



*When it
pours*

USA Today Bestselling Author

LILI VALENTE

When it Pours

A BAD DOG NOVELLA

THE MCGUIRE BROTHERS

LILI VALENTE

When it Pours

A Bad Dog Novella
The McGuire Brothers Series
By Lili Valente

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About the Book

Truth or Dare: Tell the One-Who-Got-Away that you're still madly in love with him OR spend the night trapped with him in a hunting lodge that's about to be swept downstream?

Ha! Trick Question. I get to do BOTH! Because when it rains, it pours.

First, I call Theo McGuire to tell him that I've always loved him and I always will—at least for the next few hours until Pippa Jane the Pig and I are swallowed by the floodwaters. Then, I open the second story window when Theo comes knocking in his kayak, in a likely doomed attempt to save us.

Soon, we're trapped in the cabin where we had our first time fifteen years ago and all I can think about is how much I wish I could turn back the clock. If I could, I'd never let this fiercely kind and sexy-as-hell man go.

Since this could be The End, we agree to make our last night a night to remember.

But what happens when morning dawns, we're both still breathing, **and I can't bear to think of a life without my favorite McGuire?**

For the real Pippa Jane, a sweet little corgi, who we are so glad is still with our family today. It was a close call for you during the flood, my darling fur baby, but you made it through.

Thank you for the love, cuddles, and ear-piercing barking you bring into our lives. They are all the better for it. So grateful for you.

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Chapter One



MACY MALLARD

Of “Move This Way with Macy,”
a slow travel influencer learning
that you can’t go home again.

Or, that you can,
but you might die there...

“Please, Pippa Jane. Just do your business on the puppy pad.” I thread my fingers together into a single fist, pleading with my sweet—but oh-so-flipping-stubborn—Kunekune mini-pig. “It’s the only option, buddy.”

Pippa snorts in response and plops down on her ample haunches on the wooden cabin floor, sticking her black-and-white spotted snout in the air.

“I know it’s beneath you,” I assure her, “but it’s too dangerous to go outside in the storm.”

I stroke her head, hoping my touch will relax her the way her nuzzles always relax me. This pretty girl has been my roommate in my VW camper van since I adopted her from a rescue farm in West Virginia four years ago. She’s my snuggle buddy, my co-pilot, and my best friend.

I’ve met so many cool people on the road, but Pippa’s the only one who’s always there, no matter what. She never gets tired of my wandering lifestyle or asks me to hawk poisonous

energy drinks on social media for cash or thinks I should “stop making racy internet videos and get a real job.”

My old-fashioned family disowned me years ago, embarrassed by the amount of swimsuit content on my channel—sorry, but I like to swim, and I’m not going to do it in a 1920s bathing costume—and rampant vegetarianism. They raise sheep for slaughter; I live with a pig who saved my life when I broke an ankle on a hike and couldn’t get a satellite signal to call for help.

Enough said.

Which reminds me...

I narrow my gaze on Pippa’s stubborn face. “If you’re smart enough to retrace our steps to the nearest ranger station and coax a ranger out to rescue me, you’re smart enough to know the river is too high to risk going outside right now.” I bend to gaze into her warm brown eyes with my most winning smile. “Come on, P.J. Use the puppy pad. It’s not a big deal. I’ll go into the other room and give you your privacy, take care of the mess right away, and we can pretend it never happened. No embarrassment or affront to your dignity required.”

She coughs politely into my face—her ladylike way of telling me to take my “signature charm” elsewhere, because she won’t be swayed—and waddles off to sit by the window, staring out across the waterlogged forest in the gray evening light like the heroine of a gothic novel.

“Fine,” I say, propping my hands on my hips. “But you’re not going out. That’s final.”

She lifts her snout even higher, a silent pillar of queenly defiance.

“And my signature charm is still charming,” I mutter as I cross to the opposite side of the open living space on the second floor of my uncle’s old hunting cabin. Leaning against the wall, I gaze out the sliding glass door that leads out onto the small balcony. “I’m up for two more Indie Content Creator awards this year.”

And I am.

And there was a time when I would have been really excited about that. Thrilled, even. Over the damned moon.

But that was before...

Before the internet became a toxic cesspool filled with bullies and scammers. Before the trolls learned to send bots after people they wanted to crush and had to actually post their “ur too fat to wear a swimsuit, gross, cover ur dimply ass, fatty,” comments on their own.

Before we were all reduced to algorithmic versions of ourselves that corporations use to sell us things we don’t need, propping up toxic, late-stage capitalism and speeding the destruction of our planet and society at large.

I miss the old days.

I miss my old *self*, the one who had a bigger life in the real world than in the virtual one.

But being an independent content creator is only getting more competitive. Most of the people I started travel blogging with fifteen years ago quit a long time ago. They couldn’t handle the constant evolution, the keyword training, the ad spend, or the increasingly cutthroat culture of an industry where there isn’t enough room for all the people who want to paddle their canoe through these waters.

Though, most people don’t actually paddle canoes anymore. They hop into the canoe in a sexy thong with their makeup and hair done, have someone snap their picture, and jump back out again to start promoting the post on social media.

This job has become more performance than experience.

More hierarchy than community.

More and more, everything feels fake, surface...hollow.

I confess, I’m depressed about it. Maybe clinically. For weeks before this storm swept in, the world looked grayer than usual. Food didn’t taste as good, my vibrator held no appeal, and not even the “shimmy, shimmy, it’s a damned fine day for

oatmeal,” dance Pippa does for me every morning on our way to start breakfast could make me smile.

That’s the only explanation for why I thought it would be a good idea to come back to Minnesota. Bad Dog hasn’t been “home” in fifteen years and even before then, it wasn’t a place where I felt safe or welcome. I’m the black sheep of my family—extra scandalous when the family in question are actual sheep farmers—and was pretty shy until I started my travel channel and came out of my shell.

I didn’t have a ton of friends in junior high or high school. I preferred to spend my time working in the garden club’s community plot or volunteering at the senior center.

I’ve always loved older people, the cool ones who understand that life is short and there’s no time to waste being anyone other than who you are. They know that the worst possible end is one where you’re lying on your deathbed, looking back at a life filled with lies and pretend.

A life where the truest story of *you*, the one no one else can tell, was left untold.

That’s the real reason I’m in Bad Dog in late November, a season of rain, stick limbs, and despair, camped out in a hunting cabin my family never uses because they’re too busy working themselves to death to take a break and enjoy a weekend in the woods...

There’s a part of my story I’ve left untold, one giant regret in a life filled with adventure, exploration, and commitment to the things I believe to be important and true.

Theo McGuire.

It wasn’t love at first sight that day at the senior center, where we were both new teen volunteers. It was something deeper than love. It was an instant *knowing*, a profound recognition.

Have you ever looked into someone’s eyes and just *known* they were meant for you?

Neither had I. Never before and never since.

Back then, I'd realized it was a special feeling, but I didn't know how special. I had no clue that I'd *never* feel the way I felt with Theo with anyone else. I didn't realize that kisses would never taste as sweet, laughter would never be as easy, and sex wasn't always a transporting experience.

I wouldn't say I saw God with Theo, but it was something pretty close.

Our nights together were so beautiful, and many of them were spent here in this very cabin.

We were so close, so in sync, so innocently, profoundly in love.

If I'd asked him to, he would have come with me on my big adventure. He would have abandoned his commitment to caring for his sick grandmother—the one who'd raised him, who he loved beyond all reason—to be my forever man.

And it would have killed him.

Just like staying here, betraying the bone-deep calling to explore the world, to finally see who I could be away from the family who'd always thought there was something wrong with their daughter, would have killed *me*.

I learned that love isn't always enough when I was only eighteen, driving out of Bad Dog with nothing but my van and a soul torn between two diverging paths.

I guess, deep down, I thought if I came home...even if I was too afraid to reach out to the man my first love has become, that Theo would just *know* I was in Bad Dog and show up on my doorstep.

But he didn't.

And he won't.

No one comes out to this part of the woods when the weather is this wet, not even the most hardcore hunters, and Theo was never one of those. He might do a little duck hunting with his cousins, but that's it. There is literally no way in hell he's going to know I'm here unless I *tell him*.

I should, but the thought of learning Theo is in love with someone else might kill me. I know he isn't married—I've stalked the town paper's archives enough to be certain of that—but that's it. He could have a long-term girlfriend or a fiancée.

Or he could hate me...

He made me promise not to leave without him. Or, if I was determined to go it alone, at least not to leave without saying goodbye. He said that would hurt in a way he wasn't sure time could heal.

But I did it anyway.

In the end, I was a coward who skulked off in the dead of the night. I just wasn't sure I could do it. If I looked into Theo's eyes, I might have stayed, and I couldn't stay.

I couldn't stay, and I couldn't go.

I couldn't leave him, and I couldn't take him with me.

At eighteen, the situation was a hopeless, emotional mess that I wasn't prepared to untangle. And I'm not sure I'm much better off now. Even fifteen years of learning to be the best version of myself hasn't prepared me to say the things I want to say to the one who got away.

Theo means so much to me. Maybe more now than he did then, in many ways.

But how to tell a guy that you're still in love with him after fifteen years apart without sounding like a crazy person?

A panicked squeal penetrates my brooding thoughts.

I spin from the window to see Pippa Jane has vanished, leaving nothing behind but a shredded puppy pad.

Chapter Two



A second squeal pierces the rattle of the rain on the old tin roof, this one loud enough to vibrate the boards beneath my feet.

I dash toward the stairs leading to the gloomy ground floor, the one we've been avoiding because it smells of mildew from the leaky sink and the rotten potatoes someone left in the cupboard.

But I know my pig. She's determined to go outside to do her business and the door is down there. She must have run into trouble of some kind on her way out into the woods.

I'm moving so fast that I'm up to my calves in icy water before the scene downstairs fully registers.

When it does, I freeze, and my jaw drops.

Water from the overflowing river pours in through the cracked windows and the old plaid couches are floating across the room. Books bob through the flood, along with pieces of art unfortunate enough to be hung too close to the floor. And in the middle of it all, Pippa Jane paddles madly in place, the water rising swiftly around her.

The moment she sees me, she squeals again, a panicked cry for help that cuts through my chest like a hacksaw.

"I'm coming, baby, hold on," I shout, charging down the rest of the steps, until the frigid river is up to my ribs. My thick socks instantly take on liquid, making it hard to walk. I reach down, wrenching them off and tossing them aside without slowing my progress toward Pippa.

The water is up to her chin now and her paddling has grown even more frantic. She's clearly stuck on something, and if I can't get to her in time, there's a chance she'll drown.

Right here in front of me.

The thought sends me diving into the flood and swimming hard the rest of the way to my girl. When I reach her side, I wrap an arm around her, trying to buoy her up with one arm as I grope beneath the water for whatever has her caught with the other. But she weighs seventy pounds—mini-pigs aren't all that mini except when compared to larger pigs—and I can't reach her back legs.

After only a few seconds, it becomes clear this isn't going to work.

I press a kiss to her cheek and promise, "I'm going to get you out of here, Pips. Don't worry." Then, I dive under the water.

I can't see anything in the dark, gritty river, but when I run a hand down Pippa's belly, she stops kicking long enough for me to feel the thick plastic wrapped around her thigh. It's an extension cord, I think, the bright orange one almost everything in the cabin is hooked up to because my uncle Clint was more concerned with hunting than sophisticated electrical systems or aesthetics.

Pippa Jane is tangled in it and her frantic kicking has only tightened the knot above her haunch. Mercifully, however, I'm able to get it untangled pretty quickly—thank you, opposable thumbs. I burst from the water with a gasp to find Pippa already swimming hard toward the stairs.

She glances back at me, fear and worry in her gaze, but I assure her, "Go! Get to the steps, I'm right behind y—"

I break off with a sharp cry as I step on something sharp hidden beneath the water, but I force myself to keep moving forward. The river is up to my chest now. If we don't get to the second floor soon, we're both going to be in danger of drowning all over again.

I reach the base of the steps just as Pippa is scrambling out of the water and limp up after her, too anxious to stop until we're at the top of the stairs and she's cuddled close to my side.

"It's okay, sweetheart." I hug her close, catching my breath as I stroke her head and she nuzzles a worried snout under my chin. "We're okay. We made it. All in one piece."

When she finally stops shaking, I turn to survey the damage.

First, I peek down into the first floor—craning my neck, I can see the water is up to the middle of the large windows—then, the damage to my person. The cut on the bottom of my foot is deep, but I don't think it needs stitches. As long as I clean and bandage it before too long, it should heal well enough.

Thank God I brought my medical kit up to the third-floor bedroom along with my backpack when we rolled up in Old Bessy a few days ago.

"Oh no," I croak, the words ripping past the lump in my throat.

It's like a part of me already knows, even before I hobble to the window to peer out over the gravel parking area.

It already knows what's about to be lost...

"No!" I press my hand to the cold, rain-streaked glass, my eyes filling as I watch Bessy—my orange-and-white-striped VW van, my home, my escape partner, the friend who carried me into the world to find myself and Pippa Jane and all the adventures along the way—be swept away.

I watch until she drifts into the angry surge of the river proper and close my eyes with a wince.

When I open them again, she's gone.

Pippa Jane presses closer to my thigh with a soft grunt. I crouch down, pulling her into my arms and burying my face in her coarse scruff. "Oh, Pips. What are we going to do? Everything was in there. Everything."

My thoughts race, building an ever-more-heart-wrenching list. My passport, my journals from the past fifteen years, my sketches and watercolor drawings, gifts from friends, the turquoise bracelet I made in New Mexico the night Pippa and I danced under the moon with a shaman who said we'd been friends in an incarnation before this one, the small bud vase from a kind man I hoped I could learn to love even though he wasn't Theo...

All gone.

All irreplaceable.

Clothes, my tent, my mountain bike, and all the rest of our gear can be bought at a store. But the precious objects that held my creativity, my memories...

I feel robbed. Violated by those churning waters.

I try to tell myself it isn't personal—Mother Nature is angry, and she has every right to be—but the pain is still fierce, cutting all the way to the bone.

After a few moments, I pull back, sniffing as I stroke Pippa's worried face. "It's okay. We still have each other. We'll get through this."

She oinks and her brows lift as if to ask if I'm sure about that.

I nod, patting her front haunch. "I am. Bad Dog has a great rescue squad. As soon as I tell them what's happened, they'll be out to fetch us in two shakes of a pig's tail."

I limp back toward the oversized armchair by the second story fireplace, deciding not to mention the possibility that the closest cell tower might have been swept away. If there's one thing I've learned from being in tough situations throughout the years, it's not to borrow trouble.

Take each challenge as it comes and don't stress about things that haven't happened yet, is my motto.

Still, when I grab my cell from where it fell down between the cushions after my nap this afternoon and see two bars, I exhale a sigh of relief.

The relief lasts until I call 911 not once, not twice, but *three* times, and am answered by a busy signal each and every time.

Pulse picking up again, I chew the rough edge of my thumbnail, wishing my foot didn't hurt too bad to pace. I always do my best thinking while I'm pacing.

"It's okay," I tell Pippa Jane, who is now sitting on top of my good foot, clearly having no intention of being more than a few inches away from me in the near future. "There are a lot of houses near the river and the lake in town. They're probably getting tons of calls. We'll keep trying and get through eventually."

I try again and again, keeping a brave face on as Pippa continues to grumble fretfully at my feet. As I hang up on the busy signal for the seventh or eighth time, I briefly consider calling my parents, but it's been years since we spoke. I don't know if they'd answer and even if they did, there's nothing they can do to help. They aren't boat people. Mom doesn't even know how to swim.

And if they *didn't* answer, or worse, didn't care that I was in trouble, it might break me, and I can't afford to be broken. If I'm going to get Pippa Jane and myself out of here in one piece, I have to stay strong and keep a clear head. The foundation of the cabin should be sturdy enough to hold as the flood rushes around it, but we're going to need drinkable water and food to ride out the time until the river goes down.

I'll have to head back downstairs and gather as much as I can from the still dry upper cabinets and a pot to boil water.

I should do that now.

Before it gets any more dangerous.

Instead, I pull up a search window on my phone and type in Theo McGuire's name. In just a few seconds, I have his work number—he's in charge of marketing for a fancy real estate firm and looks so handsome and happy in his staff photo, with his thick arm band tattoo hidden beneath a crisp blue button-down shirt.

Before I can think too much about the consequences, I hit the green button and bring the phone to my ear. I know he probably won't answer at six p.m. on a Saturday in late November, but my heart races anyway.

This could be it, my last chance to say the things I've never had the courage to say.

I take a breath, my chest tightening as his deep voice rumbles in my ear, telling me he's out of the office, but that I should leave a message and he'll get back to me within two business days.

At the beep, I brace myself and say, "Hello, Theo. It's Macy. Macy Mallard. I'm out at my uncle's old cabin and things are flooding and just in case I don't make it out, I..." I gulp. "I wanted you to know that I still feel the same way I did, when we were kids." Tears pricking at my eyes, I hurry to add, "There's never been anyone else, Theo. It's always been you, and it always will be. I hope you're happy and have a wonderful life. You deserve it. All my love, Macy."

I hang up, summoning a sharp, high-pitched grunt from Pippa.

"I know that you don't sign a phone message like a letter," I say, dragging a hand through my wet, tangled hair. "I was nervous." I curse beneath my breath, but I don't regret the message.

It was scary, terrifying really, but it felt...right.

Now, if the worst happens, if I'm wrong about Uncle Clint not cutting corners when it comes to the structural integrity of the foundation, at least I can shuffle off my mortal coil without any regrets.

But I'm definitely not going out without a fight.

I dial 911 again and again. When I continue to be met by a busy signal, I do an internet search for the closest firehouse, hoping to bypass the middleman and go straight to the source.

But before the results can load, I lose service, going from two bars to none in the blink of an eye. A moment later, the

lights flicker off, leaving Pippa and I in the dim gray gloom of the stormy November evening.

My heart sinks and my stomach tightens into a hard, fearful knot.

I hug Pippa closer, steadying myself. “It’s okay. We’re going to be okay. But you’re going to have to use the puppy pad, lady. That’s non-negotiable.”

Pippa rests her chin on my thigh with a heavy sigh that vibrates her entire body.

“Same, buddy,” I agree. “Same.”

Deciding not to think about what *I’ll* do about the bathroom when the time comes—the second-floor toilet will flush as long as the well water keeps pumping, but who knows how long that will last—I prepare to head downstairs to gather supplies.

I try to focus on one thing at a time, not dwelling too much on the future or what’s going to happen when Theo eventually hears that message on Monday.

Whatever comes next, I’ll rise to meet the moment as best I can. It’s what I’ve always done. I just wish I’d had the chance to find out what it was like to tackle the tough times in life with a partner I love instead of all alone.

Pippa chooses that moment to utilize the fresh puppy pad with a furious stream that makes me sigh.

Looks like we both have a lot we’ve been holding in.

Chapter Three



THEODORE MCGUIRE

A man who's been waiting for a sign.
And who just got it...

As soon as I hear Macy's message, I launch into action. I have friends at the Bad Dog fire department—good friends—but connections don't matter at a time like this. When I finally get through to Jim at the lakefront firehouse, bypassing the clogged 911 line, he assures me he'll get to Macy as soon as he can.

"But I'll be honest with you, it's going to be a few hours at least, man," he says, the stress of the night clear in his voice. "We have people trapped in the development by the river and the water is rising fast. We have to get them out before we start sending teams to more isolated locations. It's probably going to be morning, maybe even tomorrow afternoon."

"I understand," I say, and I do.

That development is packed with people. Macy is just one woman.

But she's *my* woman, my *one*, and I'm not about to sit on my hands until morning and hope she's still alive when they finally get a boat out to her uncle's place.

"I'll go on my own," I add. "Take my boat. See what I can do."

“Theo, no,” Jim says. “It’s too dangerous. You need to leave this to the professionals.”

“Would you leave it to the professionals?” I ask. “If it were Gigi?”

Gigi is Jim’s wife. They met when he was an exchange student in rural France as a teenager and wrote love letters for years before they were finally reunited after Gigi graduated from university. They’ve been married for twelve years, have three gorgeous kids, and can still regularly be seen making out at the Bad Dog beer garden in the summer after a few too many lagers.

He knows all about young love. First love. The kind of love that changes you forever and that you can’t quite put in your rearview, no matter how hard you try.

“You haven’t seen her in years, Theo,” he says, but his heart isn’t in the protest. I can tell.

“It doesn’t matter. You know it doesn’t.”

“Right.” He sighs. “At least share your location with me before you go, okay? I’ll keep an eye on you and get someone out to get you guys as soon as I can. Take water, food, and medical supplies. And stay away from the river near the Grange Bridge. That’s where the current seems to be the worst so far.”

I promise him I will and am about to hang up when he adds, “And Theo?”

“Yes?” I ask.

“I’m rooting for you. Both of you. I know how much you loved her. Sounds like you two were great together.”

“Thanks,” I say, my throat going tight as I end the call.

We *were* great together. We were fucking magic, until we weren’t. Until she left and blocked my calls and didn’t send me a single postcard.

But I could never hate her for it, not for a second.

I loved her too much.

And I understood. At least a little...

Macy didn't have the kind of family I did, with a grandmother who doted on me and a huge extended family that made sure I never felt alone, even though my parents had passed away in a car crash when I was just a baby.

It hadn't seemed like Macy's parents wanted a child at all, and they certainly didn't want one like Macy. She was too curious, too independent, too alive for people whose one goal in life seemed to be maintaining the status quo. Or, more accurately, taking the "quo" back to the 1950s, when gender roles were clearly defined, women knew their "place," and ten-year-old girls didn't decide to become vegetarians or toss all their frilly skirts into the donation box outside the Salvation Army.

Macy had to get out from under them before they smothered the spirit right out of her. She wasn't choosing between me and the open road. She was choosing between life and death. This town, her family, the old-fashioned church she was forced to attend as a kid...they were killing her.

And leaving Gram when she'd just broken her hip and needed me to care for her the way she's always cared for me would have killed me.

It was an impossible situation, but I still think we could have figured it out, if we'd only been able to hold on to each other.

Fuck...all I want to do is hold her.

All the way out to the boat launch near Pearson's dam, my best shot at getting to the cabin without crossing the river, all I can think about is my arms around her, her sweet Macy smell, and that little sigh of relief that always escaped her chest when we were finally alone.

Back then, I was her safe space, her refuge from the storm.

All I want to do is be that again, even if it's just this one last time.

Please, let me get to her. Let her be okay. Give me the chance to tell her that she's always been it for me, too.

I've tried to move on, to date, to find something like what I had with Macy, but every connection falls flat. There are a lot of wonderful women in Bad Dog, but they aren't *her*, and none of them ever will be.

By the time I reach the edge of the woods, the sun has set behind the storm clouds and darkness is taking hold beneath the trees. Visibility is limited to the glow of my floodlight penetrating into the gloom about twenty feet ahead, and I'm navigating on instinct now that all the familiar landmarks are underwater.

I'm starting to think I've made a wrong turn, in fact, when I pass the smaller, faded blue cabin Macy's grandfather used for his hunting camp before Uncle Clint built the new one in the 70's.

My heart leaps into my throat, throbbing there as I weave around the trees, heading south. The water is already nearly up to the second story of the old cabin and still rising. Her uncle's place is bigger, but not *that* much bigger. I may not be able to get in through the ground floor and there's a chance the entire structure has already been swept away.

I tell myself that isn't the case—if the shack is still standing, the newer, bigger structure will be okay—but I don't draw an easy breath until I hear the sound of rain on the metal roof.

I hear it before I see it and then, in the glow of my floodlight, the cabin emerges from the gloom. The ground floor is indeed under, but the small balcony on the second floor is clear of the flood and will make the perfect dock.

I slow the motor, guiding the boat carefully toward the right side of the balcony, heart pounding as I realize I'm probably within seconds of seeing Macy again. I've been so worried, so focused on action, that I haven't had time to think about what that will feel like.

Will it be awkward?

Strained?

Will she regret that message once she sees my face?

Or will it be like no time has passed at all?

Before I can form an opinion or talk my heart out of my throat, the sliding glass door leading out on the balcony opens and Macy steps out into the drizzle. Her dark hair is longer than it was before, her cheekbones more defined, but other than that, she looks exactly the same.

Same heart-shaped face, same confident, athletic grace, same big green eyes that look for the beauty in the world, desperate for a reason to believe.

She lifts her hand to shield her eyes, squinting into the glare of my floodlight. As soon as I finish tying the boat to the balcony railing, I cut the light and the engine and shout over the rain, “It’s me. Theo.”

I can’t see her face in the darkness, but I hear her relieved rush of breath. “You got my message?”

“I did,” I say, climbing out of the boat and over the railing.

“And you came to help us? All this way? All by yourself?” she asks, her voice trembling.

“I did.” I jump lightly down beside her on the aging wood. “And to tell you I feel the same way.”

Then, I do something that’s out of character for me.

I’m not a shy guy by any means, but I’m not a steamroller, either.

I’m a person who likes to stand back and get the lay of the land before making careful, informed decisions. But when it comes to Macy, I don’t have time for any of that. I just need to get my arms around her—STAT.

One second, we’re standing face-to-face in the rain. The next, I’m crushing her to my chest, lifting her off her feet as she wraps her arms around my neck so tight it leaves no room for doubt.

She’s home for me.

Just like before, just like she always will be.

“Love you so much,” I whisper into her hair as her ribs begin to shake against mine. “I’ve loved you every single day you were gone.”

“Me, too,” she says, her words thick with tears. “Every day, Theo. Every single day. I’m so sorry I left without saying goodbye. So, so sorry.”

I’m about to tell her it’s okay, that everything is okay now that she’s back where she belongs, when something hard and ruthless takes hold of the bottom of my jeans.

I cry out, but before I can warn Macy to get inside to safety, I’m whipped off my feet. I hit the wooden balcony floor hard, knocking most of the breath from my body. Seconds later, a dense, shockingly heavy little animal plops down on my chest, finishing the job.

For a moment, I think it’s a dog, but then my eyes adjust to the darkness enough to make out triangle ears and an upturned snout.

I vaguely recall someone mentioning that Macy had a pet pig who makes frequent appearances on her travel channel. I’m about to assure the creature that I mean its mistress no harm, when the beast squeals like a feral banshee, directly into my ear.

Chapter Four



“Pippa, no!” I reach down to grab her under her front legs, but she hunches lower on Theo’s torso with a menacing grunt. She’s in full “defend my herd” pig mode and there’s only one way to get through to her when she’s like this.

I drop my voice as low as it will go and enunciate clearly, “Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. I repeat, Peter Piper picked a peck of pickled peppers.”

By the time I get to the second “Peter,” my Mama Bear of a pig has turned to look at me over her shoulder.

“What was that?” Theo asks, earning another grunt from Pippa.

“Our emergency catchphrase,” I explain. “It lets her know I’m serious about being obeyed without raising my voice. She gets upset when I yell. Now, go to your bed,” I tell Pippa firmly. “I don’t need protection right now.”

She grunts and taps a suspicious hoof on Theo’s chest.

“Yes, I’m sure. Theo’s an old friend,” I assure her. “He’s here to help us.”

She squeals and tosses her head from side to side.

“Yes, he is.” I point a stern finger toward the house. “Now, go lie down on your bed and wait for a treat. Right now. I’ll be there in a minute.”

Still grumbling, Pippa slides off Theo and starts toward the open sliding glass door only to spin back at the last moment

and cough aggressively in Theo's direction.

"Message received," Theo says, lifting his hands into the air as he shifts into a seated position. "I'll be on my best behavior. I promise."

With a "you'd better be" snort, Pippa heads inside, trotting over to flop onto her canvas dog bed in the corner with a dramatic sigh, making it clear it's still very hard to be a wise pig in a world full of dumbass humans.

"Sorry about that," I say, reaching a hand down to Theo. "She's overly protective at the best of times. Let alone a day like today, when she nearly drowned, was forced to pee on a puppy pad, and only got one apple for a pre-dinner snack. I'm rationing them because we're low on food."

Theo's big fingers wrap around mine as I help him to his feet, making my entire body hum again. Touching him is even better than I remembered. It's like riding my favorite stretch of white-water rapids and being snuggled up by a warm fire during a winter snow, all at the same time.

Safe and wild and...perfect.

"Is she okay?" he asks. "Does she need a vet?"

"She's fine," I say, keenly aware of the fact that he's still holding my hand, long after any need for it has passed. "I was able to get her untangled from the extension cord that was holding her under the water in time. She just needs rest and to get back into her routine. Pigs thrive on routine."

Remembering that most of our "routine" now belongs to the river, I sigh and add, "Though that might be hard for a while. The river took the camper van. We watched it float away about an hour ago."

"I'm so sorry." He threads his fingers through mine. "I can imagine how hard that must have been. It was your home for so long."

"Fifteen years," I say, my throat going tight. "A lot of things have changed since I left Bad Dog, but not that."

"I bet." He steps closer. "I've missed a lot of your life."

“And I’ve missed a lot of yours,” I whisper as I tip my head back, searching his expression in the dim light from the candles flickering in the living room. “We’re probably completely different people than we used to be.”

“I don’t know.” His gaze locks intimately with mine, making it hard to breathe. “Do you think you’re different?”

I ponder the question for a moment before shaking my head. “No, not really. I’m just more confident about my good qualities and better at managing my bad ones.”

“What bad ones?” he asks, bending his head closer. “As far as I remember, you’re pretty damned perfect.”

“I’m so far from perfect,” I say, guilt swelling in my chest. “Perfect people don’t ghost the people they love and run off without saying goodbye. I would never do that now. I can handle hard conversations.” My pulse races as I lift my chin, bringing my lips close enough to his that I can feel his body heat warming my skin. “I really am so sorry, Theo. If I could go back and change one thing in my entire life, that would be it.”

“Apology accepted,” he says. “Now I need a promise from you.”

I nod, my heart lifting. “Anything.”

“Never apologize for any of that ever again.” He releases my hands to wrap his arms around my waist, drawing me slowly against him. “I don’t want to rehash the past. I’m way more interested in the future. Are you home to stay?”

Curling my fingers around his biceps through his raincoat and the sweater beneath, I want to tell him what he wants to hear, whatever words will make our clothes vanish and his lips cover mine.

But I was telling the truth before.

I *am* better at managing my bad parts, and I don’t say things I don’t mean, not even to please the people who matter most.

Doing my best to memorize the feel of his strong body pressed to mine in case he pulls away for good, I confess, “No, I’m not. Bad Dog never felt like home to me. I know it does for a lot of people. I know it’s a great place to live in so many ways, it’s just not *my* place. But I completely understand if it’s yours.”

He seems to consider that for a moment before he nods. “All right. But we’re going to have to buy something bigger than a van. I’ll need an office space to work remotely, and I’d love Pippa to have a little room of her own. One with a door we can close when we’d like privacy.”

As the meaning of his words penetrates, a wave of joy surges inside me, making my entire body tingle with delight.

I’m about to tell him that I’ll move into a truck shaped like a giant hot dog if that’s what he needs to feel comfortable on the road with me, but before I can speak, an ominous groan vibrates through the air.

A moment later, the balcony shifts sharply beneath our feet.

I grab a handful of his jacket sleeve. “Inside!” I shout, starting toward the door as a loud cracking sound explodes from the side of the house.

A beat later, Theo has his arms around my waist and is on the move. He practically throws me through the open sliding glass door and into the house. I stumble but manage to find my feet at the last second and spin back toward the balcony.

As I turn, I expect to see Theo charging inside behind me.

Instead, he’s crouched beside his boat, reaching through the railing slats for a bright orange backpack as the balcony splinters away from the house, ripped away by the surging current.

“Leave it!” I cry, starting for the door.

“Stay inside,” he shouts. “I’ll be right there.”

And he *would* have been right there...if his jacket hadn’t snagged on the railing as he lifted the bag out of the boat.

But it does snag, costing him precious seconds. By the time he frees himself and transfers the bag from the hand between the rails to the one on top, the porch has become a raft drifting downstream.

“Theo!” His name rips from my throat in a terrified sob as he shrugs the bag onto one shoulder and jumps into the raging water, his hands outstretched.

Our eyes lock, time slows, and in those two seconds that seem to last an eternity, I promise the universe I’ll do anything, anything at all, if the powers that be will just let Theo live.

I’ll devote my life to service and donate every penny in my bank account to my favorite rescue farm. Hell, I’ll even give up my rambling ways and move back to Bad Dog, putting down roots in this place that’s always made me feel like an outsider.

No price is too great because no amount of money or stretch of open road holds a candle to him, this precious man I’m about to lose only seconds after finding him again.

Hell, no, you aren’t, my inner self bellows in her Take No Prisoners voice.

It’s the same voice that gave me the strength to leave Bad Dog the first time, as a scared eighteen-year-old kid with nothing to my name but a beat-up old van, five hundred bucks in gas money, and a head full of dreams. It’s the voice that knows what really matters and isn’t afraid to go after it with everything she’s got.

It’s never steered me wrong, so when it shouts, *Jump!* I listen.

I dive toward Theo, hitting the floor hard enough to bruise my elbows, but I’m there in time to lock my hands around his wrists, holding him in place when his fingers start to slip off the slick edge of the sliding glass door.

“I’ve got you!” I shout over the rush of the water and Pippa’s panicked squeals as she realizes I’ve managed to get

myself in trouble all over again. “Try to climb up the side of the house with your feet.”

Shifting his grip to lock his fingers around my wrists in return, Theo starts to walk up the wall. But he’s so much bigger than I am that he drags me forward, until my head and shoulders are out in the rain and he’s back in the water.

“Take the backpack and let me try by myself,” he says.

“No way,” I shoot back.

“I’m too heavy. And you should have the backpack, just in case. It has food, water, and medicine.”

“I’m not taking the backpack! I just need to brace my feet against something,” I insist as Pippa appears beside me, nuzzling my armpit with a worried snout. “Give me a second to get my legs under me and we’ll try again.”

“I’m not dragging you in here with me, Macy,” he says, his grip loosening on mine. “And if this is it, it’s okay. I got to see you again and make things right between us. That’s the only piece of unfinished business I had left.”

Tears springing to my eyes, I shake my head. “No! This isn’t how it ends between us, Theo McGuire. As soon as this storm blows over, we’re going to drive off into the sunset and have a beautiful life together. So you’d better hold on tight and let me pull you out of the river or I’ll never forgive you. Do you hear me?”

He nods. “I hear you.”

“We can do this,” I say, willing him to believe me.

“We can,” he says, his fingers tightening around my wrists once more.

With a determined oink, Pippa leans out, grabbing a mouthful of Theo’s jacket, making him smile. “Thanks, Pippa.”

“See, we’ve got your back.” I slowly shift position until I’m crouched on the floor with my legs curled against my belly and my bare feet braced against the floor. The position

hurts my wounded foot, but I don't flinch or loosen my grip on Theo for a moment. "On three."

He pulls in a breath, counting with me as I say, "One, two..."

On "three," I throw my entire weight backward, Pippa tugs at Theo's damp jacket for all she's worth, and Theo climbs up the wall and into the house.

He lands in a heap, sending muddy water sloshing on to the floor all around him, but I don't care. The second he's safe, I'm in his lap, throwing my arms around his neck and hugging him so tight I hear something crack at the top of his spine.

He grunts and wraps an arm around me. "You did it."

"We did it," I correct, fighting the tears stinging at the backs of my eyes as I burrow my face into the damp skin at his neck. "And that's how it's going to be from now on. You and me. For keeps."

"You and me for keeps," he agrees, a hint of amusement creeping into his voice as he adds, "And Pippa Jane."

I pull back to see Pippa under his other arm, nuzzling his armpit with her snout as he strokes her back. I grin, "Well, well... You won her over pretty quick."

"Trauma bonding," he says. "She'll probably hate me again by morning."

Pippa grunts and flops more fully onto Theo's lap, until her legs are draped over his thighs and her head is on my hip and we're hopelessly tangled together on the floor. But that's okay, because it's a love tangle and both the beings I treasure most are safe here beside me.

I turn back to Theo, resting my hand on his damp chest. "I mean it. I don't care if it's fast or if other people think we're crazy. I want to give this a shot. A real shot. And if you decide being on the road isn't for you, I can find a way to make things work in Bad Dog. I'll run a rescue farm on the outskirts of town or something and only come into town for groceries and to get my hair cut on my birthday. As long as we're together, I know I'll be happy."

He smiles and runs a hand over the top of my fuzzy head. “You still only get your hair cut once a year?”

“What can I say, I’m a low maintenance kind of girl.”

“You’re the best kind of girl,” he says, correcting after a beat, “The best kind of woman. You should be so proud of everything you’ve built for yourself, Mace. I know I am. And I’m ready for an adventure. I have been since Gram passed, really. I’ll work remote four days a week and spend the other three climbing mountains with my favorite person. Sounds like heaven to me.”

“Me, too,” I say, my eyes filling with tears again. “And I’m so sorry about Gram. I know how important she was to you.”

“She was. But we had a beautiful goodbye, and I know she’s so happy for me right now.” Theo reaches up, cupping my face in one big hand. “Don’t cry. We’re going to be okay. I promise. I contacted a friend in the fire department before I left. He knows I came to get you and exactly where we are. He’ll be here with a rescue team as soon as he possibly can.”

“That’s not why I’m crying,” I whisper. “A part of me can’t believe this is real.”

His gaze softens. “I know. But it is. I promise.” He brushes his thumb lightly over my bottom lip, making me shiver for reasons that have nothing to do with the cold river water soaking into my clothes. “Why don’t I make us some dinner and we can talk. Catch up on all we missed.”

Pippa perks up at the word “dinner” lifting her head from my hip with a hopeful grunt.

I scratch her ears. “Yes, you can have dinner, too. But I think the humans in the room should get out of their wet clothes before we eat.” I shift off Theo’s lap, shooing Pippa with me. “It’s going to get colder as the night goes on, and I’m not sure if it’s safe to have a fire with the first floor underwater.”

“It should be.” Theo rises to his feet, sending more water dribbling to the floor all around him as he moves. “But you’re

right. Even if we didn't need to worry about hypothermia, this is pretty miserable."

"I have an oversized sweatshirt you can wear," I say, starting toward the circular staircase leading up to the bedroom on the third floor. "And Uncle Clint might have left an old pair of jeans or something in his armoire. I'll check as soon as I change and bring whatever I find down for you to try on in the bathroom."

"Thanks," he says, watching me climb the stairs with heat in his eyes that makes me wonder if he's thinking what I'm thinking.

About the fact that we'll both be spending the night alone together for the first time in over a decade.

Or the fact that the other two bedrooms in the cabin are currently underwater on the first floor, which means there's only the one big king bed on the third for us to share.

It's the place we always chose to snuggle up on cool winter nights, back when we were young and too naïve to realize how rare a love like ours truly was.

But I know now.

And so does Theo.

And tonight, maybe we'll get to do more than catch up on the news of our lives.

Maybe we'll get to do a different kind of catching up.

The kind that says a thousand things without a single word...

Chapter Five



THEO

By the time I finish changing into Macy's giant Smashing Pumpkins concert sweatshirt and a pair of her uncle's old flannel pajama pants, she's started a fire in the fireplace and Pippa Jane is happily gulping from a large silver dish by the closed sliding glass door.

"The smoke is going up the chimney," Macy says, turning to smile at me, making my heart lurch in my chest all over again. It's just so damned good to see that smile again. "So, I think we're good to keep the fire going. Luckily, I brought a few loads of wood up last night before I put Pippa to bed. There's more room to run around and play on this floor, so I thought she'd have more fun hanging out here today if the rain was as bad as they said it was going to be."

I sigh as I carry my wet clothes over to the side of the fireplace. "Instead, it was ten times worse."

Her eyes widen. "I know! What the hell? What happened to three to four inches and a slight risk of flooding in low lying areas? It feels like the world's ending out there. I wouldn't be surprised to see an ark float by on its way to the ocean."

I laugh. "I know. But I think the rain is slowing, at least." I crouch down, spreading my clothes out to dry on the tiles surrounding the fire. "It doesn't sound as loud on the roof as it did before. I would check my weather app to see if the worst is over, but I lost my phone in the river. It must have been swept out of my pocket when I fell in."

Her lips turn down and her brow furrows. “Oh no, I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, it’s fine.”

“If it’s any comfort, there’s no cell service out here right now anyway. It went out not long after I left that message for you.”

I come to sit beside her, cross-legged on the blanket she’s spread out in front of the fire. “Right. I tried to call you. I should have remembered that.”

“It’s okay,” she says. “It’s hard to remember things when you’re in fight or flight mode.”

“Or make good split-second decisions,” I agree. “In hindsight, I shouldn’t have gone for the backpack. I just thought I had more time before the balcony separated from the house. And I knew we’d need food and water if the rescue took more than a day or two. Things are really bad in town and my friend from the fire department told me they had to put those rescue efforts first.”

“I totally get that. And I’m glad you got the bag, actually.” She motions toward her now socked feet. She’s wearing a pair of oversized pink-and-blue flannel pajamas that swallow her whole but still looks sexy as hell. “I had bandages in my kit, but I didn’t have Neosporin, and I got a pretty bad gash on my foot while I was pulling Pippa out of the water earlier.”

I frown at her feet. “Do you think you need stitches?”

She shakes her head. “No, I don’t think so. And I’m up-to-date on my tetanus shot in case it was something rusty under there.”

I frown harder. “You want me to take a look? I’m no medical professional, but I’ve bandaged more than my share of baby cousins. It’s not a McGuire family reunion if half a dozen kids don’t skin a knee.”

“No, it’s okay,” she says, a hint of sadness flickering behind her eyes. Before I can ask about it, she brings her hand to rest on my thigh, and I’m suddenly struggling to think of anything but how much I want her back in my arms. It’s been

a long time since I've been with anyone, and no other woman has ever compared to Macy. What we had was so honest, so intense and connected.

I wonder if it still will be? Or if this sense that no time has passed between us will fade if our clothes come off?

“What about you?” she continues. “Any injuries while you were in the water? There’s so much junk drifting by right now—logs and boat parts and stuff from camps farther up the river. I saw half a dozen coolers float by before it got too dark to see the water as clearly.”

“No, I’m fine,” I say, my stomach choosing that moment to snarl angrily beneath my ribs. She arches a pointed brow, and I add, “Starving, but otherwise fine. I was about to start dinner when I heard your message.”

“I’m so glad you heard my message,” she says, leaning closer. “But you shouldn’t be working on a Saturday. You deserve time off.”

“You’re right. I just...haven’t had much going on aside from work lately. The rugby rec league is on break, and all my friends are headed into holiday mode with their girlfriends and families.”

“How are you still single?” she asks in a softer voice, one that truly seems to find the fact shocking. “Are all the women in Bad Dog blind these days?”

I smile. “You’re good for my ego.”

“I’m honest,” she says without missing a beat. “You’re a snack, Theo, and even if you were a hideous beast with a creepy moustache, you’re one of the kindest people I’ve ever met. Like, truly kind, not one of those nicey-nice people who act like they’re kind but dump you as soon as their travel channel becomes more famous than your travel channel.”

“Who was she?” I ask, narrowing my eyes. “I’ll go leave her videos a dozen one-star reviews.”

She laughs, the sound warming me more than the fire. For the first time in so long, I don’t feel like I’m on the outside looking in at all the love in the world. “No, you don’t have to

do that. I don't play dirty, and she'll self-destruct on her own, sooner or later. She's one of those people who's never happy with what she has, you know? She keeps setting bigger goals, thinking once she reaches the next level, she'll finally find the peace and sense of accomplishment she's been looking for. But that feeling never comes."

"Because it doesn't come from the outside," I say, understanding completely. I have friends like that, people who think the next promotion or a fancy house or the "perfect" girlfriend is all they need to banish the empty feeling inside.

But as far as I can tell, the only way to banish the ache is by loving yourself and your people with everything you've got. Love is the opposite of emptiness, not money or fame or your status symbol of choice.

Still...

"But you didn't deserve to be treated that way," I add.

Her lips hook up on one side. "Well, thank goodness we don't always get what we deserve. I also didn't die in the woods after I forgot to have a backup plan to my backup plan, broke my ankle, and my satellite phone wouldn't connect."

My stomach drops. "Fuck."

"Yeah, it was terrifying." She glances over her shoulder with a smile. "But Pippa Jane came to the rescue. Because she's the smartest, bravest pig ever."

Pippa oinks in agreement before turning back to her supper, making us both laugh.

"So, what do you want food-wise?" Macy asks. "I have pasta sauce, a few apples, and peanut butter I managed to rescue from downstairs, but nothing to put the peanut butter on except the apples, and Pippa will have a fit if we eat her apples. All apples are her apples."

Pippa Jane grunts again before trotting over to flop down onto her bed nearby with a heavy sigh, clearly exhausted by the day's adventures.

“I have trail mix bars, canned chili, and a handful of canned soups, but everything else was probably ruined by the water.”

“Let’s take a look,” she says, shifting to grab the orange backpack from where it’s leaned against the wall closer to the fire. “I grabbed the medical kit from the top but didn’t want to go through the rest of your bag without you.”

“You can go through my bag anytime,” I assure her, summoning a teasing smile to her lips.

“Oh yeah? Any time?” she murmurs, her brows lifting. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Are you flirting with me, Ms. Mallard?” I ask as she begins to pull items out of the still soggy pack.

She nods. “Absolutely. It’s been a long time since I’ve flirted, though, so feel free to ask if you have doubts or need confirmation.” Her smile widens as she pulls out the small bunch of bananas, I’d forgotten I threw in on my way out the door. “I’m not flirting when I say peanut butter smeared all over these bananas sounds amazing, though. I’m just hungry.”

I laugh. “That does sound amazing. Peanut butter and bananas for the main course and slightly soggy trail mix bars for dessert?”

“Slightly soggy trail mix bars *also* with peanut butter on them for dessert,” she counters. “I really can’t get enough peanut butter. Sometimes, when I’m feeling sad, I eat it straight out of the jar with a spoon.”

“Why do you feel sad?” I ask, as we set aside the items for our dinner and unpack the rest of the bag’s contents onto the tile by the fire to dry.

She shrugs. “I don’t know. Sometimes, even with Pippa and the friends I run into at campsites and festivals and things...I get lonely.”

“I can see that,” I say softly.

“Yeah,” she says. “Pig snuggles are great, but they aren’t human snuggles. And it’s been a long time since there was a

guy in the picture for me.”

“But there was one?” I ask, more curious than jealous. I know how lonely I’ve been at times during our long separation, and I never wanted that for her. When I let myself imagine things about Macy, I would imagine her loved and supported by a devoted man who cheered her on behind the scenes on all her adventures.

She nods. “Yeah. For a while. But it didn’t work out.”

“Why not?” I ask.

“He wasn’t you,” she says, making my chest ache as she turns to face me in front of the fire and offers me a banana.

But this isn’t an empty ache. It’s the kind of ache I used to get on the first day of summer as a kid or boarding a plane for a long-awaited vacation as an adult. It’s the ache of anticipation, of knowing that things are about to change for the better and that for at least the next few weeks, life is going to be the sweetest possible version of itself.

And if my hunch is right, this transition isn’t going to be a temporary reprieve.

This sweetness could last the rest of my life.

As long as I don’t fuck it up...

Which means I have to tell Macy the one thing I’ve never wanted to confess to the only woman I’ve ever loved, the secret that made a cowardly part of me a little relieved that I’d never see her again.

Macy’s a forgiving person, but can she forgive this?

I roll the question over in my mind as we eat our simple but strangely delicious supper and wash it down with bottled water.

Finally, I decide I have no idea how she’ll take the news, but that I owe her the truth. Now. Before we get in any deeper, before we retreat to that big bed upstairs, before she trusts me with a heart that she has no idea I betrayed.

So, when we're finished, I pull in a breath, set my now-empty water bottle down and say, "There's something I have to tell you, Mace. Something you're not going to like."

And then she does something I never expected.

She smiles and asks, "You mean about you having sex with Greta two weeks after I left?"

My jaw drops, staying glued to floor as she adds, "I've known for years. She told me herself. Just a few days after it happened."

Chapter Six



Theo's gone so pale that his dark eyebrows stand out against his skin like charcoal slashes on a fresh sheet of drawing paper. It would almost be funny if it weren't obvious that he's truly upset.

I set the last of my uneaten trail mix bar to one side and thread my fingers together in my lap, giving him my full attention as I say, "It's okay. It's not a big deal, I promise."

His brows draw together now, forming a vertical line in the center of his forehead. "It's not a big deal that I slept with your best friend two weeks after you left town? When I didn't know if you were coming back or if it was really over between us or if there might still be some chance of making it work?"

I shake my head. "Greta wasn't my best friend, you were." His eyes widen as if to say "like that makes it any better?" and I amend, "But yes, we were close. Close enough that she remembered I said I was headed to Arches National Park first and tracked me down at a campground there." My lips twist. "She told the guy at the main office it was a family emergency, and he brought his cell to my van door at almost midnight. After I got off the phone with Greta, I lied and told him my aunt was in the hospital. I was too embarrassed to tell him that my friend slept with my ex and was having a meltdown about it."

"I'm sorry. I shouldn't have done it," Theo says. "I shouldn't have even thought about it. But I was so sad, and Greta was sad, and we were hanging out at her place drinking rum and Coke while her parents were out of town and it just..."

happened. But it was awful. And we both felt terrible afterwards. We barely looked at each other again the rest of the summer and once she left for college, she never came back.”

I wince. “Really?”

“Really. Not even for Thanksgiving or holiday break.”

I curse. “I hate that for her. I told her it was okay the night we talked, and I meant it. If I’d known she was still messed up about it, I would have reached out to her again. I was weird about talking to Bad Dog people on the phone back then, but I could have written a postcard or an email or something.”

Theo studies me for a long beat, clearly confused, before he asks, “Why?”

“Why was it okay?” I ask, pushing on when he gives a tight nod. “Well, I mean, I wasn’t thrilled about it. You were my first love, my first kiss, my first...everything like that.” I shrug. “But I was the one who left, Theo. Without saying goodbye or honoring your wishes or even leaving a note telling you how much you meant to me.”

“And you blocked my calls,” he says softly.

“Yeah, I did. So, really, there was no reason for you to think I was coming back. Or that it wasn’t completely over. You were free to do whatever you wanted with other girls, including Greta. And I don’t know, I guess...” I trail off, trying to find the perfect words to ease his mind. “I guess, deep down, I knew it hadn’t been malicious. You were both my friends and some of the best people I knew. My gut said it wasn’t really about me. At least, not in a mean way. It was about me because I’d run away, and you were both sad and hurt about it.”

“And worried,” Theo adds softly. “I couldn’t sleep for weeks. I kept imagining you broken down on the side of the road in that shitty van with no one to help you. Or getting attacked on a trail while you were all alone.”

“I always carry bear spray,” I remind him.

“I wasn’t worried about bears,” he counters. “Women on trails are in more danger from men on trails and you know it.”

“Valid,” I say, thinking of my friends who’ve had some close calls with creepy hiker jerks. “There *were* times when things were scary. Times when I knew the only reason something terrible hadn’t happened to me was because I’d gotten lucky.” I pause for a beat, but I owe him the rest of the words in my heart. “But I never even thought about coming back, Theo. You were right to move on, whether it was two weeks after I’d left, or two years. It didn’t matter.”

“And you really don’t care that it was Greta?”

Throat tight, I nod. “I’m probably a weirdo, but I was actually glad. Sure, it hurt to think of you with someone else, but I knew Greta was a great person and...” I swallow, forcing the rest out in a raspy voice, “I knew if you two fell for each other that she’d love you the way I wanted you to be loved. With every piece of her heart.”

His eyes begin to shine, making it even harder to hold back the tears making the back of my nose burn. “I wanted the same for you. I never wanted you to be lonely.”

I nod. “I know. You wouldn’t. You’re too good.”

“Not as good as you,” he whispers. “If I’d found out you were fucking one of my best friends two weeks after you left, I would have wanted to tear his liver out and burn down the world.”

My lips hook up. “Yeah, well, it was different. *I* was the one who left. And all your best friends are also your relatives. It would be gross if I’d shackled up with one of your cousins.”

“Right. The story of my life.” He rolls his eyes. “I actually had a little thing for a woman not long ago. Sweet, funny girl. I thought we were hitting it off, but then she ended up falling for my cousin Christian.”

I wrinkle my nose. “I would say I’m sorry, but I’m not. I’m really glad you’re single.”

He grunts. “So am I. And it was just a crush, anyway. Nothing like this.”

“Like what?” I shift onto my knees, reaching out to brace my hands on his crossed knees. “What is *this*, Theo

McGuire?”

His eyes darken. “This is the reason I’m here, Macy Mallard.”

Somehow, I know he means more than here in the cabin or out in the middle of a natural disaster. Somehow, I know he means the big “here.”

Here on earth, here in this human body, here in this life filled with so much hardship and pain, but also light and love and hope.

When I look at him, all I feel is hope.

I couldn’t stop myself from kissing him if I tried.

I lean in, lids sliding closed as my mouth drifts closer to his. We’re seconds away from our first kiss in fifteen years, when a moist snout suddenly shoves into the air between us.

Theo breaks into a deep belly laugh that has Pippa Jane oinking happily as she glances between us.

“Don’t laugh,” I tell him, fighting a smile. “She’ll think she did something good and do it again. She loves making people laugh.”

“I’m sorry,” Theo says, still laughing as Pippa climbs into his lap, rubbing his cheek with her snout. He wraps his arms around her, patting her back. “She’s just so damned smart. It’s hysterical. Nothing’s getting by you, is it, Pippa?”

“Even an average pig is smarter than a three-year-old,” I say, scratching my mischievous pig between her happily twitching ears. “And Pippa’s way above average. She watches me play video games sometimes, and I swear she understands what’s going on. She always gets excited when I’m about to beat a new level. And she can count to ten and always puts her own toys away when she’s done playing at a campsite.”

“Amazing.” Theo shakes his head, marveling at my clever girl in a way she clearly appreciates if the way she’s grinning ear to ear is any indication.

“Okay, stop it, already,” I say, tugging her happily wagging tail. “I’m starting to get jealous.”

Pippa Jane lets out a soft squeal that sounds so much like laughter, Theo and I both lose it. We end up rolling onto the quilt I spread on the ground with Pippa between us, rubbing her belly and giggling like a bunch of kids.

We're causing such a ruckus; I don't hear the tree falling outside.

Who knows, maybe it didn't make any noise on the way down, but it certainly makes its presence known as it comes crashing down on the opposite side of the cabin, splintering the wall, and shattering the sliding glass door.

Chapter Seven



THEO

As a giant tree demolishes the other side of the cabin like a wrecking ball, I grab Macy around the waist with one arm and Pippa with the other, dragging them backward as shattered glass skitters across the cabin floor.

When the crash is over and the tree is lying still—half in, half out of the rushing river—I ask, “Everybody okay?”

“Oh my God,” Macy says, her breath coming fast. “Is the whole cabin going to come down now? Should we find something to tie around Pippa as a flotation device in case we’re all swept downstream? We can climb a tree if we have to and hold on until someone comes to get us. She can’t.”

I hug her closer, only wincing slightly as Pippa crowds onto my lap, too, gouging my thigh with her hoof as she oinks in distress.

After a few moments with no apparent shift in the stability of the rest of the structure, I shake my head. “No, I think we’re okay. But see if you can get Pippa upstairs to the bedroom. If another tree falls, we’ll be out of the line of fire up there. It’s too close to the tree line to be in serious danger. I’ll put out the fire, gather our things, and meet you up there in a few minutes. I just want to do a quick look around at the rest of the cabin, see how things are holding up after the impact and all the water.”

“Okay, but hurry.” Macy squeezes my arm. “If we’re going to die tonight, I want us to all die together. Is that morbid?”

“A little,” I say, cupping her worried face in my hand, “but I feel the same way. But we’re not going out like this. People know we’re out here, and they’ll be out to evacuate us before things get too bad. We just have to keep the faith and our cool until we’re rescued.”

She shoots me a look that’s half grateful, half suspicious. “I’m not sure if you believe that or if you’re just saying it to make me feel better, but I appreciate it, either way. The only thing worse than dying in some disastrous, tragic way would be dying in a disastrous, tragic way after being forced to worry about dying for hours beforehand.”

“Agreed.” I rise to my feet and help her up after me. “Now head upstairs. I’ll be right there, I promise.”

She nods. “Okay. Let me grab her bed. If she sees me bringing it upstairs, maybe she’ll be motivated enough to tackle the tiny steps. Worst case scenario, I’ll have to carry her while she freaks out. She hates being carried. I think she’s afraid of heights or was dropped as a piglet.”

“I’m not a fan of heights, either, Pippa,” I say, bending to stroke the worried pig on the head. “Here’s hoping none of us have to climb any trees tonight.”

“I’ll hold your hand while we climb if we have to,” Macy says, collecting Pippa’s bed and a candle before starting toward the stairs. “With teamwork, all things are possible.”

“Can’t think of anyone else I’d rather have on my team,” I say, taking a moment to savor the warmth that fills her eyes before shooing her and Pippa up the stairs.

“Come on, baby,” Macy coos. “Let’s go get another apple treat upstairs. Are you ready for an apple treat?”

Thankfully, the pig only hesitates a moment at the base of the spiral staircase before letting Macy’s voice and the promise of a treat coax her up the steps. Once I’m sure they’re on their way, I turn back to the tree, approaching it carefully in case the impact has weakened the floorboards.

I check the area near the wall it crushed but am relieved to see most of the wall on the first floor is still standing. The

structure seems to be holding up okay. Even better, the river is definitely lower downstairs than it was before. As I shine Macy's flashlight from the mantle down into the room, I can see the high-water mark at the top of the upper kitchen cabinets, but now the muddy water only brushes their bottoms.

The current is still dangerous, but flood-wise, we're headed in the right direction.

Turning, I gather the rest of our food and the flashlight into the only slightly damp orange backpack before putting out the fire and all but one of the candles. Then I grab the bag and make my way up the stairs with a candle in one hand, arriving at the top just as Macy is murmuring something beneath her breath and shutting the door to the walk-in closet in the corner.

She turns to see me setting the candle on the bureau and presses a finger to her lips. "She needed to rest in a cozy space. She always does when she's stressed. Our first few days on the road, she wouldn't come out from under the bed unless I had food or her favorite ball." She glances over her shoulder at the closet. "Hopefully she can get some sleep." She sighs and drags a hand through her hair. "I know I won't be."

"You can try if you want," I say, curling my fingers over her shoulders and digging my fingertips lightly in the tight muscles there. "I'll take first watch and wake you up if our situation changes."

"No, I can't ask you to do that." Her lashes flutter and a soft moan emerges from the back of her throat as I home in on a particularly stubborn knot at the base of her neck.

"Sure, you can."

"No, I can't," she insists, her hands coming to cover mine, stopping my efforts. She looks up, her eyes locking with mine in the soft candlelight. "Because I need to ask you to do something else."

"What's that?" I ask, mesmerized by the way her mouth parts and her tongue sweeps out to dampen her full bottom lip.

"If this is my last night, I don't just want to die with you, Theo," she whispers as she begins to back slowly toward the

bed. “I want to live with you.”

“I want that more than anything,” I say, my breath rushing out as she stops by the bed and reaches up to open the button at the top of her pajamas. “But I don’t have any condoms.”

“I’m on birth control and I trust you to tell me if there’s anything else I should worry about.” She arches a brow as she continues to work on her buttons. “Is there anything else I should worry about?”

“Absolutely nothing,” I say, my cock thickening as the valley between her bare breasts begins to show between the parting fabric.

And I’m not going to worry, either.

About anything but showing her how deeply I’ve missed her.

Chapter Eight



His lips crash into mine and it's like the first time all over again—electric and wild and the safest thing I've ever known—but even better.

Back when we were kids, I had no other kisses to compare ours to. Theo was my one and only. I didn't know that not all kisses are sweet and passionately fearless. I didn't know that some kisses play games or flat out lie or are about as electrically charged as a dead battery left out in the rain.

There was no doubt in my mind that what we had was beautiful, but I didn't realize how rare a kiss like this truly was.

A kiss you can get lost in...

Found in...

"I've missed you so much," I say, tears stinging into my eyes again as we fall back onto the bed, the comforting weight of his body on top of mine.

"Like air," he murmurs against my lips in between kisses that make my head spin. His tongue dances with mine as his hands roam across my bare skin, smoothing over my belly and up to cup my breasts.

I arch into his touch, my breath rushing out as he rolls my nipple between his fingers. I knead my hands down the warm skin on his back, relishing the feel of all the powerful muscle beneath, and when he kisses his way down my throat, I waste no time making the most of my newly liberated lips.

“Missed this, too.” I kiss his shoulder before dragging my teeth across the barbed wire tattoo encircling his bicep.

He chuckles softly. “My cheesy angsty teen tattoo?”

“Your sexy bad boy tattoo,” I correct, nipping at his skin again as I hook my thumbs into the waistband at the top of his flannel pants, right above the delicious swell of his ass. “When I saw this tattoo for the first time...” I trail off, moaning as he captures my nipple in his mouth and sucks, sending hunger flooding through my body.

“You knew you’d never be able to resist me?” he asks as he’s kissing his way over to my other breast.

“Never,” I agree. “You should get another one. A full sleeve on your other arm or something on your back. If you had more tattoos, I’d never wear panties. There would be no point. One look at all that sexy ink and they’d just come flying off.” I writhe beneath him as he licks and nips at my other breast with his teeth. “Or be soaked through,” I add in a breathless whisper.

But Theo hears me, a fact he proves by murmuring, “Is that right?” against my breast as his hand dips under the waistband of my pajamas and the panties beneath, gliding between my thighs where I’m already so swollen and wet. He groans as he pushes a finger inside me, a sound I echo as I spread my legs wider, desperate for more of his touch.

“Fuck, Macy,” he says, kissing me again as he rolls us both onto our sides, still gliding his finger in and out of my slickness as he shoves my pajama pants down my thighs with his other hand. “I need you naked.”

“Yes, please. Me, too,” I agree, pushing gently at his arm. “Three second break to get rid of these terrible clothes.”

“Two seconds,” he counters, pulling away just long enough to shove his pants off and toss them to the ground. Then, he turns back to me, helping drag my pajamas and panties the rest of the way down my legs.

And then we’re free to come back together with a sigh of relief.

“Damn, I missed you,” I say, as he nudges my thighs apart and settles between them, his erection thick and hot against my clit as I wrap my legs around his hips.

“Two seconds was too long,” he agrees, grinding against me, building the need already driving me wild. “Let’s never be apart again.”

“And never wear clothes,” I agree.

“Clothes are for losers.” He pulls back, catching my gaze as he reaches between us, positioning his cock at my entrance. “Is this okay? And we’ll take longer next time? I want to taste you and turn you on your stomach and bite every inch of your perfect ass and make you beg for me to fuck you, but right now I need to know this is real too much.”

I nod and wrap my arms around his neck. “Yes, me, too. Prove you’re not a dream, Theo McGuire.”

And he does.

The thick head of his cock stretches me just to the brink of discomfort, the way I remember it used to. But just like it used to, the sensation only intensifies the bliss of everything that comes after. Of feeling him pushing deep, stretching my inner walls, filling every inch of emptiness, flooding my entire being with joy.

“Oh God, you feel so good.” My throat tightens as I hold him close. “So perfect. How could I have lived fifteen years without this? Without you?”

“You were always with me, baby,” he says, kissing my forehead, my temple. “There wasn’t a day that went by when I didn’t wonder where you were and if you ever thought of me.”

“All the time,” I say, tears slipping down my cheeks. “I just didn’t think there was any path forward. I thought our lives were too different. I thought you’d moved on without me and the best thing I could do was stay away.”

He pulls back, brushing my hair from my face as he gazes down at me with the kindest eyes. “Some things, some people, you never get over. Those people are worth turning your life upside down for. But it took me time to realize that. If you’d

come back five or six years in, I might not have been ready to make this choice. But now, I am.” He smiles as he shifts his hips forward, burying himself even deeper inside me. “I’m so ready, I wish we could head back to my place and start packing right now.”

Lashes fluttering, I reach down, gripping his ass in my hands. “Maybe not right now. Maybe we finish this first.”

“This is never going to be finished,” he says as he begins to move, fucking me with the perfect mix of confidence and gentleness that is Theo McGuire. “I’m going to be making love to you in one way or another every day from now until the day I die.”

“Me, too,” I say, starting to cry again.

It’s just so beautiful and so true. I’ve had a life full of amazing adventures that I wouldn’t trade for the world, but this is the best adventure. Getting to dive into Theo, into knowing him and loving him and learning all the things I’m sure our love has to teach me...

It’s the most precious gift I’ve ever been given.

And when he rolls over onto his back, guiding me on top without severing our connection, I show him how much I appreciate it.

Bracing my hands on his chest, I ride him slow and sultry, then faster, harder, straining closer as he grips my hips and pulls me into deeper contact with his cock at the end of every thrust. I hold his gaze as he comes with a deep cry that vibrates across my skin, tightening my nipples and sending me spiraling out right along with him.

I come in thick, heart-wrenching waves that leave me as limp as the ramen I ate for dinner nearly every night when I was first on the road.

I lift my head from Theo’s chest just far enough to whisper, “You know that ultimate ramen recipe we were working on senior year? I perfected it. The secret is full fat coconut milk and lemongrass.”

An appreciative sound rumbles through his chest as he wraps his arms tighter around me. “Damn, that sounds good. And fresh mushrooms. We should have realized it needed fresh, not canned.”

“We were young and stupid,” I agree, resting my head again, sighing as he drags lazy fingers through my hair.

“But not anymore,” he says in a way that lets me know he’s talking about more than our ramen recipe. And he’s right. We’re not young and stupid anymore. We’re old enough to know what matters and to hold tight to those things no matter what.

There’s only one problem...

Theo has a lot more to hold onto than I do.

More than just me.

More than a life on the road and whatever adventure lies around the next bend.

It’s a fact that’s proven early the next morning when we’re awoken by a deep male voice saying softly, “Well, well... I kind of thought I’d find you two in bed together, but the pig is an unexpected touch.”

I open my eyes to see Drew McGuire, Theo’s older cousin, standing at the foot of our bed where, sometime in the night, Pippa Jane must have climbed up to join us. She’s currently snuggled between Theo’s back and my side, fast asleep with a smile on her face.

Thankfully, we both put our clothes back on before we drifted off, however, so the scene isn’t nearly as indecent as it could have been. Thank goodness, since it looks like Drew isn’t alone.

Another voice comes from the small landing just outside our room, “Everyone okay in there? If so, I’m going to tell the Red Cross boat that they can move on, and we’ll get our people back to dry land on our own.”

I glance over to see Christian McGuire, Drew’s younger brother, sticking his sandy blond head into the space.

“We’re fine,” Theo croaks in a sleep rough voice. “Though much better now that you’re here. I think we could all use a bathroom, a shower, and a big hot breakfast.”

Pippa Jane oinks in agreement as she rolls over onto her back between us, waving a hoof in the air, her standard way of requesting morning tummy rubs. She’s remarkably calm considering there’s a stranger in the room, but Drew has always had the best vibes. After Theo, he’s probably my favorite McGuire. He’s just so kind and patient and always willing to go the extra mile for his family.

If I had a cousin like him, or any of them really, it wouldn’t be nearly as easy to leave Bad Dog...

“How about The Fat Rooster?” Drew asks. “We passed it on the way to the boat launch. They’re open and have the best scrambles in town.”

“Sounds like heaven,” I say, scratching Pippa’s belly. “Thanks so much for coming to get us, Drew.”

“Truly, man. Thanks so much,” Theo says, sitting up beside me and running a hand through his spiky morning hair.

“No thanks necessary. I’m just glad Jim called me this morning, when he realized the fire department would be tied up in town until this afternoon,” Drew says with a smile. “This is what family is for. I’ll step downstairs and let you two get dressed. I’ll also call Tatum and see if she and Sarah Beth want to join us.” To me, he adds, “Sarah Beth is my daughter from my first marriage. Tatum is my fiancée.”

“And the sweetest woman ever. And the love of his life,” Theo pipes up, making Drew blush in a way that’s absolutely adorable. “They’re expecting another baby in a couple months.”

“We are,” Drew says, clearly beside himself with happiness. “And Tatum’s been craving scrambles the entire pregnancy. If I go to The Fat Rooster without at least offering her the chance to join, she’ll have my head on a platter.”

“Oh, congratulations. That’s amazing news,” I say, my chest starting to ache. “Yes, please invite her. I’d love to meet

her and your daughter.”

“And my fiancée, Starling,” Christian pipes up from outside. “Well, she’ll be my fiancée soon. I’m asking her on Christmas Eve and if she doesn’t say yes, I’m going to ask her every Friday night until she finally gets sick of my begging and puts me out of my misery.”

Drew rolls his eyes and whispers, “She’s going to say yes. For some reason she’s crazy about that cocky bastard.”

“I heard that,” Christian says. “In addition to being a cocky bastard, I have excellent hearing. Now hurry up and come downstairs with me. The sooner they’re dressed, the sooner we can get out of here. That squirrel in the downed tree is giving me the creeps.”

“Oh no,” I say, covering Pippa Jane’s ears before adding to Drew, “Please try to get rid of the s-q-u-i-r-r-e-l before we come downstairs. Pippa’s terrified of them. If she sees it, she’ll run and hide, and we’ll never get her into your boat.”

Drew nods seriously. “Will do.”

He disappears, closing the door behind him. The second it snicks shut, I’m out of bed digging through one of my uncle’s drawers for something to wear. My other clean things are all in my backpack downstairs.

“Everything okay?” Theo asks, making a more orderly exit from bed.

Pippa Jane isn’t happy to see us go. She oinks in indignation, clearly irritated that the morning petting session has ended so soon.

“You’ll get more belly rubs later, baby,” I tell her, grabbing a grungy blue “Bass Fishers Do It Better” sweatshirt and quickly swapping it for my flannel pajama top. I keep my back to Theo as I change, not wanting to be naked in front of him right now, not when I have this weird...icky feeling squirming around inside me. “And yeah,” I add, forcing a smile as I turn back to him. “Just ready to get out of here. I didn’t realize how claustrophobic I was getting until rescue was on the horizon.”

“I hear that,” Theo says, pulling his flannel pajama pants on over the boxer briefs he slept in along with my old sweatshirt. “I’ll run downstairs and see if my jeans are dry yet.”

“Or you can wear your PJ pants,” I say. “I was going to leave mine on. I figure, as long as we have real clothes on top and shoes on bottom, we should be fine.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Theo’s lips curve, but the smile doesn’t reach his eyes. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine,” I lie.

I’m not fine, but the thing I’m not fine about isn’t something Theo can fix, and I wouldn’t want him to try. His big, loving, “always there for each other” family is something he should treasure.

And something he shouldn’t be forced to leave behind.

I don’t know why I didn’t think more about this before. I guess a part of me assumed that with his grandma gone, Theo wouldn’t have as much tying him to Bad Dog. But he’s clearly grown even closer to his cousins than when we were in high school. It makes sense, really. I’m sure, once Gram died, the McGuires all rallied around Theo to make sure he felt loved and included. They’re a wonderful family that way.

Too wonderful to give up for a woman who may never put down roots and isn’t sure if she wants to have a family of her own. On the one hand, there are times when having a little one to share life’s adventures with sounds amazing. But there are just as many times when caring for Pippa Jane takes everything I’ve got, and I can’t imagine having a creature to take care of who can’t be sent to time-out in her crate or pick up her own toys.

I can’t promise I can give Theo children, and it’s not like he’s going to be getting any love and support from the people I’m related to. If he comes with me, he’ll be leaving dozens of loving people and a home he adores behind in exchange for... me.

Just me.

Well, and Pippa, who seems to adore Theo already—she’s currently letting him hold her like a baby as they start down the stairs, a gesture of trust that heals and breaks my heart, all at the same time—but a girl and her pig can only do so much, can only *be* so much.

As I follow Theo down, praising Pippa Jane for being such a good girl as we descend the spiral staircase, I try not to spiral myself, but it’s next to impossible. In the hard light of day, the destruction left behind by the flood looks even more brutal and my future doesn’t seem nearly as bright. No matter how much I want to whisk Theo away, sweeping him up in my nomad life, I truly love him. I love him enough to want the best for him, no matter what that is, even if it isn’t me.

We load into the fishing boat Drew and Christian tied to the fallen tree, puttering away just as a fat gray squirrel leaps out of a clutch of limbs, shaking its tiny fists in our direction. Thankfully, Pippa is on the floor of the boat, too low to see the furious creature, but I’m not, and those fists feel personal.

And deserved.

How can I say I love Theo and be so selfish at the same time?

The fact is...I can’t. Which means I have two choices—end this second chance now, before we get in any deeper than we are already. Or suck it up and put down roots in Bad Dog.

Surely, if Theo loves it, I can learn to love it, too. I’m older now, wiser, more certain of my place in the world.

I’ve halfway talked myself into giving small town life another chance when we get to The Fat Rooster and my past comes back to remind me why this place can never be my future.

Chapter Nine



THEO

We arrive at The Fat Rooster at the same time as Starling, Christian's girlfriend, and my one-time crush, and get on the waiting list for a table for seven. But even though Starling is as beautiful as she ever was, when I glance her way, I only feel friendship and gratitude that she's happy with my cousin.

She's Christian's person, after all, and Macy is mine and all is finally as it should be. Despite the loss of my boat and my phone, I'm the happiest I've been in years.

I barely feel the nip in the early winter breeze as we settle at the outdoor picnic tables to wait for our party to be called, and Drew steps away to call Tatum and tell her not to rush to get out of the house. The hostess assured us it would be at least twenty minutes before we could be seated.

But we *can* use the bathrooms and after making sure Pippa Jane is content in the small fenced-in area in front of the restaurant—a feature that makes The Fat Rooster a favorite of dog and more exotic pet-owners alike—Macy and I make the most of them. Thankfully, my toothbrush and deodorant survived my plunge into the floodwater last night, and I emerge from the small men's room feeling much more fit for polite company.

Macy, as always, looks beautiful, even in her pajama pants and an old sweatshirt with her hair pulled up into a bouncy ponytail.

She greets me as I emerge from the restaurant with a big smile and reaches for my hand, “Look,” she says, pointing toward the enclosure, where Pippa Jane is now leading Christian’s de-scented skunk, Bella, around the area in what looks like a game of follow-the-leader. “She made a friend.”

“Well, of course, she did,” I say, squeezing Macy’s hand. “She’s a sweetheart. And a natural leader.”

Macy laughs. “She is. But she would kill me if I tried to put a pink ribbon around her neck like Bella’s.” She makes a soft cooing sound. “But oh, it’s so cute. Don’t you think Pip would look adorbs in a big fluffy ribbon?”

“Adorbs,” I agree, making Macy snort. “But not pink. I think blue is her color.”

“Or yellow,” Macy says, cocking her head. “Maybe yellow and blue stripes?”

“Perfect. I’ll start looking for one online as soon as I get a new phone.”

We settle on a bench and Macy leans her head on my shoulder, “Sorry about your phone. I can buy you a new one. Since it was my fault that you were out in the flood in the first place.”

“You’ll do no such thing,” I say, wrapping my hand around her thigh just above her knee. “I’ll take care of it on Monday. And maybe look into what they have available for mobile hotspots, since I’ll need reliable internet while we’re on the road.”

“I can help with that,” she says. “I’ve had one for years, but let’s not pull the trigger on anything yet. We should do some planning and talking first, see how we really want the next few years to play out.”

“Sounds good,” I say, not worried about that conversation at all.

As long as we’re together, I don’t have many other preferences. Though I would like to avoid taking an RV anywhere near the Artic Circle. I’ve watched too many

vampire movies set up there and have a real aversion to freezing to death.

As far as whatever other adventures Macy has in mind, however, I say, bring it on, though I'm sure some of my family members will think I'm crazy. They're already giving my cousin Matty shit for wanting to live in a van while he drives through Mexico into Central America, and he's always been a less traditional person than yours truly.

But that's fine. I can handle my family's game of twenty questions. I feel like I can handle anything right now.

I'm so busy basking in the happy glow of being close to Macy again—and out of danger—and watching the animals play, that I don't see the pickup truck pull up.

I do, however, immediately sense Macy tense beside me.

I shift my attention her way to see her usually pink cheeks have gone white and follow her gaze to the faded blue Ford maneuvering into the last parking spot in the gravel lot. The driver moves slowly, cautiously, in tiny fits and starts that give me anxiety even before I see the head of curly salt-and-pepper hair visible through the back glass.

Macy's mom isn't an attractive woman—she frowns too much for that—but she has a pretty amazing head of hair. When we were younger, Macy bemoaned getting her dad's straight, glossy brown locks instead of her mother's curls.

I don't know how she feels about that now, but one look at her face makes it clear she and her mother are probably on even worse terms than they were when she left.

I turn on the bench and murmur beneath my breath, "You want me to cover you while you go hide in the bathroom? Maybe they'll leave once they realize there's a waiting list."

Macy shakes her head slightly, her haunted gaze still fixed on the Ford as the engine shuts off. "No, it's okay. If I'm going to stay in Bad Dog, this has to happen sooner or later. Might as well get it out of the way now."

I frown, but before I can ask what she means about staying in Bad Dog—surely it won't take more than a month or two to

get ready to leave, and we can avoid her parents until then, if she wants to—she’s on her feet, crossing to meet the couple mincing their way across the gravel lot like they’re traversing a field of ice. Everything about Macy’s parents screams “the world is a scary place and we’re mad and sad about it.” The way they drive, the way they move, the way their eyes narrow in suspicion for a beat at the girl approaching them before they realize who she is, and their suspicion is replaced by a different kind of fear.

Fear of their own daughter...

It breaks my heart nearly as much as the fact that they didn’t seem to recognize her at first. Time hasn’t touched Macy. Aside from slightly longer hair and the hint of smile lines at the edges of her eyes, she looks the same as she did before, just...happier.

Or, at least, she did look happier.

Until she started talking to those two.

I have no idea what words they exchange at first, but by the time I get to Macy’s side to offer moral support, her dad is saying, “Well, that’s good you got out. But you shouldn’t have been at that cabin in the first place. Ain’t safe for a girl alone.”

“I’ve spent most of my adult life traveling alone, Dad, I can handle it,” Macy says, contradicting him with as much kindness as someone possibly could.

But her father clearly doesn’t like it. His gaze hardens and his expression becomes even more guarded than it was before. “Well, that’s your choice, I guess. Nothing I can do about it.”

“Nothing we could say, either,” her mom pipes up, the words pinched from her tightly pursed lips. “Never would listen. Not even when you were a little girl. Always had to go your own way, even when it led to nothing but trouble and sin.”

“I wasn’t sinning at Uncle Clint’s cabin, Mom,” Macy says, tightness creeping into her tone. “I was just hanging out with my pet pig in front of the fire and hoping the storm would

pass. And then Theo came to try to save us, like the amazing person he is.”

Her mother’s gaze darts my way with a judgmental sniff. “Well, guess that’s between you and God.” Glancing back at her husband, she says, “Let’s go somewhere else for eggs, Bill. It’s too busy here. And loud.”

Bill grunts and turns back toward the truck, summoning a wounded sound from the back of Macy’s throat.

“That’s it?” she says, the pain in her voice stinging against my skin. “You haven’t seen me in fifteen years or talked to me in five, and that’s it? I’m your only daughter, and I could have died last night in that flood. Doesn’t that feel like a sign to you? A sign that we should put all this anger and misunderstanding behind us and try to love each other, at least a little bit? I might not always understand you guys or agree with you, but I care about you and want the best for you. If you want the same for me, then I know we can find common ground.”

Bill hesitates. He looks like he’s about to turn back when Macy’s mom takes his elbow and says, “Maybe we can try Jenny’s Bakehouse. They don’t tend to be as crowded and you always like their bran muffins.”

He grunts and after another beat of hesitation, nods. “Corn ones are good, too,” he says as they walk away, headed back to their truck without another word for their daughter, this incredible, brave, kind woman they have never given the credit she’s due.

I turn to Macy, my throat aching at the tears shining her eyes. “I’m so sorry.”

She shakes her head, her jaw clenching beneath the skin. “Don’t be. I should have known better. They’ve shown me who they are again and again. It’s past time I believed them.”

“If it’s any comfort, I think your dad wanted this to end differently,” I say, resting a hand on her back. “I think he wanted to stay and talk things through.”

She swallows. “But he didn’t. He chose Mom, the way he always has, because that’s how she works. It’s her way or the highway, and he’s been doing things her way for forty years. He’s never going to change. *We’re* never going to change. And I...” She steps away from my touch with a tight shake of her head. “I can’t do this, Theo. I can’t live here knowing my parents are on the other side of town, asking their church to pray for their piece of shit daughter every week.”

I frown, but assure her, “You don’t have to live here. We already decided. We’re going to leave. Together.”

“But you have all this,” she says, backing away as she motions toward the diner and my family at the picnic tables behind us. “You have good people in your life, a great job, a place in the world where you’re wanted and important.”

“And none of that is going to change because I go on the road with you. My family is always going to be there for me, even if I’m far away,” I say, taking a step forward only for her to counter with another quick step back. I lift my hands in surrender, hoping the gesture will help her remember that I’m not the enemy. “Please, Macy. I can imagine how hard it is to be estranged from your parents, but don’t let their bullshit ruin this for us. We’re still good and with a little time, we can be better than good. We can be great. We can be everything. The dream. I know that and, deep down, you know it, too.”

Tears fill her eyes. “But I’m not your only shot, Theo. You don’t have to give up your support system and your home for a chance at love. There are so many women who would be overjoyed to live here in this community with you, women without baggage or shitty families who hate them.”

“They don’t hate you, baby,” I say, my heart breaking to see her in so much pain. “They just don’t understand you, and they’re scared.”

“Of what?” she asks with a strained laugh. “I’m their daughter, not a criminal. And growing up, I was just a kid trying to do what felt right for me. I was never trying to be bad. I wasn’t even defiant. I just wasn’t who they wanted me to be.”

“Well, you’re exactly who I want you to be,” I say. “And I’m not going to be making a sacrifice leaving Bad Dog. The thought of living in an RV and exploring the country with you for a few years sounds amazing. You’re not the only one who loves adventure, you know.”

“But what if it’s not just a few years?” she asks, sniffing as she clearly makes an effort to pull herself together. “What if I never want to settle down? What if I want to be a rolling stone forever?”

I hesitate for a fraction of a second, but quickly decide, “I could handle that, I guess. If that really feels like the only way for you. But I think that’s something we should take day by day and not make any decisions about yet. There are great towns in the area other than this one. We could find one that feels right to us someday, and I could visit family by myself. You’d never have to set foot in Bad Dog again if you didn’t want to.”

“And what about kids?” she asks. “What if I don’t want them?”

I balk a little at that. I can’t help it.

I’ve always assumed I’d be a father someday. It was a part of my future that I took for granted even though I’ve yet to find a partner. I just had faith that it would all sort itself out, and I’d eventually get to be the kind of dad who showered his kids with all the love my father never had the chance to give to me.

But then again, the thought of having kids with anyone but Macy feels hollow.

Wrong.

I’m about to tell her so when she cuts in, “See? It’s just like last time. Love can’t solve all our problems or make up for all our differences. And it can’t make it okay for me to hurt you when you’re the one person I never ever want to hurt again.” Tears spill down her cheeks. “And this is the part where I would get in my van and run away, but I don’t have a van and can’t run. So, you’ll just have to settle for watching

me grab my pig and slowly walk down the road, back to that Red Cross tent they set up for flood victims a mile or so back.”

My forehead furrows as I fight my own tears. “Macy, please. Just stay. Have some breakfast and get some rest, then we can talk more about all this. You’ve just been through a traumatic natural disaster and barely slept last night. Now isn’t the time to make any big decisions.”

She swipes at her cheeks, her lips turning down at the edges. “I know, but I can’t help it. When I know something’s wrong, I have to stop doing it. Right that very second. Even if the timing is shit. You know that about me.”

My shoulders sag as I admit, “I do. And I love that about you.” I pull in a breath, willing her to see how much I need her to stay. “I love *you*. More than safety or familiar things or the dream of having kids. Because that’s all they are right now, Mace, just a dream. And they’re a dream I could let go of if having a family isn’t a dream you share.”

Her brow wrinkles. “But you’d resent me for it. Maybe not today or tomorrow or next year, but eventually.”

“So, now you can not only read my mind, but the future, too?” I step in again, hope blooming in my chest when she lets me get closer without flitting away. “I don’t even know what I’m going to want next year. And you know me well enough to know I don’t lie. Not even to make the people I love happy. That’s why I couldn’t promise to come with you fifteen years ago.” I reach out, twining my fingers gently, tentatively through hers. “But now, I can. I can promise it’s what I want, and that I’m never going to regret taking this chance. Not ever.”

“Even if we can’t make it work for the long haul?” she whispers.

I nod. “Even then. I don’t want to be with you because I think it would be cool to be married in five years, Macy. Or to grow old with someone in thirty. I want to be with you because I want to wake up every morning and choose *you* in every way that matters. I want to love you and laugh with you and hike

and talk and fight and make up with you and maybe learn how to rock climb while I'm at it."

"I know how," she says, still in that soft voice, the one that makes me hope I'm getting through to her. "I could teach you."

"I'd love that," I say. "And I'll treasure every minute of whatever time we get to call ours. Whether that's a month, a year, or the rest of our lives. No regrets."

Her lashes flutter, sending fresh tears down her cheeks. "That's the most beautiful thing anyone has ever said to me."

"Meant every word," I say, tightening my grip on her hand. "Besides, I've gotten very attached to Pippa Jane in a short amount of time. And I think she likes me, too. It would be a shame to end our budding friendship now."

Her lips twitch. "She does like you more than any other guy she's ever met."

"She's got good taste," I tease.

"She does." Macy steps closer, tipping her head back to keep her eyes locked on mine. "And she can probably tell her mom is crazy about you. Being with you makes me happy. Even in the middle of the storm."

Bringing my lips closer to hers, I whisper, "I'd rather weather a storm with you than share a sunny day with anyone else."

She sighs. "That was the perfect thing to say."

"It was the true thing."

"I know. Thank you."

I draw back to study her face. "For what? For reassuring you when you needed it? Because if so, no thanks needed. I know you'd do the same for me."

"I would," she says. "I promise. Because I want that, too. What you want. I just want to make the most of every day that we get to spend together. And whether it's sunny or not, I'm going to be grateful for every one of them."

“Ditto.” I nod over my shoulder. “So...should we go eat some eggs, get Christian to drop me at my truck near the boat launch, and head back to my place to rest up and plan? I have a guest room with Pippa Jane’s name on it and a fenced in backyard that could have a mud pit in it by morning.”

She smiles. “She won’t need a mud pit to stay cool until summer, but she’s going to love that guest room. Especially if we can stop by the pet supply store and pick up some stuffed animal toys. She likes to tuck her toys into bed before she goes to sleep and almost all of them were in the van when it was swept away.”

“Done,” I say. “I’m going to spoil her rotten. She deserves it after what’s she been through, and so do you. I hope you’ll let me take you shopping later to replace your clothes and shoes and anything else you need.”

“I have my own money, Theo,” she says as we link hands, starting back toward the picnic tables. “I can replace my own things.”

“I know, but maybe I want to help. Maybe I think it’s time you had someone taking care of you for once, instead of always having to do everything by yourself.”

“I heard that, and I agree,” Christian says, lifting his cell into the air with a sympathetic expression. “They found your van downstream wrapped around part of a flooded overpass. I’m sorry. Someone just posted a pic on social media, said how sad it was such a sweet ride had to end that way.”

“Yeah, it is.” Macy pulls in a deep breath and exhales slowly. “But Bessy taught me so much, and I’ll use every bit of that knowledge to build an even better home on wheels.” She glances up at me with a soft smile. “This time with room for two.”

Starling lets out a happy squeal. “Oh yay! I was hoping you’d say that. You guys have the best energy together. I was just telling Christian that if you didn’t realize you were meant to be, we should find a way to get you locked up in a cabin together again for a few days until you come to your senses.”

Macy laughs. “No, thank you. I’m done with cabins. And vans, too. I say we go for a converted school bus this time around.”

“That sounds cool as hell,” I say, “but it might take a few months to pull that off. Can you handle sticking around this small town for that long?”

She nods. “Yeah, I can. As long as I’ve got you beside me.”

“Just try to shake me,” I say, pulling her in for a hug, while my family makes approving noises all around.

And then our name is called—McGuire party of seven—and we head inside to make more approving noises over our delicious breakfast, followed by yet more approving noises from Pippa later that day, after my successful run to the pet store for toys.

But the best approving noises are the ones that come from Macy when I’ve got her back in my bed for the night.

And hopefully, every night after.



We keep the positive momentum going through November and on into the rest of the holiday season, starting work on our school bus in mid-December, just as the snow is about to fall.

We move our build into an empty airline hangar at the tiny regional airport nearby, where yet another of my many cousins works, and keep plugging away on our camper conversion until spring, through the birth of Drew’s second beautiful daughter, Christian and Starling’s engagement announcement, and so many other wild and wonderful family events too numerous to count.

I appreciate each one all the more for knowing soon I’ll get the family news from a group text or pictures shared on social media.

I love them all, but I'm ready to see the world with my girl, my person.

My Macy.

When that sunny spring morning finally dawns, and we're ready to hand the keys to my house over to my new tenants and hit the road, I don't feel a shred of regret.

In fact, sitting in my co-pilot chair with a very happy pig on my lap, watching Bad Dog roll by as Macy steers us west toward our first stop in Sioux Falls, I feel like the luckiest man in the world.

"Still no regrets?" Macy asks, turning to arch a brow my way as she rolls to a stop at the last stop sign at the edge of town.

I shake my head. "Not a single one. Drive on, woman. Let's see what the world has to teach us."

Her gaze softens. "Yes. Let's."

We do, and it's better than I dreamed it could be. Because around every bend, she's right there with me, the girl I never could learn to live without.

And now, I don't have to.

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And please accept Lili's heartfelt thanks for all your support during this trying time for her and her family. Your kindness is inspirational and beautiful.

Basically, you're cuter than a pig in a blue-and-yellow ribbon and she loves you. xo!

About the Author

Author of over forty novels, *USA Today* Bestseller **Lili Valente** writes everything from steamy suspense to laugh-out-loud romantic comedies. A die-hard romantic, she can't resist a story where love wins big. Because love should always win. She lives in Vermont with her two big-hearted boy children and a dog named Pippa Jane.

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