

Mountain Rescue

*Mountain Girl Series:
Book 3*



Rose Creasy McMills

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To Billy Mullens

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Prologue



ELIZABETH SHIFTED HER backpack and looked up Tyler's Mountain. The trees went up and up. The mountain blocked out much of the sky and cast a long shadow, turning the valley to dusk in the middle of the day.

Wild turkeys nested in the tops of the trees and occasionally spooked and flew up with a beating of wings and frantic gobbling, startling her. A stray turkey buzzard circled about.

Elizabeth was wearing tall hiking boots with thick socks, insurance against snakes, and carrying a walking stick from the collection Grandpa had made. Thinking of Grandpa made her eyes prickle. She missed him still.

She was eighteen and had spent last night at the West Virginia farm of her girlhood. But she didn't want

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to be here, for the first time ever. She had a mission, though—Uncle John had disappeared, and she might be the only one who could find him.

He had said to her once, just before she'd left the farm and moved to Fairmont, that she had his gift—that she could sense things. “You’ve got it too. You jus’ don’t know it. You cain’t use what you don’t know you have.”

It may have been the longest sentence that Uncle John ever spoke to her.

Elizabeth knew that back in the forest were many creatures—raccoons and possums, but also wolves, coyotes and black bears. Copperhead snakes hid under the edge of rocks. Poison ivy and poison oak would make your skin erupt if you touched it.

But back in the woods, too, was incredible beauty—a fairyland of tall pines, maples, oaks, ash, and beech with their canopy of green one hundred feet overhead . . . virgin timber.

The forest floor was covered with spongy moss, flowers, ferns, and dried pine needles that rivaled the lushest designer carpet. Birds seldom seen by human eyes flitted from branch to branch and trilled their piercing whistle. Deer bounded through the woods, freezing at a sound like they'd turned to stone.

The mountain was lovely and dangerous at once.

She knew he was up there hiding. She had to find him.

Chapter 1

Billy



AS ELIZABETH CLIMBED the mountain late in the day, she heard scuttling through the leaves down the hill from her and stood still, listening. A squirrel? A deer? A black bear?

She hoped it wasn't a bear because there was no eluding them. They were small, agile, and could climb trees, so escaping *up* wasn't an option. She pulled her slingshot out of its holster, picked up a rock, and waited. She looked to Velvet for a response, but there was no reaction from the beagle, who was sniffing invisible rabbit tracks.

Now she heard the movement again . . . a little closer and to the right. She secreted herself behind some bushes, pulling Velvet with her. Better to face it head on than to run.

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Velvet's getting old, she thought; her senses must be dulled.

The rustling got louder, and Elizabeth saw some movement at the edge of the clearing. Then suddenly Velvet's tail began to wag, thumping against Elizabeth's hip, and Billy stepped into the clearing.

"Billy!" Elizabeth exclaimed, then in the next breath, "You followed me!"

"I know where he might be," Billy said hastily as if he had the power to beam Uncle John home immediately. He stooped to pet Velvet who was whining and wiggling all over in an ecstatic greeting.

"Does Pearly know you're here?"

"She does and Aunt Lorena too." Lorena, Uncle John's sister, was up from Charleston to take care of Pearly and the newborn baby. Elizabeth figured they must be worried sick about her Uncle John. Why else would they have let Billy go after her?

She turned and picked up the handheld sickle she had brought along and started hacking her way through the brush angrily. "You have to go back," she said. "It's too dangerous up here."

"I want to come." Billy followed her, walking in her path, grabbing the fallen brush, and tossing it out of the way.

"Well, I don't want you to. I'll travel better alone—you'll slow me down. I don't need to be takin'

Billy

care of you.” She turned to face him. At that moment she realized his eyes were almost level with hers.

“I’m going with you,” he said.

“No, you’re not!” Elizabeth stepped forward angrily and shoved his shoulder. He stumbled backwards, blond hair flopping. “Go home!” she said, jutting out her chin.

“You can’t make me,” Billy said.

They stood a foot away from each other, breathing hard.

And Elizabeth realized she couldn’t. Billy was a big ten-year-old. His father had been a miner and Billy had spent the last five years working the farm alongside John, his stepfather. He was no longer a little boy.

“I care about him too,” Billy said quietly. “He’s the only father I’ve got.”

“Okay . . .” Elizabeth said, reluctantly. “Okay, but I’m the leader of this expedition, agreed?”

Billy stuck out his hand and Elizabeth took it half-heartedly. “Agreed,” he said seriously. “Let me spell you with that,” he said, gently taking the sickle out of her hand.

At lunch, they settled on a blanket of moss, their backs against a giant oak for safety. They had beef jerky, slightly stale biscuits, and apples.

“So where *do* you think he’s gone?” Elizabeth asked, drinking from Grandpa’s old canteen.

“There’s an abandoned mine on the west side of the mountain near a hickory grove,” Billy said. “One year

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us two hiked up there lookin' to shoot a wild turkey for Thanksgiving.”

Elizabeth was silent a moment, considering.

“I remember talk of a cabin near that mine,” she said. “I thought he might have gone there.”

“Oh . . . the haunted cabin?” Billy bit off a piece of jerky.

“Yeah, they tell stories about it—that it appears and disappears.”

“You figure they’re true?”

“More than likely people just forgot where it was. It’s easy to lose your way up here.”

“That reminds me . . .” Billy stuck his hand in his pocket. “I brought a compass.”

Elizabeth smiled at him in spite of herself.



Back at the farm, it was dusk. The chickens had climbed up the little ramp into the chicken house to roost for the night, making soft clucking sounds.

Aunt Lorena walked through the upper meadow, trailing her hands through the tall grasses—the Queen Anne’s Lace, blue-flowered chicory, all the late flowers of summer.

The lovely day had faded into evening. The lightning bugs were floating in the air, and a cool breeze stirred her hair. A red sun dropped behind the mountains leaving the sky streaked pink and blue.

Billy

But she didn't notice the beauty around her. She felt restless and worried. She'd gone out to look up Tyler's Mountain in the hopes of seeing something, *anything*—a campfire, maybe. She hoped they would be alright. She hoped Elizabeth and Billy would find John and bring him back. She knew the odds were slim, but Elizabeth had worked wonders before. She was not especially surprised that her brother left. Twenty-nine years of his brooding presence, his fits and crises had conditioned her to accept almost anything he did.

And yet . . . the last five years since he had married Pearly had been so good. It seemed John had become a stable, content family man. All the things she had wished for him as a girl—a normal life—had come true.

But now this—running off and abandoning his wife, infant daughter, Billy, and the family farm. Why did he go? She'd never understood why John did what he did. All the old shame and anger she had felt as a girl came back to her.

But also sorrow—for John, whom she loved dearly and wanted the very best for.

It just didn't make sense.