

ELIZABETH GODDARD

ROCKY MOUNTAIN COURAGE



**PRESENT
DANGER**

“*Present Danger* starts with a bang and never lets up. Goddard’s fast-paced romantic suspense will have your pulse pounding as you turn the pages. Hold on to your seat and your heart as you enjoy this thrill ride!”

Rachel Dylan, bestselling author
of the Capital Intrigue series

“A plane crash, a dead body, and two people who decide that justice and love are worth fighting for all add up to a riveting read you won’t want to put down. I highly recommend this book!”

Lynette Eason, bestselling, award-winning author
of the Danger Never Sleeps series

“A riveting beginning to the new Rocky Mountain Courage series, *Present Danger* takes readers on a wild ride filled with family tragedies, long-buried secrets, ancient relics, and broken hearts. Goddard has crafted a page-turner that takes off in the first nail-biting chapter, weaves through unexpected twists and shocking revelations, then culminates in a whirlwind of betrayal and redemption. I couldn’t read the final chapters fast enough!”

Lynn H. Blackburn, award-winning author
of the Dive Team Investigations series

“I was captivated from the very first scene of *Present Danger* to the shocking conclusion. You can always count on Elizabeth Goddard to bring you dramatic action and adventure scenes that put you on the edge of your seat!”

Susan Sleeman, bestselling author
of the Homeland Heroes series

“Elizabeth Goddard starts her brand-new Rocky Mountain Courage series with an opening that sucks you in from page one and doesn’t stop until the heart-pounding conclusion.”

Lisa Harris, *USA Today* and CBA bestselling author
of the Nikki Boyd Files

“*Present Danger*—another edge-of-the-seat story by Elizabeth Goddard that will keep you turning pages to the end.”

Patricia Bradley, author of *Standoff*,
Natchez Trace Park Rangers series

Books by Elizabeth Goddard

UNCOMMON JUSTICE

Never Let Go

Always Look Twice

Don't Keep Silent

ROCKY MOUNTAIN COURAGE

Present Danger

ROCKY MOUNTAIN COURAGE
• BOOK 1 •

***PRESENT
DANGER***

ELIZABETH GODDARD



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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author’s imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my daughter, Rachel.
You're the light and joy of my life.



*Greater love hath no man than this,
that a man lay down his life for his friends.
John 15:13*

ONE

Chance Carter should have known this last delivery wouldn't go down without a hitch.

A monstrous thunderhead had popped up in a clear morning sky and now loomed directly in his path as if forbidding, or at least challenging, his approach to his destination—a lone airstrip in Nowhere, Montana. As an experienced pilot and courier for an airfreight company, inclement weather didn't concern him as much as the troubled feeling in his chest, which he'd been trying to ignore since takeoff.

Given the cold, hard stone of unease that had settled in his gut, he'd failed miserably.

Earlier this morning, back at the FBO—fixed-based operator—the rhythm of his flight prep had seemed off. Excitement hadn't pumped through his every movement, and the usual bounce to his step hadn't accompanied him while he worked through his preflight checks. If that hadn't been enough, dread had replaced the anticipation that had always filled him as he readied to climb into the cockpit of his Piper Cherokee 235, which he affectionately called Ole Blue.

Now, as he neared the airstrip, he shook off the apprehension and grabbed on to the assurance earned from years of experience and hours spent piloting.

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A good, strong headwind buffeted the plane, which was preferred for landing. He took comfort in the familiar deafening roar of the Piper breaking through his headset and droning in his ears. He wanted to focus on nothing but landing, delivering, and escaping. But this trip carried him back, and the evergreens of the forest, the winding rivers, the meadows, the crops, and the majestic mountains captivated him, reminding him of all he'd left behind.

Gripping the yoke, he sat taller and shoved beyond the melancholy.

At seven miles from his destination, he switched tanks.

The noisy engine sputtered and then stalled.

Nothing he didn't know how to handle. Chance would quickly remedy the situation. He trusted that forward movement and lift would propel Ole Blue along like an eagle riding in the wind long enough to give him ample time to restart the engine.

Only the engine refused its resurrection. The fuel gauge indicated a fourth of a tank of fuel remained. He switched to the other tank and confirmed it was empty.

As if emphasizing his earlier presentiment, Ole Blue's propeller slowed to a stop.

Utter silence filled the cockpit. Moments passed before the slow cadence of his heartbeat ramped up and roared to life in his ears.

The plane remained in the air, gliding on the current. But not for long. Creating a controlled descent was up to Chance and the tools at his disposal. Sweat beaded at his temples as his instincts took over, and he maneuvered the rudder, flaps, and ailerons, steering the plane through the air currents to maintain lift as long as possible.

Chance had to face the truth.

Ole Blue wasn't going to make it to the airstrip.

And those evergreens he'd admired moments before rushed

at him now as the ground rose toward him, much faster than was safe.

He was going down.

Chance pressed the button on the yoke and squawked to a local frequency. “*Mayday! Mayday! Mayday!*” He detailed what he knew of the expected crash location, which wasn’t a lot.

He got no response. Nobody monitoring the frequency today in Nowhere, Montana. Just his luck.

Between evergreen-topped mountains, Ole Blue surfed along a ravine. Not a good place to land. He hoped for a clearing. Something.

Come on, come on, come on . . .

There. Between the trees, he caught sight of a forest road and aimed for it. It would be close. The trees were dense in places. Worst case, the wheels on his fixed-gear plane would catch the treetops and flip him forward. Dead or alive, he’d be stuck in the tops.

Come on, baby, you can do this.

Palms sweating, he squeezed the yoke. Continuing the mantra in his head, he willed Ole Blue to stay in the air just a little longer. When he’d proclaimed today was his last delivery, he hadn’t meant that to be a literal prophecy.

He mentally shook his fist at God. *You hear that? I didn’t mean I wanted to die today. I just meant I’m done doing what I do.*

A thousand thoughts blew through his mind at once, not the least of which was that if he made it, if he survived, he’d have to file a crash report with the NTSB. He was only supposed to take his flight bag from the crash site, but he’d have to make an exception this time and remove the package he was supposed to deliver.

The treetops reached up for Ole Blue, their lofty trunks and branches growing taller as if they would stretch to catch the plane’s wheels. The Piper shuddered. Chance held his

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breath, working the yoke until, finally, he maneuvered above the narrow road.

Lower, lower, lower . . .

The wheels touched down, and the plane bounced hard.

Trees closed in on the narrowing road. Chance braced himself. The wingtips caught the trees. The sound of metal twisting and ripping vibrated through him as the tin can protecting him shook and rattled. The impact shattered the window and catapulted what was left of his plane, and Chance's body was flung like a rag doll despite the shoulder harness. Ole Blue slammed against a tree on the passenger side, crumpling the only door. Chance's head hit the yoke handle. Thunder ignited in his temples as pain throbbed across his chest.

But the plane had stopped. Finally . . .

Seconds ticked by. He drew in a few shuddering, painful breaths. Allowed his heart rate to slow.

Chance assessed his injuries. He could move his legs and arms. Maybe he had a few broken ribs. He touched his head and felt the warm, sticky fluid. Blood covered his fingertips. He stared at the tree branch protruding through the shattered window, caught a whiff of pine from the needles, and tried to grasp the near miss. He could have been skewered. That was only one of many possible fatal injuries that could occur in a plane crash. How . . . how had he survived?

He wouldn't waste time questioning Providence. For the moment, he was alive. But for how much longer?

And trusty Ole Blue was gone for good. Myriad emotions—anger, fear, grief—seized him all at once. His pulse raced again as dizziness swept over him.

He fought the darkness edging his vision.

Why had he harbored an ounce of hope that he would be able to walk away from this unscathed? He wished he hadn't broken his one rule and looked at the contents of that package.

If he wasn't able to deliver it, he was as good as dead anyway.

TWO

Grayback County Sheriff's Detective Jack Tanner dropped his forty-pound SAR—search and rescue—pack next to his boots.

He let his gaze slide down the five-hundred-foot cliff, a slab of granite left behind when this side of the mountain gave way a century ago. Evergreens—spruce, pine, and cedar—surrounded him and filled the landscape below as well.

Kylie, a volunteer with Grayback County Search and Rescue Dogs, stood next to her black lab. “George caught a scent and”—she gestured below, her frown deepening—“it ends here.”

She didn't need to explain that George was a wilderness area search dog and that meant he would alert to *any* humans in the search area, not simply track a specific human's scent. Still, using the dogs to search covered much more terrain when minutes counted.

Please let it not be the twins.

Because the dog had caught a scent that ended here didn't mean the girls had taken a tumble. The Emmer twins—Tanya and Kendra—had gotten lost while hiking with their

dad—Ross Emmer. Jack’s gut clenched at the possibility that they had fallen. The county sheriff’s department was responsible for search and rescue missions in all of Grayback County, and though Jack had been on the team only a few short months, he knew to pray for the best and prepare for the worst.

But he didn’t want to prepare for the worst and accept that the twins could be gone.

He peered through his binoculars at the tops of evergreens below. This region of the national forest had seen more than its fair share of incidents—including the small plane crash only yesterday. Fortunately, the pilot had survived.

Through the treetops, Jack could make out the Grayback River in the distance, carving its way between mountains, through canyons and meadows, all the way to Yellowstone National Park, located seventy miles south in the northwest corner of Wyoming.

As he looked through the binoculars, he hoped he wouldn’t find anything, but, of course, there may be something—or someone—to find. If there was someone to find, he prayed they were alive. He released his pent-up breath. “I don’t see anything.”

Except birds circling above. Never a good sign, but scavengers could circle for a number of reasons.

Adjusting his binoculars, he shifted to peer at the bottom of the ridge. Wait. Maybe. Oh no. “Yeah, I think I see something.” Jack cleared his throat. “Someone.”

Next to him, Kylie remained silent while George panted.

Jack’s gut dropped with the falling sensation experienced on an amusement ride. Or . . . falling from a cliff.

“What are you going to do?”

“Gear up.”

Kylie blew out a breath. “That’s a big drop, Jack.”

“I’ve got enough gear to rappel. Trust me, it’s the *one* thing I’m good at.”

“I’m sure that’s not true, or you wouldn’t be a detective with the county.”

Jack couldn’t think of a decent response.

Kylie crouched next to the Lab and gave him a treat. She rewarded him for finding someone, though that someone was likely dead.

After eight hours of searching the mountainous wilderness, the team of volunteers and various state and local agencies had become discouraged. Some worked well together and others not so much. Probably a good thing he hadn’t had to work with Terra Connors.

He’d learned that she’d returned to the area and was working as a special agent for the forest service. He figured since she worked out of the forest service district office in Goode’s Pass, and he worked out of the county seat of Big Rapids, he wouldn’t run into her in his county detective job. Though she’d joined the SAR callout, he hadn’t seen her yet.

Maybe his luck would hold out.

He shook off those thoughts. None of it mattered.

He had a job to do here, and though he wouldn’t jump to conclusions, a knot twisted in his stomach. The search and rescue looked to be quickly shifting to a search and recovery.

With a heavy heart, he said, “We need to let the command center know we think we’ve found at least one body.”

He reached for his radio as it squawked. “Tanner, go.”

“We got ’em. We found the sisters alive and well. They got lost and were huddled together in a cave. Scared, but they kept their heads about them.” Deputy Sarnes’s smile could be heard through the radio.

Thank you, God.

Relief whooshed from the deepest part of Jack even as images from the past continued to torment him. He would concentrate on the here and now. He couldn’t go back. He could only go forward.

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He let the deputy's words hang in the air a few moments as he shared a look with Kylie, sure the woman had to be thinking the same thing.

"If they found the twins . . .," she said.

His thought exactly.

Then whose body is down there?