



Stranger

STARLIGHT MOUNTAIN SAVIORS

TARIN LEX

Granger

“Starlight Mountain Saviors”

Book 1

Tarin Lex

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Epilogue

One

Gal

Starlight, Montana.

I'm not sure why I chose this place. I've never been here before. As far as I know Brielle had never come here either. Something about it just felt right.

After I get settled in my cabin—my home away from home for the next four days—I step outside, down the porch steps and fill up my lungs with fresh, spring air. I pop a Sno-Cap into my mouth. Everything that can be enjoyed, can be enjoyed even more with chocolate. The view before me seems to stretch on forever. I can't see where the valley ends, only that eventually there are mountains that appear stacked, one on top of the other, as far as the eye can see. There's a river or a stream nearby, I can hear it, the sounds of the water also endless.

God, Brielle would love it here. Right here. Adventure beckoning. And she was always up for an adventure. I am too, but she took it to a whole other level, it's like she *enjoyed* discomfort. I actually thought she was invincible and maybe she did too.

I set out on a hike to get my bearings. I try not to think about Bri. I do anyway. I swear I feel her right next to me. I don't always, but out here, it's impossible not to.

It's been a year. It happened in Utah. A base jumper spun out of control and hit the side of a cliff, his parachute snagging on a ledge, and as he dangled, Brielle free-climbed up the rockface to get to him. She freed his parachute, disentangling him and then only one of them made the bare climb back down. I wasn't there. I wish I was. I would have tried to stop her. She wouldn't have listened.

The wind whispers past my face, cool, and warm, at the same time. *Stop that*, it's like it says. I know, I'm dwelling. I've been dwelling inside myself, in my feelings, and very few of them warm and fuzzy-like, for the last year. *Connect to earth*, I hear the wind whisper. Or is that Brielle or is it my own imagination?

The ground is becoming a bit sloshy and uneven as I make my way toward the river, which I can see now. It's narrow, long, loud, and unruly. I take off my shoes and socks. I try 'grounding' like Brielle always talked about was so good for you. The landscape ahead looks so soft, all rolling sun-kissed hills in varying shades of green and gold, but up close, in the wet earth right where I'm stepping, there's twigs and pinecones and spiky Sweet Gum balls that would absolutely *kill* if I stepped on one. (Not to mention creepy crawlies!) So I have to watch my step. But that's kind of like life, isn't it? It can seem so level in front of you, like an easy landing you've totally earned from where you've been, a future laid out before you that you could just sprint right into. Even when the very present moment feels unsettling, or even like torture. So I don't look out, where it's serene, inviting. I look down, here, *now*. I watch my step.

I guess I don't *have* to cross the river. I choose to. Holding my shoes with socks tucked into them, I step into it. I inhale sharply when my feet first hit the ice-cold water. I breathe out, getting used to it. I have to work a little against the current to cross the river in a straight line. It's not very wide. Maybe it is technically a stream? The rushing water starts to feel nice, ever flowing against my skin.

Almost reaching the other side, I don't know what possesses me to reach into my pocket for another Sno-Cap with my free hand at the same time I take another, big step and my bare foot slides across a rock that's so stunningly slick with moss that my breath punches from my stomach. Instinctively I hold up my shoes into the air as I feel myself falling. I swallow the chocolate without getting the chance to savor it, ugh. I brace my fall with my empty hand reaching toward a mess of sticks, twigs, and other forest detritus that lines the riverbend and *CLAMP!* A pain so sharp I almost immediately black out suddenly shackles my entire hand and shoots up my arm.

I cry out in pain.

I open my eyes to the thing that just trapped me in its strong-as-shit jaws, and it's...a trap. A literal trap. I cry out again. Fuck, it hurts!

And then I'm crying because what the hell am I supposed to do *now*? How do I get this thing off me?!

And then I'm crying for Brielle.

And then I'm crying because I'm crying. *Not helpful, Gal.*

No, I know. Get out of this. You have two hands. I chuck my shoes over into the dry grass that is literally *right there* yet might as well be Mars, how easy I can get to it in my current...predicament.

I pull on it with my other hand, futilely. I know nothing about traps. I try to wriggle my way out of it. Doesn't help. I consider just taking the whole damn thing with me, hand trapped and all, but it's tied down secure as shit. Who on *earth* put this here? What did they expect to trap? Something cute, furry, and maybe delicious?

When they find *me*—*if* they find me!—they are going to be sorely disappointed!

The pain becomes less and less intense and I realize the trap has cut off circulation in my hand and is crawling up my arm to do the same business there. Not good. That's not fucking good at all. It's crap *just* like this that has turned me more and more into a hermit over the last year.

I've been scared, so scared to venture out without her. Too willing to just mope around my apartment and do nothing except miss her. If Brielle wasn't actually invincible, what does that make *me*?

So a few weeks ago, Brielle's mom gave me her ashes, finally after all this time, believing I would find the best place to spread them—but I know what she was really trying to do is get me moving again, giving me a purpose. And it was working. Entrusting *me* with her daughter's ashes is such a Brielle thing to do. Like mother like daughter and all that.

God, how I miss her.

And there's something else. A deep yet nameless feeling. A longing, an ache. It's as if I can reach down into my lungs and touch it even though I have no idea what it really is. Like I'm missing something I never even had.

Oh Jesus, now I am losing my mind. I feel like I can breathe just fine but *obviously* I am lacking in oxygen in more places than just my hand! I look down at the fracking thing. I frown.

All of a sudden I remember, vaguely, someone somewhere explaining to us how to make a pulley system to get out of a trap. When the heck was that? *Help me out here, Bri-Bri!* How did that guy tell us to make the pulley? Probably with rope? Yeah, about that...

Wouldn't rope be *nice* right about now!

There's a sudden rumbling sound. It turns the inside pieces in my chest into earthquakes because it sounds like an animal. Hungry animal. A *big* one. Bigger than whatever this trap was meant for, probably. My knees, pretty much the only part of me I can still currently feel, start to buckle in panic as I miserably hold my trapped hand with my non-trapped one. The sound becomes louder as it gets closer and then the source comes into view and relief washes over me instantly.

A four-wheeler.

A *person*.

Help!

Two

Gal

“Help!” I think the word actually comes out of my mouth but I’m not really sure. “Help!” I cry out again for good measure even though the four-wheeler rider is literally getting off as we speak and starts walking toward me.

And I realize why I say it: maybe *this man* is the actual thing I need help *from*.

I swallow grit. Maybe the trap was meant for me. Well not me exactly. Who would know I was going to be out here? An unsuspecting woman lost in the woods. That’s what I am. Not me, not Gal. Currently I am nameless, faceless, *unsuspecting woman*.

And now I need rope for another thing: harness these spiraling thoughts I am having. They’re not helping.

The mystery man walking up is tall, dark, *stacked*. A thick, coarse beard. He’s wearing work jeans, mud boots that cover his shins, a black Grunt Style hoodie and camo baseball cap.

Looks the part.

“Hey! I’m stuck!”

“The fuck are you doing out here?” he chastises me. “Where’d you even come from—” but it all blows off of me with the warm wind as the man produces a long, thick, strong-looking rope.

A rope!

He stomps along the river a bit to lope one end around a nearby sturdy tree stump and then comes back to where I'm trapped in his trap, doing some fancy rope work with it. All folds and loops and knots that make my brain do the same thing as I watch him. No wonder Bri and I could never remember how to do that stuff.

"How'd you get stuck in my conibear set?" he says as he works to free me. *From a conibear trap, evidently.*

"I tripped."

A dark, thick eyebrow quirks. "What do you mean, you tripped?"

"What do you mean what do I mean?" Do I tell him I was reaching for a Sno-Cap chocolate candy when it happened? He chuckles a little. I make a sour face. "Rude," I hiss, quietly.

"Sorry, Slick." His hand, something warm and strong, wraps all the way around my arm as he starts to loosen the trap from around me, and that's when all the oxygen in my brain races straight *south*. Really, girlhood? This has got to take the cake for strangest circumstance to get turned-on in. "Good thing I was here, hmm?" the guy says.

"Is it," I deadpan. "Is it a good thing?" I raise my brow at him in suspicion.

His chuckle is deep. "I have only good intentions here. Scout's honor." I blow my hair out of my face. The rescuer pauses to look at me. His eyes, so dark, are momentarily possessed by a flash of an even darker shadow blazing across

them. And then it's gone. I gulp a swallow as the tension makes the air thick between us. Is he turned-on, too?

Oh yeah right, good one, Gal. You're a *sight*, that's for dang sure.

Click, I hear. I look down. My eyes immediately bounce back up to his face, my mouth hinging. I pull my arm back.

I am released!

First thing I do is I go grab my shoes.

"Come with me," he calls over to me, kindly. "I can patch up your hand."

"Uh, no," I mutter. Even as my inner thighs become slick with the suggestion and all the lewd thoughts it sends into the part of my brain that is all of a sudden a *very bad girl*.

Saddling up into the four-wheeler, he holds up a three-finger salute. "Good intentions, Slick."

I pause in my tracks. My heart palpitates. Did he just hear me think the word "slick"? No, of course he didn't, that's ridiculous. I take another dry swallow. By the time I ask, "You nicknamed me?" my bare feet have already led me right up to his four-wheeler, and looking at him face to face.

"Yeah guess I just did. Don't know why, I just took you for a city slicker and the name Slick came out." He shrugs his big, strong-looking shoulders.

I give him a pointed look. "Were you even a Scout?"

"Close enough." For a second, his grin, even with the beard, makes me imagine what he once looked like as a young boy. I bet he was cute. Playful. Precocious.

I huff out a breath of pretend annoyance. “I’m not a *city slicker*. I’ve just never been”—I take a glance all around —“*here* before.”

“Caught in one of my traps.” He issues a smirk that renders me boneless. “Least let me walk you back to your cabin.”

“Walk? But what about your four-wheeler.” I look down at it, as if he needs that indication.

Those mysterious, midnight eyes of his go to my curves, and ever so slowly, find their way back up to my face. “Won’t fit us both, lest you want to sit real close.” And then my own eyes go to his lap.

I immediately picture my ass all squished up in the general area of his denim-clad lap...and I’m not gonna lie, I don’t hate the mental image.

He gets off the thing. Gives it a tap, as if to say to it, ‘*Stay here, girl.*’ He gives a nod. “I’ll come back for it after I get you home safe.”

“About that,” I say as we begin to walk. “How’d you know I was in a cabin?”

“What else is there out here?”

I shrug a shoulder. “Good point. What are you trapping anyway?” I ask, because evidently, I have now decided to kill him with questions.

“That particular one was meant for a river otter.”

“Oh my god, not to kill one, right? A cute, sweet river otter, how could you!”

He laughs. “Not a city slicker, eh?” Shakes his head. Clearly, I amuse him. “Anyhow, river otters ain’t *sweet*.”

“Why, what did they ever do to you?”

“Not to me... Maybe I’ll show you sometime,” he says. So, does that mean he wants to see me again? “Anyhow, what’s your real name, Slick?”

“Gal. You?”

“Granger.”

“Another G,” I say, intelligently. Granger looks at me sidelong. “Gal. Granger,” I iterate. “G names.”

He cracks a smirk, and I can tell that it’s in spite of himself. Which is kinda frickin’ cute. “Why’re you barefoot?” Granger asks.

“I was grounding.”

“Grounding?” He rounds up one of those dark eyebrows that only adds to this air of intensity he has. But somehow, I get the feeling, he’s all squishy and warm inside.

“Yeah, it’s like, to help get yourself connected back to the earth. To be present.” I wait with bated breath for him to ridicule me—how would he understand? I bet this man has never felt *disconnected* from earth.

“I reckon that makes sense,” he surprisingly says. “But then you have to carry your shoes.”

“Yeah...” I say, stretching out the word because *duh*. He makes a twisty face like I just said the grossest thing ever. I gasp my next inhale. “Oh my *god!*” I whisper-shout. (Okay I just shout it, but I do *try* to whisper.)

“What?” Granger asks.

“You’re not just any mountain man, you’re a *germaphobe* mountain man!”

He exhales another of his lighthearted laughs. “Yeah, and you’re a pain in my ass, Slick.”

Looking straight ahead, I smile, satisfied. *Slick*. Why do I love that?

Now seems like an excellent time to reach for a Sno-Cap. Granger immediately throws me a look. “What?” I ask.

“What’re you eating?”

“You’ve never seen a Sno-Cap before?”

“Course I have.” He pulls a face. “At the movies.”

I munch on another one—and by one I mean handful, of ten. “Want one?”

“No, thank you.” He waves *no* at me with his hand. Okay, weirdo. We walk a little bit more, now with some quiet. It’s nice but it’s not. I’m all out of questions and he was just so judgy.

I’ll tell you what though, Granger smells glorious. Like a campfire and Irish soap. Every time the breeze goes through us I get a hint and breathe it in deep. Goes good with chocolate.

“I can’t believe you don’t like Sno-Caps,” gah! I can’t even stop myself from saying it.

“I don’t not like Sno-Caps. I said I—” But the explanation dies on his tongue as he snorts out an irritated breath from his nostrils, clearly frustrated by me. It’s utterly adorable.

And then, there is the cabin. Granger says something about he knows the old guy who owns it. Which makes senses. Small town. We stop. I look up at him. There's that clean campfire scent again. "Do you...um..." Very nice, Gal. Real eloquent. That'll hook him.

Wait—I'm trying to hook him? *Apparently so.*

I slowly tick my gaze over toward the front door of the cabin, drawing his gaze toward it, too.

"I had better not," Granger says, intuitively. Oh look at that, I don't even have to hit on him to get shot down. Isn't that swell.

"Okay, well. Goodnight, Granger!" Too cheerful, Gal. Too much.

He gingerly looks up at the sun. Like right at the sun. Like a dingus. His soulful, deep gaze falls on me, and I could swim in it. "Goodnight." He smirks. I turn away from him. Quickly.

I make for the door, inwardly berating myself the whole way to it. Well that was productive.

Night-schmite. *Get thee to bed, Gal—before you hurt yourself.* Again!

Three

Granger

I barely slept last night thanks to the persistent hard-on keeping me awake. Thanks to *Gal*. Where did she come from and why is she here? Not just to keep me awake although she's doing a damn fine job of that already. Those lush curves, the long dark hair and her sweet, creamy-skinned heart-shaped face are branded in my head. I was a gentleman toward her yesterday. But I can't remember being so ferociously horny since I was a teenager.

I didn't ask for her last name or how long she would be in town. I could procure that information easy, but part of me doesn't want to know more than what she said. The part of me that knows that getting attached leads to that very same attachment breaking from you eventually and taking off chunks of you along with it. Pain. It all leads to pain.

Pain is the cost of love.

I get ready to head out for the day. I take a look back at my house, my dream come true. I think back to when I first brought the realtor here to see it. We pulled up to the property, I drove of course, and after I parked and got out I opened up the bed of my truck and got out my fishing rod. The realtor looked at me funny. She asked me, "What are you doing?" I said, "I'm gonna see if there are any fish in those ponds."

"Don't you want to see the house?"

I told her, not really, it looks like a nice house. Said that if I can catch five or ten bass in the next half hour, I'll buy the whole property.

Lo and behold, I did. I caught twelve bass that day that probably weighed two to four pounds each.

It was a respite from at least some measure of the pain I'd been enduring. The cost I'd been paying for the love I had had and lost.

Then came the otters. Fuckers wanted to drag me right back down into the trenches. My dream plot of land quickly became a straight-up nightmare. Few weeks in to living here, I saw something swimming in the ponds, and thinking they were muskrats, didn't think much about it. My neighbor who I had just recently met, man named Rooker who has two adjoining ponds told me he had been out walking along the bank of a pond when he found skeletons of fish everywhere! When I went out and looked, there were literally hundreds of fish skeletons, mainly catfish and a lot of bass. We soon noticed that all of our hand-fed catfish were completely gone.

Truth is river otters may look cute but they actually kill more than they eat, not to mention their violent mating rituals. Male otters will even hold pups ransom to force their mothers to give up some of their food. It'd be the human equivalent of going to a grocery store parking lot, finding a woman coming out the store with a small child, and holding a gun to the kid's head until the mom gives you some of her food.

It's fucked up!

It feels fucked up just saying it but that's exactly what they have been known to do.

So, Rook and I set out some traps in the water to help rid the pond of the varmints. During the winter the otters come up through holes in the ice, then would dive down and catch fish and toss them on top of the ice.

The fuckers don't just kill what they eat, they kill fish just to be killing. They kill three to four times more than they eat and absolutely decimate the fish population!

I didn't tell all this to Gal. Least the traps help keep them at bay. I still love this land so much. I built up some of it, made it my own. It's my paradise. But, otters saga aside, it's been missing something. Been missing other people's voices. Been missing warm bodies that aren't my own. It gets fucking lonely here.

Anyhow, forget about the fucking otters, they are easy to forget. Even as I get my day started I can't stop thinking about Gal. These images of her are so pervasive. Relentless. Not sure how she got this hold on me. But I'm sure as shit held. I didn't go in with her after I dropped her off, she didn't technically invite me in, but now, I don't think I can stay away. I don't think I *want* to be able to stay away.

I should check on her hand, make sure she's okay. That was some ordeal yesterday. Thank God or the heavens or fate, or just thank fuck I went to check on the traps when I did.

When I pass by her cabin rental, she ain't there. *What's she up to?*

I try to just push wondering about her out of my mind and I know the best way is good old-fashioned exercise. It's what I left the house today to do anyhow. Staying mentally and physically in shape never used to be that important to me but

now I enjoy it to an almost obsessive degree. Or at least some people would say obsessive.

But when my dad died, it'd been a wake-up call. I lost him and then I lost the extra weight I'd been carrying almost my entire life. I couldn't make Dad's same mistakes; he'd made them for me. Before he passed, I had been "the fat kid" for as long as I can remember, hell even into my twenties. I was certainly okay with letting go of that part of me.

I park my truck and jog past a hidden gem of a rock-climbing area here in the Starlight Mountain region of Montana, just a short ways outside of Glacier National Park. This part of the country is heaven on Earth. Some days, it doesn't even look real.

God, my dad would have loved this place. Would have loved the land I bought. My home. Would have some more dreams of his own.

I peer up at the side of the mountain, noticing a long dark braid swishing back and forth in the wind that I know is even stronger way up there. Is that a woman? My jog slows to a stop. I look down below her for a belayer, but spot no one. The hell is she doing way up there, alone?

Gal.

I look up again, crossing toward her in a full sprint. She isn't going any higher. Dammit, her hand. It's got to be *kill*ing.

If she's stuck up there, I want her to know to just hang on, I'm coming up. But I don't want to yell up and distract or disorient her if she's struggling. That could make it much worse.

So I just start climbing.

I hear her sobs as I get closer. Gal finally senses me or hears me and she slowly peers over her shoulder at me, the wind whipping up strands of her hair and getting in her eyes. “Granger?” she says, her voice quiet and strained. “Is that really you Granger?”

“It’s me. I’m going to help you with your clips. Okay?”

“I can’t reach that one.” She looks over to where I’m already heading. “Wait, Granger, you’re not clipped in!”

“I know, and you’re as good as not clipped in either, if you can’t reach it. So just let me help you.”

“Granger...” she protests, weakly. “You’re not wearing the right shoes for this.”

I grab for the clip and side-climb it over to her. I don’t think about how difficult this is right now. I don’t even really feel how difficult this is, and it ain’t due to my own efforts. It’s because of her. In this moment, Gal is my *reason*.

“Rescued two days in a row?” I tease, wishing I hadn’t decided to speak because I’m pretty dang winded. We slowly start to make our way back down this godforsaken mountain, clip by clip.

“I’m not rescued *yet*,” Gal replies, smartassly. I can’t help but grin. I’m afraid to even look at her hand yet but it’s good to know she’s still got her sarcasm intact.

“Been thinking about that grounding stuff you talked about,” I say, making small talk so the efforts we’re making and the risks we’re taking don’t feel so huge.

“Yeah? I actually think it may be bullshit.”

I can't tell if she's kidding. “Being in the moment? That ain't bullshit.”

“Why should I anyways?”

I chance a look over at her. Gal's face is sheer determination and focus. And it's sexy as fuck. “Your entire life happens in the present moment.”

“What if the present moment sucks?” she challenges me.

“Sometimes it does,” I admit. “But it doesn't always.”

There's a beat of quiet. Just the wind. The clips. Our hands and feet. Small, careful shuffling. Gal pauses to catch her breath. So I stop, too. “Does this moment suck for you, Granger?”

I just smile. “No, it doesn't suck, Slick.”

When we get to the bottom, I look anywhere but up. Then I take off my shoes.

“What are you doing?”

“Grounding.” I toss her a wink. “I think now I really do get it.” I finally look up at the rockface where we just were. I swallow a pumpkin down my throat. I look down at my feet planted safely to earth.

Gal releases a big sigh. She takes off her shoes, too. There's a nice silence as we both just breathe.

“What are you really doing out here?” I eventually say. “Why are you like, *looking* for death?” It comes out more accusing than I mean for it to.

That's when Gal tells me about her best friend who died last year and she realized she needs to not be afraid to live. Her words send in a fresh pang of familiarity right to my chest.

"I lost someone too." But I don't go into detail. We let another long silence sit with us.

"I looked it up," Gal chimes. I look over at her. "River otters and what they...do."

"Yeah, what'd you think?" I ask.

"Think you need more traps."

I laugh.

"Your hand," she says observantly. Hers doesn't look so bad after all, considering, but where I must have scraped mine all to hell against the rock, it absolutely kills. I turn my fingers inward to my palm. Pain throbs through it from just above my wrist to the tips of my fingers. "We really do need to patch that up."

"You have supplies?"

"Don't think so. Do you?"

"I'm sure I do."

"I'm sure you do too." Gal smiles. Before we head out, Gal stops to just look up one more time. "I really wanted to get to the top."

Before I know what I'm doing, I reach for her, and when she yields into my touch, I drop my arms around her and draw her whole body to me. She looks up at me, her chocolate eyes finding mine. My eyes fall to her lips. I lean down to give her a quick, soft kiss.

We don't speak of it. We start walking toward my truck. I keep her against my side. She fits there. I glance back over my shoulder, at the mountain. Well guess there goes my exercise but I wouldn't mind getting in a little more exercise some other way.

Four

Gal

Holy shit, that was a kiss. Actually it wasn't much of a kiss at all, just a little gingerly peck, a whisper, really. But it was enough to make me want *a kiss*.

We get to Granger's house, and I am floored. It's a gorgeous cabin, straight out of a Montana mountain living magazine. I don't even know Granger all that well, but somehow I know, it's so...*him*. There isn't a woman's touch in sight, which makes me both sad and happy at the same time. And it's spotless, of course.

I turn my gaze on him. "You *live* here?"

"You don't like it?"

"Sorry. Let me rephrase." I clear my throat. "You live *here*?"

He chuckles softly. "So you do like it?"

"Eh." I shrug halfheartedly. "It's a'ight. Where's your first-aid kit?"

Granger points me in the right direction and, after washing my hands *thoroughly*, I start to tend to his mangled hand.

"Make sure you get it clean." Granger winces. I make a joke about tiny infesties, I don't know why I do it, probably as a thank-you for saving my life. Twice. "That is so gross," Granger says flatly. Gah...he's cute.

“You know infesties isn’t really a word,” I say.

“Still. The image.” He shudders.

I do my very best to stifle a giggle. My *best* being not that good.

I get him good and wrapped up, although, touching him makes me want to touch him *more*. Unprofessional-like. When his hand is set, I find us sharing this intense, knowing look. Are his eyes smoldering? Uh, is he going to kiss me again? I lick my lips.

When nothing happens in the course of three seconds except for feelings of awkwardness crawling up my insides, I decide to just clear my throat. “So um, how’d you learn to rock climb like that?”

My heart still aches from watching him have to climb up to help me. And he really did *have* to. I felt horrible for putting him there and not to mention scared for him—it reminded me way too much of what happened to Brielle. What if Granger hadn’t made it back down, because of *me*? The thought tears not only my heart and not only two. It tears my soul into pieces. I can’t even think it.

Does this mean I’m falling for him? Oh, my gosh. What? Weird. This is so unlike me. I barely do relationships, let alone love. Let alone *soul mates*.

Now I know what that strange feeling was right before I first saw him. It was like my spirit could feel his spirit coming in close. Like it recognized him. His energy. *My twin flame*.

All those thoughts change on a dime.

Because now, Granger begins to tell me a story about rock climbing. He had a similar experience to what literally *just* happened to me. Only his experience is from a year ago. And he hadn't been rescued after climbing up. He'd been rescued after jumping *down*.

His parachute got caught on the rockface.

In Utah.

A young woman saw what had happened and sprang into action. Crawled right up the fucking mountain like she owned it. And saved his life.

And lost her own.

The pieces of Granger's story and mine all click together into a very, very dark image in my mind. Dark, but it's crystal clear. It's like my brain empties of everything else except what he is telling me now, what I am finding out. I look at him, blankly, even for long moments after he is finished telling it to me.

My phone buzzes. I didn't even realize I'd had my phone on me? I fish it out of my pocket and stare at the screen. Numbly.

Everything I do from here, I do it numbly.

He's the reason she's dead.

"I have to take this," I tell Granger. My voice sounds far away. Like it's coming to me from a memory.

He says something, I don't know what. I don't hear the individual words. It's like the world has been dunked

underwater and it's hard to move, hard to hear, impossible to speak.

This is why I don't do love, relationships, any of that. Soul mates, twin flames? Oh my *god*, what the hell was I even thinking? Love is sick, so sick.

It just deludes you.

I need to go home, the cabin will do for now. I need to return Bri's mom's call. They're who I need to be thinking of now. God, I still need to find a spot to spread her ashes. The whole reason I came here.

I'm so sorry, Bri. I'm so fucking sorry.

Five

Granger

The fuck just happened?

One moment we're talking and the next she's gone.

I've lost so much. I'm not about to let her slip away. Not without telling me why, first. And even then, I may not let her go.

I can't let her go. I'm already resolved. Selfishly resolved. Possessively so. She's all I can think about for the last two days. *She's mine*. I know it without a shadow of doubt and with every fiber of my being.

Two days? Damn. That isn't very long at all but somehow, it's all the time I've needed. Thirty-three years of never finding the right woman, and in two days, I know she's it.

I find her for a third time, not far from the spot where she got her arm fettered yesterday in my conibear. It's a beautiful view, all rolling green hills, and the sun setting behind Starlight Mountain painting it purple and blue. For the first time in my life I look at the sunset and think it looks like bruises smattered across the sky.

I am assuming Gal is there to spread her friend's ashes, but from a distance, I can see she hesitates. She hears me as I approach, I'm sure of it, but she lets me come all the way up to her. I sit down with her on the soft grass.

She doesn't say hi. I don't know what I did but I'm here to listen.

"She saved your life," Gal whispers all of a sudden, without looking at me. It dawns on me, the complete picture, the two stories intertwined, impossibly and devastatingly.

Bri is the young woman rock climber.

Gal's best friend saved my life.

"What are you doing with it?"

"Would it make you feel better to know?" I ask her.

"Maybe." She finally peers over at me, and part of me wishes she hadn't. Her eyes have a hardness to them that's already determined what she'll think of what I'll say. "Try me."

I do. I say the things anyway. I tell her all the good I'm doing...like keeping the otters from wreaking havoc. Keeping an eye on our community, our small mountain town that so many from outside want to exploit. I tell her about my closest buddies Rooker, and Devlin, and the others. The people we've helped; saved, even.

Gal's shoulders seem to sulk into herself. "Well. Now I feel like shit." She snuffles. "You're evidently a better person than me."

"Not true. But maybe now it's time for you to live, too."

She nods, not looking at me. The sun dips lower, burning orange and red against the outline of the mountain. "That's what everyone keeps telling me."

"I know the feeling, too, you know. I lost my dad."

“I’m so sorry.”

“I miss him, but a lot of good came of that. In a way he saved me. He saved me just the same as your friend Bri.”

“What...what do you mean?”

“He was always overweight, led to other health problems. I struggled with that too, for a long time. It always felt out of my control. Out of the realm of things I *wanted* to control. I no longer had a choice but to make some changes, whatever changes I could after he died to make sure it wasn’t in vain. To make sure I didn’t learn from some mistakes he’d already made for me.”

“Wait wait wait,” Gal says, lightening a little. “Are you telling me, you used to be fat?”

“Not sure that’d be my first word choice.” I give her a playful smirk.

“Why not?” And she huffs a breath. “I’m *still* fat.”

“You are not. You kidding me? You’re perfect.”

There’s a long, long quiet. Her voice comes out soft, tender. *Sweet*. “Granger. What did you just say?”

She heard me. And I fucking meant it, too, and she knows it.

I draw her into my arms and answer her question, officially, with a soft, slow kiss. A real one this time.

Her quiet moan slips into my mouth and I swallow the sound. Gal deepens the kiss, taking me by surprise. Dammit, I think I love this woman. The entire world around me spins in a dizzying circle. I hold her closer as my eyes fall shut and her

taste and scent and the feel of her curves in my hands takes
over my senses.

Mine. *Mine.*

I love her to death.

Six

Gal

You're perfect. It's way more than I needed to hear. All I ever needed, I suddenly realize, is *you're good enough.* Or just, *you're enough.* That'd be enough.

But perfect? It's such a high pedestal to be put on. But I know what he means, because Granger is perfect, too. Perfectly imperfect. *Perfect for me.*

And this moment? *Gah!* It's more than I ever wanted and all I ever want now. It doesn't take much convincing from Granger to know that he's a good man. A truly good man. The kind you only read about. And he wants me. The blazing, intense lust in his eyes says he wants *me.*

God, I want him too.

He doesn't lay me back so much as I hungrily pull him down on top of me. I've never done this before. Never had a man between my legs, writhing, pulsing. My hips bucking up eagerly against his. His mouth, open and hot against my neck, my throat. Heat...*everywhere.* Burning through parts of me I had long since seemed to forget about until I met Granger.

Now all I want is his touch, and his kiss, and his breath, and his words, and his fullness inside of me, *now.* My panties have all but melted off from the sodden heat collecting in them.

I push him off of me. “I want to see you.” I toy at his shirt, and he lifts his arms so I can take it off him. My hands go rogue with a mind of their own, running across every inch of bare skin I see, as if memorizing him. It’s official: Granger is the dead sexiest man on earth. I don’t care about deserving him. I don’t care about failing at perfect. I want him, badly, and I want him *bad*.

Granger just kneels there, letting me explore him, each of his muscles jumping as I stroke him. My curious fingers tiptoe lower, and when I get to the button of his jeans, he shackles my wrist.

“My turn,” he says huskily. “Let me see you.”

I sit up on my knees and kick off my shoes from behind me, then peel off my socks. “That good?”

“More,” he grunts, more than says, the word. Smiling sheepishly, I reach for my shirt, pulling at the hem and then lifting it over my head. Before I lose confidence I make really quick work of the rest, standing up just for a second to push down my pants and underwear, and then tossing my bra off to the side after he reaches around behind me and unsnaps it. What a gentleman!

And then I’m completely naked before him. “This isn’t fair,” I say, half playfully.

“Fuck, honey,” he burrs, as he cups himself over his pants. “Your body is *fire*.” My whole body is trembling under his gaze, even as he compliments me and heat scours up my neck and into my cheeks. “Look at me,” he says, reaching out to touch my face. “I mean it. I’m not just trying to get laid. You’re *breathtaking*, Gal.”

“Thank you,” I whisper. He may not be a full-on germaphobe, he is a mountain man after all, but does he really want to do this on the *ground*?

Granger takes my hand then, lowering it down and onto his bulge. *Okay, evidently so.* His voice is deep, dark gravel, “You made me so fucking hard just looking at you, babe.”

At his words, my lower belly rolls with need and desire and belief. Who knew turning him on would turn me on *so* fucking much? I look up in his hooded eyes. “Prove it,” I say bravely.

“Yes, dear.” He smirks, then dives into me, claiming my mouth and neck and then dragging his tongue down the hollow of my chest. My nipple hits wet warmth as he sucks it into his mouth. His hands are everywhere, kneading my other tit, feathering across my stomach, reaching around to grab my butt and bring me closer to him. Then his hands move between my thighs and I press them closed over it.

Granger’s lips move off my breast and descend toward my stomach, and then lower, as his hand drags up my inner thigh, relaxing my legs open for him. The tips of his two fingers part my swollen, sensitive lips. His tongue touches my lower belly, and then my mound, and then my clit, and my hips jerk up at the contact. His mouth and tongue caress me in ways I’ve only ever imagined. And even my imagination hasn’t been this good.

“More,” it’s my turn to say. “Please, Granger. Please don’t stop.”

He hums a reply, his finger moving in and out of my channel that’s constricting around him even as my juices drip

onto his mouth and chin and he laps it up needfully. The friction is perfect, languid and slick and full-feeling. And then it's almost too much. Granger is relentless. I become single-minded as a curl of heat begins in my belly and twists lower, until I'm certain that Granger can feel it.

Everything tightens and warms. The climax comes over me all at once, courses through every nerve in my body and I can't hold back my cries as waves of pleasure roll over me again and again until all that's left are tiny tremors shaking my core.

"Wow, I'm delirious," I admit breathlessly. "I've imagined that a million times but it's always only played out with my own hand."

"Now there's an image I would love to see." Granger pushes himself up from the ground and gets to his feet. He waggles his eyebrows at me, his gaze flickering down to my snatch, and I know the assignment. I reach down to stroke the place he just tended to, still wet and enflamed, and now distending all over again as my eyes go wide with wonder watching Granger unzip his pants and pull them down along with his boxers. My mouth hinges open. I just stare at his manhood, huge and erect, his hand reaching to encircle the big bulb on the end as if to ease some of the tension that's filling up inside it.

I blush as I realize my eyes are moons. "That's not even a cock," I tell him, pointedly. "It's a weapon."

"Ah...I don't want to hurt you, Gal." Says the guy with the ten-inch cock aimed at me. He gets back down in the earth

with me, crawling up over my legs, planting little kisses on the tops of my knees.

“Whatever,” I tell him, my voice low now that he’s all the way close again. “It’s like a heat-seeking missile.”

He chuckles warmly against my thighs. “Heat seeking, huh?” Then he goes for my pussy. He delivers a low, long lick up my slit, to my clit. He grins up at me. “Found my target,” he teases, sticking his tongue out for another slow assault on my puss. “Mmm...*Slick!*”

“Showoff.” I push him off me by his forehead. “You did this already. Let me have a turn.”

Granger rolls over almost instantly, granting me complete access to his body in this vulnerable state. I have no idea what I’m doing, proffering little kisses down his chest and abdomen, to the V of muscles that descend into a thatch of dark, thick hair. I even kiss him there, delighting in the way he sucks in a sharp breath when I do, and exhales a groan.

I get to the column standing at attention, licking and kissing up and down from root to slit before I press my mouth down around him, barely getting past the tip into my mouth while knowing full well that I am only prolonging the inevitable: *losing my V-card*. I toy a little with his balls and stroke my hand up and down the length to compensate. I can’t even suck him all the way in...how am I supposed to give him my V-card even if I really want him to have it?

Suddenly I hear Brielle’s voice in my head. Seriously—*now?* From the freaking grave she is able to tell me that it’s like, *so* sophomoric to call it a *V-card* but what else am I going to say about this? There are no better words for giving this part

of yourself, for the simultaneous giant loss and gain, so it's easier to just be silly.

Granger has no idea the thoughts I'm thinking, thank God. He reaches for the back of my head, gently coaxing me on. I gurgle a sound when he hits my gag reflex and he groans louder. I feel a new, sticky taste on my tongue that rushes from his tip and I pop his cock out of my pursed mouth.

"Is that..." I start, embarrassed and I don't really know why, "did you..."

"Not yet, honey." He smirks down at me, amused, and I realize it's only precum that's weeping from the hole. I lean back in, slowly and lick it up, and he growls out deeper in the throes of arousal. Really, that's hot? I do it again. He pulls my head off of him and flips me over. His member drags up along my body as he's prowling over me and all but throws my legs over his hips.

"Granger," I stutter. "I've never... Um—"

"I know, Slick."

"You know?" I ask. Feelings of insecurity rise up, fast. Making my heart work double-time. The feeling lodges in my throat.

"I felt you." He kisses me then, making it better. "*Tasted you*. Looked at you. So yeah, I know, I just don't fucking know *how*."

It makes me smile. I hold him to me. "Will you be my first?"

"That depends." Granger pretends to think about it. "Will you be my last?" I pretend not to die immediately.

“What?” I ask.

“Please,” he begs.

“Okay,” I answer.

We kiss and kiss, my earlier orgasm all but washed away and my body primed for another. Granger begins dragging his thickness up and down along my seam, teasing me, torturing me and himself in equal measure.

“You’re a masochist, sir,” I grumble.

“Mmmh. Look how pretty that is.” He peers down at our sexes rubbing slipperiness and heat together. “*Fuck*,” he hisses, and the breath releases from his nose, his nostrils flaring as he’s already having to hold himself back.

He pushes the tip in between my folds, and either his cock fills up even harder with blood, or I tighten like yokes around him. A long, rolling groan rumbles out of his wide chest as my pussy suctions around the head. What is it about that sound, about that sound grumbling as if uncontrolled out of this hot-as-sin man in heat, that turns me on at least ten times more?

Granger stares down at our gentle, tortuous movement. “God, that feels good. You look so hot, baby.” Then his cock probes a little bit more, and begins to deliver slow, careful pumps into my hole, opening me. My lips folding and opening as naturally as water washing stone over the thick, swollen head. “Just a little deeper, okay, sweetheart. Then we can stop.”

“No,” I simper. “No stopping. I want you to... More.”

“You want me to what?”

“I want you to come, Granger. I want to feel you come inside me.”

“*Fuck.*” He plunges deeper just like I asked for and my hands clutch into the earth. “God, your pussy.” And that’s all he has to say, and my pussy replies, further strangling and sluicing his hungry cock as it strokes inside my walls. Gaining confidence I reach around him, grabbing hold of his ass and pulling him to me.

Suddenly I can smell our sex. Like earth and milk and sandalwood. When he’s all the way seated inside me I feel his balls start to slap against my butt, and I can’t help the smile that runs away from my face.

“Does that feel good?” Granger murmurs.

“Yes,” I whisper, trying not to giggle.

“What’s up?” I can tell he’s amused.

“I can feel your balls...” I pause, then say, more quietly, “on my butt.”

He gnashes his lip, little amused still, lot turned-on.

One hand grabs hold of my hip, the other scopes underneath me to grip my ass, and then it’s not so funny anymore. He grinds into me harder, faster. Miraculously and gratefully my walls stretch to accommodate him as he drills ever deeper, *deeper* in my hole.

“You like how I feed your little pussy, baby?” Granger says, losing control of his rhythm and voice.

“Yes, oh my god. Oh, fuck.”

“That’s it, baby girl. Come on my dick.”

And that's it, just his invitation to come, his *desire* for me to come on him, and I feel that now-familiar throbbing heat all over my body, my senses. It spills into my mind and fills up my heart. My arms splay into the earth at my sides and my knees fall limply against his hips.

I see stars.

He gives me all of a three-second break to catch my breath before moving in and out of me again. Clear to chase his own orgasm now, he leans up a little, his now-dark eyes devouring my body that's spent with pleasure and laid out beneath him, all invitation and want and zero regrets. He reaches down to cup my breasts and they overflow his hands as he drives into me hard and fast again. His head tips back and his eyes close, his stomach muscles appearing in defined, almost spasming ridges, and when he opens his eyes again they are blazing, manic, animal-like.

My body is his playground and there's nothing I want more than to give him all he wants, all he needs to come hard, to annihilate him with pleasure. And he takes it. Leaning over me, Granger shoves his fingertips into my hair, rounding to the back of my head and then making a fist. He squeezes harder as he starts to come, his pace fast, uncontrolled. His voice goes deeper than I've ever heard as he bends low to my ear, "You're making me come *so* hard, Gal— FUCK!—"

"Yes. Come in me..." I whisper, dulcetly.

"Jesus Christ." His whole, hard body tenses up and I feel hot, sticky ropes of his spend fire into me again and again for what feels like an entire minute.

When his body is finished shuddering, it falls onto me. I let his weight linger against my front until my breathing is labored. I push him a little and the big lug rolls right over. I roll over, too, wondering how his arm slipped under me so seamlessly and pulls me to him as I tuck into his side. I breathe him in. He strokes my hair. Can we stay like this forever?

I drift a little. He drifts, his breaths deepening, my head riding the slow rise and fall of his abdomen. He reaches for my other arm, draping it over him. He holds my hand.

More than forever. I want to stay like this for more than forever.

Now, what am I supposed to do with those ashes?

Seven

Granger – Six weeks later

We had only known each other for two days, and she was leaving in two more. But I couldn't stand the thought of saying goodbye to her. I had *just* found her. (Actually I had found her multiple times, but that's just kind of turned into a thing that we do.)

I told her, "Stay."

I'll never forget how she looked at me. The hope in her eyes. "Stay?"

"Yes, Gal. Please, stay with me."

And she did. Gal stayed. She moved her things from the rental cabin to my cabin.

It took her some time to figure out where she wanted to spread Bri's ashes. A month after living here she came to me and asked if she could do it here, on my land.

"*Our* land," I corrected her.

She just kind of rolled her eyes and then gave me a big hug when I said "yes, of course." I find her out there sometimes, sitting in the meadow behind the main house, talking with Bri on the wind. It's sweet, and a little bit crazy, how the dead can bring us to life. Bri's mom came out to see the place soon after Gal moved in, to see her girl, and I know she was so proud of Gal, too, for what she had done and overcome.

I was just glad to thank and hug the woman whose daughter had very literally saved my life. And in an equally very real way, who brought Gal into my life.

She's the love of my life. The best thing that ever happened to me.

Every time I think of her, it makes me so happy.

As for the river otters? Let's just say they've been taken care of.

One evening, when I know it is going to be a breathtaking sunset, I open a couple boxes of Gal's precious Sno-Caps and make a trail out toward the pond, up the stairs of our dock which always has the perfect view. The water is so glassy and still, it reflects a perfect twin image of the main house set back a ways from the pond.

And I just wait.

Suddenly, I see curves swaying toward me, long, dark hair swishing. That gorgeous, bright smile. She doesn't pick up *all* the Sno-Caps on her way to me. She doesn't not pick up any though, either.

Ah, yeah, she's falling for it. Like a bear to sweet honey.
Cute bear.

"Sno-Caps," she says, coming up the steps. She throws me a grin. "Nice."

I just shrug. "I know my girl."

"That, you do." She dips her hand in the open the box. Pops a candy into her mouth. "Wait." Her face puzzles up.

"What?"

“Why are you luring me here with sugar? You know if you wanted to seduce me you could just—”

“I have a question,” I cut her off. The sunset lights her cheek.

“You?” She scrunches her face up, adorably. “But you never ask *questions*.”

True. So I just say, “Marry me.”

“Now, *that’s* more like my Granger.” She smiles. And then, “Yes.”

“Yes?” I echo, toyingly. Meanwhile my heart is going ballistic inside my chest. “But I didn’t ask.” And it’s only been six weeks. Are both of us nuts here?

“You didn’t have to,” Gal says, with that air of confidence I love. “It was always going to be you and me, my love. Always.”

“Yeah, forever?”

“And ever.” Smiling wide, she lifts up on tiptoe, her warm, soft hands shackling the back of my neck then pulling me down to her lips. We kiss long and slow and deep. Like the future that’s stretched out before us. When we break the kiss, I hand over the box of chocolates, and get down on my knee, officially. I hold out the ring to her. “Oh my god,” she breathes, mouth open wide.

“You like it.”

“Like it?” She snuffles, her pretty eyes glistening with happy tears. “Baby! It’s even *better* than Sno-Caps!”

“Really?”

“Well...” She makes a face. I slide the ring on her finger. It fits, perfect. Her eyes flicker up toward mine as I stand up. “Kiss me again,” she says on a sniffle.

I cup her face in the palms of my hands, tenderly, and my head descends, slow this time. I say the words I know I’ll always say to her, against her lips, “Yes, dear.”

Anything. Yes.

Epilogue

Gal – One year later

A lot's changed in the last year, and then some of it's even changed back!

For one, I was barred from eating Sno-Caps in our bedroom. And now I'm allowed to again. Granger's dream is my dream, too, now, and he's the man front and center of all of my dreams. But that doesn't mean he calls *all* the shots. And he knew from day one, I like my Sno-Caps.

So that's just what I'm doing—rebel that I am—in *our* bedroom enjoying the views of our expansive land outside and the mountains rolling endlessly in the distance, eating Sno-Caps. Granger finds me here. He always finds me. And I love it every time.

“There's my girl.” He grins at me, looking like a feral Cheshire cat. Still a hunk of a hunk, somehow. I want to ask him why he's been in such rare form today. Instead I just ask:

“Want one?” I hold up a Sno-Cap.

“Do I ever say yes?” He chuckles.

“Yeah. At the movies.”

“Exactly.” His arms fold around me and then tighten, and my heart starts to race. Granger always knows just how to hold me.

“Mmm, sorry,” I tell him with a mouthful of candy. “I know you’re always trying to be healthy. I don’t mean to tempt you with my chocolate addiction.”

“Honey, chocolate doesn’t tempt me. Least of all your chocolate.” He leans his head down on that spot where my neck meets my shoulder, and I can feel his smirk. His lips coast up my cheek. “*You* on the other hand...”

Next thing I know I’m in his strong hands—chocolate goes flying *everywhere!*—being flipped over on our big bed. My husband’s breath, coarse with his arousal, against the back of my ear.

“Mmmmhh,” he groans, one hand thrusting into my hair, the other hand scoping down my side, giving my butt a hard smack then gently rubbing the wounded spot. “God, I love your sweet little ass.”

Little? No. Loving this anyway though? Oh God, yes.

“What are you going to do about it, mister?” I goad him.

He turns me over, so we’re face to face. Is he not even caring about the mess with the Sno-Caps? Geez, this man *must* be horny! His hand is warm and tender as it brushes the hair out of my face, and he looks in my eyes. *That look.* We’ve been together for over a year and he still makes my toes curl and my belly do flips with just that look.

“Put a baby in you, Slick.”

“A baby?” I ask, shocked. We haven’t talked much about babies yet. Babies are for someday. Is someday here, already?

“Yes, a baby.” He smiles adorably. He leans in a little to nudge his nose on mine. He says, almost in a whine, “I want to

put little Grangers in you.”

“What if they are little Gals?”

The grin on his face spreads up to his eyes. “Even better.”

I reach up, holding his cheeks. I sling my legs around his hips and squeeze in with my thighs. “Well, we’d better get started.”

He kisses me. Pulls back and breathes, “God, I love you so much, Gal.”

“I love you,” I reply, pressing up to him. I love this man more than anything.

For more than forever.

~ * ~

Thanks so much for reading *Granger*! I adored getting to know Granger and Gal as I wrote them, and I really hope you liked it!

Up Next: Meet Rooker & Jane in Starlight Saviors book 2,
Rooker!

~ * ~

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