WHEN THE SILENCE BREAKS
MERCY RIDGE
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
ELIZABETH GODDARD

MERCY RIDGE
BOOK 1

WHEN THE SILENCE BREAKS

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Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan
RevellBooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Names: Goddard, Elizabeth author
Title: When the silence breaks / by Elizabeth Goddard.
Description: Grand Rapids, Michigan : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, 2026. | Series: Mercy Ridge series ; book 1
Identifiers: LCCN 2026001955 | ISBN 9780800747688 paperback | ISBN 9781493453979 ebook
Subjects: LCGFT: Thrillers (Fiction) | Romance fiction | Christian fiction | Novels
Classification: LCC PS3607.O324 W47 2026
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2026001955

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Cover design by Mumtaz Mustafa

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26 27 28 29 30 31 32 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Therefore whatever you have said in the dark shall be heard in the light, and what you have whispered in private rooms shall be proclaimed on the housetops.

Luke 12:3

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ONE

Secrets can't stay buried forever.

The road into the North Cascades was narrow, twisting just like the path Sarah Ellison had chosen. As she navigated the two-lane highway that took her deep into the mountains, she listened to her sister-in-law, Tessa, pleading with her over the cell.

"You don't have to do this," Tessa said.

Don't I? "It's too late to back out. You and Jeremy stay hidden, and you'll be safe. You focus on taking care of him and don't worry about me." Tessa and Jeremy—who was only three years old—remained tucked in a safe house along the coast. "There's plenty to explore. Build sand castles. Collect seashells. Act normal. Just . . . keep your head down."

Someone had buried the truth, and she would excavate whatever lay hidden on the mountain that had already claimed one life. Her brother, Aaron, deserved justice. Two weeks ago, he'd drowned, and that left Sarah to finish what he'd started before it was too late. Since her husband had died four years ago, and now her brother, that meant Tessa and Jeremy were the only family Sarah had left.

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"You could just stay here on the coast until it all blows over," Tessa said.

Sarah had no plans to simply let this go. "I know what I'm doing."

Once . . . she'd been good at her job with the federal government. She'd left that part of her life—left the secrets, the lies, and the burden of knowing too much—behind. But sometimes, the past didn't let go so easily.

Silence met her over the cell. Had the call dropped? "You still there?"

"Yes." Tessa obviously had her doubts. Then she started in again, but this time only half her words came over the connection.

"Listen, you're breaking up," Sarah said. "I need to go. Call me if anything happens. Anything suspicious. Let *me* decide if it's something to worry about."

The call ended, and she turned her focus to the winding road. Autumn leaves swirled in this place where beauty abounded and took her breath away. Considering that it was October already, she was running out of time in more than one way. The mountain would be unforgiving once the snow started falling. On that point, she could already be too late. But one thing at a time. First, she had to get to the small town of Mercy Ridge.

At times the highway edged too close for comfort to a steep drop-off, making the drive treacherous, and she imagined it foreshadowed what she could expect over the next few days.

One small veer—that's all it would take to send her over the edge. The guardrails promised safety they couldn't deliver. Life was like that too, offering comfort you couldn't count on, protection that vanished when you needed it most. One moment of looking the wrong way, one choice made in fear or desperation, and everything could change forever. One mistake

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could take a person farther than they ever imagined from where they'd hoped to land.

But sometimes someone *else's* mistake had the same effect and sent a person off the right path. She just hadn't figured out whose mistake had derailed her plans. Because just like that, here Sarah was, with a chest full of dread, on her way to a quiet Bavarian-style town in the American Alps. Perfect for tourists and skiers and outdoor adventurers. Sarah was none of those things.

Her knuckles tightened on the steering wheel as a streak of lightning split the sky, momentarily blinding her. She swerved and almost drove off the road. But corrected the vehicle. A sudden torrent pounded her windshield, exploded, and crackled across the pavement, making the road slick.

Wonderful. She didn't have time for bad weather.

But she was almost there. Almost safe. Except safety was an illusion, and she shouldn't let herself forget.

Though she'd lost her tail—that silver boxy crossover so obviously following—she wouldn't count on keeping her follower at bay forever. Sarah had known she had a shadow before she'd turned onto this road. The vehicle had been behind her, lingering just far enough back that most people wouldn't have noticed. But she wasn't most people. And she'd turned at just the right moment.

Maybe they hadn't seen her.

Maybe they had. So she couldn't risk it. She would change up her plans. She wasn't sure how they'd found her in the first place. In this old 1999 Ford Explorer, she couldn't be followed—no GPS or Bluetooth. She'd bought it off her neighbor in Sequim. Paid him in cash. With duct tape on the side mirror and a dog leash looped around the rearview mirror, it was perfect for fitting in with the rural community and tourists in Mercy Ridge.

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Slowing the vehicle, she turned down an almost imperceptible forest road, then steered deep into the woods. She then turned off the road between the trees, intruding upon nature so that low-hanging branches scraped the Explorer.

Good enough.

She hopped out. Beneath the dense evergreens, the rain had slowed. She grabbed her backpack filled with survival and tactical gear—everything she might need in case the unexpected happened. Spare clothes and cash. Her Sig Sauer P365—though if she had to use it here, she was already doomed. She'd packed two extra mags that were wrapped and stored deep in the pack. And an encrypted laptop.

She had a locked duffel with a secondary 9mm, a tactical vest, a satellite communicator, and more, but that would have to wait until she could come back to retrieve it. She couldn't carry everything as she made her way on foot. Wasn't the first time she'd had to alter her plans.

This almost felt like old times.

Her goal was to lose her followers and disappear if they tried this road, though if they had a clue what she was after, they would already be in Mercy Ridge waiting for her. Jamming her hand into her pocket, she pulled out the cracked compass that had belonged to her grandfather. She never traveled without it because, as he claimed, it always pointed to what mattered most. Well, it was broken but inscribed with "Family is everything." She didn't need the reminder, but maybe she needed the comfort.

Once she hiked down this foothill to town, she'd blend into the Mercy Ridge community and remain off the radar. In town, her first task was to hire a guide to take her deep into the Cascades. These mountains held three hundred glaciers, which was more than any other US park, outside of Alaska. And she

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shuddered at the reminders of Alaska. She didn't relish going back into any terrain that resembled her morbid experience, especially when this region was uncommonly remote.

"Yeah, and reported the highest death rate in the country," she mumbled to herself. Hikers, beware.

Already talking yourself out of it, are you?

But to accomplish her mission, she needed someone who knew their way around the mountains—*these* mountains—like the back of their hand. And from what she'd read, Ryder Goodwin was the right man for the job. She'd done her research. His great-grandfather had built the town. After Ryder's stint as a Navy SEAL, he'd returned to Mercy Ridge. She'd probably read too much about his past because she knew how to get access, but regardless of what had happened, he had carved out a new life working as a guide for Good Adventures and running wilderness training exercises.

His picture wasn't on the website, but his name had been listed along with several other guides. She didn't want to ruin his life by dragging him with her into whatever this turned into, but she needed his help.

Would he even be there? Could she convince him this was a good idea? Could she accomplish her self-imposed task without raising too many questions? She didn't know.

Pausing to catch her breath, Sarah looked out over the town in the valley below. She still had a hundred feet or so to go before she hit Five Cedars River at the bottom, flowing out of an expansive waterfall. Sarah swiped the sweat beading her forehead—even on this cool mid-sixties day—and adjusted her backpack straps.

Then she felt it.

A slight tremble beneath her boots. She frowned and scanned the ground, searching. Had she imagined it? Unease shivered over her.

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The earth shifted beneath her feet, suddenly giving way with a sickening lurch, crumbling and morphing into liquefied dirt. A scream ripped from Sarah's throat as she was carried away in the muddy gush racing down the slope. Plunging her body toward the river below, the torrent of slurry whipped her side to side like she was a rag doll on a natural waterslide. More terrifying was that she had no control over the landing at the bottom. The raging river and the base of the cataract waited to swallow her.

I have to stop this!

Her arms flailed and fingers clawed anything solid—a rock, a branch, roots—anything to stop the momentum of the churning sludge, until cold, thick mud coated her, even clogging her mouth and nose. Rocks and broken branches nicked her arms and legs.

The roar of the river grew louder.

No, no, no!

If she was going under, she had to suck in a breath before she hit that frigid water.

Panic built in her chest as she struggled to spit out the muck. Then she saw him.

She must have been seeing things. Had to blink the grit out of her eyes.

A man leaned out over a thick, sturdy branch as if bracing to grab her. She didn't know how his rescue would be possible. His eyes locked on hers, willing her to understand. She barely made out his tense features.

Oh, I understand. God, please let this work!

She rushed toward his outstretched arm . . . *I have this one chance.*

Her only chance.

She reached out, stretching, her muscles screaming.

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Then he clamped onto her wrist, holding her as mud poured around her. Arms straining, she willed him to pull her up and out. Except the forces of nature had other plans. Gritting her teeth, she clawed toward him.

But the mud wouldn't let go.

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TWO

The ground beneath Ryder Goodwin moved, dropping away until he was swimming upstream through the churning muck. Gripping the thick fallen branch, he refused to let go of the struggling slide victim. Muscles burning, Ryder hauled them both out of the violent flow of debris and rolled onto solid ground.

That was too close.

Along with the roar of the liquefied earth pouring into the river below, the sound of the waterfall filled his ears. Heart still pounding, he caught his breath. The river was one thing, but the mudslide would have taken them both under and out. Failure wasn't an option. And it pained him to the core that, yes, in the past, he'd failed when it mattered most.

Ryder pushed up and hovered over the muddy body he'd saved from certain death. Realization dawned. A woman stared up at him. Covered in mud, she looked beyond haggard.

He had to look equally awful. "Are you okay?"

Her caramel-brown eyes flashed bright. "I'll be better once I can breathe."

Oh. He hadn't meant to hurt her. He rolled away to lie on his back. Looking up, he let the raindrops that found a way

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through the dense canopy hit him in the face and wash away the mud. He took a split second to even out his breathing and think clearly.

Then he pushed to his feet. "This ground isn't stable. We need to move." He'd stated the obvious, but in case she had any questions, he'd made it clear.

Ryder grabbed her slick hand and assisted her up.

He looked her over and spotted a few scrapes. Probably bruises too. More importantly . . . "Anything broken?"

"No obvious injuries." She glanced in the direction of the river and frowned. "It could have been worse."

Once the mud was washed away, she could confirm that it wasn't worse. Until then, adrenaline might hide her pain. She lifted her face to the sky to let rain wash away the mud as she raked her hair out of her face. At the moment he was uncertain of the true color, but he could guess it was dark brown to go with her eyes.

She coughed and spit mud out of her mouth.

His small backpack had survived the battle with nature, so he pulled out a canteen. "Here."

She grabbed it. Swished water around and spit. Then drank from the canteen. She blinked at him with eyelids caked in mud as if she might be bashful.

"Looks like you kept your backpack," he said. "Do you need anything? I can help you out of it."

"I'm good, thanks." Her voice held a surprisingly commanding tone.

"Let's go." Ryder assessed the terrain—he didn't want to walk them into another threat—then started toward the safest path.

The woman balked instead of falling in behind him. "What just happened here?"

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"I'll explain everything as we hike. Are you good to go?"

She tilted her face, looked at him hard and long. Sizing him up to decide if she could trust the man who'd just saved her life?

"Yes," she said. "Lead the way. Guide me out of here."

Guide her? Her use of that word surprised him, as if she knew who he was. But he'd never seen her before. His picture wasn't on the website, was it? He'd asked that his information be removed.

Trekking between the trees at an angle, he ascended the rise. At least the rain had stopped for the moment, though it left them cold and wet when they needed warmth.

"Shouldn't we be descending? You know, heading to town?" She brushed a clump of mud from her sleeve.

"We're taking the safest path." Ryder scanned the slope ahead. "I've been out here for a couple of days, keeping an eye on the terrain, watching for new cracks or places where the ground's giving way." Although, he hadn't seen this mudslide coming.

She stopped. "Wait . . . are you a scientist?"

He kept walking, boots stepping firm in the slick loam. "Nope. Just tracking safety conditions. Seasonal runoff shifts, new cracks, you name it." The kind of stuff hikers didn't notice until it was too late.

And she followed. "That sounds like you're a scientist to me."

"I'm a wilderness guide." The words slid out as if he was still guiding. He hadn't taken on clients in two years. "Or . . . I was. Now I'm a wilderness safety consultant." He worked with the county sheriff's office search and rescue, taking care of route planning and gear assessments. He was just the guy they called when something didn't add up or when no one else wanted to go that far off-trail.

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"Besides the mudslide, what exactly have you seen that you're going to report?" she asked.

Why so interested? Or was this just conversation to help her forget her near-death experience? "I can't interpret what any of it means, but I've seen a pattern—small shifts, fresh breaks. This ridge is on edge."

She stopped in her tracks, and he paused, finally turning to her. Took in her athletic build and determined jaw beneath the smattering of mud that remained on her face.

Her eyes scanned the valley below. "Do we need to be worried? Should I bother staying in Mercy Ridge?"

"It's normal for the region. It's monitored because, yes, sometimes things go sideways."

"In case it becomes *not* normal." She looked at him then. Really looked.

"Exactly."

"What about the road?"

"I'll report the mudslide and the other findings as mentioned to the ranger district and sheriff's department. We'll see what happens. It's not my job to make heads or tails of it." Ryder got them on the move again. Despite what he'd said, he carried an unscientific feel for the land he knew well, and right now a deep dread was growing in his gut. But that wasn't considered science, and he wouldn't talk about it.

"But it *is* your job to decide if it's safe for hikers," she said. This woman was persistent. What more did she want from him? "You know something. I can tell that you have your own read. So, what's your take?"

"For now, the rain could explain it—but I don't love what I'm seeing. Now, let's keep going."

"You know where you're going, then, taking us up the hill?" she asked.

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Her easy breaths confirmed that she was in shape and athletic, not just in appearance. Very few people were these days. But her question surprised him and brought him back to the point he'd been going to make.

"We'll head toward stable ground, then make our way down to Mercy Ridge. I assume that's where you hiked from."

"Sure."

Sure? What did that mean? "Unless you hadn't finished your trek and the slide interrupted you. I'd recommend calling it a day."

"Town works for me," she said. "The sooner we get there, the better."

"I couldn't agree more." He was glad they'd moved on to a new topic. He'd prefer no conversation at all while he considered the mudslide and the stability issues.

"My name's Sarah, by the way," she said.

He should have introduced himself to begin with, but to be fair, they'd both been shaken. "Nice to meet you, Sarah. I'm Ryder Goodwin."

"Oh? I read about the town. Matthias Goodwin is the founder. Any relation?"

"Yup. He's my great-grandfather."

The rain picked up again—*great*—heavier this time, and Ryder gazed up at the hill they were ascending.

"Maybe the rain will wash off the mud completely before we get to town," she said. "I'm just trying to stay positive. It's colder out here than I thought, but at least the movement keeps us warm."

Exactly. He focused ahead. "We need to make that rocky outcropping just over there. Can you keep up?"

"Yes."

He picked up the pace, weaving his way through the foliage,

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which wasn't as thick here, so they could move faster. Half an hour later, they trudged across the parking lot of the local dollar store at the edge of town, just past the big Mercy Ridge welcome sign.

"I hope nobody pays attention to us," she said. "We look like we just finished the world champion mud wrestling event."

He laughed. "Who would they think won?"

"Who won? That's what you think about?" She stopped walking and turned to look at him as her lips curled into a beautiful smile.

He wanted to see her whole unmuddied face. "Well, *you* made the comparison."

"There's no doubt it would be me." Her teeth flashed white, then she suddenly dropped the smile. "In all seriousness—thank you."

She gave a slight shudder. Yeah, his mind had gone there too. Both their bodies could be washing down the river. Who knows if they would ever be found.

She stepped closer and peered up at him. "You risked your life for me. You didn't have to do that, you know."

"You're welcome." Saving someone wasn't anything he stopped to think about. "I'll escort you wherever you're staying."

"How do you know I'm not a local?" she asked.

While he was only guessing . . . "You mentioned reading about the town. Just your reaction, really."

"That's right." She took a couple of steps away. "I did give myself away. Well, thanks for getting me out of this mess."

She was about to turn and walk away, but she paused as her gaze lifted to look over his shoulder at something behind him. Almost imperceptibly, her eyes widened with a look of fear. She recovered and hid her reaction, but Ryder didn't miss much, if anything.

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"I have to go." She slowly and casually backed away, but he imagined her nerves were vibrating underneath. "I'll see you around."

She turned her back to him and hurried off, then shifted into a slow jog.

What was that about? Now that the rain had stopped, no chance he wasn't still caked in mud. He started toward Good Adventures located on the far side of town. He'd left his vehicle in the parking lot. He took the opportunity to glance at Main Street, acting like this was just another mudslide day in the region and he was just one of many mud-covered guys on the street.

He'd be noticed—probably—so he wouldn't make his curiosity obvious. Something had spooked Sarah—of that he had no doubt. As he walked, he didn't see anything suspicious, but that didn't ease the unsettled feeling in his gut. Maybe she was fleeing an ex or a stalker. Even though Sarah's obvious negative reaction wasn't his business, he'd stay watchful. Maybe he'd been a SEAL before, but he'd left the fight behind and chosen this quiet, peaceful town and these mountains as his sanctuary . . . only to lose again.

And every day was a fight to put those shadowed memories behind him.

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THREE

After a long, hot shower to wash away the mud and grime, Sarah towel-dried her hair, grateful she'd escaped with only minor scrapes, thanks to her outerwear. A few raw welts bloomed on her back, but nothing serious. Surviving a mudslide hadn't exactly been on her bingo card when she'd set out on this self-imposed mission. She cleaned the grime off her backpack, making sure to get the mud out of every crevice, then she cleaned her Sig.

Moving to the window, she cautiously peeked past the curtain. Her cheap motel was located on the outskirts of this town nestled against the mountains. The plan had been to blend in with the tourists who flocked here. If anyone came looking, she'd be just another face in the crowd.

Mercy Ridge was tucked deep in the Cascades—hard to reach yet somehow still a magnet for visitors. The towering peak of a nearby volcano loomed in the distance like something out of an Alpine fairy tale. No wonder the Cascades were nicknamed the Alps of America.

The town leaned into the theme too. Sloped chalet-style roofs. Carved wood trim. Flower boxes bursting with color.

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Even cobblestone streets in places. The whole thing felt curated, quaint—almost too much so. Whose idea had that been?

And she just realized that she'd arrived here in October. The townspeople must celebrate their version of Oktoberfest. Had she missed it?

A car turned in to the parking lot, then peeled out, bringing her focus back to where it should be. Her heart rate jumped at the disturbance, though, as she searched the parking lot and across the street where the downtown art district started.

At least she'd seen no sign of the silver hybrid that had followed her for almost thirty miles.

Unfortunately, she might have seen a former colleague—Reid Maddox. That couldn't be good. Not good at all. Except, after the trauma she'd been through, coupled with paranoia and fear, she must have been seeing things. She was still reeling from her collision with the wilderness guide—the very man she sought to hire. She should have explained that to him, but she needed a moment to gather her thoughts. Besides, he was focused on the mudslide and getting them to safety. She'd do better to walk into the Good Adventures establishment and book her trip with him when he had the capacity to listen to her specific request.

If those who'd tried to follow her had figured out that she'd come to Mercy Ridge or even driven through town to search for her, they wouldn't find the old Explorer parked at the motel. She was glad she'd left it in the woods. Yes, if she'd driven all the way in, she would have been here without the mud and wouldn't have run into Ryder. Maybe the serendipitous connection would help. But something he said disturbed her. He mentioned that he *used to* be a wilderness guide. Was he no longer guiding? She'd just have to convince him.

In the meantime, she needed to relax and catch her breath.

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Now that she was finally here in Mercy Ridge, she had work to do. She'd figure out how and when to get the rest of her stuff from the vehicle she'd left in the woods.

Meeting Ryder the way she had confirmed that, without a doubt, she'd picked the right person for the job. He'd pulled her right out of a ferocious mudslide. Reached in and grabbed her. She relived that moment repeatedly—not the bad, terrifying part of it but the good part . . .

The hero she'd come here to find had been in the right place at the right time to pull her from the jaws of death. That idea left her stunned. Especially considering that she had half expected he would be out guiding a group and she'd have to book ahead and wait for him to return for her particular search. Time was short, and so she'd tell him what she could, what she must, to convince him to help her.

He wasn't a guide, he'd claimed, and wasn't a scientist, so why was he *really* surveying the region? Unstable ground was another issue entirely, and she could only worry about ten things at a time.

That would be number eleven, so no, thank you.

Maybe she was thinking about this all wrong in trying to hire a private guide to search for something that—as far as anyone knew—was a myth. A fairy tale. Just a story. But this buried truth had gotten Aaron killed, and she would uncover it. Expose it. Get justice. And save Tessa and Jeremy from further threats.

She'd seen a picture of Ryder because she'd gotten his file, but she hadn't recognized him today, especially with his wavy, shoulder-length hair. In the image she'd seen, he was tall, broad shouldered, and had the hardened physique of a former Navy SEAL who now guided people through the mountains—or used to, per his claim. His hair was sun-streaked, and his eyes were a sharp gray.

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At least, she'd seen those features through the mud.

When he'd shared his name, she'd been stunned but shouldn't have been. Who else could have pulled her right out of the mud—a singular, deadly force of nature—other than Ryder Goodwin?

With several hours of daylight remaining, she made sure the Sig Sauer was clean and tucked in her ankle holster, then exited her room. Kept her head down and curled into her Nordic sweater on this beautiful fall day—beautiful now that the rain had stopped. Before heading to Mercy Ridge, she'd dyed her hair a drab brown and tried to look plain and unassuming.

Unnoticeable. Unmemorable. And yeah, that seemed to be working. Not one person looked at her as she hiked a couple of miles to the other end of town and up the pebbled trail to Good Adventures. Through the glass door, she caught sight of a woman with silver-blond hair—kind of like Paula Deen's—locking up. What? It was only four thirty. Not closing time yet, at least in her mind.

Sarah rushed forward and gently knocked. "Oh, please, let me in. I need . . . Please."

"We're closed for the day." Speaking through the glass door, the woman gave a warm and friendly apologetic look.

"I met Ryder earlier today." She spoke loudly so the woman could hear through the glass. "He saved me from a mudslide. I'd like to thank him." Oh, good grief. She could have come up with something better than that. Then again, the truth worked too.

The woman's brow arched, and with a smile, she unlocked the door, opening it wide for Sarah. "Well, hello. I'm Dinah Goodwin, Ryder's mother. I run the Whispering Pines Café and help at Adventures when I can."

His mother? Oh, this wasn't exactly going the way Sarah

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intended. *Come on, get your act together.* Was she that out of practice?

Dinah pulled Sarah all the way into the establishment and closed the door but didn't lock it. A concerned frown filled her face. "So, what happened today? You said he saved you from a mudslide?"

"Is Ryder here?"

"I'm afraid not. I haven't seen him since early this morning. That's why I'd love to hear your story."

"Oh. Well, there was a mudslide on the mountain. A small one, really, but I got caught in it. I don't know how he did it, but he saved my life. Your son is a true hero." Sarah might have been laying it on too thick.

"Yes, that's my boy. Proud mama here. I'm so relieved that he was there for you. How'd you like to join us for dinner? Ryder's supposed to stop by the house. You can thank him then."

Sarah might have been reading this all wrong, but it felt like Ryder's mother was on a matchmaking mission. Or she could just be a kind person and everyone in town was this generous and welcoming.

"I . . . uh . . . I don't know if that's a good idea. The truth is, I'd like to hire him as a guide." She should have gotten right to the point to begin with.

"First, what's not good about my idea? And second, Ryder doesn't guide anymore. Hasn't . . ." Dinah's forehead crinkled. "He hasn't in more than a year. We have three others available for our fall activities—Nico, Taryn, and Benji—but they're unavailable the rest of the week. Mushroom-foraging guide starts next week, but I think that's full. And there's fly-fishing—are you into fishing?"

"I . . . uh . . ." Sarah took a step back.

"What am I saying? We can talk about that later at dinner!

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Everyone has to eat, including you. I brought chicken pot pies home from the diner earlier today."

"I don't want to intrude. I . . . he only saw me covered in mud. He probably won't even recognize me." Now she was digging herself in deeper. That didn't sound good. She was on a mission. A daring, potentially deadly mission. Surprising Ryder at dinner could send the wrong signal.

Maybe in the past she would have seen this as the way in, but not now. "I'd better go. Thank you for letting me in, and please pass a message on to Ryder that I appreciate his help."

And I need his help on the mountain. But this conversation had taken a weird direction and now seemed like the wrong time to hire him, especially if he wasn't here. For crying out loud. He wasn't even guiding anymore.

She'd have to find another way to talk to Ryder and convince him that he was the guide for the job. She'd researched him, felt like she knew him—to a point—and today had confirmed that for her.

Before she turned to leave, a man entered through the front door. For a split second, Sarah's hopes rose. But it wasn't Ryder. Still, he looked like a guide. A person couldn't mistake that build, that attire, for anything else but an outdoorsman who loved trails and climbing mountains.

"Hi, Dean. What can I do for you?" Dinah asked.

"I heard Good Adventures mapped that new route on the north slope. Just wondering if you'd share the track—or your waypoints. A client is asking for a guide, and we're heading out soon."

Dinah's smile was warm yet tight. "Why didn't you just send them on over here?"

He laughed. "Funny. You don't have anyone to take people up that way this time of year."

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"It isn't advised, of course. I'll ask about the route file. Of course we'll share what we know. Don't want anyone getting hurt on Blackspire Mountain. Not good for business."

"Thanks for being so understanding, Dinah. There's enough business for all of us here." He shook Dinah's hand, then turned his attention to Sarah and flashed a smile.

Brilliant and insincere.

"I'm Dean Rourke. I work at Backcountry Bound, just down the road."

"Dean is our competition." Dinah winked. Her teasing smile held a hint of animosity.

"I'll leave you to your business and catch Ryder later," Sarah said.

Why did everything have to be so complicated?

She turned and headed for the door. Dean caught up to her. "I can help with anything you need. No need to catch up with Ryder. If you need a guide, I'm available for the next few days. We had a cancellation."

"Okay. I'll think about it." She brushed him off and headed down the sidewalk. She was losing her touch, her ability to make things happen.

Exhaustion weighed on her after the day she'd had, and now the soreness along with a few scrapes and bruises from the slide were catching up to her. But she ignored the pain.

She needed to get back to her vehicle. But . . . not yet. Not until she was sure that she hadn't been followed and that Reid wasn't in town.

A small matte-gray SUV steered next to her and slowed. Sarah stiffened and tried to cautiously put distance between her and the approaching vehicle. She searched for the best way to escape as she glanced over. The window lowered.

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Dinah smiled and waved. "Let me give you a ride. Anyone who got caught in a mudslide needs some pampering."

Oh, brother. She wasn't going to lose Ryder's mother so easily. And yeah, she might not need pampering, but a ride would be nice, and she appreciated the woman's kindness. Sarah climbed into the vehicle.

I don't have time to get up close and personal. But that was the door that opened, and Sarah had to walk through. The next thing Sarah knew, she was on her way to have dinner with Dinah and Ryder as the kind woman slowly steered up into a residential community on the hillside and then well beyond it. The mudslide that happened earlier was on the other side of this small valley in which the town was nestled. Was Ryder at all concerned about stability up here?

"Are you sure Ryder isn't going to feel ambushed?" Sarah asked. "Or do you invite strangers over for dinner all the time?"

Dinah laughed as she swung into the long driveway and passed beneath a weathered sign—CIRCLE G RANCH—then guided them toward a house set back on sprawling acreage. "You said he saved your life. Anyone whose life my boy saves is no stranger. You're not a stranger to either of us now."

Sarah got out and followed Dinah into the house. The aroma of pot pies made her mouth water.

Dinah led her into the kitchen. "I had a feeling I should bring some extras home. You know, like maybe we'd have company tonight. I just love it when that happens, don't you?"

Me? Sarah had never had the feeling that she needed extra for surprise company. "Sure. It smells wonderful. What can I do to help?"

"You can have a seat. What would you like to drink? We have sweet tea, soft drinks, and coffee."

This had been a bad idea. Ryder wouldn't be happy when

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she told him what she needed from him. He would believe she was using his mother to manipulate him. Or maybe that was just her old job talking. She needed to do something to get past this awkward feeling.

Dinah paused to look out the back kitchen window. "Timber keeps barking. You wait here, and I'll go check on him."

"No, please, I'll go," Sarah said. "You finish up."

"No, no, you're a guest."

Sarah made for the back door. "I got this," she called over her shoulder and headed out into what looked like a literal back forty. At least a few acres of meadow and some grazing land for horses. The sun was setting, and it would be dark soon. A barn revealed that they might actually have horses. And at the far end of the fence line a German shepherd barked savagely. The fence was barbed wire, so the dog was smart enough not to attempt that, or just well trained.

Yeah. A well-trained guard dog. Should she really be sneaking up on him?

Timber might see her as a threat. Dinah had been right, but the growling, barking dog had disturbed her as well as Dinah. Sarah pulled out her Sig.

What has you so spooked, boy?

The dog bristled and turned around to face this new threat—*her*.

"Hey, Timber. Hey, boy . . ."

Fear squeezed her chest. But he must have sensed she was friendly and turned to race down the fence line. His barks turned even more vicious. She wouldn't be surprised if he decided to breach the wired fence. She lifted her gaze to the tree line in time to witness a shadowed figure disappearing into the woods.

The threat was fleeing. *Please don't let it be related to me*

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or the reason I'm here. The walls felt like they were closing in too fast. Then Timber returned, focusing his attention on her.

"Drop your weapon." The commanding voice of Ryder Goodwin came at her from behind.

Oh boy. "This isn't what it looks like." She lowered her gun, placing it on the ground, and turned slowly to face him.

"What does it look like?" he asked, his gaze intense and intimidating. He barely contained a scowl.

"I wasn't going to shoot your dog, if that's what you're thinking," she said.

His face shifted into confusion. "Sarah? What are you doing here?"

"I didn't think you'd recognize me without the mud."

"It took me a second. But seriously, what are you doing here?"

That was easy. "Your mother forced me to join you for dinner."

His concerned features morphed into a crazy, unexpected smile and a deep laugh.

And that tripped her up inside.

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