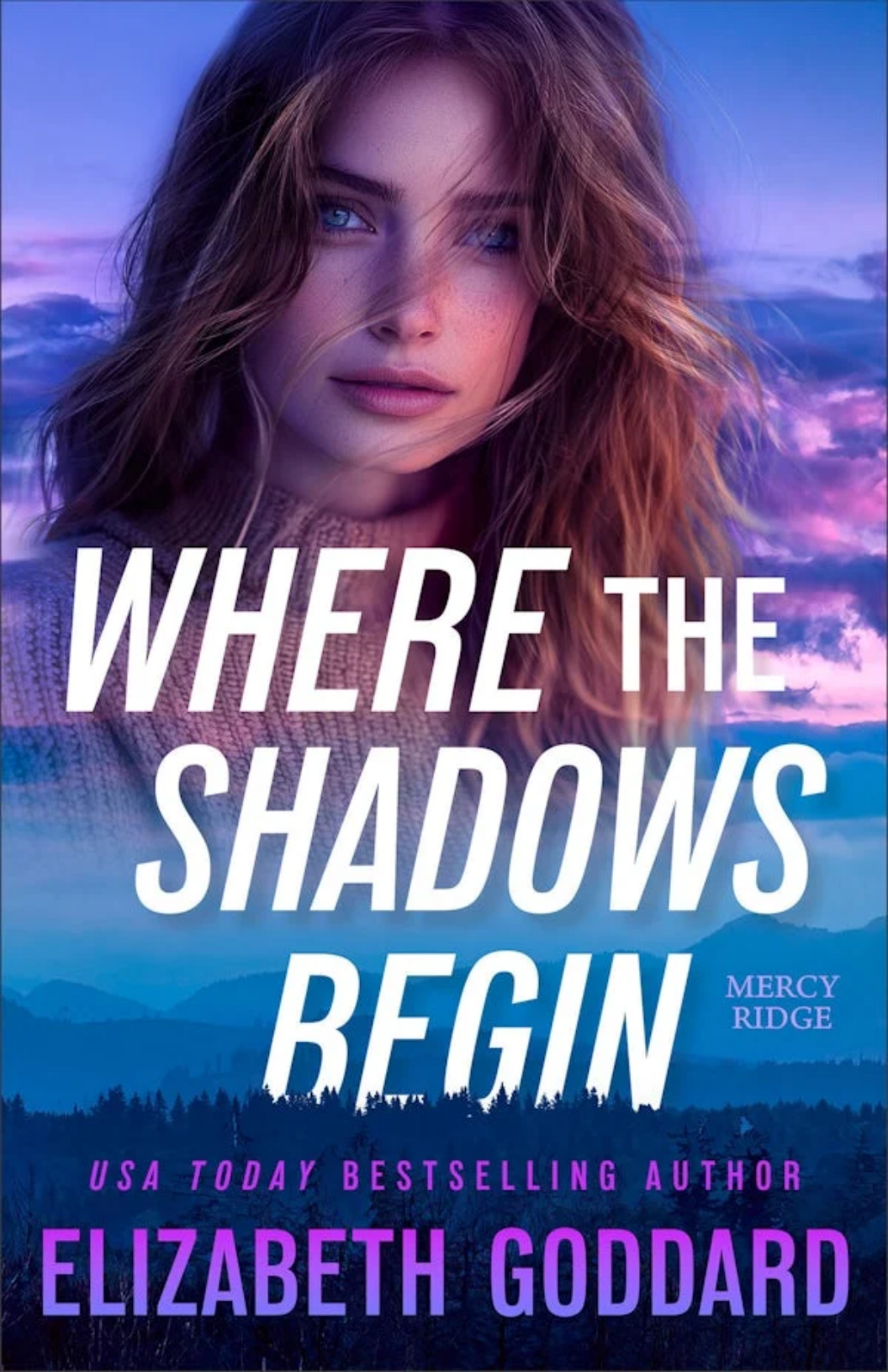

WHERE THE SHADOWS BEGIN
MERCY RIDGE
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ELIZABETH GODDARD

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Where the Shadows Begin

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MERCY RIDGE

BOOK 2

WHERE THE SHADOWS BEGIN

ELIZABETH GODDARD

Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Dedicated to Jesus,
who makes all things new.

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The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

John 1:5

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ONE

Lightning split the sky, momentarily blinding her. The cloud-to-ground strike had been too close for comfort. Sloane Andrews gripped the armrest of the puddle jumper—a single-engine Cessna. She'd experienced very little lightning in Seattle, but watching it out the window of this plane—and so close—unnerved her. That and the ridiculous turbulence.

The pilot's attention remained focused on navigating through the storm, his hands steady on the controls. His competence so far had reassured her. His broad shoulders were rigid beneath that leather bomber jacket, and his left hand was steady on the yoke while his right adjusted the throttle. But beneath his cool demeanor, he seemed preoccupied with something beyond just flying the plane. He'd been quiet and serious with his one-word responses to her attempts at conversation. Just as well.

A friend of a friend of a friend had connected her because this guy was a pilot with his own plane and was already traveling to Mercy Ridge, a small town in the northern Cascades of Washington. Actually, she was surprised he'd agreed to let her—a complete stranger—ride along. She'd been desperate to get to her destination, but now she wished she'd driven out

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from Seattle instead of trying to save a few hours. What had she been thinking?

She slid her gaze sideways to the man with her life in his hands. What did she really know about Holt Goodwin anyway? Supposedly he was a former Air Force pilot, and now he was some kind of federal agent. His title—Homeland Security something—should mean that he was someone she could trust. But her life experience left her wary and on guard, even with someone who seemed trustworthy. Everyone had their secrets. And here she was, risking everything on this stranger, trusting him to get her to Mercy Ridge so she could find the solution to a life-or-death situation.

But she didn't have time to be selective.

"Is this normal?" She spoke into the headphone mic. "I mean, I've experienced turbulence. Maybe it's just this region of the country." On the last word, the plane dropped and shuddered, and she felt like she might have left her stomach about two hundred feet above her.

"Define normal," he finally said.

"I thought we were flying into clear skies. So is this just a normal clear-sky flight into the mountain range?" Now she just sounded ridiculous.

"A word of advice—expect the unexpected. A thunderstorm popped up. Microclimates can catch you by surprise, and here we are." His voice remained smooth and even, once again reassuring her, as if this was simply another day in the sky.

Air Force. Hello.

She'd let him focus on getting them out of the storm without telling him she'd pinned desperate hopes of surviving this flight on him. As if he didn't already know that.

Rain pummeled the windshield. Not that she could see much anyway—other than the lightning—in the fading daylight. And

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neither could the pilot. The storm clouds filled her view and had turned the day dark. Another flash of lightning illuminated his profile at the very moment she looked at him and seared his rugged features into her mind. She tried to blink away the image of his tightly clenched, angular jaw, his gaze focused on his instruments.

She could almost be grateful the lofty, sharp-edged Cascade Mountains loomed ahead of them and drew her attention away from the steady-handed pilot. Still, they were flying into the mountains, and in this storm, that struck fear in her.

Though she'd rather let him focus on getting them to Mercy Ridge and landing the plane, she couldn't help but ask, "How much longer?"

She bit back anything else she might have said. Let him focus. It wasn't like she was paying him to get her there. He'd simply offered based on a mutual acquaintance. She'd had her reasons for making the hasty, irrational decision to accept his generosity.

Her sister Brynn's pale face flashed in her mind. Time was running out. Sloane forced herself to breathe. When the plane dropped again, she gritted her teeth, and her breathing hitched. She hated how her gasps and occasional whimpers must sound to the pilot.

Maybe he hadn't noticed.

"We're fine. Just a little weather," he said.

So he'd noticed.

A little weather. Right. Through the rain-streaked window, jagged mountain peaks emerged and disappeared in flashes of lightning. Somewhere in those millions of acres of forest surrounding the mountain range was nestled the small town where she hoped to find her father.

Holt keyed the mic. "Mercy Ridge traffic, Cessna Five-Niner-Seven Charlie Romeo." He flicked his gaze at her and then

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back. "It's a one-runway strip. One guy on the radio—if he's still there."

That didn't make her feel better.

The one guy on the radio responded. "Cessna Five-Niner-Seven Charlie Romeo, Mercy Ridge traffic. Severe weather's closing in fast. What's your position?"

How about, they were already in the storm?

Holt leaned forward. "Mercy Ridge, Cessna Five-Niner-Seven Charlie Romeo. About fifteen miles east of your position."

"Copy that. You've got a nasty cell between you and us. Recommend—" A rhythmic thrum of static interrupted the transmission.

Sloane caught Holt's eye. "That doesn't sound good."

"It's not ideal." He sent her a half smile, half grimace. How did he do that? It was the first crack in his unreadable mask. He banked the plane slightly, she assumed to find a better route through the storm.

"What are our options?" Sloane was no pilot, but she knew risk assessment.

"We push through and land at Mercy Ridge," Holt said, eyes scanning his gauges and screens, "or we try to find somewhere to set down before the weather gets worse."

"Which is safer?"

"Safer depends. Either way, we're trading one hazard for another."

What kind of answer was that? Still, his honesty was oddly reassuring. And he was talking more than he had been.

"Any good news?"

"Yep. I know this terrain. There's a reason they call flying through these mountains in bad weather the 'Cascade Coffin.'"

Seriously? That's what he was telling his passenger? "I've

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never heard it called that. Then again, I'm not a pilot. Maybe keep those kinds of things to yourself." She pursed her lips, biting back anything more she would have said, and stared out the window.

Another violent jolt caused her head to knock against the window. Sloane sent up a silent prayer, and she wouldn't stop praying until they landed. Outside, the fading light created dark shadows, except when lightning flashed, revealing the outline of the Cascades ahead, along with the cloud formations. They weren't going to get above the storm. Not in this little Cessna.

"Can we go around it?"

"That's what I'm doing." He'd yet to sound impatient with her questions, her need to talk through the fear, and she appreciated that.

A sharp boom shook the Cessna, lightning once again striking dangerously close. The panel lights flickered—once, twice—then steadied.

Sloane's heart pounded.

The plane lurched like it had dropped into an invisible hole. Holt tightened his grip on the yoke, the nose dipping. Was the Cessna losing altitude, or was he taking them down on purpose? What was going on?

"What just happened?" Why couldn't she leave him to do his job?

"Nothing good." Every line of his body was edged with tension, but his voice was smooth and controlled. How did he maintain his composure?

She couldn't fathom it. "Did we just get struck?"

The engine sputtered, giving a rough cough.

"Come on, come on, come on," Holt demanded, as if to coax the engine back into a steady rhythm with his words.

For the first time, his tone didn't sound reassuring.

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She drew in a long, slow breath to calm herself. Didn't work. *We're going to die.*

They skimmed close to a mountain ridge—too close, to her way of thinking.

God, please get us out of this. Please . . .

Unshed tears burned behind her eyes as she squeezed them shut. She couldn't shake the terror gripping her.

"Mercy Ridge, Cessna Five-Niner-Seven Charlie Romeo," Holt called again. "We've taken a lightning strike. Experiencing electrical issues and engine trouble. Request landing advisories."

Pulsing static answered him.

"Holt?" Sloane struggled to keep her voice steady.

"We'll be fine." He rapidly flipped switches and checked gauges. His actions belied his words.

Don't lie to me.

The plane shuddered violently as the engine coughed again. Holt's jaw tightened. "I need you to listen very carefully. We might need to make an emergency landing."

"This after you just said we would be fine?" Her voice came out too high, too thin, filled with fear.

She could see the headline now.

Woman on Mission to Save Dying Sister Killed in Plane Crash.

"Where?" Sloane looked out at the shadowed world beyond the window. The last of the light was draining away, the landscape flattening into dark shapes. Lightning flashed, revealing rocky ridgelines. Tree lines. Nothing that looked remotely safe. "You can't even see where you're going."

"I was using the instruments before. Now . . ." His gaze flicked to the dark panel, then out through the windshield. "I've got enough light left to pick something. Barely. And I know this terrain."

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Was he being overconfident? Trying to convince her or himself?

The engine faltered again and then went quiet. The sudden silence was more terrifying than the noise had been.

"Scratch that," Holt said, voice tight. "We're gliding now."

These planes could glide for a good while, she knew, but under these circumstances, the tight fist squeezing her heart only squeezed tighter.

The nose of the plane dipped, and her stomach lurched.

"What can I do?" she asked, forcing herself to think past the fear.

"Brace when I tell you. Head down, arms crossed, feet flat." Holt worked the yoke with deliberate precision, keeping the wings level though the wind buffeted the small plane. "And say a prayer. I heard you earlier—so I know you can do it."

Oh, sure. Leave it up to her to pray hard enough to save them.

Through the windshield, the fading light and a jagged flash of lightning revealed a break in the trees ahead—a rough meadow, small and uneven, but open.

"There," Holt said, more to himself than to her. "That's our chance."

So one chance was all they had? *Lord, we're in your hands.*

The plane descended rapidly toward the dark patch. Holt guided it, controlling the Cessna as it fought to glide steadily through the wind. Trees at the edges came into focus, closing in around them, growing terrifyingly near by the second.

"Can you really land here?"

"We're about to find out." His tone sounded grim. "Brace now!"

Sloane folded forward, crossing her arms over her chest, heart hammering. The plane stayed in a controlled glide, but they were coming in fast—too fast. Trees whipped past the windows.

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"Come on," Holt muttered, wrestling the yoke. "Just a little more . . ."

The first impact jolted through the fuselage as they clipped something—a tree, Sloane guessed. The Cessna tilted dangerously to one side before Holt somehow corrected. The second impact was worse. They bounced once, twice. Something tore away from the plane with a metallic shriek. Sloane bit back a scream as they slid forward, the world outside a blur of shadow and lightning.

Finally, with a sickening lurch, they stopped.

For a moment, neither of them moved. The only sounds were the drumming of rain on the fuselage and her ragged breathing. Not just hers, but Holt's.

"Are you hurt?" Holt's voice broke the silence.

Sloane did a quick mental inventory. "I don't think so. You?"

"I'll live." He was already unbuckling. "We need to get out. Now."

"Why? Is something—"

"I smell fuel." His words were clipped, urgent. "That means a leak. Possible fire risk."

Holt forced his door open against the wind and rain. Sloane fumbled with her seat belt, fingers clumsy with adrenaline, before managing to free herself. She grabbed her purse and pushed on the door at her side—nothing. The frame had warped.

"I can't get it open!"

"This way." Holt motioned for her to follow him.

Moving toward him, she clambered over the console, heart pounding, and tumbled out after him. Feet on the ground, she followed him out into the storm.

The rain hit like needles, instantly soaking through her light-pink sweater. Lightning revealed their surroundings in brief, disorienting flashes—trees, rock, the crumpled fuselage of the

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Cessna looking utterly abused. They'd come down in a narrow clearing, the wings chewed up by trees on either side.

She couldn't see much, but she wanted a better look at the man who'd just saved their lives. She wasn't sure she'd ever met anyone so . . . capable under such pressure.

Holt gripped her elbow to guide her away from the aircraft. They stumbled across uneven ground, the growing darkness between lightning flashes nearly absolute.

Fifty yards from the plane, Holt pulled her down behind a fallen log. "Wait here."

"Where are you going?" Sloane grabbed his sleeve.

"Back for the emergency kit." He didn't look away from the wreck. "It's stowed in the back. I had to get you clear first. Stay put."

"Grab my duffel!"

Then he was gone, swallowed by the darkness.

Sloane huddled against the log, rain plastering her hair to her face as she watched the shadowy outline of the plane. They might have survived the crash, but they weren't out of this yet. Her body shivered uncontrollably.

Holt reappeared moments later, a pack slung over one shoulder. He'd barely made it halfway back when lightning struck a tree near the wreck.

The flash was blinding. The boom shook the ground beneath her. When Sloane could see again, horror seized her as the tree—burning despite the rain—toppled directly onto the Cessna.

Fuel ignited with a *whoosh* that she felt, more than heard, to her bones. Holt threw himself down over her, covering her as flames erupted, pushing back the darkness. Then he finally released her and sat up to stare at his burning plane. "If you've got a phone, check it now. But don't count on service out here."

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She swallowed hard, hands shaking too much to check her cell. "What about my duffel?"

"Sorry. It was a tangled mess . . ."

"No, it's okay. If you'd stayed long enough to get it . . ." She let the words trail off. Her teeth were chattering from cold and shock. "Where are we?"

"About ten miles from Mercy Ridge."

"Well, at least we're close."

"As the crow flies, that is. Close is relative. We're on the wrong side of Blackspire Mountain."

"Okay, well, we can still walk if we have to, right?" Worst case, they were in the vicinity and just had to overcome the obstacles.

"Oh, we'll walk," he said. "But we're not walking out tonight."

Sloane stared at the burning plane, reality sinking in. She was stranded in the mountainous wilderness with a stranger, miles from civilization, in the middle of a storm.

While her sister—who counted on Sloane—was hanging on to life by a thread.

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TWO

Flames consumed the Cessna 172 Skyhawk he'd bought five years ago. And it seemed to be a fitting end to the worst day of his life, or at least *one* of the worst. But the day wasn't over yet—not by a long shot. They were out in the middle of no-man's-land—thick forest in the wilds of the northern Cascades on the wrong side of Blackspire Mountain—at least for someone wanting to land in Mercy Ridge. He'd needed to fly around the mountain to the other side. At least he had a few supplies in his flight bag, which was filled with the essentials required to survive until rescued—up to twenty-four hours. It included his satellite messenger and a couple of handheld radios, a flashlight, and his sidearm—a Glock 19. But with the terrain and weather, he didn't hold out hope their rescue would happen within twenty-four hours.

"We need to move. Come on." He shined the flashlight beam ahead, urging Sloane away from the burning wreck.

"I'd think staying with the crash would give us a better chance of being rescued," she said.

"We need to get away in case there's a larger explosion. Just a few more yards. Over by that group of boulders should do it."

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"Oh, why didn't you say so?"

I just did. He regretted bringing a passenger along, but she wasn't the first person who'd hitched a ride on his 172.

For some reason he couldn't fathom, she was the first woman to have drawn his attention in a long time. The moment he'd seen her striking blue-gray eyes, his breath had caught. It made no real sense. Then she'd shaken his hand while introducing herself, and an electric charge had surged up his arm. So he'd taken her in as she crossed the tarmac to get to his plane. Dark-blond hair tied at the nape of her neck. Tall and slender. Long strides and graceful moves.

Then, when he'd opened the door to assist her into the 172, he looked at her face. She wasn't pretty in the usual way, but with high cheekbones and stunning eyes, striking all the same. When he dared to look at her eyes again, he witnessed a storm raging there. If he was reading her right, intelligence, grief, and determination warred inside—and the whole of it almost knocked him over. He wasn't one to be moved so easily, and maybe that's why his reaction to Sloane Andrews had stunned him.

What was her story? He hadn't asked. Wasn't his business.

She stumbled, bringing his thoughts back to the present, and he assisted her. Those shoes wouldn't do. Maybe she should have dressed for function, but she hadn't known they would crash in the wilderness. They continued their scramble up the rocky incline and out of the circle of light surrounding his burning plane.

At the top of the incline, they stopped and turned to watch the flames.

"Are you sure we have to be so far?" she asked. "The heat from the fire doesn't follow us here."

Far enough that surrounding darkness and cold already

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gripped him. That and the strangest sense they weren't alone out here. Was someone watching them from the trees?

"Maybe not, but at least the rain stopped." He expected it to pick up again.

"However long that lasts," she said. "But we're already drenched."

Hypothermia could set in if they didn't find shelter and warmth.

"And won't the rain put out the fire and stop a more dangerous forest fire?" she asked. "It might be worse to get caught in that."

She was thinking through every possible worst-case scenario.

"It'll start up again, don't worry," he said. "Either way, it's going to be a long, cold night."

Holt opened up the flight bag and grabbed a thermal blanket, which he wrapped around her shoulders. Her flimsy pink sweater was soaked, and even if it hadn't been, it was nothing against this cold. As for Holt, his leather jacket would do for now.

"So, what's the plan?" She glanced his way then back to the flames. "I assume we stay and wait for a rescue?"

"Normally, yes."

"Normally? Come on, please tell me what you're thinking. I'm out of my element here. And maybe you are too."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence."

"Anyone in these circumstances is out of their element."

"My family runs Good Adventures in Mercy Ridge. My brother's a wilderness guide. As previously mentioned, I know these mountains better than the next guy. I was able to land the plane . . . okay . . . yes, it was a crash-landing, but we're alive only because I know my way around, even in the dark." Maybe he was laying it on too thick, but he kept going. He didn't need

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her challenging his every decision. "My brother is part of the SAR team out of Silverpine County—the county we're in right now." Maybe. He wasn't entirely sure of the county lines, but close enough.

"Oh." She blew out a heavy breath. "That's a relief. For a minute there, I thought I was going to die despite surviving a crash-landing. I'm impressed that you were able to land the plane, by the way." Her chuckle sounded nervous. "I have a feeling there's more to it."

"Air Force CSAR."

"CSAR? That's combat search and rescue?"

"Yes."

"That makes sense. And . . . thank you for your service."

He'd heard the words many times, but somehow, the way she said them sent warmth through him. He glanced at her, briefly, then turned his attention to the flames and his thoughts to their predicament. "You're welcome."

Holt didn't bother sharing about his missions into firestorms, war zones, and jagged mountain terrain to pull out the wounded and lost. Discovering he had the right instincts for patterns and threats and for seeing danger before it struck, he left the cockpit and moved into intelligence operations analysis. It was steady work in a relatively controlled environment, which was everything his past hadn't been.

And his new job kept him in the business of saving lives the same as the old job. So if he thought about it too long, he was more than upset at being placed on investigative leave pending the security inquiry, meaning they had benched him and called it procedural. Whatever. In the back of his mind, he'd expected it, and a part of him had to admit, from his employer's perspective, he deserved it.

He could worry about that later. In this current predicament,

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he had to focus on surviving, one minute at a time and not just for himself. Sloane's life was in his hands too—he'd do everything to keep her safe and get them out of this.

She needed that reassurance that he could get them out, or at least keep them alive until their rescue.

On the other hand, he didn't want to give her false hope. "Look, I won't sugarcoat this. Once we don't show up—and I don't close the flight plan—Phil at the Mercy Ridge airport is going to notice and start making calls. Search and rescue will roll. But even if the ELT—the emergency locator transmitter—survived the impact, the lightning and fire likely finished it." He released a heavy sigh. "The flight plan will put them somewhere along our intended route, but the storm shoved us off course. Way off. And once we dropped into these valleys, our signal died. No radar. No ADS-B. In terrain like this, in weather like this . . . we're probably not looking at a twenty-four-hour rescue. Due to this weather, they may not be able to launch until first light."

"Was that supposed to be a pep talk?" Sloane's voice was steady and strong—angry, even—but still held a thread of panic.

"Did it sound like one?"

"What about your family?" She softened her tone.

"Yeah . . . I didn't tell them I was coming. I like to surprise them."

So much for reassuring her.

She stared at the pile of flames. At the moment, he wasn't being very friendly or gentlemanly or professional or whatever it was she wanted from him. He could soften things up, but why should he have to? Sometimes hearing the harsh reality was required.

"The cold, hard truth is always better than a lie," she said.

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"Though I already suspected as much. I like to hold on to hope, no matter how small."

"I want you to have a clear understanding that sitting by the burned-out hull of our plane is probably not going to get us rescued. They don't know where we are." If she had any idea of the scope of these mountains, she might understand.

"Then what do you suggest?" Her voice sounded strained, grasping for hope again.

And he would give it. "Don't worry. All hope is not lost. I've got an inReach—satellite messenger. If I can get it a clear view of the sky, it can grab a signal and send our coordinates. But down here, these ridges and trees block everything. We need higher elevation—someplace with open sky."

Once again, he glanced down at her fancy shoes with heels. She followed his look and stared down at them. To get that elevation, he might have to make the climb himself.

He stepped closer to her, then turned to the burning plane again, letting the shock roll through him. The only thing that mattered now was getting her off this mountain alive.

He thought back through the events of the day, starting with the fact that he'd been placed on leave while the powers that be investigated his actions from months back. While he thought he'd been fine, turned out it had taken that long for his actions to reach the review board of the OPR—the Office of Professional Responsibility.

He prided himself on working by the book, and while he should welcome an investigation to clear him, he wasn't sure he would come out unscathed, since, well, he hadn't gone by the book.

And still, he didn't regret his actions, and he would do it all over again. A criminal had been caught, and lives had been saved. Why should he suffer for doing what was right? But this

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was the world they all lived in. Doing what was right usually came with a cost.

What had he done to deserve any of this? He couldn't waste time thinking about that now.

The night would only get colder and they weren't prepared, so maybe that was why he remained close to the flames, watching the plane's aluminum frame twist and pop with the heat in a way he never would have imagined. The cacophony of destructive sounds drove home the point that they were in big trouble, despite the small hope he'd given her.

He wouldn't be taking them to higher elevations in the dark during a torrential storm. This was the most lightning he'd seen since his brief stint in Tornado Alley visiting relatives in Texas.

Sloane had settled onto a rock with the emergency blanket. She stared at the burning wreckage with an expression that gutted him. Her world had shifted sideways.

Lightning flashed again but in the distance, and he hoped that meant the severe thunderstorm had moved on. But in the brief light of that flash, he'd taken in their surroundings a little more clearly, confirming that dense forest and mountain peaks edged them in on all sides. It was a miracle he'd even landed in this clearing and hadn't crashed right into one of those peaks.

Nearby, he heard the trickle of a brook or rainwater runoff.

"What do we do for now, then?" she asked.

"The rain will start again. We need to find shelter, and we'll stay as close to the plane as possible until morning. I'll try to send a message tonight, but in the morning, we'll get to higher elevation."

"What kind of federal agent are you, Holt? Or is that too personal? I figure, we're in survival mode together, I'd like to know a little more about the man I'm with."

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"I have the really boring title of intelligence operations specialist." He didn't want to go into more detail, like the fact that his career might be over. "How about you? What do you do?"

"My job title sounds boring too. I'm a cultural resource recovery specialist."

"Am I supposed to know what that is?" He injected a teasing tone. It felt good to get to know her a little. She was right, they were stuck in this for who knew how long.

She gave a small laugh. "In a nutshell, I work for museums and authenticate artifacts. I won't bore you with more details than that."

"Were you headed to Mercy Ridge on business or pleasure?"

"Neither." Her tone told him that was all he would get.

Fine. She had her secrets, and he had his. Maybe they wouldn't get to know each other after all. The fire that had kept them soaking up what little warmth they could started to die down as the rain picked up again. He turned the flashlight back on.

"Let's go find shelter." He searched the tree line.

And for an instant, he thought he saw someone. He pulled the beam back—but the face was gone. Had he imagined it? Considering that earlier he thought he'd sensed someone was watching, that left him more unsettled than he'd already been. If someone was out there, they would have made themselves known, and if they were hiding, well, in that case, Holt had better be at his best tonight, and he was already stretched on all sides.

He tested his left knee, which had taken the brunt of the impact during landing. It was stiff, but nothing was broken. Unfortunately, that would slow him down.

Sloane got to her feet, and she, too, moved stiffly.

"Anything suddenly hurting that wasn't before?" He shined the light over her.

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"I'm good."

Throwing the bag over his shoulder, he led the way, and Sloane trudged awkwardly in her heels. "Wait." Turning, he dropped the bag. "Give me your shoes."

"What?"

"You'll twist an ankle, and then we'll both be in bigger trouble than we already are."

She handed them over. Holt braced one against a rock and worked the heel back and forth until it gave with a crack. She let out a yelp. He did the same to the other, then ran his thumb along the broken edge.

"Not pretty." He pulled out his multi-tool to pry away the worst of the jagged edges and handed the more functional footwear back.

With a frown, she took them and slipped them on again—wincing as if the shoes had betrayed her. "Honestly, I don't know whether to be mad at you or thank you."

"As long as you don't tell me I owe you five hundred bucks, I'm good either way."

Her laugh surprised him.

They continued on, going deeper into the woods, searching for shelter. Holt shined the light across the thick, tangled undergrowth, relieved he didn't find someone with bad intentions waiting. He'd chalk what he'd seen earlier up to his imagination, the crash, and his nerves being on edge. If they had to spend the night in the woods, at least this was an old-growth forest filled with Douglas firs and cedars, and their canopy provided protection from the rain. But even better, at the edge of his flashlight beam, he spotted a rock with an overhang. Perfect.

He led her through the brush. "Watch your step. The ground's uneven."

"Yeah, and the bushes are scratching my ankles," she said.

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"I could carry you."

"No. Please, no. I should have dressed for hiking in the woods."

"You couldn't have known you'd end up here."

The rocky overhang was a natural shelter. A massive boulder had tumbled down from higher up the mountain and would protect them from the elements. Maybe it would work well for her to stay here while he went higher to get a message out. But he'd think about that tomorrow.

"Here we are." He dropped the pack and opened it. "Your shelter for the night."

He pulled out a lightweight tarp and paracord.

"What can I do?" she asked.

"Help me string up the cord." They worked together, and the tarp was in place within minutes, providing additional protection.

Raindrops offered a soothing sound, which Holt appreciated. Inside their rudimentary shelter, he unpacked the additional blanket, spreading it on the ground, then took out some water and energy bars. All set, he leaned back against the rock wall and closed his eyes.

What a difference a day makes.

This morning he'd been sitting in his apartment in Seattle, staring at the ceiling and thinking through the actions that may have destroyed his career. Now he was stranded in the wilderness with a stranger, his knee throbbed, and they had to survive until rescued or make their way home on their own . . . and he faced a cold, rainy night sleeping on the rocks.

No. Scratch that. He wouldn't get any sleep.

"It's nice you have family to visit in Mercy Ridge," she said. "Too bad they aren't expecting you, but once they learn about the missing flight—from Phil—they'll find us."

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Something in her voice made him look at her more closely in the dim light of his flashlight beam. Her face was haggard with exhaustion, as his must be. But something else weighed on her. What was it? She sounded so . . . grieved. And that went along with her eyes when he first met her. What was going on? Had someone died and she was on her way to attend a funeral?

"You have no one waiting for you in Mercy Ridge?"

When she didn't answer, he let it go. He understood. Talking about things sometimes made them worse. He should just focus on making it through the night, because tomorrow would bring its own problems.

The storm raged. The wind blew. And the rain pelted their tarp, even through the thick canopy of trees. Water dripped down from the rocks above and threatened to invade their dry space.

"No one is waiting on me." She spoke so softly, he barely heard her. "I need to get to Mercy Ridge to find the only person who can save my sister's life."

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