

This engagement was supposed to be for show . . .
And yet here I am, head over heels for my *fake* fiancé



Hopeless

ELSIE

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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.

She loves cooking and trying new foods, traveling, and spending time with her boys—especially outdoors. Elsie has also become a big fan of her quiet five o'clock mornings, which is when most of her writing happens. It's during this time that she can sip a cup of hot coffee and dream up a fictional world full of romantic stories to share with her readers.

www.elsiesilver.com



Also by Elsie Silver

Flawless
Heartless
Powerless
Reckless
Hopeless

Hopeless
ELSIE
SILVER



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Published by Piatkus

ISBN: 978-0-349-43775-0

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Piatkus
Little, Brown Book Group
Carmelite House
50 Victoria Embankment
London EC4Y 0DZ

www.littlebrown.co.uk
www.hachette.co.uk

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For every single reader (and there are a lot of you) who has messaged, emailed, or commented begging for Beau's book.

This one's for you.

Reader Note

This book contains discussions of alcoholism, PTSD, and skin grafting/burns. It is my hope that I've handled these topics with the care they deserve.

1

Beau

I thought pissing my brother off and storming away would make me feel something.

I was wrong.

Even acting like a raging dick when I'm supposed to help a family friend move into their new house feels ... bland.

As I walk down the main drag in Chestnut Springs, my fingers curl into my palms, nails digging against skin.

I don't feel that either.

I only feel tired.

But not tired enough to sleep.

A train horn blares, and I freeze in place. For years, I've covered the way loud noises startle me, but it's different this time.

You'd expect me to choose either fight or flight, but these days I brace.

Pause.

Wait for any emotion to hit. Fear, anxiety, disappointment.

But these days, I feel nothing.

I pivot on the corner of Rosewood and Elm to watch the train puff past. Chugging along. Back and forth. Point A to point B. Load. Unload. Wait overnight. Start over again.

"I am a train," I murmur as I stare at the wheels crushing against the tracks.

I work all day on the ranch because I'm supposed to. I go through the motions. And I hate every second of it.

A woman pushes a baby in a stroller past me and shoots me a confused look. Her expression changes to surprise when she recognizes me. We might have attended high school together, but the same is true for anyone in this town born within a few years of each other.

“Oh, Beau! Sorry, didn’t recognize you for a second there.”

Probably because I haven’t cut my hair in months.

I don’t remember her name, so I plaster on a smile. “Not to worry. I’m blocking the crosswalk, aren’t I? Here ... ” My arm stretches out to press the crossing button for her.

The woman I can’t remember shoots me a grateful grin, hefting a bag up on her shoulder while trying to keep hold of the stroller overflowing with an unnecessary amount of stuff. “Thanks! Nice to see you out and about. You had all of Chestnut Springs worried for a couple of weeks.”

My cheek twitches under the strain of keeping my mouth upturned. Yes, I was JTF2, Canada’s elite special ops force. Yes, I knowingly missed our transport out to save a prisoner of war. Yes, I was missing in action for weeks and was in rough shape when they found me.

I’m still in rough shape.

People love to talk about it.

You gave us quite a scare.

Try to catch your ride out next time, eh?

I bet you’re loving all this attention.

It’s when they think I’m not listening that the comments become less tongue-in-cheek and more dagger-in-back.

He looks like he’s gonna flip out any second.

Even the therapist couldn’t fix him.

What I call stupid, he calls heroic.

I know they all mean well, but the way they express their interest bugs me. Like my getting stuck in enemy territory on deployment has a single fucking thing to do with them. Like I scared people on purpose or just casually decided not to pick up a phone. Civilians can’t fathom the shit I’ve seen, the decisions I’ve been forced to make.

So I ignore them.

“Gotta love the small-town support,” is what I say, because I can’t say what I really think. Being the real me—the new me—would just make people uncomfortable.

“Well, you’ve got it in spades.” With a kind nod, she turns and crosses the street.

I blink away, not wanting to follow her but not knowing where I’m going either. The opposite direction, I think.

Which is when my eyes land on The Railspur, the best bar in Chestnut Springs.

It doesn’t matter that the sky is blue, and the sun is out on a beautiful summer afternoon. It doesn’t matter that I pissed my brother Rhett off. It doesn’t matter that a friend needs my help unloading furniture a couple of blocks away.

At this moment, the town bar looks like a damn good hole to hide in. And a drink doesn’t sound too bad either.



“Gary, if you don’t slow down, I’m going to take your keys away.”

The ruddy-faced older man scoffs at Bailey’s warning as I pull up a stool a few down from him. I turn it so one elbow rests on the bar and I’m facing the door. It may be just another small-town bar, but the extensive updates give it an elevated sort of vibe that I like. Western decor fills the space, a wagon wheel chandelier hangs over polished wood floors, and mason jar glassware lends a rustic feel.

“Don’t know when you got so lippy,” he grumbles, dropping his pint glass away from his mouth. “You barely used to talk to anyone. Now you’re bossing me around like a little tyrant all the time.”

Shiny, almost-black hair swishes over Bailey Jansen’s tanned shoulders. Her back is to us as she bends down to pull glasses out of the small washing machine behind the bar.

“Got comfortable, I guess. And you could use some bossing, old man. Sitting here, harassing me every day.”

“I do no such thing. I’m perfectly nice to you. One of the few who is, I reckon.”

She spins now, white towel in hand, to point at her only customer in the quiet bar. “You are. And I consider you a friend, which is why I tell you every day you drink too damn much.”

Her gaze snaps to mine, dark eyes widening in surprise, like she didn’t hear me arrive over the country music and hum of the dishwasher.

“If I stop, you’ll be out of work. And maybe even a friend.”

Gary is talking to her like he hasn’t noticed my presence, but she responds to him without looking away from me. “I can live with that, Gar.” She pauses, tongue darting out over parted lips.

Full, glossy lips.

“Beau Eaton. Nice to see you.”

The man turns, now alerted to my presence. “Well shit, that is Beau Eaton, isn’t it? Big fella, aren’t you?” Gary slurs, and Bailey’s free hand darts forward to swipe his keys off the bar.

Gary’s eyes close and he groans. “Every fuckin’ day.”

“Yep. Every fuckin’ day.” She shoves them into her back pocket and then turns back to the washing machine, where glassware has backed up. “Beau, what can I get you? Got anyone joining you? Probably want your favorite couch, yeah?”

I swallow and glance at the couch where my brothers, friends, and I enjoyed many a night out. It feels like a different version of myself sat there. The new Beau sits at the bar with the shy neighbor girl, who wears a pair of acid-wash Levi’s better than anyone he’s ever seen.

And the sad town drunk.

“Nah, just me today. I’ll have whatever Gary here is having.”

“A Buddyz Best for the town hero!” Gary slaps his palm on the bar, and I flinch at the sudden noise. At the label. I could crumple under the weight of everyone regarding at me like I belong on some sort of pedestal. Everyone is *always* watching me.

I stare at his weathered hand, flush against the polished wood of the bar top. My eyes close for a beat and I run my tongue along the backs of my teeth to keep from grinding my molars. When I lift my gaze, forcing myself to act casual, Bailey’s got her brows drawn tight, dark irises boring into my face as though she has me all figured out. The flat smile I force onto my lips doesn’t seem to impress her. In fact, before she turns away to pour me a frothy pint, her head shakes subtly, like she’s disappointed.

My gaze trails over her body again, and I rack my brain to remember the last time I saw her. She’s always been sweet, shy little Bailey Jansen. Sadly, born into the least respected family in town. Her dad and brothers have dabbled in it all—drugs, prison, theft—and her mom took off years ago.

Worst of all, their land borders ours. I can see it from my house on the ranch, just on the other side of the river, where I’ve put up a barbed-wire

fence, so those assholes know where to turn back around.

But Bailey has always been different in my eyes.

I've always felt bad for her, always felt protective of her from afar. The stares, the whispers. I imagine living in a small town where almost every resident has a story about your family must be fucking brutal. So, I've always been nice to her. I like her—have no reason not to—even though I barely know her.

She's worked at The Railspur for years now, I just ... can't remember how many. Can't decide if enough years have passed for me to notice the way her tank top lifts today, showing a peek of skin on her flat stomach. Or for me to think about the way her perfectly round breasts would fit so well in my hands.

"How long you been working here, Bailey?" I ask, watching her shoulders go a little tense when I do.

She clears her throat. "Just over four years. Started at eighteen."

Twenty-two.

Fuck. I'm thirty-five, which means I was a teenager when—I brush the thought away and drop my eyes as she tosses a coaster down in front of me, followed by a pint of golden lager, white foam spilling over the edge.

"Thanks," I grumble as I swipe a hand through my hair.

"Mm-hmm," is all she says.

Bailey is the only person in town who hasn't fallen all over herself to tell me what a hero I am since I got home. She doesn't gawk at me like I'm a rare animal in a zoo.

She works quietly and I try to keep my eyes from straying to her, wondering why she went from chatting happily to shutting down the moment I sat at her bar.

"MIA for two weeks, huh?" Gary starts in, and I see Bailey roll her eyes as she polishes a pint glass to a clear shine.

"Yup."

"How was that?"

Oh, good. The only thing anyone talks to me about anymore.

"Gary!" Bailey's hands fall to her sides and a look of pure shock paints her face.

"What?"

"You can't just ask things like that."

"Why not?"

I can't help it. I chuckle and decide to rescue Bailey from feeling like she needs to save me. "Real warm. Got a nice tan."

The man narrows his eyes, movements a little sloppy. I wonder how long he's been here since it's barely after lunch and he's clearly wrecked. "Heard you got burned. Not the tan I'd be hoping for."

"Ga-ry." Based on the way Bailey enunciates his name, this line of questioning truly horrifies her.

My palm slides across the bar, drawing her attention. "It's okay. Everyone knows about the burns."

She blinks, eyes suddenly a little glassy.

"Really, I'd rather people shoot straight than kiss my ass or tiptoe around me. Why do you think I'm hiding out here in the middle of the day?"

"Because Bailey is the best bartender in town!"

She snorts, lips tipping up as she goes back to polishing a glass. I try to remember if I've ever really seen her smile. I'm not sure I have. She's always busy trying to blend into the background, and I'm only ever here when it's busy. I don't even know if I've ever heard her voice properly until now. There's a melodic tone to it—a gentleness—that's almost soothing.

I'm sick of people talking to me, but it strikes me that listening to Bailey talk might not be so bad.

The first sip of my beer goes down cold and refreshing. And I sigh as it does, feeling a weight come off my shoulders in the presence of the town drunk and the town pariah.

I recognize them as kindred spirits now, a misfit in my own home.

"Third-degree burns on my feet," I announce, since bluntness seems to be the theme here today. "Skin grafts."

"S'okay. You can find some girl with a weird foot fetish who will love that shit."

Bailey props her hands on the edge of the bar and drops her head with a groan. "Jesus Christ, Gary. No more booze."

"So long as your dick is okay." He waves his hand up and down my body. "Face seems fine, wouldn't you say, Bails? You'll be alright, kid. You'll find someone to love ya."

Even drunk, Gary stumbled into a sore spot. I've never considered myself to be vain or obsessed with my appearance. I haven't needed to be. Good genes and having to stay fit for my job have served me well.

Who'd have thought scarred feet would be the thing to skewer my confidence? Fucking *feet*. Like they even matter. It could have been so much worse. I should feel grateful. And yet ...

Bailey's gaze wanders over my features. And mine does the same with hers. Where the light touches it, her dark hair has a mahogany-like shine. It's silky and smooth, falling in layers from her long bangs at her chin to her shoulder and then further down her back. It doesn't look like Bailey cuts her hair often either. I'm drawn back to lashes so thick and black they remind me of one of those vintage dolls. She's not wearing a stitch of makeup, revealing a light smattering of freckles on her nose.

A warm blush paints her cheeks when she softly replies, "Yeah," and then blinks away.

Her eyes, that one little word—it ... makes my blood pump faster.

It makes me feel something in a sea of numbness.

My throat bobs as I swallow the dryness in my mouth, trying to push the moment away. Maybe I'm not ready to feel anything after all.

I take another sip and wonder if maybe I'll be able to sleep for more than a few hours tonight if I toss back a couple of pints.

Then I take another sip and swipe a hand over my stubbled chin before I turn to Gary. "Love is the last thing I need. But this beer is hitting the spot. Thanks, Gary."

Talking to him seems safe enough. Safer than talking to Bailey Jansen, who watches me just a little too closely with those big fucking doe eyes.