



MONTANA
RESCUE
+1+

WILD MONTANA SKIES

A NOVEL

SUSAN MAY
WARREN


Revell

a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Susan May Warren, *Wild Montana Skies*
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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
P.O. Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Warren, Susan May, 1966– author.

Title: Wild Montana skies / Susan May Warren.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group, [2016] | Series: Montana Rescue ; book 1

Identifiers: LCCN 2016017616 | ISBN 9780800727437 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Women air pilots—Fiction. | Helicopter pilots—Fiction. | Rescue work—Montana—Fiction. | Man-woman relationships—Fiction. |

GSAFD: Christian fiction. | Love stories.

Classification: LCC PS3623.A865 W55 2016 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2016017616>

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously.

Published in association with The Steve Laube Agency, 5025 N. Central Ave., #635, Phoenix, AZ 85012.

16 17 18 19 20 21 22 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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For your glory, Lord



1

KACEY DIDN'T WANT TO RAISE EYEBROWS and alert the entire town to her return. She simply hoped to tame the beast that had roared to life when she spotted the billboard for the Gray Pony Saloon and Grill, off Rt. 2, on the outskirts of Mercy Falls.

The home of the best hickory rib sauce in the West.

From the look of things, the hangout on the edge of town hadn't changed in a decade.

Dim streetlights puddled the muddy parking lot, now crammed full of F-150s and Silverado pickups. The twang of a Keith Urban cover swelled as the door opened. A cowboy spilled out, his arm lassoed around a shapely coed, probably a summer intern for the park service. She wore Gore-Tex pants, a lime-green Glacier National Park T-shirt, and a too-easy smile on her face. Kacey watched as the cowboy wheedled her toward his truck. The coed tugged his hat down, and he braced his hands on either side of her, leaning down to steal a kiss.

The sight had the power to stop Kacey cold, reroute her down the country road of regrets.

Maybe she should simply keep going, head north to Whitefish, back to the anonymity of a town that couldn't catalog her mistakes.

Still, the brain fog of two days of driving, not to mention the drizzle of a nagging rain, could be the recipe for disaster on the winding roads that journeyed north through the foothills.

The last thing she needed was to drive headfirst off the highway and die in a fiery crash here in her own backyard. Some welcome home that would be.

Kacey parked just as thunder growled, lightning spliced the darkness, and rain began to crackle against her windshield. The soupy night obliterated the view of the glorious, jagged mountains rising on the horizon.

Another pickup rolled up next to her, the running boards caked with mud. A fleet of what looked like army types piled out, garbed in mud-brown shirts and camo pants. Fatigue lined their grimy expressions, as if they were just returning from a two-day march in full field gear.

The nearest army base was over 150 miles away, so the appearance of soldiers had her curiosity piqued. She watched them go in, and a reprimand formed on her lips about donning utility wear off duty. But, like her army psychologist had suggested, some time away from her fellow soldiers might help her heal.

Keep her from derailing twelve years of distinguished service with an ODPMC discharge—or, to her mind, the old Section-8, Maxwell Klinger designation.

She wasn't crazy. Just . . . exhausted. Maybe.

She couldn't let the war follow her home. Let it destroy the best part of herself, the part she'd left behind in Montana.

The part of her that desperately needed a definition of life that included words like *safe* and *normal*.

Instead of, oh, say, *deployment* and *Afghanistan*.

And acronyms like *PTSD*.

Which meant she had to start living like a civilian and keep her military secrets safely tucked away if she intended on putting

herself back together and returning to base, healed and fit for duty, by the end of the summer.

Kacey scrubbed the sleep out of her eyes, then got out, hunting ribs and a frothy homemade root beer.

The Pony might not have updated their exterior, with the rough-hewn porch, the Old West-style sign, and neon beer ads in the windows, but inside, they'd overhauled for the next generation.

The honky-tonk tones of some country musician met her as she opened thick double doors, and she walked into the distinct intoxicating aroma of hickory barbecue.

She glanced to the front and almost expected to see cowboy crooner Benjamin King on stage at the back of the room, past the gleaming oak bar. Work-hewn muscles stretching out his black T-shirt, one worn cowboy boot hooked onto the rung of his stool, and wearing his battered brown Stetson over that unruly dark blond hair, Ben would grind out a love song in his signature low tenor, wooing every girl in the room.

His devastating blue eyes fixed only on her.

Kacey blew out a breath, letting the memory shake out, settle her back into reality.

Stopping for dinner at the Gray Pony would be a very bad idea if Ben hadn't long ago sprung himself from the grasp of Mercy Falls, his guitar slung over his shoulder, nary a glance behind. No, she wouldn't find him, a big star now with the country duo Montgomery King, back in this one-horse watering hole tucked in the shadow of Glacier National Park.

Now, Kacey scanned the room, getting her bearings. Roy had kept the taxidermied moose, rainbow trout, and black bear still posed over the bar, but the rest of the joint, from the themed barrel tables to the sleek leather barstools, suggested an upgrade. Along the wall, every few feet, flat screens displayed sporting events—bull riding, a UFC fight, a golf tournament, and a fishing show. And

the adjacent hall that once hosted a row of worn pool tables now sported a shiny mechanical bull-riding pit.

Judging by the cheering of the fellas gathered at the rail, more than a few wearing Sweetwater Creek Lumber Co. shirts, the girl in the center of the ring offered up quite a show.

The saloon seemed to have upgraded their clientele from the obligatory cowboys and park workers to a large conglomeration of army, local law enforcement, and even what looked like young, long-haired hippies hoping to spend their summer in yurts and hiking the craggy routes of the Rocky Mountains, cameras hanging from their necks.

Waitresses squeezed through tables packed with hungry patrons, their trays stacked high with wings, onion rings, and nachos. An “oo-rah!” rose from a table of soldiers as one of the UFC fighters went down.

She recognized no one, which, of course, could be providential. Because they might not recognize her, either.

Kacey squeezed past a group of hikers perusing a map and nabbed the only empty barstool. She climbed up, took a napkin, and mopped up the remains of a frothy beer puddling on the counter.

“Sorry about that.” This from the woman behind the counter, her dark hair pulled back in a long braid, her brown eyes quick as she surveyed the activity behind Kacey. She took a rag and wiped the counter. “I think the person sitting here stiffed me.” She glanced at the door.

“Where did she—”

“He. I dunno. I don’t see him. He wasn’t in uniform, but he could be with the guard.” She tossed the rag under the counter, grabbed a coaster. “We have specials on tap—”

“Do you still have the house root beer?”

A hint of a smile. “Home brewed, my daddy’s recipe.”

Her *daddy* . . . seriously? Ah, sure, Kacey saw it now. Hair dyed black and about fifty pounds thinner. And of course, a decade in her eyes, on her face. She couldn't help but ask, "Gina McGill?"

The woman frowned. "Do I—"

"Kacey Fairing. I used to—"

"Date Ben King, yeah, wow, how are you?"

Kacey was going to say that she'd sat behind her in Mr. Viren's biology class, but she supposed Gina's version might be an easier association. "I'm good."

"I haven't seen you since, uh . . ." And there it was. The prickly dance around Kacey's mistakes. The ones that had driven her out of Mercy Falls and into the army's arms.

"Prom," Kacey filled in, diverting, trying to make it easier for both of them. "Nice of your dad to let us host it here. One of my favorite high school memories."

"What are you up to?" Gina said, pulling out a frozen mug from the freezer, filling it with frothy, dark, creamy root beer from the tap.

"I'm a chopper pilot. For the army."

"Really? Wow. I suppose they called you in, huh? Rescuing people off rooftops?"

Kacey frowned. "Uh, not sure what you're talking about."

Gina set the mug on the coaster. "Oh, I thought you were here with the rest of the National Guard. The Mercy River is flooding, and all these guys are working twenty-four-hour shifts sandbagging upriver all the way down to the bridge."

Ah, that accounted for dinner in their field dress.

Kacey took a sip of the root beer, let the foam sit on her upper lip a second before licking it off. "Nope. Here on leave for the summer, although, yeah, I'll be doing some flying for Chet King's PEAK." See, that came out easily enough, no hitch, no hint at the past. No irony.

And no suggestion that she might not be fit to fly. Keeping her chopper in the air had never been her problem, thank you.

Besides, she needed this gig, if only to keep her sanity during the daylight hours. Too much idle time only invited the memories.

Gina offered her a menu. "Well, don't be surprised if Sam Brooks comes knocking on your door. The Mercy Falls EMS department has the PEAK team on full alert, and he's recruiting volunteers for the sandbag brigade."

Kacey perused the menu offerings. "Why is Sam doing the recruiting? Is Blackburn still sheriff?"

"Yeah. He'll be in office until he retires, probably. Sam is the deputy sheriff. So, the smoked BBQ ribs are half off now that it's after 10:00 p.m., and I think I could score you a basket of the fried calamari on the house."

"The ribs sound perfect, thanks, Gina," she said, handing her the menu. "And I'm game for the calamari too."

Kacey grabbed the mug, sipping as she turned in her chair, glancing at the band on stage, the lead singer now leaning into the mic, plucking out another Keith Urban ballad.

"I'm gonna be here for ya, baby . . ."

Young, dark-haired, and not a hint of Ben's resonant twang. And yet just like that, Ben showed up, almost tangible in her mind, even after all these years. The smell of fresh air in his flannel shirt, his arms around her, lips against her neck.

Nope. She wrapped her hands around the cool glass.

She should probably also remember that Ben had made her believe in a different life. In the full-out happy ending. She should probably hate him for that.

On the dance floor, the cowboy and the coed from outside locked themselves in a slow sway. A few more couples joined them, and Kacey turned away, rubbing her finger and thumb into her eyes, slicking away the exhaustion.

"Working the flood?"

She looked up into the striking, blue eyes of the man who had slid onto the stool next to her. Brown, neatly trimmed hair and a smattering of russet whiskers, neatly clipped but just long enough to suggest a renegade attitude in a cultured life. He wore a camel-brown chambray shirt open at the neck, sleeves rolled up over strong forearms, a pair of faded jeans, scuffed cowboy boots, and the smell of money in his cologne. A rich, cowboy-wannabe tourist. And he had a low, rumbly voice that should have probably elicited some response, if she weren't so tired.

Really tired. "Nope."

From the end of the bar, a huddle of hikers roared as one of them landed a bull's-eye into the dart target. The man seemed to follow her gaze, frowned.

Huh.

"I suppose the rain's cutting short your vacation," she said.

This got a laugh. Or a harrumph, she couldn't tell. "Naw. I'm over the park."

"That's a shame. So much beautiful country."

Did she imagine the shadow that crossed his eyes? Maybe, because in a blink it vanished. Instead, "Gina talked you into the calamari, huh?"

Gina had deposited the deep-fried squid, sided with creamy aioli.

Kacey reached for a twisty piece. "Why? Something I should be worried about?" She took a curl, dipped it into the spicy mayo.

He shook his head, took a sip of his own root beer. "I tried to tell Roy that nobody north of Denver has ever heard of calamari, but he wanted to add it. Something for the tourists . . ." He lifted a nicely sculpted shoulder. "I think I'm the only one in five hundred miles ordering it."

So, not a tourist. But not exactly a local either.

"Rubbery." She wrinkled her nose. "Yeah, probably Roy should

have stuck with cowboy food." She shoved the basket his direction. "Help yourself."

"Not for you?"

"I'm spoiled," she said, rinsing down the flavor. "I've spent the past year in Florida, seaside."

He seemed like a nice guy—maybe the right guy—to help erase old memories, find new ones.

Not that she was looking, really, but maybe, away from her rules on base, and with a longer stint home than normal, she might . . .

A shout on the dance floor made her turn, and she saw that the cowboy she'd seen before on the porch was tussling with one of the hippies, this one wearing a park-logoed shirt.

Oops. Apparently that cute coed in his arms had cuddled up against the wrong demographic.

"We're dancing here," Cowboy said.

"And she's not your girlfriend!" the hippie retorted.

Next to her, the man, Mr. Rumble Voice, rose. "That's not pretty."

She glanced at him. "They'll be fine."

He wasn't the only one on his feet, however. A couple of the hikers on the far end of the bar separated from the group and edged toward the dance floor.

And the table of USC fans stopped cheering, eyes on the spectacle.

She took another sip of her root beer.

The voices raised, a few expletives thrown.

When Cowboy pushed the hippie, Rumble headed toward the dance floor.

And, shoot—like a reflex, Kacey found herself on her feet, as if still on duty, the cool-headed soldier she'd been for twelve years.

Stay out of it. The voice simmered in her head.

"Hey, guys," Rumble said, moving closer, hands up. "Let's just take this outside—"

Cowboy threw a punch at the hippie, and the room exploded.

The hippies emptied their table, and of course Cowboy had a few hands he'd dragged in off the ranch.

And just like that, Kacey was dodging fists, zeroing in on the coed who started the mess. The girl held her mouth where someone had accidentally elbowed her.

Kacey maneuvered through the fray, caught the girl, and pulled her back toward the stage. "Are you okay?" If she remembered correctly, there was an exit just stage left . . .

"I didn't mean to start this."

Kacey threw her arm over the girl's shoulder and ducked, heading toward the exit.

She didn't see it coming.

A body flew into her, liquid splashing over her as the weight threw her. Kacey slammed into the stage; pain exploded across her forehead.

The room spun, darkness blotchy against her eyes.

She sat there, just a moment, blinking.

Pull back, Kacey! Your position is compromised!

She shook her head to rid it of the voice but felt a scream rising when arms circled her, lifting—

"Oh no you don't!" Kacey shouted.

She thrashed against the embrace, elbowing her captor hard.

He made a sound of pain, but she followed with a hard upercut to his jaw.

And landed on the floor.

The jolt of hitting the floor, the sense of movement around her, brought her back.

"What?" She blinked, clearing her vision.

Rumble peered down at her, holding his jaw. "You have quite a right hook, honey."

Oh. Boy. She made a face, but her forehead burned, and she pressed her hand against the heat of a rising bump. "Sorry. But—"

"My bad. But you need to get off the floor."

Voices now, loud, punching through the tension in the room. He hesitated a second, then held out his hand.

She made a face, shook her head, and climbed to her feet. "I don't need help, thanks."

But she swayed, trying to find her balance on the wooden floor.

"Seriously, you look like you could go down."

"I'm fine." Only then did she realize the wetness down the front of her white T-shirt. And . . . oh no. The odor of beer from her soaked shirt rose to consume her. That would play well when she arrived home. She pulled the shirt away from her body and removed her hand from her head. Then, "Wait . . . that girl—"

"Jess has her."

Jess? She looked around and found the girl being led to a table by a pretty blonde, one of the hikers.

Rumble seemed to be debating grabbing her arm, but she gave him a look, and he simply led the way back to the counter. On the dance floor, the factions had separated, the musician was setting his mic back to rights. The hippies, angry, a few of them holding back their champion, congregated at their table. The cowboy stalked out of the bar, holding his hat, his posse shouting epithets as they trailed.

"The flood has everyone keyed up," Rumble said.

A man walked by, wearing a two-day scraggle of whiskers, dressed in a tight black shirt, Gore-Tex pants. Another one of the hikers. "Thanks, Ian," he said, clamping her not-needed rescuer on the shoulder.

Ian nodded after him. "Miles."

Apparently, this guy knew everyone in the saloon. "Ian? That's your name?"

He nodded while reaching for a napkin. He fished ice from his water and folded it into the napkin. "You've got a nasty bump

there." He made to hold the makeshift ice pack to her head, then simply handed it to her.

"Thank you." Kind. She should have seen that earlier. "Sorry I hit you. It's a . . . well, a reflex."

"What, from your years cage fighting?" He raised an eyebrow, and she couldn't help a smile.

"No. Just . . . nothing."

He frowned a second, but it vanished.

She anchored the ice pack in place, too aware of the fact that she should be attracted to this man who seemed so clearly interested in her.

Or maybe she was simply so out of practice she didn't know how to flirt, or what flirting even looked like. Maybe he *was* simply being nice.

And she looked like a fool. She knew better than to dive into the middle of a barroom brawl—resurrect all her nightmares in broad daylight, or at least under the dim lights of a bar. Her specialty was picking up the pieces, not preventing the disaster in the first place.

Or at least it had been.

"I should go," she said, pulling the ice away, fingering the bruise, testing it. "I still have an hour of driving tonight."

Ian raised an eyebrow. "I don't think so. You're injured, and you've been drinking."

Huh? "Hardly." She picked up her glass. "This is *root* beer. Besides, I've been hurt worse than this and still managed to airlift eight marines out of a hot zone. Trust me, I can keep my Ford Escape between the lines from here to Whitefish."

"You still can't go."

"*Enough* with the gallantry. Listen, I'm exhausted, I've just driven for two days without sleep, and I have to report for my new job in the morning." She turned to Gina just emerging from the kitchen with her ribs. "Can I get those to go?"

Gina nodded, turned back to the kitchen.

"You don't understand—" Ian started.

"No, dude, *you* don't understand. I'm simply not interested, and frankly, you don't want to get messed up with me. Trust me on that one."

He frowned then, but then reached out and cupped his hand over her keys.

And that was just . . . it. So what if he had six inches on her, looked like he worked out regularly, and knew how to handle himself. She only *appeared* helpless.

She schooled her voice, kept it even but with enough edge for him to take her seriously. "Ian. I know you don't know me, and right now, I sort of wish we'd never met, but trust me . . . You let go of my keys or that little altercation on the dance floor will look like a warm-up."

And he actually, seriously, smiled?

"Huh. Okay." She slid off the stool.

"Slow down, I'm not trying to start another fight." He moved his hand. "You can't go home because . . . you can't. Highway 2 is washed out just north of Mercy Falls. Unless you want to drive three hours back to Great Falls, then two hundred miles to Missoula, then finally north on 93 for another one hundred or so miles and end up arriving home around dawn, you're hunkering down here tonight."

Here. In Mercy Falls. She sighed and found the fist she'd made loosening.

"I was just trying to save you hours of driving."

Gina came back out, plunked the bag of ribs on the bar. "Okay, here you go. By the way, Dad says hi. And that dinner is on the house for your service to your country. I didn't know you won a bronze star."

Kacey glanced at Ian, who raised an eyebrow. She turned back

to Gina. "Tell him thanks." She didn't follow up on the medal comment. Because, really, she had her doubts about the validity of giving someone who'd just barely kept it together a medal.

"Listen," Ian said. "The hotels from here to Great Falls are full of National Guardsmen and volunteers trying to keep the river from flooding. Why don't you come home with me? I have a ranch not far from here."

She stared at him. "You've got to be kidding me. What—do I have the word *desperate* tattooed on my forehead? Or *easy*, perhaps?" She grabbed the bag, her keys. "This may be a shocker, but no, I won't come home with you, thanks." She slid off the table, bumped her way through the crowd.

"Kacey!"

She ignored him, skirting past his friend Miles, who turned at his voice. She pushed outside, gulped in the fresh air. Wow, did that go south fast.

Apparently, it still wasn't over because Ian emerged through the doors right behind her. "Stop, Kacey."

She rounded on him. "And now this is starting to get a little stalkery. What's your deal?"

But the way he was looking at her, something like determination in his eyes . . . Now a little concern reached in, tugged at her. Her breath caught. "How do you know my name?"

"Take a breath. I'm not a stalker." He held up his hands as if in surrender, his jaw tight. "But I'm right, aren't I? You're Kacey Fairing?"

She found herself stepping back, wishing she had a sidearm. She dropped her takeout bag onto a bench.

He noticed and softened his voice. "This is my fault. I should have explained myself better. I heard you mention PEAK and then figured it out when Gina mentioned the medal, which is, of course, exactly what Chet said when he told me about you."

She took another step back. “Chet King told you . . . about me?” Which would only stir up questions, she had no doubt. The last thing she needed was for her reputation to precede her.

“What did he say?”

“That you were exactly who we needed to take over flight ops for PEAK. Military hero . . .”

Oh. That. Still, that meant maybe she was safe from anyone grounding her based on false assumptions. Just because she was a little jumpy didn’t mean she couldn’t still handle a bird.

Ian lowered his hands but kept them out, away from his body, where she could see them. “You *are* the new pilot for PEAK Rescue, right? The one Chet hired to replace him and Ty?”

She nodded.

“Let’s start over. I should have introduced myself earlier.” He stuck out his hand, as if meeting her for the first time. “Ian Shaw. Local rancher and, well, founder of the PEAK Search and Rescue team.”

Founder.

She swallowed, wrapping her brain around his words, even while reaching out to take his hand.

He rubbed the other hand over his jaw, now red, even a smidgen swollen.

“In other words, I’m your new boss. Welcome home.”



Of course Ben knew that his father hadn’t really caused the flood.

Sure, it did seem sometimes as if the Reverend Chet King possessed a direct tin-can-and-shoestring line to the Almighty that could call down divine forces. After all, Ben had seen it happen on more than one occasion—his dad hit his knobby knees and suddenly the sun began to shine, people got healed, and the town of Mercy Falls shouted hallelujah.

But certainly Chet's petitions hadn't caused the warm spell that thawed the snow cap off the Livingston Range, swelling tributaries and flooding the Mercy River. He hadn't created the three-day thunderstorm that saturated already drenched fields and creeks, turning them to torrents. Hadn't triggered the river to crest, to take out the Great Northern Bridge, wash out Highway 2, and threaten the existence of the small cowboy town of Mercy Falls.

Most importantly, he hadn't purposely trapped Ben in Mercy Falls while his music career fell to shambles around him. Not that his father actually cared, but at least he could acknowledge Ben's attempt to get himself back on his feet, stop being so stubborn, and most of all, refrain from calling down the wrath of God.

Thanks, but Ben got it already. He knew exactly what God thought about him.

Ben turned his F-150 onto the muddy frontage road edging the Shaw ranch.

Even if his dad could claim responsibility for the divine catastrophe, it wasn't going to work. Ben wasn't going to fall for the need to stick around and help his hometown dry off and rebuild. He had his own life—and frankly, his father's—to piece back together.

So what if he'd spent the night hunched over, hauling fifty-pound sandbags and trying to save the mobile home of Arlene Butcher. Not just Arlene's double-wide, of course, but the entire neighborhood of Whitetail Park that bordered the Mercy River. And, beyond that, the Mercy Falls Main Street, the high school, and even the Mercy Falls Community Church.

Which he supposed he should care about saving instead of wishing the place might be swept away.

He hit a rut in the muddy ranch driveway, and it sent a spear of pain through Ben's already aching back. And, wouldn't you know it, the tire spun in the muck, spitting out grime.

Ben shoved the F-150 into park and got out, stepping into

ankle-deep soup. The sun hovered just above the horizon, bleeding through the gray veil of dawn, and the hint of more rain hung in the misty air, still too warm for June, which had caused this problem in the first place.

He pulled out a board that he kept in the bed of his truck just for this purpose and shoved it under the tire to give it traction. Then he stood, stretched, and simply breathed in the fragrance of the ranch.

Billionaire Ian Shaw's land sprawled through a bowl at the base of the western edge of Glacier National Park, in and over foothills striped with craggy streams and runnels of canyon, bordered by rolling meadows lush with foamy white bear grass, crisp alpine daisies, and pink fireweed. Behind it all, the northern Rockies rose in rugged, glorious backdrop, the Flathead Range to the east, the Swan Range to the southwest, their ragged peaks blue-gray and unyielding in the haze of the morning.

Ben could stand here forever, caught in the view, the sound of chattering bobolink, the rush of overflowing creek behind the house, the hint of all things summer in the air. Once upon a time, he had craved this life, relished the honesty of it. He could have built a happily-ever-after on the sense of accomplishment gained one day at a time, if he'd wanted it.

But therein lay the problem. He hadn't wanted this life. Just Kacey.

Ben got back into the truck, eased the truck out of the mud, then exited to retrieve his board.

He noticed the black outlines of Shaw's cattle, pinpricks on a hill on his northern forty, munching happily on the soggy table of wheat grass.

Ben ran his hand behind his neck, kneading a stiff muscle as he crawled the truck through the muddy track toward the highway.

The problem with sandbagging was that, at best, it kept the water from destroying homes, businesses, and yes, maybe even

saved the lives of a few household pets. Which, of course, should be enough.

But it didn't actually fix anything.

Didn't repair the Great Northern Bridge, now eaten away and washed downriver, lodged at the apex of where the Mercy River met Hungry Horse Creek's south fork.

It didn't put the cabins at Moccasin Pass back on their foundations, nor keep the campers at Swiftcurrent Lodge from being stranded, having to be carted out by the army.

No, when a guy spent the night sandbagging, one backbreaking, fifty-pound bag at a time, he clued in to the raw-edged truth.

He had to do more than sandbag if he wanted to rebuild his life, his career. Which meant figuring out how to get his groove back, pen his own songs, then get into the studio and resurrect his solo game. Hollie Montgomery had another thing coming if she thought he'd just step aside for her to steal everything he'd sacrificed for.

He shot a glance at his watch hanging from the rearview mirror. Shoot.

His dad might be up already, trying to make breakfast, banging his chair into the table, upsetting the juice, refusing to let life sideline him. Ben longed to refit the house to accommodate Chet's injury, to help his old man *just be patient* as he healed from his dual broken hips. He kept pushing forward too fast, reinjuring himself, and now risked his long-term mobility.

But Chet never did well with *sit still*. Worse, Ben could admit he probably inherited the restlessness from his father and that he might be just as frustrated if he'd lost everything he'd loved.

Maybe he understood his father better than he'd thought.

Ben pulled up to the house, got out. Behind the log cabin A-frame, the creek tumbled over boulders, cresting to the edge of the wide bed. The porch swing facing it rocked in the morning

breeze, and he half expected his mother to be sitting there, her Bible open or her knitting on her lap.

Overhead, the gray sky hovered low, thick with clouds. More rain in the forecast.

Maybe sandbagging was the best they could expect at the moment.

He came onto the porch, opened the entry room door.

Jubal met him, barking, upset, the hair on his neck ruffed up. "What is it, pal?"

Then, the acrid odor of burning metal rushed over him. A light haze clouded the entry, and he heard sizzling. "Dad!"

"In here!"

Ben charged inside, found the kitchen engulfed in smoke.

His father sat on the floor, dressed in his pajamas, his robe open, gripping a spatula like a weapon. "It's over. I got the fire out."

Next to him, on the melting linoleum, lay the overturned cast-iron pan, black oil puddling around the base.

Across the room and out of reach lay the overturned wheelchair, discarded, or maybe even shoved in disgust.

Ben picked it up, set it right. Leaned over the table to open the kitchen window. Glanced, one more time, at the stove, just to make sure.

"Stupid chair. I leaned too far forward and the thing flipped on me."

"Dad, that's one of the best chairs on the market. It doesn't just—"

"It flipped, son." He tossed the spatula in a perfect arc into the sink, began to scoot across the floor to the wheelchair.

There had been a time when Ben considered his father superhuman—lean, toned, one of the strongest men he knew. At sixty-five, Chet still had the strength of a bear, hands that could rip an apple in half or pull a birthing calf from its mother's withers. He

possessed the stamina to outlast a breaking colt and a look that could stare down a bull. He'd been a hero too, evidenced from his stories of flying rescue choppers in 'Nam.

But seeing his father grunt as he wrestled himself onto his chair, his legs a nuisance more than a help, Ben just wanted to pick him up by his armpits, set him back into place.

Stop him from suffering one minute longer.

His father shouldn't have to spend the rest of his days shackled to a chair, and the injustice of that could cause Ben to shake a fist heavenward, even if he knew the consequences.

Frankly, Ben had run out of second chances so long ago, it didn't matter anyway.

"I'll get the pan," Ben said, reaching for the handle.

"Careful, it's—"

Hot. Ben jerked his hand back, shook it. Reached for a towel.

"I fell, and before I could get up, the bacon started burning," Chet said, now wheeling his chair to the table. "I tried to reach the handles on the stove, but I think I turned them the wrong way. I finally decided to move the pan off the heat, but it wouldn't budge, so I finally just yanked it down—"

"It could have fallen on you." Ben took the pan, wiped out the bacon grease, set it back on the stove.

"Naw. I knew where I wanted it to land."

"Then you might have gotten it closer to the carpet, because it burned the linoleum." Ben took a rag, wiped up the mess. "How about I fix us breakfast?"

But his father had already started cracking eggs into a bowl. He reached for a fork. "I'm not dead, kid. I'll whip us up an omelet. You grab a shower. You're filthy and I could smell you coming from Great Falls."

For the first time, Ben noticed the mud he'd dragged into the house. "Sorry."

"Your mother would've had your head," Chet said, and grinned at him. Ben wanted to match it, but how could his father so casually, so easily drop her name? Like she might be in the next room?

As usual, the old man could read him. "I miss her too, son. But she's just waiting for us. We'll see her again."

And there was the chaser, his father's casual, easy faith statement.

"Right," Ben said. He walked back out to the entryway, used a jack to yank off his grimy work boots. He returned to the kitchen. "I'll grab a shower if you promise not to burn the house down."

His father threw the towel at him. Ben caught it and threw it back, trying for a smile. *I'm trying, Mom.* But wow, Dad didn't make it easy.

Still, he'd made her promises . . . "Come home once in a while, okay? He needs you."

Right.

He turned toward the bathroom, then stopped, her words lingering. "You know, Vanderbilt Stallworth Rehab Center in Nashville is one of the best rehab centers in the country. And I've already lined up a therapist for you—"

"I'm not leaving Mercy Falls, Ben. I told you that."

Ben paused, not able to say the words—that maybe they should consider the fact he might never get out of that chair.

He hated that thought as much as his father did.

Besides, he knew how to pick his battles.

"Then what if I made some changes to the house—put in handicap-accessible appliances, modified the kitchen so you can get around. That's why I came home—to help you adjust to this life."

His father rolled the chair over to the stove. He reached for the cast-iron pan and Ben tried not to lunge for it, to help.

Chet turned on the flame. "Is that why you came home? Really?"

He didn't look at Ben as he poured the egg mixture into the pan. The omelet began to sizzle.

Ben frowned. "Of course that's why. You needed help."

Chet just pursed his lips, nodded. "Huh. Because it looks a lot like running to me."

Ben refused to flinch. His father had never pulled his punches, and apparently without Mom around to temper him, he went right for the heart. "I'm not running. In fact, if you'll listen, I'm trying to get you to come to Nashville—"

"I'm not moving to your fancy digs in Nashville so you can shove me in rehab. I'm just fine here—"

"Dad! You nearly caught the house on fire."

Chet made a noncommittal noise that Ben didn't know how to track, then opened a drawer, grabbed a flat spatula, and tested the eggs. "You'd better be getting into the shower if you want breakfast."

"Listen, I'm just trying to help—"

"Then stop talking about me leaving and start unpacking—for real."

In other words, *stay*.

"You know I can't do that."

"You can do anything you want, son. It's never too late to start over."

Ben stared at him. "I don't want to start over. I've spent the last thirteen years building something—I'm not going to lie down and let someone take it away from me."

But yes, maybe it had taken him a month to figure out that he wanted to fight for it.

Betrayal did that—took the wind out of his sails, kept him gasping.

It took him three years to recover, find his feet last time. A month seemed record time, frankly.

But Chet's words bit at him. Especially as Ben moved to his tiny bedroom in the back of the house. He'd thrown his filthy clothes in a corner, the pile marinating with ranch odors. His clean laundry sat in a basket available to sift through on a daily basis.

Maybe it did resemble running—a bit. He had simply dumped his duffel bag out on the floor, made some not-so-tidy piles, and dove into some long-overdue house repairs.

Reverting back to his ranch-hand roots, the ones he sang about, the ones that had launched his now-in-jeopardy career.

Ben found a clean pair of jeans and an old Bluebird Cafe T-shirt, then headed to the shower down the hall.

Five minutes later, he braced himself against the tile, letting the still-warming water cascade over his aching muscles, lifting his face into the spray. Another thing his father couldn't do—shower. The old man somehow levered himself into the tub in his master bedroom, a feat the home health nurse probably assisted him with. Despite his father's disappointment over his music career, he noticed his father hadn't turned down the fancy, comfort wheelchair or Ben's offer for nursing help.

Thankfully. Ben wasn't good at that caretaking stuff.

But he could probably pick up a hammer and start modifying the house.

Ben scrubbed off the mud, let the heat massage the stress out of his back, then turned off the shower and climbed out, drying off. He wrapped a towel around himself, ran a hand across the mirror to clear the steam, and peered at his bloodshot eyes. He looked like he'd just come off the road after playing a month of back-to-back gigs, catching just a handful of winks between stops.

Grabbing his toothbrush, Ben stood at the window and cleaned his pearly whites, checking out the sky for rain. Two hundred yards away, on the far side by a creek and nestled in a grove of towering

lodgepole pine, Ian Shaw's unassuming but gorgeous hand-tooled log home gleamed under the caress of morning.

With wide-planked wood floors and arching beamed ceilings, stuccoed walls, opulent leather furniture, five private bedrooms and baths for each, and a top-of-the line chef's kitchen.

So much house for a single guy, but of course, Ben was one to talk. His own place sat on thirty acres outside Nashville, with five bedrooms, a pool, and enough space for the family he'd always thought he'd have.

Maybe that's what he and Ian had in common—the hope for family. If they built it, it would happen. Or not. From the talk Ben could scour up, Ian preferred to be alone, or at least surround himself with just a handful of confidants—Chet, his personal assistant Sierra, and Deputy Sam Brooks, who swung by to check on the place when Ian jet-setted off to manage one of his many companies.

As if Chet and Ben weren't right across the yard to keep an eye on the place.

Even after more than a decade away, Ben still knew nearly every person in the town of Mercy Falls.

Or so he thought.

Ben moved the curtain aside to get a better look at the silver Ford Escape, a newer model caked with the appropriate layer of dried mud to have driven up in the night.

So Ian Shaw had a new friend. Interesting.

Ben spit into the sink, rinsed his mouth out. Decided against running a comb through his dark blond hair. Or trimming his whiskers. He had a feeling he'd be heading back out to the sand-bagging team for a fresh layer of grime.

He pulled on his jeans and T-shirt, then headed out barefoot to the kitchen to find his father at the table eating an omelet.

Chet shoved a plate toward him. "I added mushrooms and picante sauce."

Chet had turned on the news of the day—the police scanner squawking reports from the local EMS. Flood updates, a few calls from worried locals checking on the height of the river.

“Reminds me of the flood of ’64. I was about sixteen, and Dad was working the Marshall ranch, closer to Great Falls. Mom looked out the window and saw this wall of water coming at us, way off in the distance. Dad threw me and Ham into the truck, and we went to the bottoms to move the yearlings. We got them to higher ground, then headed back to the house.”

Ben retrieved a cup of fresh-brewed coffee.

“We got to the creek—it was about three feet wide when we’d crossed it an hour before. It had turned into frothy whitewater about thirty feet across, sweeping away cattle and horses, uprooting cottonwoods. And the worst part was my mom, trapped in the house on the other side of the creek, waving at us, holding Ike and Lucille on each hip.

“My father nearly lost it. He tied one end of the rope to a cottonwood, the other to his waist, and dove into the water. I thought he would drown, but he somehow made it to the far bank. He tied that rope onto one of the cottonwoods, and then Ham and I had to go hand-over-hand through the river.

“I took Lucy on my shoulders, and Dad grabbed Ike, and we ran in our bare feet up the bluff behind our house. The river simply ate our house, engulfing our front porch, breaking windows, tearing it off its foundation. It took everything, the cattle, the horses, and the lives of thirty-one people. We were lucky.”

Ben had forgotten about his food. “What did you do?”

His father took a sip of coffee. Set it down to stare into the past. “We thanked God we were alive. And then we figured out how to keep going.”

“Is that when you moved here?”

“Mmmhmm. Dad worked this land for Mr. Gilmore. And that’s

how I met your mom. Ruthie Gilmore. See, God can fix even the worst disasters, make something new and whole out of them."

If he expected agreement, Ben couldn't acquiesce. Instead he dug into his now-cool omelet. "The creek is nearly over its banks, but I don't think it'll rise much more." He shoveled in a forkful of eggs. "But the crest did take out the Great Northern Bridge last night—"

"Shh. That's an EMS call."

Huh? But Ben piped down, watching as the old man's head cocked toward the static of the radio. Ben hadn't a clue how to decipher the code.

"Get the phone," Chet said, gesturing to the ancient wall-mounted rotary next to the fridge.

"It hasn't even rung—"

And as if his father had magical powers, the old powder-blue phone jangled. Ben picked it up and, to make things easy, handed the receiver to his father. He ducked under the cord and settled back in his seat.

"Yes, Nancy. I think so," Chet said, then, "No, not yet. But I'm expecting the new pilot today."

He glanced at Ben, as if assessing him. "Yes, on four-wheelers, I suppose, but according to Sam, Swiftcurrent Creek is completely flooded, no access into the pass."

Ben put his plate on the table. "Is someone trapped in the Swiftcurrent Basin?"

Chet shot him a quelling glance, held up his hand. "Okay, if the National Guard changes its mind, give me a yell. I'll try to track down our new pilot and get back to you."

He handed the phone to Ben to hang up.

"I'm going to get you this nifty new gadget called a cell phone," Ben said, hanging up the handset. "What's going on?"

His father was digging into his robe pocket. "Youth group. Went camping up in the Swiftcurrent area and haven't returned. They

were due back yesterday, but with the rains, they should have pulled out sooner. They were supposed to take the Swiftcurrent Nature Trail up to the pass, but it's washed out all the way to Bullhead Lake. Parents are worried." He pulled out a piece of paper. "Dial this number, then hand me the phone."

Ben took the paper, picked up the receiver. "Is the National Guard going in?"

"Not until the campers are located. The army can't spare the manpower to look for them. They've got one chopper, and it's busy hoisting people from rooftops." He held out his hand for the phone. "But you know that area well."

"Yeah," he said woodenly, and his father didn't have to mention her name for Kacey to appear in memory—long auburn hair, mountain green eyes, the kind that could find him in a crowd and stop his breath. She swooped into Ben's head, lodged right there. No, worse, she sank down to his heart, where a fist tightened.

"Good," his father was saying, "because if you can locate the group, we can fly them out."

"In what, exactly, Dad? Your chopper is in pieces."

Chet grinned, winked, as if letting him in on a secret. "Insurance—and Ian—made sure we got a beautiful new dual-engine Bell 429."

Ben finished dialing and handed the receiver to his father. "Wow. So, want me to get Ty on the line?"

"Ty's still shaken from the crash. Hasn't even been in the simulator since it happened. No, it's going to be a busy summer, and we need someone at the helm who is seasoned, who knows what she's doing. I hired us a new pilot."

She?

The word must have come out of Ben's mouth.

"Yes, *she*." His father held the phone to his ear. "Do you have a problem with that?"

"Of course not, but . . . I don't know. I thought with the accident, you were done with PEAK Rescue. I mean, who will take over the team?"

"Maybe you could."

Oh, Dad. "I have a job."

His father shrugged, and it opened up the scab.

"Why would I come to your concert, Ben? You sing about beer, women, trucks, and fast livin'. That's not my life, and it shouldn't be yours."

Well, that life paid the bills—his and his father's.

More, people lined up for days to get tickets to his concerts. Or at least they had, once upon a time.

Right then, whomever his father had called picked up. "Hi, yeah, this is Chet King. I'm just checking that you're headed in this morning? You can stop by the house . . . super. See you soon."

He handed the phone back to Ben. "Now we have to call Miles. I suspect the team is already busy working the flood, but maybe Jess can ride along in case there are any casualties."

"Okay, fill me in here. Who is this new pilot?"

Ben might have imagined it, but he thought he saw his father turn a shade gray. "Before she gets here, I need to talk to you, son."

"Dad, are you okay?"

Through the window over the sink, he saw a figure move out from Ian's house, climb into the Escape. From this vantage point, it looked like a woman.

Really, Ian?

But he didn't have time to think that through, sort it out from what he knew about Ian, because his father had turned to him.

"Son, I know you say you're not hiding, but the fact is you've never been the same since you and Kacey split up—"

Ben's gut tightened. "Dad, stop."

The Escape pulled a U-ey, started their direction.

"And I know there's a lot of hurt there, but—"

"Hurt, Dad? That's how you're framing it?"

"I know you have unfinished business."

"I can promise you we don't."

"And I think the reason you've never been truly happy in Nashville is—"

"I'm happy in Nashville! I have a great career, fans, a house that's five times this size—"

"Because you never stopped loving her."

And now Ben had nothing. His father stared at him.

Chet's voice dropped. "You're still running from your mistakes, refusing to forgive yourself."

"No, *Kacey* couldn't forgive me."

Although, what good would it do to forgive himself, really? It was over, either way.

The Escape rolled to a stop in front of their house.

"That's the thing. What if you gave yourself a second chance?"

His dad's words dug in, even as the car door closed.

"There's no second chances, Dad. You can't go back and fix the past."

Chet's grin was rueful. "Well, I guess we'll see about that."

Boots scuffed on the porch, and now his dad's expression changed. Hardened. "Listen, sometimes you just gotta have faith. See that it can work out for good. There are second chances. Even grace, son, if you'll open your eyes to see it. To let it in—"

"Hello? Mr. King, are you here?"

Ben simply froze. The voice, sweet, bright, carrying so much of the past and too many fragmented hopes, rushed over the threshold, flooded through the house, and caught him by the throat.

No. His father did *not* call—

"In here!" his father hollered.

Ben stared at his father even as the footsteps stole his breath,

stopped his heart. And yes, he had the crazy urge to get up, push away from his father, and simply, well, run.

Put this town and his father's meddling behind him.

He didn't want to rehash the past. Didn't even want a second chance.

"Dad . . ." His voice shook.

"This is why you came home, Benny," his father said quietly.

"Not for me. And not for you. For *her*."

Then he looked up, past Ben, and smiled. "Kacey Fairing. Finally. And, I might add, just in time."

He glanced at Ben, grinned as if he hadn't just put a fist through his son's chest.

"You're a sight for sore eyes. Right, Ben?"