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# WILD EYES

ROSE HILL SERIES



BOOK TWO

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# ELSIE SILVER

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ROSE HILL

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*Wild Eyes*

**Rose Hill** Book #2

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*For all the ones who have felt crippled by the opinions of others. I hope you learn to love what you're doing so completely that all those critical voices cease to matter. And until then, remember that thriving is winning.*

*Go forth and thrive.*

# CONTENTS

[Content Warnings:](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)

[Chapter 32](#)

[Chapter 33](#)

[Chapter 34](#)

[Chapter 35](#)

[Chapter 36](#)

[Chapter 37](#)

[Chapter 38](#)

[Chapter 39](#)

[Chapter 40](#)

[Chapter 41](#)

[Chapter 42](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Sneak Peek of Wild Side](#)

[Sneak Peek of Wild Side](#)

[Books by Elsie Silver](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[The Elsie Silver Saloon](#)

[About the Author](#)

## CONTENT WARNINGS:

Childhood psychological abuse, childhood trauma, substance abuse/death  
by OD referenced on page.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## WEST

THE SUN IS SHINING, THE LAKE IS SPARKLING, AND THERE'S ANOTHER fucking tourist on the side of the road trying to get a selfie with a bear.

Not just any bear either. A *grizzly*.

"You have to be kidding me," I mutter as I press gently on the brakes of my pickup truck and shake my head. I don't have a clear shot of the woman, but I see skin-tight jeans, a crop top, and a waterfall of loose bronze waves spilling down her back in shiny ripples.

While the bear forages in the ditch behind her, she lifts one hand, gesturing to it wildly as she talks at the phone held up in front of her.

I pull over in front of her Tesla. Because of course she drives a Tesla. And she has to be a good thirty feet away from it, like she's slowly edged herself closer to the animal.

When I finally roll to a stop, I watch in pure, dumbfounded shock for a moment. During the summer months in Rose Hill, you see this city-folk stupidity, and it never fails to blow my mind. It's like people go from having "see a bear" on their bucket list to "get killed by a bear" on their bucket list.

I press the button to lower my window because I don't want to startle the animal, and I also don't particularly want to get out of my truck. I enjoy living, and my days of testing those limits are—mostly—behind me.

So using the calmest voice I can muster, I say, "Ma'am."

But she continues talking to the camera, clearly recording herself without a care in the world. "It was just a casual drive down a scenic backroad when—bam!—the most beautiful bear saunters down into this ditch behind me."

“Ma’am!” I lean against my door and wave my arm to catch her eye. Maybe my unwelcome voice in her video will snap her out of it.

And it does. She spins on me with furrowed brows, fiery eyes, and a face I’d know anywhere.

A face most of the world would know anywhere.

Yes, country music superstar Skylar Stone is mean-mugging me for interrupting her video. For a moment, I’m starstruck. At a loss for words. I suspect I know what brings her to town, but I don’t bother with small talk at a time like this. I don’t want to be known as the guy who stood by while a hungry grizzly devoured a beloved starlet.

“What?” she asks, arms held wide, like she’s not standing with her back to an unpredictable apex predator. “I’m going to have to rerecord this for my socials now.”

“That’s a goddamn grizzly bear. You need to get back in your car,” I hiss, hiking a thumb over my shoulder toward her car.

She shakes her head and continues glaring. “You know what I’m fucking sick of?”

“Is it living?” I bite out as instinct takes over and I step out of my truck. As much as I’d like to slam the door, I leave it open to avoid making more noise. “Because that’s what it looks like right now.”

She scoffs. “No. But I am fucking sick of people telling me what to do.”

Her piercing gaze rakes down my faded black jeans, the ones caught on the ridge of my scuffed charcoal Blundstones, before perusing back up to my plain white T-shirt. Her eyes hover over the hole near the neckline and a small wrinkle crops up on her dainty nose, as though she’s found proof that I’m not worthy of giving her advice.

I approach with caution, craning my neck to glance down the slope, where the telltale brown grizzly hump peeks out above the shrubs. I can hear its deep, satisfied grunts as it forages, likely ripping berries off a bush as an appetizer before it comes up and tears the limbs off our bodies for the main course.

“I relate. I really do. But this may not be the hill to die on right now. Literally and figuratively. If we survive this, I will drive you to a zoo and film your social media content for you. And I hate social media, but I don’t break promises.”

She follows my gaze and then lifts her chin to face me head-on. Plush, heart-shaped lips purse tightly and hazel eyes narrow at me like missiles

ready to launch. She hides her phone by crossing her tan arms.

Pure sass.

She reminds me of my six-year-old daughter, Emmy. Something that's only emphasized when she stomps one foot. The difference is, I'd have picked Emmy up like a football under one arm and gotten the hell outta here a solid sixty seconds ago.

"It's eating. It doesn't even know I'm here. And I've never seen a bear in person." She whines the last part, like I'm the bad guy ruining all her fun.

My jaw drops as I look this woman over. She's got diamond studs the size of ripe blueberries in her ears. They're so big that if she were anyone else, I'd think they were fake. "Listen, I get it. There aren't bears in the city. It's an experience. But that"—I point at the bear—"is not Winnie the Pooh."

Her expression is strained as she glances longingly back at the ditch. It's as though she sees my logic but so badly wishes she didn't.

I keep going because it seems like the children's fiction reference really hit home. "Eeyore isn't trapped in a well. Piglet isn't off finding him a pot of honey. Just...pretend I'm Owl, and I'm giving you really wise advice right now."

"But...there are babies." She all but coos the word *babies*, saying it with extra emphasis, like it should make this entire thing endearing. Like it makes her irrational behavior more logical somehow.

But anyone who knows about bears knows that things just got so much worse. I edge closer to the ditch, as though needing to see them with my own eyes to confirm just how bad this situation is. I crane my neck, and sure enough...there they are. Two.

"Please," I say, trying a less forceful approach while also filling my voice with as much pleading as I can muster. With one arm held out, I fold my fingers over my palm repeatedly, gesturing her forward like I might a skittish horse. As a horse trainer, I've got lots of experience with those. All bluster—until they're not.

She must pick up on the urgent tone in my voice because her shoulders fall, and she swallows heavily as her eyes dart back and forth between mine, seeming to weigh whether I'm trustworthy.

Finally, I get a nod and a tentative step away from the deep ditch. A heavy, relieved breath rushes from my lungs as she moves toward me.

But that relief is short-lived because, as soon as she moves away, the bear follows her as though attached to an invisible leash.

I can't blame it.

She's alluring. There's something about her that makes it hard to peel my eyes away. You can see it onscreen. Hear it on the radio. And it's even more pronounced in person.

"Okay, doll."

"Don't *doll* me—"

"You need to shut up," I blurt out, keeping my voice as even as possible. My gaze moves beyond her to the massive bear emerging from the slope, four-inch-long nails clacking as it takes its first steps onto the asphalt. The sound freezes Skylar in her tracks. "Walk toward me slowly. Do not run. Do not look behind you. Stay calm."

She blinks hard and fast. I can see she wants to tell me to go fuck myself, but she has some survival instinct underneath all that attitude because she follows my instructions.

The bear lets out a loud huff, and Skylar stutter-steps, wide eyes latching onto mine for dear life. I nod and gesture with my hand again. As though I can do a single fucking thing for her right now other than get her close enough to dive through the open door of my truck.

She continues walking, but her steps increase ever so slightly in speed. Her breathing turns ragged. I start to edge back toward my truck, hoping she'll follow.

"Good girl. You're doing so well." Any other time, I'd laugh at myself for talking to this woman like a horse. But in this moment, my skin hums with tension and my muscles coil as though ready to spring into action.

She nods, then peeks over her shoulder and makes a small squealing noise as if she's just realized the massive size of the bear following her.

But that noise was not the right one to make. Because the grizzly notices it and is suddenly more interested than it was. The bear stops and rears up onto its hind legs.

The sound it makes now is more of a bark, followed by a sniff and an interested head tilt.

A show of curiosity, not aggression.

Not yet anyway.

"Oh god, oh god, oh god," she whispers, her voice coming up choked and tearful.

With one hand outstretched, I summon all the calm within me. "Whatever you do, don't r—"

Before I can say the word *run*, she fucking sprints toward me. And against what would be most people's better judgment, I leap into action without thinking.

I head straight toward her.

And the bear.

The bear that is now pawing at the road like it's ready to charge. It takes a few powerful leaps forward before drawing back.

Now in defensive mode, I do the only thing I can think of. The instant I reach Skylar, my fingers wrap around her bicep, and I curl one arm around the back of her head before tossing us to the ground. My tall body covers her smaller one like a shield.

She squirms against me. "What are you—"

I cut her off by clamping a palm over her mouth, propping myself up on my opposite arm, and shaking my head. "Stop. Please stop. I need you to be quiet and still. And the bear will probably go away."

She nods subtly. Enough so that I can remove my hand and cage the entire top of her head in with my forearms.

Her terrified golden eyes search mine again and I can smell something sweet on her breath as she pants nervously into the air between us. Tangerine and sugar.

"Can we make it to your truck?"

I can barely hear her over the sound of my heart pounding in my ears. "We're not close enough and I don't like our odds of outrunning a grizzly."

"Okay." She licks her lips nervously and I watch a stray tear leak out of one eye. It rolls down over her temple before trailing toward her ear. I trace the wet path with my gaze before meeting hers and giving her my full attention, conveying an outward sense of calm that doesn't necessarily match the way I'm feeling inside.

More tears leak out as we stare at each other.

"I'm sorry." Her choked sob hits me hard in the chest.

I can hear the bear huffing as it draws within mere feet of us. I swear the ground trembles beneath the weight of its steps. Lighter footsteps thump from lower down in the ditch. And I assume those are the cubs.

My thumb rubs soft, slow circles over the crown of her head. "It's okay. You're okay. We're just gonna be quiet together and then everything is going to be okay." I whisper the words to her, but I say them for myself.

She blinks in recognition, and I blink back. Then I distract myself by counting the swirling hues of her irises. Brown, gold, green, and a delicate gray woven between them. Minimum four colors.

And even covered in a sheen of tears, they glow.

I'm not sure I've ever gotten this lost in a perfect stranger's eyes.

"Tell me it's going to be okay again." The words are a breath, weaving into the hush of her long exhale. Even this close, I barely hear them.

The tips of our noses brush as my face slants down over hers. My lips move silently against the skin on her cheek as I mouth the words, *It's going to be okay.*

I've done a lot of wild shit in my day. Done a few things that I'm surprised to have survived, if I'm being honest. But in those moments, I'd always been alone. There's something about lying this damn close to another person, knowing she could be the last thing I see, that makes everything around us stand still.

Shit, maybe I'm just getting old and sentimental.

Then I feel the hot, damp breath of the grizzly as it sniffs the back of my neck. An eerie sense of calm settles over me, even though it shouldn't. I'm calmer than I have any right to be. It's as though my body knows that giving into my own rising anxiety won't help.

Because while I may have seen my fair share of bears growing up in Rose Hill, I have yet to feel one breathing down my neck. To be frank, it's an experience I could have done without.

But there's no time for me to wallow in my anxiety. I have to remain composed for Skylar. So I keep my eyes locked on hers, willing her to stay still and in the moment with me even though she's clearly so far out of her element that she's on another planet.

Her lips part, and her breaths come fast and frantic. She clamps her eyes shut. I can smell the bear, so I'm sure she can too.

All sweat and musk and old gym shoes. It's overpowering. It's a combination I'll never forget.

The sun beats down on my back, and the heat of the bear's enormous body beside me makes the moment downright stifling. I rest my forehead against hers and try to regulate her breathing with my own.

*Three seconds in.*

*Three seconds out.*

Soon, the heat feels more bearable. The heart-pounding clatter of nails aren't as loud. The stench, less overpowering. The rustling from the ditch dissipates, and I assume the cubs have followed mom away too.

Skylar squirms a little and peeks up at me from beneath her thick lashes. "Did you see the babies? They're so cute."

I roll my forehead against hers as I stifle a laugh, wondering how I constantly end up in the orbit of women who are this atrocious at following simple instructions—even when their lives depend on it. "Let's stay quiet" is all I respond with.

I'm not sure how long we lie on the ground breathing in and out together. Five minutes? Ten minutes? Long enough that her knuckles must be cramping from clutching at my shirt. Her entire body is still trembling uncontrollably, so I smooth my hand over her hair to ease her shaking.

Logically, I know the bear has moved on, but I still feel like I could glance up and come face-to-face with it.

So I stay in place, stroking this woman's head and trying to get my bearings before I make a move to stand up.

To lighten the moment, I blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. "I saw the results of a survey recently that said six percent of Americans think they could beat a grizzly bear in hand-to-hand combat."

"What?" The question is breathless and hushed, but the expression on her face is pure disbelief.

"I know. Can you believe that?"

She stares at me like she's wondering if I'm for real right now. "Hand-to-hand combat?"

I nod down at her before peeking up over the top of her head.

No bear.

I push up onto my knees and twist to look back over my shoulder.

No bear.

I flop back onto my haunches and run my palms over my close-cut hair as I take in a full three-sixty view of our spot on the backroad.

No bear.

Just bluebird skies and warm yellow sunshine.

It's with a ragged sigh that I finally glance back down...to see I'm straddling Skylar Stone.

My eyes catch on the graceful line of her collarbone, the swell of her breasts pressed high over the neckline of her shirt. I close my eyes and

shake my head, but no—she’s still there. Under me.

With one hand, she wipes at her eyes but makes no move to escape me. She lies flopped on the road looking beautiful, and stunned, and completely exhausted. Her teeth strum at her bottom lip as though she’s thinking hard. And she doesn’t let go of my shirt. Her arm is straight, and her knuckles are still white as she grips the cotton.

Finally, a giddy laugh shakes her shoulders. “When they say six percent, though...it’s probably more.”

I sigh, and then I laugh with her. “Yeah, you gotta rule out children and the elderly.”

Her pointer finger taps at my thigh. “And women.”

“What?”

She rolls her eyes at me now. “Only a man would think he can fight a grizzly bear with his bare hands.”

“Rich coming from the woman who just tried to take her photo with one.”

“It was a video!”

I push to stand on wobbly legs and reach a hand down to pull her up. With a grin, I say, “Right. For your socials. That makes it *so* much better.”

Her eyes slice to my hand, but all traces of earlier humor have been erased. Tensions are already running high, and now she’s annoyed.

“Don’t judge me. You don’t even know what I was doing.”

“Okay, what were you doing?”

Her chin lifts. “Creating relatable content.”

“To be decided. I’ll have to search up the percentage of Americans who have been charged by a grizzly in their lifetime.”

She pauses for a beat, as though shocked by my offhanded joke, then she grits out, “You don’t know me well enough to mock me.” A frustrated growl rumbles in her throat as she claps her palm against mine aggressively.

With one firm tug, I haul her up. She’s lighter than I expected, though, and I pull too hard, which throws her off balance.

Her free hand lands on my chest to steady herself, the tips of her fingers awfully close to that hole in my shirt. She stares for a beat and pulls away abruptly, like she’s been burned.

I may not know her, but I know her face has been splashed all over the headlines lately for freezing up in front of the camera.

Today, though? Her words seem to flow just fine.



“It was all going great until you showed up acting like fucking Crocodile Dundee crossed with...with...” She waves a hand over me as she struggles to find the right insult. “With Superman or something.”

I lift a hand and scrub it over my chin. “It’s the strong jawline, isn’t it?”

“No, it’s the obnoxious hero complex.”

I snort and cross my arms, regarding her with amusement. I always perceived her as this sweet southern-belle type. All airy laughter and good gollys rather than curse words and cutting one-liners.

I wasn’t looking close enough. Because she is none of those things.

“And the”—she waves a hand over my body—“the know-it-all smugness.”

Now I’m full-on grinning. “We both know I saved your ass. Just say thank you.”

She shakes her head as she crouches to pick up her phone. “I would have. But now you’re demanding it of me, and that makes it feel forced and insincere. And I’m so sick of everyone treating me like I owe them something.” She brushes at her jeans, agitation lining every movement as she tries and fails to get all the gravel and dust off her body while muttering, “Skylar, do this. Skylar, do that. Skylar, smile and wave. Skylar, say thank you.”

With a tired sigh, she stops and looks up. “You know what? I’m sorry. I’m having a bad month. You don’t deserve this shit. I’ve put you through enough today. Thank you for being willing to die for me. That’s new and unexpected and something I’ll have to process with my therapist at a later date.”

I quirk a brow at her confession. She’s still trembling, so I try to draw the conversation out. Give her a second to catch her breath. “A bad month?”

A forced smile touches her lips, but then it falters as she kicks at a stone near her sandal-clad foot. “Actually, more like a bad year.”

“I’ve had those before,” I reply, watching her carefully. I can’t help but wonder what’s got a woman who seems so strong acting like she can’t meet my eyes.

She redirects the conversation with phoney brightness. “Right, so anyway, I need to find Wild Rose Records. It’s a little boutique recording studio. Brand-new. Maybe you know the owner? Ford Grant? I took a scenic route and got lost. These roads aren’t even marked, and there’s no

reception. And I thought it would make me feel alive to just like...hit the open road. Ya know?"

I scoff good-naturedly as I turn to walk back toward my truck. When I grip the still-open door, I glance over my shoulder at her. She looks beautiful, and confused, and totally forlorn.

And I'm not the least put off by her outburst. In fact, I like that she came back from that terrifying moment all feisty.

"Nothing quite like a near-death experience to make us feel alive, am I right?" I haul myself up into the truck. "Follow me, and I'll take you to Ford Grant."

Skylar walks my way with surprise painted on her face. "You know him?"

I turn the key in the ignition right as she approaches my open window. "You could say that."

Her brows knit together and she seems nervous as she tucks her hair behind her ears. For the first time today, she looks beaten down.

"I'm sorry. I'm just overwhelmed by...by everything. That was fucking terrifying, and I don't know how to thank you. I don't think anyone has ever been willing to lay their life on the line for me."

She says it so offhandedly. It catches me off guard.

*What a damn shame.*

The thought pops up in my head instantly. What a shame to be an adult and not have felt that kind of loyalty. To be as beloved as Skylar Stone is and still not feel it.

When she peeks up at me from beneath her thick lashes, I offer her a reassuring wink. "You can thank me by not apologizing anymore. Then you can get in your car and follow me."

She nods, teeth digging into that distractingly full bottom lip once again. "I don't even know your name."

"Weston Belmont. Rose Hill's very own Super-Crocodile-Dundee-Man at your service," I reply with a dramatic salute.

She rolls her eyes, and a ghost of a smile touches her lips. I tap my hand on the outside of my truck as I roll forward.

I'm happy to have saved her life, but I've still got four horses to work today, a farm with chores that never seem to end, and two little kids who need their dad. I have to get going.

No matter how tempting it is to stick around and chat.

“Wait! Don’t you want to know my name?” she calls as I pull away slowly, giving her time to hop in her Tesla and trail behind. I don’t respond because I know who she is. I’ve been a closet Skylar Stone fan for years.

But I don’t want to make her uncomfortable, so I don’t say that. Plus, there will be plenty of opportunities for conversation.

Because if she’s heading to Wild Rose Records...we’re about to be neighbors.