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WILD SIDE

ELSIE SILVER



PIATKUS

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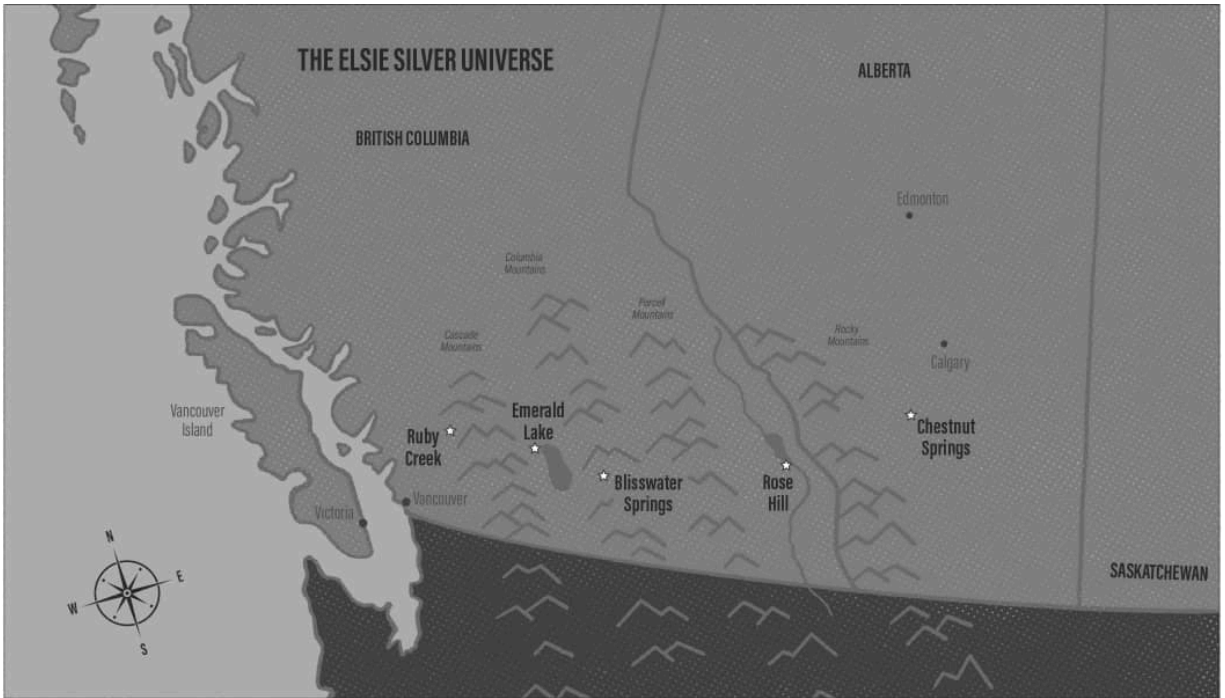
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For anyone who has loved someone not because they are perfect but because you manage to find beauty in all their shades of gray.

And for Penny (16) and Twiggy (14). My two sweet canine companions who I basically grew up with. They were there for it all—college, marriage, a baby. They also slept curled at my feet through the writing of eleven whole books and half of this one. They say that your dog is your best friend for a short time but that you are their best friend for their whole life...and I say that makes me pretty damn lucky.



CONTENT WARNING

This book contains references to addiction (discussed), drug use (off-page), death by overdose (off-page), and themes of child welfare, abuse/neglect (off-page). It is my hope that I have handled these topics with the care and attention they deserve.

READER NOTE

I am not a lawyer, but I consulted one on the legalities mentioned in this book. For the sake of the story, some liberties have been taken.

To ensure that the themes in this book have been handled with the care they deserve, a clinical therapist has been hired as an early reader and consultant throughout the writing process.

CHAPTER 1

Rhys

I HEAR THE DOORBELL. AND I IGNORE IT. I DON'T WANT whatever they're selling.

So I continue surfing through the options of TV shows to watch next. Nothing appeals to me. *Ted Lasso* left me in a slump, and being too injured to work out has me bored.

Now there's three strong knocks at the door. And I still don't want to answer it. I come to this place to be left alone, so I pretend I don't hear it. Door-to-door people always go away, eventually.

But not this person.

Now they knock five times.

Pissed off now, I push to stand and ignore the sharp twinge in my knee as I march across the open living space.

"Whatever it is, I'm not interested—" I yank the front door open, but I come eye-to-eye with absolutely no one. Just a clear view of the front street.

"Hi. I'm Tabitha." The firm voice comes from below me, and I drop my chin to follow the sound. "Rhys, right?"

There's a woman standing on my front doorstep. She has dark hair, nearly black. The onyx slashes of her eyebrows frame narrowed chocolate eyes that are ringed with a thick fringe of lashes. She's short—next to me, most people are—but there's something about the way she carries herself that feels tall.

She has a presence.

I say nothing, but she sticks her hand out to shake mine anyway. I stare at it, not wanting to be rude, but also wondering what the hell she wants. This place is my haven. No one knows me in Canada.

When I'm in Emerald Lake, no one bugs me.

And that's how I like it.

"Hi? Hello?" She bobs her hand again, calling me out on the fact that I've stood here glaring at her and not made a single move. "If English isn't your first language, I have some passable French. Otherwise, I'll pull my phone out to translate."

My lips flatten, and I reach forward to wrap my hand around her small one. “I speak English,” I mutter as I meet her eyes once more. “I just wasn’t expecting anyone.”

I can feel the calluses on her palms as she grips my hand. Hard. It’s a real, proper, honest handshake. “Who doesn’t love a surprise, am I right?”

“Me. I don’t love surprises.” Her eyes don’t leave mine, and I get the sense she’s sizing me up. Judging my worthiness. For what, I have no clue.

We continue staring and shaking hands tightly, even though at this point, the custom has dragged on for longer than necessary.

“Well, surprise!” she announces suddenly. “I’m your new tenant’s sister, and I’m currently helping her move in. I need to have a chat with you while she’s out.”

I drop her hand and blink. Her tone makes me feel like I’m in trouble. All I wanted was someone unobtrusive to live next door and maintain the place during my stretches away. Now I have some tiny terror on my front step, looking like she’s ready to interrogate me.

“Invite me in. We’ll cover our bases, and I’ll be on my merry way.”

She smiles now.

And it’s fucking blinding. It’s not demure or shy. It’s a weapon, and she knows exactly what she’s doing by pulling it out on me.

Before, I was quiet because I’m always suspicious of people who randomly show up at my door. Now I’m quiet because my brain is short-circuiting, and my eyes are wandering. Wandering over shiny strands of dark hair, tan skin, and the feminine flare of her hips.

Yeah. Tabitha, sister of my new tenant, is hot, looks like she thinks I might have bodies buried in my basement, and has a mean handshake.

Strangely, I’m into it.

So I step aside and gesture her in.

For a flash, she softens, a relieved smile touching her full lips as she wipes her palms nervously against acid-washed jeans. Her chin dips as she steps into the foyer with a muted, “Thanks.”

I muster a nod before closing the door and gesturing her through to the kitchen. The windows on this side of the A-frame face the lake. It’s a stunning view, and I can’t blame her for stopping to admire it.

“Beautiful.”

I watch her for a beat, eyes trailing her profile with a level of interest that I don’t bother hiding. She carries her shoulders tall, plush lips slightly parted. “It is.”

My gaze stalls out on her mouth. A sly grin twists those lips as she turns to me with a quirked brow. She returns my once-over just as blatantly.

“A man of few words, huh?”

“Guess so,” I respond, turning my back as I turn to open the fridge. “Drink?”

“Nah. I won’t be that long.” I can hear the amusement in her voice as she tugs out a stool at the island.

I take out a can of soda water and crack it, leaning against the counter behind me to face her. She’s folded her hands, fingers woven together, and pressed her lips in a tight line.

“So...” The word trails off, and I wait.

And I wait.

I take a casual sip of my bubbly water and set it on the counter beside me.

She continues staring at me, and I’m not oblivious to the way her eyes have shifted, following my arms as I cross them in front of me and take her in.

“So,” I say back, with a small twitch of my lips.

She sniffs and straightens, eyes flitting to the side and back. “I’m just going to come out with it. Erika has not had an easy go of it. Her stories are not mine to share. I just need to know that she and her son, Milo, will be safe here.”

I shift slightly. “Okay. My home base is out of the country, and I’m only here now and then. There’s an alarm system though.”

“That’s not the kind of safe I mean.” Her teeth strum at her bottom lip before she sighs. “Listen, I know I’m overstepping, but my sister is just finally in a good place, and I don’t know what she would or wouldn’t... Ugh.” The woman runs an agitated hand through her hair. “I hate myself for asking this, and she’d fucking kill me, but...if you have any drugs stronger than Tylenol, can you please put them somewhere that no one would suspect?”

My brows drop, and I lean forward. “What?”

“Prescription drugs. I want to make sure she won’t have access to them.”

“She’ll be living next door. Not with me.”

Tabitha shrugs and looks away again. “She’s charming and beautiful and finally back on track. Never say never.”

This woman has no clue how deep my trust issues go if she thinks I have designs on my new tenant. “I’m not planning on pursuing your sister.”

She flinches but doesn’t hesitate to look me dead in the eye when she says, “Well, that plan might be one-sided.”

“Are you...” I trail off, unsure of what to say. I have never had a more bizarre conversation with a perfect stranger in my life.

“I am being a snoopy, overprotective sister who has listened to her gush about you for two days. Just nod your head if you understand me, and we can agree to never talk about this again.”

I spent all of maybe thirty minutes around Erika when I first showed her the place. And a few more when I gave her the keys and met her son. She seemed accommodating about managing the mail situation along with the yard and gardens. She was nice. Okay, really nice.

Too nice?

And her kid was cute.

But my head definitely didn't go *there*.

Still, I nod.

Tabitha's palm slaps against the granite countertop, and a triumphant grin emerges on her face. "Excellent. Great. Good talk." She slides off the stool, but not before taking one longing glance back over the space. "This is a nice kitchen. Nothing better than cooking with a view."

"You like to cook?"

A soft smile touches her lips now. "You could say that."

I move past the island, padding across the hardwood floors, drawn to her chaos and unpredictability. But she's already walking toward the door.

Blowing out the way she blew in. Confident and direct but also... tentative.

You could say that.

It makes me wonder what's written between the lines of that response. This entire encounter also makes me wonder about her sister's story.

"Should I be worried about her? Your sister. As a tenant?"

After toeing on her sandals, she straightens and faces me once more. The evening sun filters in from the windows surrounding the front door, casting her features in a warm glow. Her cheeks have a pink tint, like she's embarrassed for barging in here and oversharing. For interfering.

"She's a girl who got injured playing volleyball in high school and was prescribed something she shouldn't have. She's been low. Really low. But she's healthy now. She's gotten help. I swear. She's a good mom. And she'll be a good tenant. I promise."

There's a plea in her eyes. Determination in the set of her jaw. And underneath it all, I'm too fucking soft to push back. If she needs help this desperately, I can give it.

"Okay." I dip my chin and shove my hands into the pockets of my gray sweats. We've all hit rough patches. Far be it from me to hold that over the head of a woman I barely know.

"But..."

I glance back up slowly, not liking the sound of that *but*.

"If—and this is a big *if*—if she ever falls behind on rent, can you please call me? Day, night, whenever. I want her somewhere safe. I want a roof over her head. I want Milo happy and safe. I will pay if it comes to it."

She slips a business card from her back pocket and holds it out to me. I reach for it—a little too eagerly. My fingers pinch the card stock, and I can see *the Bighorn Bistro* printed on it, but when I go to pull, she doesn't let go.

My eyes snap to hers, and I can see the ferocity burning in them. She holds her opposite hand up, pinky finger extended. “Pinky swear.”

“Pinky swear?”

This encounter just keeps getting stranger.

“Yes. Pinky swear to me that you will call me if there’s a problem.”

I hold my pinky up with a deep chuckle. “You know these aren’t legally binding, right?”

Her finger curls around mine as her eyes point like arrows in my direction. “I know, but only a total asshole breaks a pinky promise.”

The woman is dead serious. And I’m too off-kilter to deny her.

“I pinky promise,” I reply gruffly.

She watches me for a beat, as though assessing the truthfulness of my promise. Then she nods and draws away. Without another word, she pulls the front door open and saunters out of my house. And I just stand there, arm propped on the doorframe, trying to wrap my head around that conversation.

Around that woman.

The one who, farther down the front walkway, turns to peek back over her shoulder.

For a few beats, I catch her looking. Or she catches me looking. To be honest, I don’t care which one it is.

I just know that usually I go out of my way to hide from too much attention.

But I don’t mind the way she looks at me.

CHAPTER 2

Tabitha

TWO YEARS LATER...

THE YELLOW DOOR BEFORE ME IS ALTOGETHER TOO CHEERful for a day like today.

Scuffs near the keyhole tell a story of full hands and rushed attempts to open the door. There's a pink splatter over the canary gold at the bottom. Likely the only evidence of a grape-juice-box-meets-the-ground type of crime scene.

Milo loves grape juice.

His mom does too.

Did.

Erika loved—past tense—grape juice.

Heat builds behind my lashes, and I blink away the tears. Crying won't see me through this job. Since we got the call last night, everyone around me has been crying. I can't start too.

If I start, I worry I won't know how to stop. Then shit won't get done. And that's my job right now.

Take care of her little boy. Navigate my parents' grief. Run my restaurant. Get shit done.

Numb is preferable. Especially having just left the morgue.

So I push the urge to cry aside, roll from toe to heel a few times, as though I might be able to rock myself forward, into motion.

Toward my dead sister's abandoned home to collect her belongings.

I both need to go in there and dread going in there. My lips twist into a sardonic grimace. Erika would have gotten a real kick out of seeing me wringing my hands on her front step. Too chickenshit to even face what she left behind. I suspect she's somewhere watching me with a grin on her face right now. She'd say something like, *You just identified my body. Vampirism would need more than twenty minutes to take effect.*

I chuckle at my own made-up joke.

She wasn't perfect—hell, I'm not either—but her dark sense of humor was spot-on.

“Okay, Erika, I'm going. I'm going,” I mutter in an amused tone, digging out the spare key I've been holding on to for two years.

I had it made when I helped her move in here and haven't needed to use it until now. Mostly because I thought she was doing okay. I've always known addiction is a lifelong battle. I just thought she was holding the line.

I thought wrong.

The key clicks when I slide it in, and the door gives way when I grip the handle and press my thumb onto the lever. Sucking in a deep breath, I wait to see if any strong smells register. Nothing comes.

Judgmental little bitch.

I can hear Erika taunting me, clear as day. Somehow, this imaginary interaction brings me a sense of comfort. As a kid, she'd have killed me for going into her room. Borrowing her clothes or makeup always ended in a cat fight.

But we also always made up.

I chuckle darkly and shake my head. “Okay, sissy.” My arm straightens as I push the door open. “I'm here, and I'm going to take your clothes and jewelry, and there's nothing you can do about it this time.”

Milo will want her things one day. I want him to have memories of her. Good ones.

With that in my head, my foot finally leaves the ground, and I move to step into the house.

But a deep foreboding voice brings me up short, and I freeze. “What the fuck do you think you're doing?”

My heart rate accelerates as I slowly turn away from the door. And then my eyes land on him.

Rhys.

Her landlord. The one who evicted her without a second fucking thought. One late payment, and he didn't even bother to contact me. Instead, he gave her a week to clear out.

In a mad dash to keep a roof over her head, I swooped in and took Milo so she could focus on viewing new places in the area. But instead, she spiraled.

It wasn't the first time she'd struggled with housing. When our parents kicked her out, she went on a binge that landed her in the hospital, clinging to life. And it's been something that destabilized her ever since then. The worst was before Milo—she'd hit rock bottom after being kicked out of a house by her roommates.

I spent three sleepless days frantically searching Rose Hill for her. At the hospital. At the local police detachment. In the local shelter. Under the bridge that leads out of town. In that one campground near the river our parents always told us

to stay away from. Once, when I found her dirty, and downtrodden, and slumped in a back alley, I promised myself I'd never let her end up there again.

It's an image I've never been able to scrub from my mind.

But this time, I didn't find her at all. Someone else did. She was in the basement of a house owned by people who didn't even know her. There was mention of her arriving with a man that no one was able to identify. How she ended up at their party will always be a mystery to me.

What isn't a mystery to me is that *he's* the one who put her there. Rhys is the one who upended her fragile balance by kicking her out. It's like she hadn't even bothered looking for a place. She'd given up. Given in. And if he'd told me she was struggling like he promised, maybe she'd still be here.

In an instant, my urge to cry evaporates. Instead, the urge to rage on the hulking man standing on the front lawn, staring daggers in my direction, overwhelms me.

If Milo didn't need me, I'd kill this big fucker with my bare hands and march myself to prison, convinced that I'd fulfilled my life's purpose.

For now, I opt to clench my molars and glare back as I bite out as few words as possible. "I won't take long." I have three days to pack up all my big sister's possessions, and then I'll never have to set foot in this godforsaken town again.

The man's head tilts, and a loose piece of dark hair flops over his forehead. It's too long, and he's used a touch too much product in an attempt to slick it back, making it appear almost wet. I focus on how unappealing that one lock of hair is so that my eyes don't look at the rest of him.

The impossibly wide shoulders, the towering height, the dangerously dark eyes, the black tattoos that curl over his forearms, covering him from his wrist all the way up to where his T-shirt sits. It makes you wonder where else they go.

Yes, everything about this man screams sex.

I already knew that he was physically appealing. But now I also know that he's indirectly responsible for Erika's overdose. And I hate him for it.

"You can't go in there." His tone hedges no room for debate.

"Legally, I can go in there."

He crosses his arms, which, with the size of his biceps, looks borderline uncomfortable. "Your name isn't on the lease, and I never gave you a key. I doubt Erika did either." A tendon pulses in his jaw, and the disdain in his gaze intensifies my anger.

"You doubt Erika did?" I repeat the words and nearly laugh as they leave my lips. "You've got a lot of nerve acting like you speak for her."

"Says the woman who just announced she was going in to steal jewelry. We both know she wouldn't want you in there."

My mouth pops open. How dare he pretend he knows what terms my sister and I were on? "Are you fucking kidding me right now?"

He stands taller, like a sentinel guarding a castle. It infuriates me. Where was this sense of contractual integrity when he booted her without honoring the pinky promise we made?

That agreement may have been childish, but it meant something to me.

The asshole's facial expression gives nothing away. His delivery is perfectly even. "Not a joke in sight. If you want to enter the unit, you'll need Erika's permission."

I bark out a loud, disbelieving laugh and shake my head at him. "Right, well, since you're the Erika expert now, I'll just wait here while you head down to the morgue and ask her permission."

The mountain of a man flinches as though I slapped him, but then he takes a stuttered step forward, eyes searching. "Come again?"

"My sister is dead."

God, saying it out loud is a shot to the heart. My voice cracks, but I forge ahead.

"My emotional bandwidth is shot, and my desire to talk to you is nonexistent. I'm next of kin, so if you want to call the cops and have me removed from the property"—I wave a dramatic hand over the front lawn as if welcoming a crowd to a show—"please be my guest."

With that, I spin and barge into the house. I'm about to slam the door in his face with a flourish when he's suddenly there, crowding me, towering over me, one massive hand gripping the door and keeping it from hitting him in the face.

I can feel the heat of his body, sense the threat in his stance, and smell the cinnamon scent in his hair product.

"And Milo?" His voice is all gravel, and I swear there's a threat in his rough tone. One I don't fucking appreciate.

But I also recognize his concern for the small boy because I feel it too. Acutely.

I let my eyes crash against his, both confused and agitated by his distress.

What I see in his dark irises is an apocalypse of storms. Fire and brimstone. And I'm certain mine are no better. As his gaze traces my face, I let my hatred take center stage on every feature, wanting to show him I'm not standing down, no matter how much he stomps around like he's the fucking man of the house or whatever this territorial show is.

I decide on as little information as possible, but enough to get him to leave. "Milo is happy and safe."

A brief flash of relief touches the man's features as he retreats incrementally.

A soft moment.

A perfect spot for me to strike.

"I pinky promise," I add cynically.

And then I slam the door in his face.