

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace in a field of tall grass. The man, with long, wavy blonde hair, is wearing a brown corduroy jacket over a white shirt and a dark tie. He is leaning in to kiss the woman on the cheek. The woman has long, wavy blonde hair and is wearing a white, long-sleeved dress. She is smiling and looking down. The background is a soft-focus field of tall grass under a warm, golden light, suggesting a sunset or sunrise. The overall mood is romantic and intimate.

powerless

*a Chestnut Springs novel*

ELSIE SILVER



Elsie Silver is a Canadian author of sassy, sexy, small town romance who loves a good book boyfriend and the strong heroines who bring them to their knees. She lives just outside of Vancouver, British Columbia with her husband, son, and three dogs and has been voraciously reading romance books since before she was probably supposed to.

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Also by Elsie Silver

*Flawless*

*Heartless*

*Powerless*

Powerless

Elsie Silver



PIATKUS

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*For the ones who've spent their lives being just a little \*too\* agreeable.  
Here's to getting comfortable disappointing other people to avoid  
disappointing yourself.*

The truth is we only have control over a finite number of things in life. The rest is a fucking crap shoot.

— Kandi Steiner

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Acknowledgments

The Elsie Silver Saloon

## Reader Note

This book contains adult material including childhood trauma, death of a family member, and anxiety. It is my hope that I've handled these topics with the care they deserve.

## Prologue

Sloane, age ten

**M**y car door is open before my parents have put the Bentley in park. My feet hit the gravel driveway before they've even managed to get out of the car. In a whoosh of breath, my arms wrap around my cousin Violet. We almost bowl each other over onto the dirt driveway with the force of our hug.

She smells like green grass, horses, and sweet summer freedom.

"I missed you!" I squeal as Violet pulls away and grins mischievously at me.

"I missed you too."

I catch my mom staring at us, happy and sad all at once. I look like my mom, and Violet looks like hers. Except Violet's mom died, and my mom lost her sister. I always think she likes bringing me out here because she feels close to her sister when she's on the ranch.

It also makes it more convenient for my parents to travel to their favorite spots in Europe. My dad said something about it being good for me to "see how the other half lives." I'm not totally sure what that means, but I saw my mom's lips clamp down on each other when he said it.

Either way, I never complain because a full month at Wishing Well Ranch with the Eaton family means I get to hang out and have fun with my cousins. The rules are lax. The curfews don't exist. And I get to run wild for four full weeks every summer.

"Robert, Cordelia." Uncle Harvey reaches forward to shake my dad's hand before giving my mom a tight squeeze that leaves her blinking a little too quickly as she peers out over the flat farm fields and jagged mountains behind them. "Nice to see you both."

They start talking about boring adult stuff, but I don't hear them because my other cousins walk out of the big ranch house. Cade, Beau,

and Rhett jog down the front stairs, joking and shoving and roaming like a pack.

And then they're followed by one more boy. One I don't recognize. One who immediately has my attention. One with long, lanky limbs, caramel-colored hair, and the bluest eyes I've ever seen.

The *saddest* eyes I've ever seen.

When that boy slides his gaze over to me, there's nothing but curiosity on his face. I jerk my head away all the same, feeling hot splotches pop up on my cheeks.

My mom moves beside me, patting me on the head. "Sloane, you need to remember your sunscreen. You already look too hot, and you spend so much time in the dance studio, your skin isn't used to this exposure."

Her fussing only makes me blush harder. I'm almost eleven and she's making me seem like a baby in front of everyone.

I give my eyes a petulant roll and mumble, "I know. I will," before taking Violet's hand and storming off.

We go inside and up to my guest room, searching for some privacy while everyone else stands around outside and makes small talk.

Violet flops on the mattress and announces, "Tell me everything."

I giggle and push my hair behind my ears, drawn to the window that overlooks the driveway. "About what?"

"School? The city? What do you wanna do this summer? Just . . . everything. I'm so happy there's a girl here. This place stinks like boys *all the time*."

Out the window, I see the mystery boy shaking hands with my parents. I note the distaste on my father's face. The pity on my mother's.

"Who's the other guy?" I ask, unable to look away.

"Oh." Violet's voice gets a little quiet. "That's Jasper. He's one of us now."

I turn to her, eyebrow quirked, hands on my hips, trying to play it cool, like I'm not *too* interested, but not really knowing how to achieve that either. "What do you mean?"

She rolls up to sit cross-legged on the bed and shrugs. "He needed a family so we took him in. I don't know all the details. There was an accident. Beau brought him here one day last fall. I like to think of him as

one more stinky brother. You can just think of him like a new cousin.”

My head cants as my heart battles with my brain.

My heart wants to stare out the window again because Jasper is *so* cute and staring at him makes it do this weird little skipping thing in my chest.

My brain knows it’s stupid, because if he’s friends with Beau, he must be at least fifteen.

But I can’t stop myself.

I look anyway.

What I don’t realize is that I’ll be fighting the urge to stare at Jasper Gervais for years to come.

1  
Jasper

Sloane Winthrop's fiancé is a royal douchebag. I'm familiar with the type. You don't work your way into the NHL without encountering your fair share.

And this guy has the act down pat.

As if the name *Sterling Woodcock* wasn't enough of a giveaway, he's now bragging about the hunting trip he and his dad spent hundreds of thousands of dollars on to kill lions born and bred in captivity, like that will somehow make their dicks bigger.

From the Rolex on his wrist to his manicured nails, he's dripping wealth, and I guess it only makes sense that Sloane might end up with a man like him. After all, the Winthrops are one of the most powerful families in the country with what is damn near a monopoly on the telecommunications industry.

As he rambles, I glance at Sloane across the table. Her sky-blue eyes are downcast, and she's clearly fiddling with the napkin in her lap. She looks like she'd rather be anywhere but here in this dimly lit, ornate steak house.

And I feel about the same.

Listening to her small-dicked future husband boast to a table full of family and friends I've never met about something that is honestly embarrassing—and sad—isn't how I'd choose to spend a night off.

But I'm here for Sloane, and that's what I keep telling myself.

Because seeing her right now, all downtrodden mere nights before her wedding . . . it feels like she needs someone here who actually knows her. The rest of the Eaton crew couldn't make it into the city tonight, but I promised her I'd come.

And for Sloane I keep every promise, no matter how badly they hurt.



I expected her to be smiling. Glowing. I expected to be happy for her—but I'm not.

“You hunt, Jasper?” Sterling asks, all poised and pretentious.

The collar of my checkered dress shirt feels like it's strangling me, even though I left the top buttons undone. I clear my throat and roll my shoulders back. “I do.”

Sterling picks up the crystal tumbler before him and leans back to assess me with a smug smirk on his perfectly shaved face. “Any big game? You'd enjoy a trip like this.” People who don't know me nod and murmur their assent.

“I don't know if—” Sloane starts, but her fiancé steamrolls her attempt at adding to the conversation.

“We all saw what your last contract came in at. Not bad for a goalie. So provided you've been responsible with your money, it's something you should be able to afford.”

Like I said: douchebag.

I bite the inside of my cheek, tempted to say I've been horribly irresponsible with my money and don't have a dollar to my name. But as lowbrow as my upbringing might have been, I have enough class to know that finances aren't polite dinner conversation.

“Nah, man. I only hunt what I can eat, and I'm unfamiliar with how to cook a lion.”

A few chuckles break out around the table, including from Sloane. I don't miss the quick moment where Sterling's eyes narrow, where his teeth clamp and his jaw pops.

Sloane jumps in quickly, patting his arm like he's a dog who needs soothing. I can almost feel her slender fingers on my own arm and absently find myself wishing it were me she was touching instead. “I used to hunt with my cousins out in Chestnut Springs too, you know?”

I'm tossed back in time, remembering a young Sloane keeping up with the boys all summer. Sloane with dirt under her nails, scrapes on her knees, sun-bleached hair all tangled and free down her back.

“It's more about the thrill, you know? The power.” Sterling ignores Sloane's comment entirely.

He looks at me like an opponent, except we aren't playing hockey right

now. If we were, I'd give him a quick blocker shot to the face.

"Did you not hear what Sloane just said?" I'm trying to be cool, but I hate the way he's treated her through this entire dinner. I don't know how she ended up here. She's my best friend. She's eloquent, and smart, and funny—does he not see that at all? Does he not see *her*?

Sterling waves a hand and chuckles. "Ah, yes. I'm always hearing about Wishing Well Ranch." He turns to her with a condescending tone and a mocking smirk. "Well, thank goodness you outgrew whatever tomboy phase you went through, babe. You'd have missed your calling as a ballerina."

His shitty response is worsened by my realization that he heard what she said and *chose* to ignore her.

"I can't even imagine you handling a gun, Sloane!" one guy further down the long table exclaims, his nose a deep red from far too much scotch.

"I was good, actually. I think I only hit something alive once." She laughs lightly and shakes her head, bright blonde strands of hair slipping down in front of her face before she pushes them back behind her ears and drops her eyes with a faint blush. "And then I cried inconsolably."

Her lips roll together and I'm entranced. Instantly imagining things I shouldn't be.

"I remember that day." I glance across the table at her. "You couldn't even eat the venison for dinner that night. We all tried to console you—it didn't work." My head tips at the vivid walk down memory lane.

"And that right there"—Sterling points at Sloane without even sparing her a glance—"is why women don't belong out hunting. Too upsetting."

Sterling's overgrown frat buddies guffaw at his lame comment, which urges him to go all in on his assholery. He holds his glass up high and looks down at the table. "To keeping women in the kitchen!"

There's laughter and a smattering of people offering "cheers" and "here, here."

Sloane dabs the white cloth napkin over her full lips with a prim smile but keeps her eyes fixed on the empty place setting before her. Sterling goes back to gloating with the other guests—ignoring the woman sitting beside him.

Ignoring the piece of herself she tried to share with him. Ignoring the way he embarrassed her.

My patience for this night is quickly dwindling. The urge to slink into the background is overwhelming.

Sloane catches my eye across the table and gives me one of her practiced smiles. I know it's fake because I've seen her real smile.

And this isn't it.

It's the same smile she gave me when I told her I couldn't go to prom with her as her date. Taking a twenty-four-year-old NHL player wasn't appropriate for either of us, and I was the asshole who had to tell her that.

I smile back, feeling frustration build inside me over the fact she's about to tie herself to someone who treats her like an accessory, who doesn't listen to her. Or appreciate that she's layered and complex, and not just the polished princess she's been molded into by her family.

Our eyes stay locked, and her cheeks start to flush pink. She shimmies her shoulders back, and my gaze drops to her collarbones. Suddenly I see myself trailing my tongue there. Making her squirm.

My eyes snap back up to her face. Like maybe I've been caught. As though she could somehow hear what's in my head. Because we both know I can't be looking at her like that. She's might as well be family. And worse, she officially belongs to another man.

Sterling catches the exchange and turns his attention to me once again. It makes my skin crawl. "Sloane tells me you've been friends for a long time. Pardon my confusion, but a rough around the edges hockey player doesn't seem like he'd be friends with a prima ballerina. Of course, I haven't seen you around much since she and I got together. Something keeping you away?" He drapes an arm over her shoulder in a show of possession, and I try not to fixate on the gesture.

"To be fair, I haven't heard much about you either." I say it with enough humor in my tone that anyone missing the way we're glaring might not even pick up on the jab. I lean back, crossing my arms over my chest. "But yeah. I guess I'm not too rough around the edges to be the one that brings over Polysporin and painkillers when my friend's feet are too raw from dancing in pointe shoes to even walk."

"I've told you this." Sloane's voice is placating. "He helped me move

into my new condo. Sometimes we grab coffee. Simple things like that.”

“Basically, she knows if she needs something, I’ll be there,” I add without thinking.

Sloane shoots me a look, probably wondering why I’m acting like a territorial asshole. I’m wondering the same thing, to be honest.

“Good thing you’ve got me for all that now.” Sterling is responding to Sloane, but he’s staring at me. Then he abruptly places a palm over Sloane’s hands that are now propped on the table. The ones still pulling at her napkin anxiously. But the way he touches her isn’t soothing or supportive. It’s a swat, a reproach for fidgeting.

It sends fury racing through my veins. I need to get away before I do something I’ll really regret.

“Well, I’m going to head out for the night,” I announce suddenly, pushing my chair back, desperate for fresh air and a break from the dark walls and velvet drapery pressing in around me.

“Better get a good sleep in, Gervais. You’ll need it to get thins rollins for the Grizzlies this season. After last season, you’re probably on thin ice.”

I pull at the cuffs of my shirt and force myself to ignore the jab. “Thank you for inviting me, *Woodcock*. Dinner was delicious.”

“Sloane invited you,” is his petulant reply, clarifying that he does not like me—or my presence.

I stare down at him blankly and hitch one side of my mouth up. Like I can’t quite believe what a raging prick he is. I can feel eyes on us now, other people picking up on whatever unspoken tension is between us. “Well, that’s what friends are for.”

“Wait, but you’re her cousin, right?” The drunk guy’s scotch spills over the rim of his tumbler and onto his hand as he points at me.

I don’t know why Sloane and I have always been so adamant that we’re friends and not cousins. If someone tried to tell me that Beau, or Rhett, or Cade wasn’t my brother, I’d write them off immediately. Those men *are* my brothers.

But Sloane? She’s my friend.

“Actually, he’s my friend, *not* my cousin.” Sloane tosses her napkin on top of the white linen-covered table with more force than necessary.

The people gathered for her wedding stare.

Her wedding *this weekend*.

My stomach twists.

“Will you be at the stag party tomorrow, Gervais?” the drunk guy continues. He hiccups and grins stupidly, reminding me of the drunk mouse at the Mad Hatter’s unbirthday party. “Would love to say I partied with hockey-superstar Jasper Gervais.”

Color me surprised that the only reason a guy like this wants me around is to boost his reputation.

“Can’t. I’ve got a game.” My smile is tight, but my relief is immense as I rise from my chair.

“I’ll walk you out,” Sloane pipes up, clearly missing the sharp look Sterling slices her way. Or she’s just pretending she doesn’t notice.

Either way, I hold one hand open and gesture Sloane ahead of me as we weave our way silently across the restaurant.

I go to press my palm against the small of her back to guide her through, but she tenses, and I jerk my hand away at the feel of smooth, bare skin burning my fingertips. My eyes find the floor as I shove the tingling hand into my pocket where it belongs.

Because it sure as shit doesn’t belong on the bare back of an engaged woman.

Even if she is just my friend.

It’s only as we near the front of the restaurant that I glance up again. Sloane’s slender frame sways as she strides across the room. Every movement steeped in an inherent grace—one that comes with years of training. Years of practice.

She smiles politely at the maître d’ and then walks faster, like she can see freedom through that heavy front door and is desperate for it. Her shoulders drop and her entire body sags, almost in relief, when she rests both hands flat against the dark slab of wood.

I watch her for a moment before I step up behind her, the heat of her body seeping out toward mine. Then I reach one arm above her petite frame and push the door open, ushering us both out into the cool November night.

I jam both hands into the pockets of my slacks now so I don’t grab her

shoulders and shake her, demanding to know what the hell she's doing marrying a guy who treats her like Sterling Woodcock does. Because it's really none of my business.

Her toned, bare back is to me as she faces the busy city street, car lights a blur of white and red just beyond her, misty air puffing over her shoulder like she's trying to catch her breath.

"You okay?"

Her head nods furiously before she turns back around with that weird Stepford-wife smile plastered back on her dainty face.

"You don't look fine." My fingers wrap around the keys in my pocket and jangle them anxiously.

"Shit, thanks, Jas."

"I mean, you look beautiful," I rush out, grimacing when I note her eyes widening. "You always do. You just don't look . . . happy?"

She blinks slowly, the edges of her mouth turning down into a slight frown. "Is that supposed to be better? Beautiful and unhappy?"

God. I'm really blowing it. I rake a hand through my hair. "Are you happy? Does he make you happy?"

Her mouth pops open in shock, and I know I'm out of line, or stepping in it, or whatever. But someone needs to ask her, and I doubt anyone has.

I need to hear her say it.

Her pale cheeks flush and her eyes narrow as she steps up to me, jaw tight. "You're asking me this *now*?"

I huff out a breath and run my top teeth over my bottom lip, eyes totally fixed on her baby blues, so wide and pale and sparking with indignation. "Yeah. Has anyone else asked you?"

She drops my gaze, her hands planting against her cheeks before pushing back through her collarbone-length blonde hair. "No one has asked me."

The teeth of my house key dig into the palm of my hand. "How did you meet Sterling?"

"My dad introduced us." Her eyes fixate on the black sky. It's starless, not like at the ranch where you can see every little fleck of light. Everything in the city feels polluted compared to Chestnut Springs. I decide on the spot to drive out to my place in the country tonight rather