right. We're not finished, Jonny and me. Nowhere even close. Until we are, "forever" is just a blank entry, an empty word etched into my skin like a scar. And I'm just a sucker, as Jonny had said.

A sucker with half a fucking heart.

Chapter Three

The next day my friend Rob shows up at the end of my shift. He's constantly traveling for his job, and he texted me earlier to say he'll be in town until tomorrow afternoon. Since I'll be back at work in the morning, we decide to have a quick drink and split some nachos at the bar.

We leave when they close the restaurant at eleven. I step onto the sidewalk and give him the usual bro hug. We're pulling apart when I notice someone watching us out of the corner of my eye.

I turn and Jonny is there, leaning against one of the streetlights. He stares between me and Rob but doesn't speak.

Rob's not slow on the uptake. He senses the tension. It's thick enough to swim in. I can tell he's curious—we're friends from ILIA, not the neighborhood, and he has no knowledge of Jonny—but all he does is clap me on the shoulder. "I'll text you when I'm in town again." He jerks his chin at Jonny and walks away.

I'm still frozen. He said he'd be back, but I halfway expected him to disappear again. It seemed so unreal to see him after six years of dead silence, like I'd dreamed him the way I had so many times before.

But here he is, salt on an unhealed wound, and I feel flayed open and raw. I thought I wanted this, but I don't know if I can handle it now. The sight of him hurts. And I must be the world's biggest dumb-ass because I still want to fall at his feet and demand to know why—*how*—he could've left me.

"I called earlier," Jonny says. "Stella told me when you were getting off."

Fucking Stella. We'll be having words later.

"I'm tired." I am, down to my bones. I spent the day hungover after my conversation with Devlin last night, but what exhausts me is the emotional havoc that comes from being in Jonny's presence. I can't do this here. I don't know if I can do it at all. "I want to go home and take a shower."

"Can I come with you, then? I need to talk to you, and I wanted to apologize for how I acted the other day."

I hesitate. It's a bad idea. It's a horrible, god-fucking-*awful* idea. But at this point, even if I'm torn between running and never letting him out of my sight again, I can't cope with the idea of sending him away without getting an

explanation. He said I owe him a talk. Well, he owes me some answers. I may not want to hear them—I may want to cover my ears and scream—but after a five-year relationship followed by six without any contact, I deserve them.

“Okay,” I say, and he follows me to my car in the parking lot behind the restaurant. He must’ve gotten a ride to Salinas. I could use public transportation myself, but most days, after ten or twelve hours in the kitchen, the last thing I want is to deal with the sights and sounds on the buses or the L.

We don’t speak during the drive to my building. My shoulders are tight because I keep expecting him to talk. He stays quiet until we’re actually walking through my door, and I finally break the silence.

“There’s pop and whatever in the fridge.” I nod toward the kitchen. “Feel free. I’ll be out in ten minutes.”

“Cool, thanks.”

I turn the water on as hot as I can stand it, soap up from head to toe, and linger under the spray until my normally light brown skin turns pink and ruddy. When I’m finished, I pull on a T-shirt and the first pair of sweats I see, not bothering with underwear. My hair is still damp, the ends dripping, when I rejoin Jonny in the living room.

He’s in the corner, looking at the contents of one of my bookshelves. I wonder if he’s searching for the books he left behind, checking to see if I kept them. I’m glad they’re hidden away. I’m sure seeing them would reveal much more than I’m ready for.

“How’re your folks?” Jonny asks.

I stop next to the couch and shrug. An open can of Coke sits on the coffee table. He even used a coaster, which he never used to do. I remember the condensation rings that stained the old wood dresser in his bedroom. “Fine. Same as ever. I see your grandpa around sometimes. Does he know you’re back?”

“Yeah, he knows. He’s the same too. Looks a mess.”

I don’t say anything. It’s true. Last time I saw Old Man D’Amato, he was sporting an Einsteinesque hairdo, gin blossoms on his cheeks and nose, and he reeked of stale beer. It’s a mystery to me how he hasn’t managed to drink himself to death.

“You back at his place?” I ask.

“Nah. I’m in a one-bedroom over on Lexington.”

I jerk my head up. That’s only a few blocks away. To think he’s been so close and I didn’t know. Fury simmers inside me. “How long?”

“A week.” He abandons the bookshelf and moves to stand on the other side of the coffee table. “I know I probably shocked you by showing up at Salinas the other day. I wanted to say I’m sorry for that. I know I acted like an asshole. I just... The attitude comes out sometimes when I’m nervous or whatever, and seeing you again had me scared as hell. I didn’t mean to act all entitled. All I want is a chance to explain.”

“So explain. Were you really in the army?” My tone is more hostile than I intend.

Jonny looks at me in surprise. He rubs a hand over his short hair, and his mouth twists. “Yeah.”

“Your grandfather told me you joined. I wasn’t sure if it was true or if you lied to him when you left.”

Jonny frowns. “I didn’t lie. My active duty ended last month. I’m in the IRR—the Individual Ready Reserve—for another two years, but basically, I’m back to being a civilian.”

“I don’t understand. Why the army? You never showed any interest in the military when we were kids. I even remember you saying you’d never join. So why?”

Jonny sighs. “You remember that time Eddie robbed that store?”

The question throws me off balance. “Of course.” It was one of the other times we had a really close call. Eddie was more Jonny’s friend than mine. I never liked him much. He was a cokehead and shady as hell. I didn’t trust him. One night, about a week after I got the “forever” tattoo on my side, we were all stoned, and he whined about needing munchies. Once he brought it up, I started fiending for Doritos, so we hoofed it to the *mercado* near the park where we were smoking.

“Marco, grab me some Cool Ranch.”

I nod at Jonny and pick up one of the blue bags of tortilla chips. “Can you get me a Coke?”

“Yeah. See if they got beef jerky over there. I’m fucking starving.”

I look toward the other end of the aisle. This little store doesn't have much in the way of jerky, but there are a couple of the small packages. I snag one of those just as Jonny comes around the corner carrying two bottles of pop.

"Hey, do you think they have Lucas? I want sweet and sour mango."

I make a face. I don't know how he likes that chili powder stuff. I think it's disgusting. "It's probably on the other side."

We find the sweets, and sure enough, they have an array of Lucas powders, lollipops, and hard candy.

"Oh, they got cherry too," Jonny says, grabbing one of the red-capped bottles from the shelf. He's searching for the mango flavor when shouting breaks out at the front of the store.

One of the upraised voices is Eddie's. "Give me the fucking cash! And I want some smokes too. Marlboros. The menthols. Hand 'em over!"

Jonny and I exchange a disbelieving look. Surely this motherfucker isn't trying to rob the store right now. His stoned ass is probably waving around a Twinkie as a weapon.

"Son of a bitch." Jonny shoves the candy and the bottles of Coke on the shelf. "Come on."

We get to the front of the store as the middle-aged clerk lunges over the counter at Eddie. He isn't about to take any shit from some punk-ass kid, apparently. Eddie should've known better in this neighborhood.

"He has a knife," Jonny says, voice high with alarm.

At first I think he means the cashier. Then the guy groans, and I see a glint of metal in Eddie's hand.

Holy shit. Eddie's the one with the knife, and he just stabbed the guy. They're thrashing on the floor, and blood is spreading everywhere.

Jonny bolts toward them. Horrified, all I can do is stand there and stare.

When he gets to them, Jonny grabs Eddie from behind and yanks him off the cashier. The action pulls me from my shock, and I drop the snacks and run after him, worrying Eddie will try to stab him too.

"Are you fucking crazy?" Jonny shoves him in the chest. The knife flies from Eddie's grip as he slams into a display of chips and crashes to the floor along with it. Metal screeches and plastic bags burst open under his weight. He

sits up, wearing a dazed expression, totally confused. Clearly he has no idea what's happening.

I recognize that look, and my stomach drops. Fuck, I should've guessed he was on more than weed.

Eddie holds up his blood-stained hands and gapes at them, mouth hanging wide. He scrambles to his feet. "Oh fuck. Oh fuck, man."

I take a step toward him, palms out so he can see I'm not holding anything. "Eddie—"

Wild-eyed, he turns and takes off. I give half a thought to chasing him, but then there's a groan behind me.

I forget about Eddie for now and go to where Jonny is pressing his T-shirt to the wound in the cashier's side.

"Call the cops," he says.

I nod and pull my cell from my pocket. I unlock it and dial 911, my gaze focused on the cashier. He's pale with white lines bracketing his mouth. Sweat gleams on his forehead, and as I watch, he starts shaking hard.

When the operator answers, I tell her what happened and give her the names of the street and the mercado.

"It's gonna be okay," I hear Jonny say. "Stay with me, man."

I drop to my knees beside him and pray the guy doesn't die.

We stayed until the cops and ambulance arrived. Then we wound up at the station for hours. We'd both recently turned eighteen, and they weren't required to notify our guardians, but fearful I might need a lawyer, I called my parents anyway. We told the detectives our story. Yes, I was going to pay for my and Jonny's snacks using the money I earned from my stints washing dishes and busing tables at Salinas. No, we didn't know Eddie had a knife or planned to use it. No, we never talked about robbing the place or agreed to help. It was as much a surprise to us as it had been to the cashier.

Luckily, the guy survived. When he woke up from his surgery, he corroborated our story and told the police only Eddie had attacked him. We got lectured for drug use, but since we didn't have any weed on us, we were allowed to leave with my folks. The cops found Eddie the next morning and

arrested him. He was charged with armed robbery and attempted murder. Last I heard, he'd badly injured one of his fellow inmates and had time added to his sentence.

Yeah. I'll sure as hell never forget that night. Only a couple of weeks later, Jonny broke my heart and disappeared.

"Of course," I say again. "And I remember what happened after too."

"So do I." Jonny meets my eyes. "I remember being scared the cops would think we were lying and throw our asses in jail. I remember thinking if you hadn't been with me that night, you wouldn't have been at risk. I could've ruined your life. That cashier could've pulled out a gun and shot all three of us. So many things could've gone wrong, and you were there because of me."

I scoff and cross my arms over my chest. "I was there because I was high and I wanted some chips. Neither of us meant for any of that to go down. Unless you're trying to tell me you actually knew what Eddie planned."

"Fuck no."

"Then, see. That was all on Eddie. But what does that even have to do with anything? I thought you wanted to talk about us?"

Jonny rubs the back of his neck, his face tight. "It is about us. That was the final straw. How many times did I get you into trouble when we were kids? When those Latin Kings were shooting at us, that was because of me. We were with Eddie because of me. That car we stole? My idea. I led and you followed. You were even thinking of taking a year off before college because I'd dropped out of high school and didn't know what the fuck to do with myself, and I know why. You didn't want to feel like you were leaving me behind. Well, Marco, I didn't want to be the person who dragged *you* down."

I stare at him, uncomprehending. "What are you saying?"

"I lied. I told you I didn't love you and I walked away because I knew you'd never agree to take some time apart while you finished school and I figured my shit out. You would've wanted to work through it together, and I would've felt like I was holding you back. I didn't see a happy medium. I didn't see a future for us if we stayed on the path we were on, if you put your life on hold because of me."

"So you left me for my own good." I catch his dark eyes, searching his expression. "Is that what you're saying?"

“Yes.”

“Bullshit.” I shake my head in anger as much as denial. “You’re telling me you just decided for us both? Made the call without even asking me? You said that shit to me on the roof and you... you walked away, and you...” I can’t get another word out. My throat’s so tight I’m damn near choking, suffocating.

He takes a step toward me. “I loved you,” he says. “But I felt like I was this horrible influence in your life, like I was *ruining* you. I couldn’t stay. I had to become a man who might be worthy of you, and I couldn’t do that while we were together. Not when you had everything going for you—everything—and I was just some stupid kid with no parents and no future. I only stayed out of the gangs because of you. You kept me right, but I wanted to be *more*.”

I shake my head again. I can’t believe what he’s saying, that he would’ve made such a decision without even consulting me. He ripped my heart out when he left, and now he claims he did it to protect me from him? From *myself*? It’s *garbage*. Where did he get off making choices for me?

“I’ve thought about you every day. Every fucking day.” His dark eyes bore into mine. “I know you thought about me too.”

I want to deny it, but I can’t. My voice is trapped somewhere under my rib cage. And it’s true—there hasn’t been a single day since he left when I didn’t think about him at least once.

“You still love me,” he says. “I know you do, because I never stopped loving you.”

Then he pulls up his shirt, and I see a tattoo. Not just any tattoo, but a replica of the “forever” I have inked on my side. The one I got for him. The one I asked him about that night on the roof. It’s in the same position as mine. Same script, same everything.

I see red again, just like that moment when I attacked him before. Blinding, infuriating, rage-inducing red.

My brain fills with static, and something in my chest explodes. “You son of a bitch!”

I launch myself at him, swinging and catching him in the jaw. His head snaps to the side, but he doesn’t try to hit me back. Instead he grabs my wrists, and it becomes a wrestling match. I manage to take him to the floor and we roll around, me trying to get in hits, him trying to fend me off.

We slam into the coffee table and I hear a *clink*, followed by a gurgling *hiss* as the Coke can falls over. I ignore it, too enraged to worry about carpet stains or varnish getting ruined.

He finally pins me, a hand clenched on each of my wrists, his shins bearing down on mine. He's always been leaner, but he's never had a problem using his wiry strength to overpower me.

Jonny stares at me, his chest heaving. There's a cut on his lip, and the well of blood drains the fight from me. I go limp beneath him, my stomach crashing and churning.

"Marco," he says, and it sounds so pained, so full of regret, my eyes burn and my nose clogs up. "I'm sorry. I'm *so* sorry."

I pull a wrist free and grab his nape, yanking him down to me. We crash together, kissing desperately, and it's like it's only been five minutes since the last time. I'm overcome, drowning in the reality overlaid by a rush of sensory memories—his taste, his weight on top of me, the way he grinds into me and moans, the feel of his fingers, the sight of our contrasting skin tones, my light brown to his pale creamy gold.

The rest of it happens in a rush. We rip clothes off. He explores my tattoos with his hands and his tongue, takes my cock into the warm, wet heat of his mouth. He doesn't waste any effort on teasing. He remembers how to get me off when I want it fast and hard. I come within minutes, my body shaking, gasps punching from my lungs in sharp bursts.

I open my eyes to find him on his knees next to me, jacking himself with quick, frantic motions. I get up on all fours to lick over his knuckles and between his fingers, tasting the skin of his cock as he beats off. I drag my tongue to the tip and play across the slit, then suck him in deep, following his stroke down to the base.

He takes his hand away, and I keep going, pushing past my gag reflex, welcoming him into my throat. My nose hits his pubes, and he grunts when I swallow around his girth. I ease back slowly, so slowly, swirling my tongue, and when I get to the head, I do it again in reverse.

He pants and his thighs flex as he fights to keep himself still. I lift a hand to cup his ass and encourage him to move. He's tentative at first. Then he pushes me to the floor, straddles my shoulders, braces his palms on the coffee table, and sets into the type of brutal face-pounding I crave but few men have ever delivered. I whimper and grab his hips, urging him on, faster, harder.

I can tell when he's going to come by this sound he makes. After all these years, it hasn't changed. It's a hitched breath, startled, almost like he's in pain. It's followed by a long, broken groan as he floods my mouth with bitter saltiness.

I lap at him, moaning, savoring the taste, until he finally pulls away. He drops to the carpet beside me, winded, his stomach muscles trembling.

"Fuck," he says. "No one's ever been as good at that as you."

I know he means it as a compliment, but my heart constricts. I sit up and brace my elbows on my knees, hair falling into my face, fingers laced on the back of my skull.

I feel him touch my shoulder. "Marco? Did I hurt you?"

Yes. Not in the way he means, but yes. *Fuck*. I'm such a moron. I knew bringing him home was a terrible idea.

"Marco?"

"You think I want to hear that?" I ask without looking at him. My voice is raspy from blowing him, but it's the tremor in it I curse. "I never wanted you to be able to compare me to anyone else. I thought it would be me and you forever, that we'd be each other's firsts for everything, always. I never thought you'd *leave*."

"I'm sorry. It's not as many guys as you might be thinking. And you have to know I never wanted to leave you."

My laugh is so dry I'm surprised it doesn't sap the humidity from the apartment. "I don't know anything. What you said to me that night on the roof. That was... I thought you really didn't care anymore."

Jonny breathes in deep and presses a kiss to my shoulder blade. "I know. It killed me to say that to you. I got about a block away before I puked. I'm sorry, Marco. I don't know what else to say. I thought I was doing the right thing for both of us."

I tighten my fingers, tangling them in my hair. The tiny tugs of pain help keep me calm. I still can't look at him. "It wasn't the right thing to let me think you stopped loving me, that I was some kind of chump for believing in you and what we had."

He hesitates. "Can you honestly tell me that if I'd told you I was going into the army and why, you would've been okay with it? That you wouldn't have tried to talk me out of it?"

I release my hair and turn to him. The nakedness I feel has nothing to do with the fact that I'm sitting there bare-assed. "I guess we'll never know, will we?"

He flushes and drops his gaze. "I'm sorry. I'll say it every day if you give me another chance."

I ignore that. For now. I'm still curious about what he's been doing for the last six years. Without me. "Tell me about the army. Tell me why you thought that was your best choice."

Jonny lifts one shoulder. "I didn't have a high school diploma, no job skills. I didn't see a way of changing that without any money, and I didn't have your grades. I ran into this recruiter one day. He'd come to Benito Juárez a few times, when they did those job fair days. He seemed cool, and I told him I might be interested. He had me come down to the recruiting office, and eventually he helped me get my GED and study for the ASVAB. Once we got my scores, we discussed what jobs I might qualify for. After basic, they trained me to be a welder. That's what I'm doing now. I got hired by a company over in Rogers Park." He meets my eyes again. "I applied to a bunch of places in Chicago and the suburbs. My plan was always to come back here for you."

"What if I'm dating someone?"

He searches my face. "Are you? I didn't think you'd let me touch you if you were."

I can't lie. "No, I wouldn't have. But what if I did have a boyfriend? What would you have done?"

"I would've hated it. I'd respect it, but hand to God, I would've been hoping you'd ditch him for me."

An honest answer, at least. And without any of his usual brash confidence.

I reach for my T-shirt and pull it back on. He grabs his jeans, probably expecting me to send him on his way.

"I don't forgive you," I say once we're both dressed. "I can't. Not yet."

He swallows, his Adam's apple bobbing convulsively. "Yeah. That's fair." He shoves his hands into his pockets, shoulders slumped. "Guess I should go."

I try not to be swayed by the sudden moisture in his eyes, but it stabs me in the gut. Before he can even take a step toward the door, I wrap my hand around his upper arm. "No. Just... stay. Talk to me. Tell me what you've done and where you've been."

The tension leaves his body, and when he turns back to me, his expression is carefully controlled. I can sense his relief, though. Even after all this time. “Maybe we should clean that pop up first, huh?”

I follow his gaze to a brown puddle soaking into the beige carpet. “Fuck.” I forgot all about that. It’s going to be a bitch to get out.

“I’ll help,” he says.

Together, we scrub up the mess. And after, we talk. He tells me about the places he’s been. I tell him about college and Devlin and becoming head chef at Salinas.

Somehow we end up sprawled out on the couch with my head on his chest. The sun is cresting when I finally fall asleep, the sound of his heartbeat a lullaby in my ear.

Chapter Four

When I wake Thursday morning, Jonny is gone. I don't allow myself time to feel sad about it. I can hear the muffled ringing of my cell coming from the direction of the bathroom, so I drag myself off the couch to find it. I have a brief conversation with one of my line cooks, who called to tell me he'd be late for his afternoon shift, then trudge into the kitchen to make some coffee. I don't start until noon, and I'd usually pick something up on my way, but after two nights of little sleep, I'm in desperate need of the caffeine.

I see the note on the counter as I'm filling the carafe. If I slosh water in my rush to snatch up the paper, no one ever needs to know but me.

M—

Had to work early. Call me?

Jonny

Below the familiar scrawl of his signature is his address and phone number. I take a moment to program a contact for him in my cell. Then I set it down before I can give in to the temptation to text him. I need to do some serious thinking before we talk or see each other again, and right now I don't have the brain power. I'm still reeling from the revelation about why he left.

The next few days pass in the same way. I get up, go to work, and think about Jonny. I'm in bed, I think about Jonny. I'm in the shower, I think about Jonny. He's on my mind like a cut that won't heal, an itch I can't reach to scratch.

On Friday, my mother corners me in the kitchen at Salinas and lays enough guilt on me—as no one but a Hispanic woman can—I agree to come to their house on Monday for dinner.

The weekend rushes by, and Salinas is packed as usual. The influx of constant orders keeps me from my angsty contemplations about Jonny and our relationship and where I want to go from here. I meet Devlin for drinks Sunday night, and he seems less sad, though we carefully avoid the subject of Jonny. But on Monday, I'm right back where I started.

It's overcast and drizzling outside, so I use the day to workout, clean, and catch up on laundry. In between scrubbing the bathroom and folding baskets of clothes, I think of Jonny. Of course I do.

Should I give him another chance? He wrecked me when he walked away, broke my heart so completely I made a mess of myself in the aftermath. But he's back, and his intentions were good, even if the execution pisses me off. Also, I can't lie to myself. I want him as much now as I did then. Six years hasn't tempered that desire. Not a bit. Him and me together, it's how it should be. It seems corny, but I've been only half-complete since he left. He's part of me. He always will be.

I'm terrified to trust him, scared he'll leave me again. But my body, my soul, still sing in his presence. I'm jonesing for his touch and his kisses. I want him at my side, the way we used to be. I want to be fucked by him and no one else for the rest of my life. Isn't that answer enough?

Despite the ongoing drizzle, I walk to my parents' place that evening. Street parking in Chicago can be a pain in the ass. It's rarely worth it to lose my space only to have to potentially park blocks away from their building because I can't find anything closer.

At dinner, it's me, my parents, my sister Connie (short for Consuela), her husband Diego, and my two nephews. For a while I think we're going to avoid any yelling or awkwardness. It's loud, as meals in our family often are. We're talking and laughing, just having a good time.

Mamá made *chiles rellenos* with rice and *frijoles borrachos*. As always, the food is delicious. I got my love of cooking from her, although she's much more traditional in her cooking than the menu at Salinas. There we serve typical Mexican fare along with a variety of Korean and French fusion dishes. We've found the combination of styles appeals to the yuppies downtown who're always looking for the next trendy thing. Luckily, I enjoy experimenting. It's a win-win.

We're demolishing the flan when Pop puts down his spoon and finally says what's on his mind. "I hear Jonathan is back."

My dad and Jonny's grandpa are the only two people who call him that. Jonny hates it, and I feel a flicker of irritation on his behalf.

"Yeah. He just got out of the army. He's a welder now. He works in Rogers Park."

Pop makes an unimpressed noise. "I don't want him stopping at the restaurant, disrupting business. *Es desmadroso, como su papá*. Always up to no good."

“He didn’t come to stir up trouble,” I snap. “And he’s nothing like his father.” Jonny would lay someone flat for even implying as much. His dad was an abusive asshole who nearly beat his mother to death while strung out on smack before abandoning them both. Jonny’s mom died when he was twelve, not long before he transferred to my school. Years later, he told me he’d attacked his father when the guy staggered into his ma’s funeral, disrupting the service with his drunken ramblings. As far as I know, they never spoke again after Jonny moved in with his grandfather.

Pop points a thick finger at me. “Men like that never change. Don’t delude yourself. You don’t see the truth of him. You only see what you want to.”

I flush and my palms start to sweat as my temper rises. We had this argument so many times when I was a teenager. I should’ve figured we’d return to this same old song and dance. He’s played the record so many times I have the lyrics memorized. “You’re the one who has blinders on when it comes to him. Even when we were kids, you dismissed him. He’s got his life together now.”

“Ha.” Pop makes a sharp, dismissive gesture. Beside him, my mother flinches. “For how long? How soon until he’s calling you from the police station, asking for bail money? And you’ll go running like you always do.”

“That was *one* time, Pop. Once. He was fifteen, and I told you I was in that car with him when he stole it.” Jonny just got lucky the owner of the Buick knew his grandfather and chose not to press charges after the car was returned. It was the only time he did anything so recklessly stupid, and I was right there next to him. Where else would I be?

“Exactly my point,” Pop shouts. A vein appears in the center of his forehead, throbbing with his pulse. It’s the first sign he’s well and truly pissed. “You would’ve been arrested too if he hadn’t slowed the car and told you to get out. That’s one of the reasons I told him to go. I warned him never to come back here. I thought he was gone for good!”

My mother gasps. I blink at my father, and I can tell he regrets his words.

“What did you say?” I stand, fists clenched at my sides. “Are you saying you *told* him to go?”

Pop gets to his feet, and I recognize the mulish set to his jaw. This is going to be ugly.

I glance at my mother and sister. “Mamá, Connie, why don’t you guys go into the living room? The kids don’t need to hear this.”

When Mamá hesitates, Connie grabs her arm and pulls her up. She steers Mamá and the boys out of the dining room, but Diego positions himself in the doorway, making it clear he intends to stay. Whatever. As long as he doesn’t get involved, I don’t care.

“Yes, I did,” Pop says once they’re gone. “I told him he would ruin your life if he stayed. I told him he was a good for nothing, like his deadbeat father, and it was only a matter of time before he landed in prison. I didn’t want him dragging you down with him.”

My stomach crashes to my toes and a wave of heat washes over me. Trembling with rage and shock, I stare at my father. Nothing he could say to Jonny would be crueler or more effective than those words. Pop had pounced on his biggest insecurity.

I can believe Pop would interfere in our relationship. In fact, I’m ashamed I never suspected before now. What I *can*’t believe is that he’d stoop so low as to put the sins of a father onto the son. He’d hated his own dad—I’ve heard the stories—and he’d be beyond insulted to be compared to my grandfather. How could he do that to a young boy who already doubted his own worth, in spite of all the cocky self-assurance he projected?

“How dare you?” My voice shakes with contained fury. “Do you know what I went through when he left? Do you have any idea what you—”

I cut myself off. It’s clear my father does know, and worse, he doesn’t care. He’s assured himself he did the right thing. Nothing I say can change his opinion or what happened.

“I’m tired of people making decisions about *my* life,” I tell him. “I’m tired of you trying to control every goddamn thing. To hell with you.”

Pop’s face turns purple, and I can tell he wants to raise a hand to me. He hasn’t whooped my ass since I was a kid; I almost want him to try now. I’ve never been tempted to hit my father before this moment. He’s a controlling bastard sometimes, but I love the old man.

Loving him doesn’t mean I’ll forgive him for this.

“Don’t you speak to me like that again,” Pop yells. “*Esta es mi casa*. You’ll show me respect or get out!”

“Fine. I’m gone.”

I push past Diego and storm to the front door, ignoring Mamá's calls of "*mijo*" from the living room. I'm too enraged to deal with her. I don't know if she knew. Right now, it doesn't make a difference either way.

I rush down the stairs and slam out into the cold, rainy night. The drizzle has turned into fat droplets. I ignore them as I dig out my phone to dial Jonny's number.

No answer. I check his contact to remind myself of his address and take off in the direction of Little Italy. All I want to do is see him. I need to ask him if Pop was the real reason he left, why he felt like he wasn't good enough.

When I reach his building, I'm soaked through. I lay into the buzzer marked D'Amato, but there's no reply. I randomly hit a few of the other buttons until someone finally says, "Hello?"

"Sorry to bug you, but I'm in two oh one," I say, giving Jonny's apartment number. "I forgot my key. Can you let me in? I think I left my door unlocked."

"Yeah, sure," comes the fuzzy reply.

The door clicks and I pull it open. I race up the stairs and pound on his door for five minutes. Nothing. He's not home, he's not answering his phone, and I'm getting more desperate with every passing second.

I have to see him. It's beyond need. It's vital.

I try his cell again, but it goes to voice mail. I bolt back downstairs. I'm not sure where I'm going or how I'll keep from going crazy until I find him. All I know is I have to do *something*. I don't have the patience to just stand there and wait.

I'm jogging down the block, directionless and half-blinded by rain, when I literally run into him.

He clamps a hand on my arm to steady me. "Marco?" he asks. "Are you okay? Is something wrong?" He looks at me in alarm. "Come up to my place. I'll get you a towel."

"Fuck the towel." I grab his shoulders. "Tell me it's not true. Did my father make you go away?"

The streetlight is enough for me to see his eyes widen. He licks his wet lips and goes silent for a long moment. "Marco..." He exhales slowly. "No."

"Don't lie!"

He shakes his head. “I’m not. He did talk to me, but—”

“Oh God.” Agony streaks through my chest. I cling to him, trembling so hard my teeth rattle.

Jonny puts his hands on my waist to support me. Raindrops cling to his lashes as rivulets streak down his face. His short hair is plastered to his forehead, and he stares at me worriedly. “Let’s go inside. I’ll explain and—”

I can’t let him finish. I feel torn apart by grief and lingering panic and the relief of finally having him here in front of me. I cup his cheeks, cutting him off, and crush my mouth to his.

The contact makes me moan. For a second, he seems too startled to react. Then he’s kissing me back, his hands moving up my spine, palms hot through the drenched, clinging material of my shirt. We kiss for ages, our bodies rubbing, creating heat and friction, the cold rain forgotten.

The moment feels pivotal. Life-altering. Because I know I’ll never allow him to walk away again, not now that I know the truth. How he feels about me. How he’s always felt.

Let him try to leave me now. Let him fucking try. I’ll follow. Nothing but death can separate us. I’ll destroy anyone who tries.

He breaks the kiss. “Marco,” he whispers against my bruised, tender lips. “Come on.”

I nod this time, dropping my hands from his face. He smiles at me and laces our fingers together before leading me to his building.

Once we’re inside his apartment, he tells me to wait in the entryway then disappears into what I assume is the bedroom. He returns seconds later with a couple of beach towels that feel new.

I use one to dry myself off as best I can. My clothes are damp and clammy, and I know I won’t be comfortable in them, so I strip down to my boxer-briefs. Jonny watches me with darkening eyes before he does the same. He wraps his towel around his waist and bends to gather up our sopping clothing. “I’ll put these in the bathroom.”

I look around while he’s gone. Calling the apartment spartan is being generous. In the living room there’s only a futon and a coffee table made up of cinder blocks and plywood. A paperback of *A Storm of Swords* by George R.R. Martin sits on top of it, and it makes me smile. He’s still a book nerd.

He comes back to find me leafing through the book. He gestures toward the futon, embarrassment reddening his face. “This is the only place to sit right now. It’s my bed-slash-couch. I sort of need to buy furniture still.”

“That’s okay.” Even if he hadn’t only been in town for a couple of weeks, I’m not one to judge about things like that. I’ll sit on the damn floor as long as he’s next to me.

I drape my towel around my shoulders to catch the water drops falling from the ends of my hair and take a seat on the futon. It’s about as comfortable as I expect. I don’t mind.

“I need to explain some things,” Jonny says as he sits beside me. “Your father told you he talked to me?”

I press my lips together and nod. It kills me to think about what my father said to him. I don’t know if I can get over it. But then, I thought that about what he said to me on the roof that night, and now I’m willing to let it go. There’ll be no forgetting, but I think I can forgive. I don’t have a choice if I don’t want to live without him. And I don’t. “Is that why you left?”

“No. I mean, I won’t lie, it hurt. But do you really think *anyone* could’ve made me leave you if it wasn’t my idea? No way in hell. All he did was validate the feelings I was having after Eddie stabbed that guy. I’d already made the decision when your pop confronted me. All he did was drive it home. Otherwise, he could’ve talked ’til he was blue in the face. It wouldn’t have meant shit to me.” Jonny puffs out a breath and rubs a hand over his drying hair. “I knew I needed to change my life before something happened that I couldn’t take back. If you’d gotten hurt or worse, or ended up in jail because of me, if I’d fucked up your future... Marco, I couldn’t have ever forgiven myself for that. Ever. Do you understand?”

A jerky nod is the only answer I can give. I do understand. I still don’t like how he went about it. I would’ve preferred for him to tell me and for us to try to work out a plan. But I do know myself well enough to say I wouldn’t have been okay with him enlisting. Even now the thought he could’ve been killed while on active duty and I would’ve never known the truth... It makes me want to scream and puke and toss furniture.

“I don’t blame your dad,” Jonny says. I turn to him in surprise, and he shrugs. “He had his reasons. I tried to look at it from his point of view and saw myself through his eyes—this punk kid constantly getting his son in trouble. Fuck, if it was my son, I’d probably do the same thing. I can’t fault him for wanting to protect you when it’s what I wanted too.”

I stare at him. That's more forgiving than I would expect. At heart, he's always been a good person, but when we were younger, he also had a big enough chip on his shoulder to stopper a black hole. It wouldn't have shocked me to hear he held a grudge against my father. The last six years had changed him. I can't help but be impressed.

"You were right," I tell him. "I never stopped loving you. I told myself I had over and over again, because it hurt too fucking much to think I could be in love with someone who'd walk out of my life like that. It was a lie."

Joy lights Jonny's face, making my breathing hitch, but I hold up a hand when he moves toward me. "I'm not saying I'm happy with how you did things. I know your heart was in the right place, and you thought you were doing the best thing for me. We were both young as hell, and we got into a few situations that could've ended badly, so maybe the time apart has done us good. We've both matured, I hope. But I should've had a say. You have to at least agree with me about that."

"Yeah. You're right." From the sincerity in his expression, I can see he's not just trying to appease me. "It wasn't fair. I've regretted a lot over the years, but that most of all. I know how much I hurt you. It wasn't what I wanted. I just didn't see any other way at the time. I felt like breaking things off was for the best, so maybe you could find someone else. Someone better. I didn't want you to feel tied to me. I wanted you to live your life, and it seemed like I'd be setting us both up for failure if I had a guarantee you'd be here waiting. I couldn't allow myself that safety net. I needed a reason to work my ass off."

He grabs my hand then, and I let him. His gaze is brutally earnest when it meets mine. He's dropped his walls. All that's left is raw honesty. It's almost painful to see.

"I don't know if that makes sense," he says, "but I've had a lot of time to think about what I'd say to you over the years, and that's the truth."

"I believe you."

He leans in and kisses me—soft, sweet, so different from the hard desperation we shared outside. "Does this mean I get another chance?" he asks when we break apart.

I pull him back in to keep our lips together. It's not quite a kiss, but I can't abide any sort of distance between us right now. I need him as close as possible. Closer. "Yeah. I want to try. I want to get to know you again. We've both changed."

“Maybe on the surface. Deep down, where it matters, I’m still your Jonny. And you’re still my Marco.”

Warmth blooms in my chest and I laugh shakily. My Jonny and his Marco. As it should be. But... “You can’t leave me again.” My voice trembles on the words. I pull away far enough to meet his eyes. “I won’t survive watching you walk away a second time.”

He lifts his hands to thread his fingers in my hair, pushing it off my forehead. “Never. I’m here for good. Forever. It was never an empty promise. I always planned on coming back to you. I hoped you’d still be single. I just didn’t want to hold you back from what you were meant to be.”

“I was meant to be with you,” I tell him.

His lips meet mine, and something inside me clicks into place, like a broken bone being righted. Finally I can start to heal.

He and I belong together. No matter what happened in the past or what the future brings. That’s the truth.

Epilogue

One year later

“So, how does it feel to have a husband?” Jonny grins at me before dipping his head to drag his mouth, open and wet, across my “*juntos para siempre*” tattoo. When he reaches the star on my right hipbone, he bites hard enough to sting then soothes the hurt with his tongue.

The sound I make is somewhere between a laugh and a moan. I arch my back, encouraging him downward even if it’s way too soon for me to get it up again. His response is to lick a path to my other hip and nip there too. Tease.

“It’s the best I’ve ever felt. How about you, Mr. Salinas?”

Jonny chuckles against my pelvis, his warm breath tickling the sensitive skin. “It feels great. Jonny Salinas has a nice ring to it.”

It does. I’d planned to take his name at first. I wanted to be marked as his in every way I could be. But when I told him, he gave me an incredulous look and firmly shook his head. “Hell no. I want you to keep Salinas,” he said. “It means something to you, to your family. It’s the name of the restaurant you love. I don’t want you giving that up for me. I’ll become a Salinas. I’m proud to.”

So, that’s the way it’ll be. Marco and Jonny Salinas. As soon as we get our notarized marriage certificate, he’ll go in and make it official. But today we’re celebrating.

This morning we exchanged vows in a small ceremony at the courthouse. No frills. Just me, him, my family, and his grandfather, who surprised us all by showing up sober and presentable. Our reception was a huge spread at Salinas, which was closed for the occasion. Everyone who works in the restaurant was invited, along with our friends and people from the neighborhood. Those who were cool with a couple of dudes getting hitched, anyway. With the university campus nearby, the area is fairly liberal, but Pilsen is predominantly Hispanic, and there are more churches than Starbucks. Some people still have issues with us. Not that it matters. Jonny and I won’t lose any sleep over their close-minded bullshit.

Devlin was there, of course. The first few months after Jonny and I got back together were rough for him, but he and Jonny had befriended each other over the past year. I caught my cousin Pablo watching Devlin a couple of times. I

wondered if there might be interest there and if I should encourage Pablo or just mind my own business. Devlin's been single since we broke up, and I want to see him with someone who makes him happy. In the end, I kept my nose out of it. They were grown men. They didn't need me interfering like some nosy grandmother.

After the meal, we went to my favorite tattoo shop. We had an appointment set up with Cisco, who's been inking me for years. We decided actual wedding rings wouldn't work well for either of our jobs. I wash my hands dozens of times a day, and for him, there's a risk of jewelry getting caught on the machinery at the factory. It just seemed safer to do tattoos instead.

We didn't go for anything on the left finger, though. We both added the date and our entwined initials along the curve of the O in our "forever" tattoos. It felt right. Fitting.

Jonny's eyes meet mine. His hair is long now, a messy halo of black. He looks ruffled and sexy, his lips swollen from our kisses and the sloppy blow job he just gave me. I tangle my fingers in his disarranged waves and pull him up until our mouths crash together.

"Love you." I speak into our kiss and feel him smile.

"Love you too." He leans up on his elbows to stare down at me. "I'm glad your father came today."

"Me too." I don't think Pop was thrilled when we got engaged or when I told him I have no plans on following his footsteps into management, but he kept his opinion to himself. I've forgiven him for what he said to Jonny. I can't hold a grudge if Jonny doesn't. Pop apologized to us both and he grudgingly confessed he felt ashamed about trying to push Jonny away instead of offering help when he knew Jonny's circumstances weren't exactly ideal.

He's not perfect, but he's trying. That's what matters. The rest is water under the bridge. Jonny and I are back on track. And the entry for "forever" in my dictionary? It's not blank anymore. Good thing I never gave in to the temptation to get the tattoo covered. Maybe a part of me always knew we'd find our way back to each other again. We're forever linked—and inked.

I wouldn't have it any other way.

The End

Author Bio

Piper Vaughn wrote her first love story at eleven and never looked back. Since then, she's known that writing in some form was exactly what she wanted to do. A reader at the core, Piper loves nothing more than getting lost in a great book—fantasy, young adult, romance, she loves them all (and has a two thousand book library to prove it!). She grew up in Chicago, in an ethnically diverse neighborhood, and loves to put faces and characters of every ethnicity in her stories, so her fictional worlds are as colorful as the real one. Above all, she believes that everyone needs a little true love in their life... even if it's only in a book.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [Website](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Twitter](#) | [Google+](#)