

A romantic couple is shown in a close embrace, kissing on a beach at sunset. The man, with a beard and short hair, is wearing a light-colored t-shirt and jeans. The woman has long dark hair and is wearing a white, ruffled, short-sleeved dress. The background features a calm sea, a rocky shore, and trees silhouetted against the warm, golden light of the setting sun. The overall mood is intimate and tender.

hopeless

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.

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.

Also by Elsie Silver

Flawless
Heartless
Powerless
Reckless
Hopeless

Hopeless
ELSIE
SILVER



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.

2

Bailey

It's been two weeks since Beau Eaton snuck into my bar in the middle of the day. Two weeks since I took one look at him and almost dropped the glass in my hand. He's hard to miss with his broad shoulders and tall, well-built frame, and long legs that have him a head above most men who walk through that door. Light brown hair, a little too long, flops over his forehead, the perfect frame for silver-gray eyes. Even slightly unkempt the way he is right now, Beau Eaton is fucking hot. Totally intimidating.

And hot is one thing, but Beau is nice too. And funny.

A true triple threat—or at least he was.

He's never treated me like I'm wearing a scarlet letter on my chest, even when others have. I only know him from the bar, but he's never held my family's reputation against me. He's always offered kind words, a polite touch on my elbow, and a generous tip at the end of the night.

But he's still the town prince, and I'm still the town trash.

He's the hero, and I'm the bartender.

He's an Eaton, and I'm a Jansen.

And yet, he's here every damn day since the afternoon he walked in looking like a caged animal who broke free.

Here every damn day drinking with fucking Gary.

The first day started out sweet enough. He was endearing, if I'm being honest. But for the past two weeks, his presence has slowly morphed from light to dark, gathering itself into an ominous storm cloud.

It's getting to where he's making everyone around him uncomfortable. You can sense the electricity in the air, like lightning ready to strike.

I'm feeling fed up with him too. He's reminding me of my dad or my brothers, and I have sparse patience for that kind of toxicity.

He comes in mid-afternoon and nurses his pints, quietly simmering. I swear I watch his frustration bubble to a boil right before my eyes. His hand stays clamped around the glass, and he takes tight sips from it with white knuckles.

I'm almost positive he's going to shatter it one of these days. He seems too big, too strong, too angry to be squeezing something that fragile so hard.

When people talk to him, he runs his tongue along the backs of his teeth like he's trying to keep from biting them or something.

"So, what'd you do when you spent those two weeks stuck in the desert?"

My jaw clamps at Gary's words. I know he means well, but he's not reading the room right now. Not reading Beau. Must have missed the way he went taut and never relaxed again when a booming thunderstorm rolled through not thirty minutes ago.

Yeah, Beau looks ready to burst tonight, but Gary hasn't noticed.

"Tried to stay alive," Beau bites out. There's a tremor in his voice—a quality that reminds me of a dog when they growl at you. It's a warning to back away.

But Gary is too damn drunk to notice.

"They say you missed your flight on purpose to stay behind and save that journalist. That's some real hero complex shit." The words overrun each other, emerging in a sloppy jumble.

Beau just stares at his pint, gazing into the golden liquid. They've already talked about this subject, but alcohol makes a person repetitive. I know because I've spent years studying drunk people. I'm an expert.

"Imagine where your life would be if you hadn't."

My lashes flutter shut because my gut tells me a line exists, and Gary just stepped right over it.

Or right into it.

Beau's thickly corded arm swipes out, knocking both their glasses onto the bar floor. Beer sprays across the smattering of patrons seated nearby, and if not for the music blaring at this point in the night, I'm certain The Railspur would be dead silent as they watch the altercation unfold.

Beau stands so fast his stool topples behind him with a crash. Gary looks instantly terrified. “Imagine where your life would be if you didn’t sit here drinking and embarrassing yourself every fucking day, Gary. Ever think about that?”

His chest heaves, the splatter of liquid making the cotton of his T-shirt stick to his clearly defined pecs. Only someone who grew up in the household I did could be smack dab in the middle of a moment like this and be checking a guy out.

Beau isn’t my dad, though, and I’m not worried the way I would be if I were in the house I grew up in.

“Beau,” my voice comes out clear, not a single waver to it.

“All alone every damn day, a young girl as your best friend. Seems a little pervert—”

“Beau Eaton, shut your mouth and get your ass outside.”

His head swivels, gray eyes latching onto mine like he just noticed my presence. Like he didn’t expect little Bailey Jansen to be the one barking at him.

He straightens, but I don’t care how tall he is.

He doesn’t scare me.

Not even when he’s like this.

I point to the emergency exit that leads to the patio, and my hand doesn’t shake at all. I’m not nervous. I’m pissed off.

Beau turns stiffly, striding around the end of the bar, past the server station, and straight out into the fading light. If I didn’t know how many drinks he’s had, I wouldn’t notice the slight stagger in his steps or the way he leans on the door just a little heavier than necessary.

Before I cut through the small wooden push gate to follow Beau, I glance back at Gary.

“Too far?” he asks, averting his gaze.

My lips flatten against each other. “Yeah, Gary. Too far.”

He swipes a hand through his thinning hair and drops his head, hand tapping over the keys he laid on the bar the minute he sat down. “I’ll catch a cab.”

I respond with a firm nod before shoving out the door onto the darkened patio. The summer storm caused everyone sitting here to flee, their forgotten glasses now partially filled with rainwater.

I can still smell the storm. And Beau. Pine and lemon mingle with something deeper, more sensual. Tobacco maybe, like a cigar.

He's slumped against the outer brick facade of the train station-turned-bar. As I approach, he shoves his fists into the pockets of his jeans, chin dropped almost to his chest, eyes fixed on the sneakers he's always sporting.

They feel out of place for him—too white and shiny, too pristine.

"You can't pull that shit in my bar," I say.

He scoffs, still refusing to meet my gaze. "Your bar, huh?"

"Yes, Beau. My bar. My place. The only place in this town where people don't treat me like shit. I bust my ass working here. I bust my ass trying to make customers like me. And behind that wood is *my* bubble. Gary isn't perverted, he's fucking lonely. And he's one of the few people who is consistently kind to me. So, if you think you can waltz into my bar acting like an untouchable asshole and scaring all my regulars away with your antics, you've got another thing coming."

Now his eyes are on me, a little unsteady but narrowed. "Untouchable asshole?"

"Yes." I cross my arms, like they might give me some protection from him. He looks a little wild tonight, a little dangerous—not like the happy-go-lucky guy we all thought we knew before his last deployment.

Silvery light plays off his features, his tan skin and luminous eyes almost glowing as he stares me down. The only thing that moves between us is his chest, rising and falling in time with mine.

But I don't drop his gaze. I'm so over men trying to intimidate me. And it feels wrong on him, so I don't let him have it.

After our staredown moves from a heated moment into awkward territory, he blinks away, jaw flexing.

"Did I embarrass myself?" His voice is all gravel and rumbles over my skin.

"You did. But the good news is your last name is Eaton, so everyone will forgive you and go back to kissing your feet the minute you walk in there and flash them a smile."

"Bailey, what the fuck? Did you really just say that to me?"

"Yes." My head tilts. "Because it's true. All I had to do was be born into my family and everyone looks at me like they're waiting for that part of my genetics to rear its ugly head. Like I'll go from hardworking and polite to a

hillbilly criminal mastermind in the blink of an eye just because my last name is Jansen.” His brow furrows deeper the longer I talk. “So, yeah. I think you’re gonna be fine, even though you embarrassed yourself.”

“That’s not true.”

“What part?”

“People thinking that about you.”

“Ha!” The laugh lurches from my throat, sharp and lacking any humor. “That is adorably naive,” I say, shaking my head in disbelief.

“Well, I don’t see you that way.”

I swallow now, eyes flitting away. It’s true that Beau has always been kind to me—to everyone. Maybe that’s why this new version of him pisses me off so much. “I know.” I shoot him a grateful smile. “You’re one of the good ones, Beau. That’s why you can’t keep doing this.”

“Doing what?”

“Sitting at my bar and drinking yourself into a sullen stupor every night.”

A quiet keening noise escapes him as his head rolls back and forth against the wall, hands coming out of his pockets to scrub at his face. “It helps me sleep at night.”

“What?” I can hear my heart pounding in my ears. Somehow, that’s not the response I expected.

It’s painfully honest.

“The alcohol. It helps me fall asleep. I go home to the ranch and crash. I haven’t been sleeping well these days.”

My stomach drops at his admission.

“You telling me you drive like this?” My finger waves up and down him, catching on the bulge of keys in his front pocket.

His wide eyes plead with me, desperate and forlorn. I feel monumentally stupid for assuming he was different from Gary. That he’d be in control enough to get himself a cab rather than get behind a wheel in this state.

I was foolish to fall for the chucklehead good-guy act when he’s clearly drowning. I can see him sinking right before my eyes. And I want no part in that. I can’t afford to be taken down with him.

“Beau.” I step forward, right up to him. He tenses, but I’m too pissed off to have many boundaries right now. And I’ve always felt more at ease around him than most people. He’s always had a way of making me feel like that, which is why I don’t think twice about shoving my hand into his pocket and wrapping my fingers around his keys.

His body is rigid. His muscles coil, but he makes no move to stop me. The jangle of metal between us has me looking up into his eyes for a sign I've taken things too far.

I angle my face up to his and get caught in his thrall for a moment.

I only see those moonlit eyes and the way his Adam's apple bobs as he swallows.

"I'll make you a chamomile tea," I say, breaking the tense silence between us. "Helps with sleep. But you need to promise you won't make a scene like that again."

He nods and drops his head. "I promise."

The tension between us evaporates as he follows me back into the bar. Prying eyes stare at him as he stands, swaying on the spot, like he's going to be the one to clean up the shattered glass.

"Sit your ass down, Eaton," I grumble as I do it instead. The last thing I want to clean up is his blood.

I can tell he's ashamed. And he should be, but I will not pile on his punishment. He's beating himself up just fine already. Instead, I prepare him a steaming mug of tea, wipe up the beer he spilled, sweep the evidence of his outburst into a dustpan, and carry on with my night like he isn't here.

I refill the tea.

He drinks the tea.

We don't talk, but he watches me, spinning the mug between his broad palms. I feel the outline of his keys in the back pocket of my jeans.

Pete, our cook, walks out of the back at 10 p.m. "You all good out here, Bails? Kitchen's closed."

I scan the bar. It's busy for a Monday night, but manageable. We're only open for two more hours anyway. "Yup. All good here," I reply, giving him a brief thumbs up.

Pete returns the motion with a smile and heads out the front doors. He got hired from the city, which means he doesn't automatically hate me. Which makes working with him a breeze.

When I check Beau's tea again, he stops me. "So, he leaves, and you're here alone for the rest of the night?"

I shrug as I take his mug to add water. "Yeah. I'm a shift manager now, so if it was busier, I'd have kept a server on, but I cut her early."

He rests his forearms on the bar, pads of his long fingers pressed together like he needs something to do with them. "But you're alone? You shut

down alone?”

Steam rises as hot water pours from the dispenser.

“Correct.”

As I slide the mug across the bar top until it bumps into the tips of his fingers, I try to remember how many refills I’ve done since the tea is looking awfully watery.

I crouch down and rummage through the box of tea on the bottom shelf. The Railspur isn’t a big tea place, but I find another bag of chamomile and drop it into the mug, making a mental note to have our general manager, Jake, order more.

When I tie the string around the handle, Beau doesn’t move his palms from around the cup, like he’s desperate to soak up the heat.

“Does the manager know this?”

“Jake? Presumably. He makes the schedule. Never met the new owner, totally hands-off investor. So as long as the place is making money, I doubt they care either.”

His brow furrows. “That’s not safe for you. What if something happens?”

My fingertips brush against his hand as I complete the knot.

I peek up now, lifting one eyebrow. “Like some guy pitching a fit and knocking beer all over the place?”

He glares at me, and I try to keep from smirking at him.

With a nonchalant shrug, I answer the question. “I deal with it.” *Like I always have.* I’ve been looking out for myself for as long as I can remember. It doesn’t feel like such a hardship anymore. Just reality.

The only thing Beau gives me in response is a hard stare and a grunt.

But he doesn’t leave. He drinks tea at my bar for the rest of the night. For two hours, he sits there, keeping watch. And when I kick everyone out at midnight and shut things down, he stays behind, silently guarding me.

“Are you sober?” I ask as he walks me through the darkened parking lot to my car.

“I’ve been drinking fucking chamomile tea for two hours. I’ve never been more sober or hydrated in my life.”

I suck in a deep breath and pull his keys from my back pocket, holding them out to him on a flat palm. “Don’t pull that shit on me again, Beau.”

His throat works as he reaches forward and swipes the keys from me. “You’re not how I remember you, Bailey.”

I let myself smirk now because, of course, we all change. I couldn't stay that frozen, terrified little girl forever.

I wanted to change.

"You're not how I remember you either, Beau."

His eyes shift back and forth between mine, like he's searching for something in them. "What days do you work?"

I snort, glancing down to pull my own keys from my purse. "What days don't I work?"

"Okay, what nights do you work alone?"

"Sunday through Tuesday," I reply, zipping my bag.

Beau nods and says a terse, "Okay," before spinning on his heel and giving me his back, looking every bit the military man he is. Head held high, shoulders perfectly straight.

Like he's some sort of knight in shining armor.

One who starts pulling up a stool every Sunday through Tuesday to drink chamomile tea until midnight, so I don't have to close by myself.

3

Beau

Cade: You're coming to the wedding, right?

Beau: It's my little brother's wedding. Of course I'm coming.

Cade: You're not exactly reliable these days. You no-show. And when you do show, you're a miserable asshole.

Beau: I'm only doing my best imitation of you.

Cade: I'm not miserable anymore though. Just an asshole. That's why everyone voted and decided I had to be the one who sent this message.

Beau: Everyone voted? Very democratic.

Cade: Willa says you need to apologize to Winter. She's in the wedding party.

Beau: Willa doesn't run my show.

Cade: You must be new here. Willa runs everyone's show.



A song I don't recognize plays from the speakers, but I two-step anyway. I'm wearing a suit that feels fucking awful, and these dress shoes are rubbing my grafts uncomfortably. Winter Hamilton has one hand on my shoulder and her nose is tipped high as she stares just beyond me. Or possibly at the top of my ear. I'm not entirely sure which.

Dancing with Winter is more uncomfortable than anything going on in my shoes. And that's saying something.

For an entire song, we dance like stiff pieces of wood, ignoring each other. I can see Rhett and Summer dancing too. They look so fucking happy

it's hard to watch, but I don't know where to land my gaze. It seems like everyone is watching me. I've got my hands locked in place because I don't want to slide too low or too high on Winter's ribcage. Those are no-fly zones, and based on the way her baby daddy, Theo, is glaring at us, every inch of her might be a no-fly zone.

The music switches over to a slower song and Winter mumbles, "Thanks. That was the junior high dance blast from the past I've always dreamed of."

"Good god, Winter." My fingers tighten. "One more dance."

"Why?" Her head tilts and her blue eyes home in on my face. I feel like I'm in therapy again. Something broken that needs fixing. A specimen for medical professionals to poke and prod and analyze. Between my burns and my brain and my insomnia, I'm like a shrink's wet fucking dream.

I hate that feeling. That expression. Like I'm a big dumb goldfish in a bowl.

"Because I need to apologize to you."

She just shrugs. "No, you don't."

"I blew up at you at a family dinner."

I'd quit seeing all my doctors and wasn't sleeping. I was sore and tired and just wanted to rest for a bit. Winter saw right through it when I dragged her down the hallway to talk. Right through my request for prescription sleeping pills—because over-the-counter ones weren't doing the trick. Her knowing smirk and crossed arms, followed by a calm "no" pushed me over the edge.

I exploded. She didn't deserve it. Everyone heard.

Winter's lips form a slight curve. "Did you? I don't remember."

"Winter," I bite out, annoyed that she's making this so hard for me.

"Beau," is all she responds with as we continue swaying on the wooden dance floor. Over her shoulder, I catch sight of Bailey. Her glossy hair shines like the top of the river, reflecting every light. She's not a guest, but she's tending bar for the reception, and that's good enough for me.

"I shouldn't have done that." My eyes stay on Bailey as I speak to Winter. Focusing on her makes this easier. She's become a calm spot in a mind that is a turbulent storm.

"No, probably not. But you know what, Beau?"

I finally glance down at Winter. "What?"

"We're all human, and we all make mistakes. Especially when we're struggling."

“I’m not struggling.”

She snorts and then gives me an exaggerated wink. “Cool. Me neither.”

My molars clamp down and I glance back at Bailey. “Okay. Maybe I am.”

But I relax when I’m looking at her.

“You sleeping now?”

I roll my lips together and consider lying to her. But Winter is so nonsense—so not flowery and overly doting—it’s easier to be real with her than with the rest of my family. “No. Well, I’ve gotten on a schedule, and that seems to help a bit.” I don’t tell her that by *schedule* I mean planning my week around sitting at Bailey’s bar drinking chamomile tea. But the truth is, sitting there has given me a purpose, and it feels good.

“Seeing anyone?”

“Like a doctor?”

She nods.

“Nah.”

“Why see a professional when we can diagnose ourselves, right?”

I smirk but say nothing.

“A childhood filled with neglect means I learned to survive by not relying on anyone,” she says. “Boom. Diagnosed. Saved myself hundreds of dollars. You go.”

I curve a brow as I consider what to say next. “PTSD.”

“Yeah.” Her nose wrinkles as the song nears its end. “So generic. I can see why you wouldn’t want to talk to a professional about that.”

“Winter, are you making fun of me? I can’t fucking tell.”

She pats me on the shoulder. “You’re big and handsome, Beau. Some people might think that means you’re stupid. I think you let people think you are because it’s easier that way.”

“Wow. Thank you. I’m endlessly flattered, Dr. Hamilton.”

“But I know better. You know better. We both know therapy is good but we both don’t go. So we’re just doing the best we can.”

“What does that mean?” My brow furrows, and she steps away at the end of the song.

“Fuck if I know. I’ve had a lot of champagne to medicate myself through this family event. Have you tried it? It’s delicious. At any rate, no hard feelings. Water under the bridge, as they say. But if you need anything, you’ve got my number.”

We shake hands. Then she turns and walks over to Theo, who is eyeing her up like she might be dessert. That's hard to watch too. So I walk toward someone who isn't.

I'm drawn to Bailey through the crowd like a magnet. Or maybe I've just become the new miserable regular who sits on a stool waiting for her to finish work. Like a sad puppy dog.

But she talks to me like no one else does. About inane things. And sometimes we're just quiet together.

And that quiet is comfortable.

When I lean against the bar, she barely acknowledges my presence. She doesn't need to. She knows I'm here.

"No chamomile tea. But you look like you could use a pick-me-up." She slides a glass of Coca-Cola in front of me, not realizing that *she's* the pick-me-up.

"Thanks," I reply, hunkering down against the bar, preparing myself to emulate what we do at The Railspur. I told my family I'd be at the wedding, and I am. But the truth is, it's overwhelming. It's hot, and loud, and busy in this barn turned event space, and I don't like it.

"How ya doin', soldier?" Bailey asks, propping a hip against the ice well to face me. She crosses her arms and inspects me a little too closely, as if she can sense that something is isn't right.

I stare back at her, absently wondering how many freckles dot her nose. Wondering if they only crop up in the summer or if they linger through the winter. I've never looked at her close enough to notice. There's one just above her lip that I'm pretty sure is always there.

I tear my gaze away and glance at the dance floor, seeing all my family members together. It's nice to see them happy. I put them all through so much. And yet, I take a deep swig of soda, peek back at Bailey, and say, "I'm struggling."

She nods. "Trust your struggle, Beau."

"What does that mean?"

"If we're struggling, we're still in motion, yeah? Heading somewhere better. That's what I keep telling myself anyway."

My chest tightens. I don't want Bailey to struggle.

I'm where I am by choice. She's where she is by birth. It seems profoundly unfair.

But I lift my glass to her all the same. “I’ll cheers to that. To struggling together.”

She laughs lightly and lifts her drink from behind the bar, clinking her glass against mine. “Less lonely that way, for sure.”

It’s a simple exchange. Probably nothing noteworthy to the average person beyond two fucked-up people commiserating.

And yet, knowing I have something in common with Bailey makes me feel instantly lighter.

I wish it was her I’d been out there dancing with.



Some people might find the blue sky and the chirping of birds charming. The smell of fresh mountain air and all that. And maybe I’m being ungrateful—that’s a distinct possibility—but the charm is all lost on me.

“Beau?”

My older brother’s voice cuts into my thoughts as I sit up on the back of a horse, staring over the ridge at a valley of cows who all look the fucking same. They look the same, they eat the same thing every day, they follow each other around almost blindly.

Everything about their existence seems very simple. Boring even.

And yet they all seem happy.

I wish I were a cow. Wish I could find some joy in the monotony of ranch life. Instead, I’m restless and writhing. Trapped beneath the surface of the perfectly manicured façade I slip on for the benefit of everyone around me.

They want me to be okay. And I’m not. Not really. I want them to think I am. But these days? These days, I suck at maintaining my cover.

“Beau!” Cade’s voice is real mad now, and I can hear the danger in it. If I were his son, Luke, I’d be trembling in my boots.

But I’m not.

So I turn my head slowly to glance at my brother. “You’re dressed like some sort of emo cowboy. Why are you wearing all black on such a hot day?”

He shakes his head in disbelief. “Did you not hear me talking to you?”

I heard my name, but not much else.

“Sorry, just kinda got lost in enjoying the view. Blue skies, the birds chirping.” I wave a hand over the horizon. “It’s nice.”

My brother blinks at me, clearly unsure of what to say next. His eyelashes are so dark, he almost reminds me of a cow with the slow, lazy way he blinks at me.

“Hey, why do cows have such long eyelashes?” I ask, abruptly switching the subject.

His brow furrows in my direction beneath the brim of his cap. “What?”

“Their eyelashes. They’re just so damn long. What’s the point?”

What’s the point of anything?

The words crop up in my head. But they’re immediately followed by Bailey’s wisdom from this past weekend. And that has my lips tipping up ever so slightly.

Trust your struggle.

So I do. I trust that there’s a perfectly good reason my brain needs to know about cow eyelashes.

Cade clears his throat. I’m clearly confusing the hell out of him. And he’s doing the thing my family does where they cater to me, no matter how ridiculous I act. Tiptoe around me like it helps me when they accommodate my every whim somehow.

Not like Bailey, who gives me shit at every turn.

“It’s just to protect their eyeballs. Dust, rain, insects. That kind of thing.”

“Huh.” I rest my gloved hands on the horn of my saddle and gaze down at the whole dumb herd of them. “I should have figured that one out. Seems obvious now that you say it.”

He hits me with a forced smile, and I stifle a laugh. Cade pretending to be all soft and sensitive is too fucking awkward to take. I wish he’d make a mean joke and threaten to kick my ass.

That would make me feel normal again.

“Ready then?”

Ready.

I stare down at the field. His question is one I’ve heard before. And yet, it’s monumentally different right now.

There’s no adrenaline, no thrill, no life-or-death repercussions.

“Oh shit, hang on.” I shift in my saddle and reach into my back pocket, pulling my phone out and staring at it like there’s a call coming through. All I see is the background picture, which features Luke grinning ear to ear

after we threw watermelons out the window of my moving truck. The memory of speeding down a back road, watching them explode on the asphalt, and hearing him squeal with glee never fails to make me smile.

Especially since Cade told us not to.

“Jasper’s calling. One sec.”

Cade rolls his eyes and mumbles, “Catch up,” before urging his mare forward toward the path that leads down into the valley.

“Hey man!”

I’m met with silence. Obviously. Because I’m faking this call.

“Uh-huh.” I give Cade a firm thumbs up when he turns back to look at me.

“Right. Oh shit. That does sound important.”

Cade has started his descent. He’s begun to disappear behind the crest of the hill, but I carry on anyway.

“You sure Sloane can’t help you with that?”

Pause.

“Oh. She’s in the city, huh? Okay, I’ll see what I can do.”

I wait several more seconds before adding, “Alright, talk soon.” Then, with a light cluck, I urge my horse closer to the edge of the ridge. I can see where Cade has hit flat ground below and the other guys who work for him already waiting down there. I’m hit with a pang of guilt. Guilt that I can’t just suck it up and go do the job.

I know I need to stop bailing on everyone. I know I promised to work the family ranch with Cade.

But I can’t. I just ... *can’t*.

That knowledge doesn’t stop me from feeling like shit when I call down, though. “Hey Cade!” He pulls up and turns in the saddle to glare at me. It’s like he knows what’s coming. “Just got a call from Jasper! He needs my help. I’m gonna peel out and then try to make it back to wrap up the day with you and the crew.”

All he gives me is a nod. He knows I won’t be back.

I nod in return before I turn my mount to walk away. Trying to keep my shame at bay.

Once I’m out of earshot, I lift my phone and call Jasper for real. He picks up on the fourth ring. “Workin’ hard or hardly workin’?”

I can always trust Jasper to crack me up, razz me a bit. He hasn’t taken to smothering me since I got back. In fact, he mostly lets me come to him

when I'm ready. Jasper knows trauma. He knows when to push and when to sit back. And he knows how it is to have everyone staring at you, waiting for something to happen, like you're an experiment in a Petri dish.

These days, I feel like I understand him better than ever.

"How'd you guess?" The thump of hooves on the dry ground beneath me rattles my bones, and I can already sense my body starting to relax as I head away from the crew.

"Well, Beau, the only thing reliable about you these days is how unreliable you are."

"Harsh."

He snorts. "But true. You're a big boy. You can take it."

"That's what she said."

He huffs out a laugh, and I can clearly envision the expression on his face—amused but sharp. We've known each other since we were fifteen, practically glued together since he came to live with our family. I don't get much past him anymore.

"So I need you to do me a solid."

He doesn't even hesitate. "Alright."

"If Cade asks, I need you to corroborate my story that you called me away from work because you needed help."

"With what?"

"I didn't say. You pick."

"Okay, I'll tell him I was missing Sloane and that you offered to come dance like a ballerina for me to make me feel better."

"I would if you wanted me to," I deadpan.

He laughs at that. "I know you would."

"Let's say your car battery died and you needed a jump."

"I would never let my battery get old enough to die."

So literal.

"Cade wouldn't know that, though."

He grunts his assent. "It's like we're teenagers all over again. Tricking Cade into thinking we're totally above board."

I chuckle. "The good old days."

That one-liner strikes my friend silent for a beat too long. "There are still good days to come, Beau."

"Of course, I know." I sigh, wanting to end this call before it veers into territory I'm not ready for.

“Is there a reason we’re pulling one over on Cade? Planning on telling me where you’ll be if you aren’t dancing for me or giving my car a jump?”

“Thanks, man. Talk later.” I forge ahead quickly before hanging up.

And then I head straight for where the best part of my day always is.

The place that I’ve come to associate with both peace and purpose.

The stool at the end of Bailey Jansen’s bar.

4

Beau

Rhett: Thank you for coming to the wedding.

Beau: Of course. Where else would I have been?

Rhett: Great question. No one knows where you hang out anymore. Only that you disappear and talk to no one.

Beau: I talk to people.

Rhett: You can talk to me too. You know that, right?

Beau: Of course. I know that. Congratulations, the wedding was beautiful. I'm very happy for you and Summer.

Rhett: Thanks. Love you, Beau-Beau. You doing okay? Like really?

Beau: Yeah, I'm great.



“Have you ever had anal sex?”

As Bailey's sugary voice cuts through the loud music at The Railspur, I spray hot tea from my mouth. My attempt to cover it with my palm only results in me getting soaked. Hot water drips down my forearm and lands on my lap. Pretty sure my eyes have popped right out of their sockets onto the wooden bar top that separates me from sweet, quiet little Bailey Jansen.

Sweet, quiet little Bailey Jansen, who I now spend a good three to four nights a week around.

Sweet, quiet little Bailey Jansen, who just asked me about anal sex like she was asking about whether I take cream in my coffee.

She tosses a rag onto the bar. “Clean that up.”

Only Bailey would tell me to clean it up rather than do it herself. That's what I've come to realize about her on these nights I've spent sitting at her bar.

That's what I like about her.

She's not a kiss ass, she's not a pushover, and she doesn't tiptoe around me.

She also might not be as sweet and quiet as I thought.

In a world that feels horribly boring and mundane, Bailey Jansen has proven to be incredibly interesting.

That's why I keep coming back. It's more than just worrying about her being alone.

"Why are you asking me about anal sex?" I mumble as I wipe the bar top and dab off my arm. "And so loudly. People are going to get the wrong idea." I turn, looking around to see if anyone else heard.

Her lips twitch where she stands at the tap pouring a pint, those dark chocolate irises slicing my way from beneath the fringe of her lashes. "People already have the wrong idea about me, Beau."

She turns away, walking down the narrow space behind the bar to the red-haired guy who sits at the opposite end, phone in his hands, eyes down. "Here ya go, Earl," Bailey announces, tossing down a coaster and then the beer on top.

He glances at her but doesn't say thank you. And it irks me.

When she turns back to face me, her eyes are wide, lips drawn back in a cringe. She walks straight at me, holding my gaze, her hips swaying.

She and I have fallen into a comfortable rhythm in the last couple of weeks. One where we talk while I pretend I don't notice how fucking beautiful she is for fear of becoming the weird old creeper who sits here all night.

She props her forearms against the bar right in front of me, a conspiratorial grin on her face. I try not to stare at her breasts pressed against the thin cotton of the frilly off-the-shoulder peasant top she's wearing. But the shimmer in her eyes or the gloss on her lips aren't any less distracting.

"Earl only comes in now and then," she says, flashing white teeth as she peeks back over her shoulder. "But when he does, he *always* watches porn on his phone. And it's *always* anal. I just wasn't sure how common it was. You know?"

“He does *what?*” Alarm bells sound in my mind. I do not know how she can joke about this asshole.

“You heard me.” Her lips roll together like she’s trying to bite back a laugh, and my eyes follow the motion.

“That’s not funny, Bailey. He’s watching porn and looking at you. In public.”

She rolls her eyes. “As opposed to in private?”

“He’s looking at *you*.” The muscles in my back tighten. “Thinking about *you*.”

She shrugs. “Probably.”

“How can you possibly be okay with that?”

“I don’t usually ask a person’s permission before thinking about them while I masturbate.”

To cover my shock, I just glare at her.

Bailey sighs and pulls away just a bit. “Listen, I didn’t say I was okay with it. But it’s kind of funny, or at least I have to roll with it being funny. Because I don’t get to pitch a fit every time something makes me uncomfortable.” Her fingers tap the bar top. “Welcome to being a Jansen. No one cares if I’m comfortable or not. And if I’m anything short of pleasant, I’m *just like my brothers*.”

The smile she gives me now is full of you’re-adorably-naive vibes and I hate this for her. I hate that a town that’s been so good to me and my family has been so hard on a girl who didn’t ask for the hand she’s been dealt.

Beyond her, I see Earl’s eyes lift and rake over Bailey’s ass.

I guess that’s why I find myself up off my stool. Walking down the length of the bar.

Right toward Earl.

He’s so engrossed he doesn’t even notice me standing behind him. I don’t bother looking up at Bailey, because I know she’ll be silently begging me not to do this, and I don’t want to see that expression on her face.

I don’t give a fuck what her last name is.

I clamp a hand down on Earl’s scrawny shoulder as I peer down at his phone. Sure enough, there’s some blonde down on all fours taking it in the ass with a lot of bright lights and perfect angles.

He startles and clicks his screen off. “Shit! Jesus.”

“Earl, I’m Beau.”

He licks his lips nervously as he looks back up at me. “Yeah, I know. Beau Eaton.”

Bailey snorts a laugh from behind the bar, and from my periphery, I watch her walk away.

“Cool. Great. So, no more porn in public. Yeah?”

“I wasn’t—” I cut him off by squeezing my fingers tighter on his shoulder. Hard enough that I hope it hurts.

It feels good.

“You were. I saw. Your lovely bartender saw. We’re not going to do that anymore, you got me? You come in for a beer, that’s fine. But you’re gonna keep your eyes off of her”—I point toward Bailey, who is pretending she’s oblivious to what I’m doing—“and your hands where everyone can see them.”

“Listen, man, I—”

I drop my voice dangerously low to silence him. “And when you get home and rush to your bedroom to fuck a sock, you’re gonna keep her body out of your head and her name out of your mouth. You got me?” I take my hand off the guy and prop my hip against the bar, staring at him to make my point.

“Dude, she’s a Jansen. Nobody wanks to a Jansen.”

I want to hit him. I vibrate with the itch to shut him up. But that itch ... is a feeling. And I haven’t felt shit in months, which means this feels *good*.

“Pay and leave before I do something I’ll regret.”

He fumbles with his wallet, tosses a twenty down, and stares at it almost regretfully.

“No change. That’s her tip for even tolerating you.”

His pale cheeks turn bright red as he stumbles away from the bar. I keep my glare on him as he hustles toward the door with his head down, fingers clasped tightly around his phone.

Fucking pig.

He’s gone and I’m still staring. I turn only when I sense Bailey coming up from behind me.

“Ahh,” she says, arms crossed under her breasts, the white cotton of her shirt making her tan skin glow. “The Eaton effect.” She gives me a smug smile. “If I had that last name, people would ask me *how high* when I said *jump* too.”

“No, they wouldn’t.”

She whips the half-empty pint glass off the top of the bar and turns away. With a shy peek over her shoulder, she adds, “Thanks for what you did back there. It means a lot.”

I don’t know why such a simple sentence hits me so hard. Her bluntness, her gratitude. I feel like a kid. I almost want to blush.

“It was nothing.”

She laughs, soft and melodic, all feminine and amused. “Okay, soldier. Whatever you say.”

I’m not a soldier, but I don’t correct her. That sense of purpose—even just for a few seconds—felt too fucking good.

So I just drop my head and smile.



“Stop stewing.” Bailey doesn’t even glance at me as she tips over a spouted bottle of bourbon to fill a shot glass.

“I’m not stewing.”

“You are.”

I don’t feel like arguing with her. To make matters worse, she’s right. I am stewing. Stewing over what she said about *The Eaton Effect*. I don’t want her to be right. I’ve always liked Bailey, but over the past several weeks, she’s become something of a comfort blanket. A friend even.

She doesn’t pester me. She doesn’t fawn over me. She makes me tea and lets me be, which is a hell of a lot more than I can say for the rest of the people in my life. Namely, my family, who’ve made it their job to overstep and inquire about what I’m doing, how I’m doing, and what I’m planning on doing with mind-numbing regularity.

So it irritates me that Bailey can be this fucking great and people can still be so fucking shitty to her.

It even irritates me that part of the reason I sit here four nights a week is because I’ve developed a totally inappropriate crush on my bartender, like I’m a fucking twenty-year-old bro waiting to make his move.

“Think Earl is rubbing one out right now?” Her lips curve up as she uses the soda gun to fill the rocks glass.

She knows she’s pestering me, and it works.

“Bailey.”

Now her head inclines in my direction, one eyebrow quirking up.
“Beau.”

“Don’t.”

“Just trying to give you something to stew about if you’re gonna sit there all quiet and broody.”

I scoff and cover my smirk behind the rim of my mug.

This girl.

It’s with that mug up over my face that I hear a raucous group of people just outside. A quick glance at my watch tells me it’s 12:01—one minute past last call. A glance over my shoulder tells me the only patrons left are a table waiting on their last drinks.

She’s walking those drinks over when three men enter, and I can feel Bailey freeze on the spot before I even turn to look at her. All traces of playfulness on her melt away, the angle of her jaw changing as she sets it.

“Little sis!” Aaron Jansen calls out as he pulls a seat up at one of the round high tops just beyond the bar. “Get us a round on the house.”

Bailey keeps her distance but gives her head a little shake, as though that could clear the tension from her body. “Sorry guys, I’ve already done last call. It’s past midnight. That’s the rule.”

“Come on. What’s the point in having a sister who works here if we can’t get some special treatment?”

I drop my head low, trying to blend in as an unsuspecting regular. I don’t want to start more shit for Bailey, and her brothers and I are *not* on good terms. Not from when we were younger, and not from the time I recently took part in toilet papering their tractor with Cade and Rhett.

It rained that night, and I imagine picking wet toilet paper off of their tractor wasn’t a good time. Still, they deserved it. And that was fun.

I smile at the memory.

“Sorry, guys.” Bailey approaches her brothers’ table with caution, like she doesn’t want to get close to them but also doesn’t want a scene with the other patrons in the bar. “Not tonight. Management has set later hours for Thursday through Saturday, so try back then.”

The oldest Jansen brother, Lance, tips his head back with a groan. “Bailey, come on. We even brought a friend from out of town. Told him you’d take care of us tonight. Seth, this is our little sister, Bailey. Always a bit of a stick in the mud, if you ask me.”

My spine straightens, and I glance over my shoulder. The third guy is leering at Bailey in a blatant and unsettling way.

At least I leer at her subtly and beat myself up about it afterward. This guy has no such boundaries.

“Come on, honey. You take care of me, and I’ll take care of you.”

My heart rate ratchets up a few notches as I continue appraising the situation out of the corner of my eye. The other table of four is pretending not to watch, but it’s quiet in the bar tonight, so it’s a hard confrontation to miss. When the Jansens roll past, everyone stares because there’s usually some sort of spectacle not far behind.

I shift on my stool and use the mug as cover to take another long look at what’s unfolding at my four o’clock.

But I freeze at the top of that motion because whoever the fuck Seth is has taken the liberty of sliding his palm over the curve of Bailey’s ass, fingers curving inward below her cheek.

I promised her I wouldn’t make any more scenes at *her* bar.

But I’m about to break that promise.

Because gawking at her while watching porn is bad enough. But laying a single fucking finger on her without her consent?

That’s a death wish.

5

Bailey

I don't know what startles me first. The feeling of an unwanted hand taking a firm grab of my ass or the crash of glass against the floor.

"Remove your fucking hand. Or I'll do it for you." Beau's voice is lower than usual, quieter. More menacing.

I lurch away from the table, shaken, cheeks hot, and realizing shit could be about to go bad. I don't know who Seth is, but if my brothers are here to wine and dine him, chances are he's not a good dude.

All it takes is a few long strides for Beau to be towering over Seth. His lean wrist twists in Beau's impossibly big hand, and a high-pitched squeal spills from his lips.

"Let go!" one of my brothers shouts. I'm not sure which one, because I'm too busy staring down at the heavily corded arm that's extended across my body like a barrier. Protecting me. And his touch is nothing like the hand that was on me before.

His touch soothes.

A screeching sound draws my attention across the bar as chairs drag across the floor. It's my last patrons. They abandon their final round of drinks, dropping their cash and scurrying out. Not wanting to get caught in the crossfire of whatever is clearly about to go down.

It hits me as I watch the situation unfold in slow motion that it doesn't matter if it's one against three. Beau was special forces.

"Let go?" His tone is smooth and eerily unaffected. This clash should feel chaotic, but Beau is the eye of the storm. "I could drop you with one touch."

This man, who's been calmly sitting at my bar night after night, is in his element. His gray eyes, all polished silver, are heated and ... excited.

"Make a single move and I'll snap this fucker's wrist like a twig."

Beau has spent years portraying himself as a happy-go-lucky goofball and it's at this exact moment I realize that was part of his cover. Part of how he protects everyone he loves from the fact *this* is who he is.

Beau is lethal.

"Hey, hey, hey. Relax, relax." Aaron's hands go up like someone is pointing a gun at him. I suppose, given the number of times he's been arrested, it's a natural position for him. "It's all in good fun."

Beau's head tilts. His eyes narrow. He looks every bit the predator he is. And when Seth tries to wind up to hit him, Beau twists his hand incrementally, dropping him to his knees with a wail of pain.

Aaron shifts in his seat, licking his lips, eyes volleying between Beau and Seth. Lance is too fucked-up to react to the situation. I can tell by the size of his pupils, by the way he's slumped against the table like it's the only thing keeping him upright.

I grew up learning to recognize that posture and then hiding from it.

"My idea of fun is breaking this asshole's wrist. How about yours?"

"You already broke it!" Seth wails, losing his menacing demeanor from mere seconds ago.

Beau doesn't even give Seth the gift of his gaze; instead, he keeps his eyes locked on my brothers. "Nah, you're fine. If I broke it, I would have felt it snap. You'll hear it when it does."

"Okay." Aaron shoots me a scowl before getting up and backing away from Beau. He taps Lance on the shoulder, urging him to move. "We're gonna head out. Find another bar."

Beau nods, dipping his chin to an impossibly broad chest, one that barely moves as though he's stopped breathing altogether. "Perfect. I'll walk you fellas out."

And he does. Literally. With Seth's brutalized wrist in his grip, he walks him out like a dog on a leash. My brothers stay ahead of them, checking back over their shoulders with both fear and rage painting their features.

No one has ever walked in acting like they rule the fucking world and then left looking so disgraced.

Looking so *weak*.

Beau tosses them out the big, heavy doors, then yanks them shut and flips the deadbolt.

He turns back around, chin tipped up, shoulders pressed back. “You okay?”

I nod, not sure that I am. “That’s going to come back to haunt us,” I say, knowing my brothers and how they work. Flying under their radar has been my general tactic until I save enough money to go somewhere beyond their reach. Then I plan to just—*poof*—disappear and never speak to them again.

Out of sight, out of mind.

Beau grins as he walks back toward me. “I know, but it was really fun.”

He’s always been handsome, but the swagger right now, the glint in his eye ... the way he leapt to my protection. He’s mouth-watering in a way that has heat pooling low in my belly. And for a beat, I let myself stare. I let myself bask in the knowledge he just blew up *for me*.

To protect *me*.

Then I glance away and get to cleaning up. Because fantasizing about Beau Eaton isn’t a productive use of my time. Especially when he’s so much older, hot enough to turn every head in this town—to set my skin on fire—and a hell of a lot more experienced than I am.

Which, to be fair, isn’t hard to be.



To absolutely no one’s surprise, I’m too amped up to sleep.

Maybe it was the run-in at the bar. Maybe it’s the fact that every time I close my eyes, I see Beau’s bulging bicep held out across me, and the ripple of his back muscles through the strain of his T-shirt. I feel the heat and strength of his body, thrown up like a guard rail across mine.

Or maybe it’s the loud music blaring all the way from the main house.

Which means my brothers have brought their party home.

I stay away from the main house at the best of times, especially since my dad skipped bail and left town. Now my brothers rule the roost. My dad is a piece of shit, but at least he scared them enough to stay a little in line.

Without him? It’s like trailer park mayhem over there.

So I stay far away, living in a seventeen-foot Boler trailer I bought off the side of the road. It’s more or less an old shoe box, but I’ve put some work

into it. What I haven't put in is any type of cooling system. Which means it's a sauna right now, even though it's past two in the morning.

The door clangs shut behind me as I step out of the trailer into the hot, muggy night. The light breeze off the river caresses my skin and I sigh, reveling in the feel. Two suspended iron steps bow under my weight as I make my way down them. My flip-flops make that obnoxious slapping noise as I trudge across the grass toward the river.

The river that's just beyond the barbwire fence. On Eaton land.

Not that the fence has ever stopped me. In the dead of night, it's always peaceful and private.

I press down on the top wire, avoiding the barbs, and swing a leg over, clearing the line that separates my family land from Beau's. I know I'm technically trespassing, but I also know that every single Eaton has been nothing but nice to me, even when they've had no reason to be.

Within a few moments, I'm at the top of the embankment, where I kick my shoes off and gingerly head down the steep path sideways. It's easier barefoot. I learned the hard way that flip-flops just twist and turn and trip me up, and the bite of the occasional pebble on the bottoms of my feet doesn't bother me all that much.

I hobble across the wobbly river rocks, shed my clothes, and slip into the darkened water, desperate to cool down. Is it the smartest thing that I do? Probably not. But it thrills me and soothes me all at once. Knowing I'm on a different piece of land than my brothers brings me an odd sort of peace.

"Hooo." The mountain water is cold enough to suck the air right out of my lungs, and I blow out a breath as my feet scrape across the rocky bottom of the riverbed, carrying me further into the gentle flow.

The chilly water whips around every curve of my body. In the spring, the current can become much stronger, but by this point in the summer, it meanders lazily through the town before joining up with the Elbow River.

My arms cut through the water, the smell of silt and pine wafting up around me. That fresh, wet rock scent almost overpowers it all.

Immediately, my body temperature drops, and the internal alarm that can make you panicky when you're overheated stops beeping at me.

After a busy night, it doesn't matter if I'm checked out and lying in my quiet trailer. I *dream* about bartending. Like I'm stuck on some sort of fucking infinite loop.

Bar, drink, till.

Bar, drink, till.

Bar, drink, till.

My body knows the motions and the feelings and the pattern so damn well that I can't escape it.

The river is my reset.

My palm wraps around an offshoot attached to the large log that lies halfway across the river. I grip it and let my body flow back with the icy water.

When I hear the crunching of shoes on pebbles coming from the opposite side of the river, I freeze. I'm fairly hidden, but my heart thunders in my chest at the prospect of being caught. Alone, and in the dark.

I've never encountered a single person down here, so, of course, it happens on a night when I'm already jumpy thanks to my shitty brothers.

The world is silent for a few beats as I try to hold my breath. It's just the soft rush of cool water and the echo of crickets rubbing their legs together.

"Who the fuck is in my river?"

Relief courses through me, and I smile.

Sure, the raspy tone is pissed off, all gravel and steel.

But it's the voice I've come to associate with safety.

And if I had to get caught trespassing naked in a river, I'm glad Beau Eaton is the one to catch me.

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