

AFTER THE *Storm*

Deborah Sprinkle

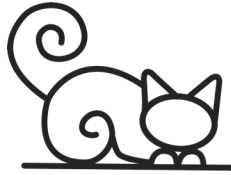


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Chapter One



Rain pounded on Mercedes Baxter's small house on Sharktooth Island like a giant demanding entrance. But it was the wind, howling like a thousand banshees and whipping the bushes and trees into a frenzied dance, that sent shivers down her spine.

She clutched her scruffy tomcat to her chest and stood inside her open front door, shielded from the fury of the storm by her screened porch. The windows were buttoned down, and she should secure the big door and head for shelter, but the power and sound of the hurricane at once frightened and mesmerized her.

The big tawny cat squirmed in her grasp. "Mrawr."

"Sorry, Hawkeye." She shifted her grip. "No way I'm letting you out in this. That wind will blow you off the island and you'll be shark bait."

After stuffing the protesting cat into his carrier, she went back to stand by the door. A branch from a nearby tree tore through a screen on the porch like a spear and landed at her feet. She bit back a scream. Time to head for cover.

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Mercy closed the heavy oak door and lowered the solid wood beam across it. Her father built the cottage to withstand storms, water, and time. She loved it here. The only thing not crafted of wood was the beautiful silver cross over the door. He'd done that for her mother.

She grabbed Hawkeye's cage and paused before descending the ladder into the cellar. "I don't know if You're out there, but Mom and Dad thought so. For their sake, please save this house from the storm. Amen."

The cabin stood amongst the rocks halfway up the mountain. Mercy's father carved a small cellar beneath the floor for food storage and protection from the occasional storm. Sandstone boulders composed three sides of the small space below the cabin, with a solid sandstone floor. The fourth side was a wall of tightly stacked timbers. Metal shelving stood against most of the wall space.

Mercy spent as little time as possible in the cellar, coming down to grab a potato or onion for dinner. More than once she felt someone's breath on her neck as she restocked her supplies. But when she whirled around, no one was there. And one time, she heard a soft moan. She inspected the walls and floors for cracks, but never found any.

Now, in the dim glow from her flashlight, with what sounded like a war going on overhead, every nerve in her body sent a warning signal to her brain. She extracted Hawkeye from his carrier and wrapped her arms around him. Stroking his rough fur brought her some comfort.

"Hope this blasted storm doesn't last long." She peered at the cabin floor above her head. "I have a feeling we'll have a lot to report to the Conservancy when this is all over with."

Quiet settled around her. Had the storm passed?

She stood, letting Hawkeye jump to the floor. After a few

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moments, she pushed the trapdoor up a crack. Hawkeye raced up the ladder and out into the house.

“Come here, you foolish cat.” Mercy flung open the hatch and climbed out.

She could see the living room, dining area, and kitchen from where she stood. No windows broken in there. Some dishes shaken from the open shelves in the kitchen, and books from the cases by the fireplace. She continued her inspection.

Two bedrooms and baths okay. Only a few photos fallen over. She righted the one on her bedside table. A wiry man had his arm thrown over a petite, dark-haired woman. Both grinning as if they’d won the lottery.

“You did good, Dad. The cabin made it through the storm.” Mercy touched her lips and then the glass covering their image. “I miss you guys.”

But at least she had Hawkeye. Where was her cat? She raised the beam from across her front door and steeled herself for the view outside. Hawkeye appeared at her ankles.

“Oh no.” She picked him up. “Let me take a look first.”

Taking a deep breath, she opened the door. The bones of her porch still stood. Limbs and sticks lay in an inch of water covering the floor, and many of the screens hung in tatters. Her screen door was nowhere in sight.

“The house made it, but my poor porch.” Mercy stroked her cat. “Time to see what other damage this storm did.” She held Hawkeye up so she could look him in his one good eye. “Sorry. You need to stay here for now.”

“Mrawr.” He gave a mighty jerk and escaped her grasp.

“You little monster.” Mercy shook her head. “It’s wet out there.”

The big cat skittered across the porch and stopped on the step to shake his soaked paws. He looked back at her.

“I warned you.”

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Mercy pulled on her boots and shrugged into her backpack, complete with machete. She stuffed her cellphone into her jeans pocket—no cell service, but it took great pictures. The porch felt sturdy. Clean up, new screens, a door, and it would be as if the storm never happened. She yanked her hair into a ponytail and stepped outside.

“Mrawr.”

“Sorry. I’m not picking you up now, you silly cat.”

The ache in her chest grew as she surveyed her once beautiful island. Bushes and ferns flattened. Trees stripped of their leaves, bent over, or uprooted. And she was on the leeward side of the island. What must the other side look like?

She pulled her machete from its sheath and began cutting her way along what used to be her normal mountainside path. Hawkeye followed at a safe distance. The banana tree her father planted ten years ago stood unharmed six feet from the house.

Tears stung the backs of her eyes. “Look, Hawkeye. Daddy’s tree made it.” She laid a hand on the trunk. “A good sign.”

At a clearing, she peered up the mountain. Where was her transmission tower? Usually, it rose above the vegetation, and she used it as a measure for distance and time of day. Another casualty of the hurricane—a big one. Now she had no way of communicating with the outside world. A weight settled on her heart as she realized she’d have to leave her island.

Her home.

About Deborah Sprinkle



When Debbie Sprinkle retired from teaching in 2004, she had a plan for keeping busy. Attend the women's Bible study at her church, join a local book club, and write a mystery novel. She began going to Bible study on Wednesday mornings, and when her local library started a book club, she was one of the charter members.

One thing led to another—as they usually do—and pretty soon she was a Bible study leader and facilitating the book club. (She says it's because she has the biggest mouth!)

In 2009, she was asked to attend the She Speaks Christian Writers' Conference put on by Proverbs 31 Ministry, where she met Kendra Armstrong. It was their friendship that led to

her first book written in collaboration with Kendra, *Common Sense and an Uncommon God*, published in 2012 by Lighthouse of the Carolinas. The second edition was later released under the title of *Exploring the Faith of America's Presidents*.

After attending lots of conferences, taking many classes, and sitting at the feet of a plethora of experienced writers, Debbie wrote her first novel. And, in 2019, her dream came true when *Deadly Guardian* made its debut. Two more novels rounded out the Trouble in Pleasant Valley series, and Debbie is now working on a new set of romantic suspense novels set in a small town in Missouri.

Originally from St. Louis, Debbie received her bachelor's degree in chemistry from the University of Missouri-St. Louis. She worked as a research chemist for many years at both St. Louis University Medical School and Washington University Medical School. In 1991, she and her family moved to Memphis, where Debbie taught chemistry for ten years at a private girls' school before retiring.