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# WILD SIDE

ROSE HILL SERIES



SUNDAY TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

# ELSIE SILVER



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# **WILD SIDE**

**ELSIE SILVER**



PIATKUS

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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.