

# RESCUE ME

A NOVEL

SUSAN MAY  
WARREN

  
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Susan May Warren, *Rescue Me*  
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# 1

SAM WOULDN'T LOSE another kid on his watch.

If the homecoming queen was out here, he intended to find her. Even if he had to trek through the entire western edge of Glacier National Park, beat every bush, climb every peak.

Unless, of course, Romeo had been lying.

"How far up the trail did the kid say they were?" Behind him, Gage Watson shined his flashlight against the twisted depths of forest. A champion snowboarder, Gage looked the part with his long dark brown hair held back in a man bun. But he also had keen outdoor instincts and now worked as an EMT on the PEAK Rescue team during the summer.

An owl hooted. A screech ricocheted through the air, folding through the shaggy dark spruce, the skeletal white birch. Only a thin strip of moonlight managed to pierce the looming cottonwoods, the towering black pine.

This time of night, with the moon climbing and the stars waking overhead, the forest sounds could raise the hairs on a man's neck.

Especially while hunting for a so-called rogue grizzly.

See, this was what happened when kids like Romeo—stupid, arrogant, too-fun-for-their-own-good charmers—led with their

impulses rather than their brains. They got themselves in over their heads, or worse, dreamed up things that went bump in the night.

Sam might be a bit jaded. It didn't help that the minute he'd pulled off the dirt highway onto the trickle of forest service road on the edge of Glacier National Park, memory flashed. He'd half-expected to see his kid brother Pete taking a giant leap over the lethal, flickering flames of the bonfire in the middle of the gravel pit. Or worse, to peel him off the dirt, burned, drunk, and surly, throw him in the truck, and drag him home.

But Pete wasn't sixteen anymore. And no longer his responsibility.

Still, more than ten years later, this after-homecoming pit party bore the telltale marks of trouble. Teenagers sitting around in their cars, the doors open, the twangy voice of some country crooner spilling out into the backwoods starry night.

As he pulled up, a few kids hid bottles of Jack Daniel's, Bacardi, and Jose Cuervo. Doused whatever other substances they'd brought to heighten their so-called fun. He'd wanted to call for police backup and start breathalyzing, see if he might scare a few of these teens straight. Maybe, once he found the supposedly lost girl.

Sam had a dark feeling he knew *exactly* what happened to send Romeo out of the forest, his shirt ripped, his face scratched. And it had nothing to do with a wild animal.

After Sam found her, Romeo would have some explaining to do.

Now, a crack from a broken branch sharpened the air behind him, and he stiffened, turned, and flashed his light across his brother, Pete, armed with an ax he'd pulled off the PEAK truck.

"You think an ax is going to take down a seven-hundred-pound grizzly sow on the rampage, there, Paul Bunyan?"

Pete's mouth tightened into a tight bud of defense. "Want to have a conversation about your dancing shoes?"

"I wasn't exactly planning this outing." Sam's first choice for callout attire wasn't his only pair of dress pants, jacket, and fancy

church shoes, recently shined. In fact, had he not had his scanner on while picking up Sierra—and had Sierra, PEAK Rescue administrator, not heard the 911 call from a frantic teenager—he would be enjoying dinner at the Whitefish Golf Club, digging into a New York strip and a mound of garlic mashed potatoes.

Trying to figure out how to keep Sierra from breaking up with him.

“At least I have a gun,” Sam said. His Remington rifle, which he kept in his trunk next to his police bag.

Just in case. Because bear or not, living in the shadow of Glacier National Park, Sam knew to expect trouble.

“Did you find her?” The voice ricocheted up the path and Sam turned. Grimaced.

The frantic and desperate Quinn Starr, aka Romeo.

About seventeen, with dark brown hair chopped short, wide shoulders, and a confident swagger, he played running back for the Mercy Falls Mavericks. Charming and cocky, the kid had Pete Brooks 2.0 written all over him.

Quinn wore desperation in his expression. It probably only halfway had to do with the fact that the kid had talked sweet Bella Hayes into hiking into the woods. The other part might have to do with the fear that once his former SEAL, senator father found out, he’d probably be shipping out to military school to finish his senior year.

Quinn’s dress shirt hung open, the buttons ripped off and his shirt-sleeve ripped.

“Tell me again what happened,” Sam said, his voice even, controlled. Later, all bets were off.

Quinn ran both hands through his hair. “We were sitting here, and all of a sudden, we heard this huffing noise, like heavy breathing—”

He made a funny sound, as if blowing out his horror. “Then it was just there! Just—there. Raging. It smelled like wet dog and just roared at us—”

He leaned over, gripped his knees, breathing hard, as if he might vomit.

Huh.

Pete looked at Sam, one eyebrow raised.

Okay, granted, the kid sounded truly terrified. Maybe his desperate tone *could* be attributed to the high adrenaline of life suddenly turning raw, out-of-control, devastating.

Sam well remembered that feeling.

"Breathe, kid," Sam said. "Are you sure it was a grizzly?"

Quinn looked up then, his expression grim. "Yeah. It had that ruff of fur between its shoulders." He stood up. "I yelled at Bella to run, and then I picked up a rock and threw it."

Sam might give the kid some props for trying to save his girlfriend.

"It grunted, and I just ran. Bella was climbing a tree, and I thought maybe I could give her time. So I ran toward the pit, hoping the bear would follow me."

Sam eyed him, his mouth tight. Probably panic had taken ahold of those running-back legs and set him sprinting.

What was the old adage? You didn't have to be faster than the bear, just the guy—or in this case, the girl—behind you?

Especially if said girl was wearing a homecoming dress.

Which only made climbing a tree that much more difficult.

"This tree?" Sam shone his light upward.

That's when he spotted a broken branch the size of his arm. As he dragged the light down, he made out claw marks peeling back the bark.

A cold hand wrapped around his heart.

Quinn pushed toward him, stared up at the tree. "Bella!"

"Here's Quinn's pack." Gage's light fell on the torn, mangled debris of a lightweight day pack. Nearby, a sleeping bag lay torn to shreds, the down lifting into the air like snowflakes against the harsh panes of night.

Which, if they didn't find the girl soon, just might turn real. Despite the late September air tinged with the scents of campfire, the breath of winter hovered.

"I found something!" Pete, banging around in the bushes, lifted a strip of fabric. A swatch of silky yellow.

"It's her . . ." Quinn's voice hitched. "Her dress."

"This way," Pete said and headed out, the ax easy in his hands.

Sometimes Sam forgot that Pete had spent the past seven summers as a smoke jumper for the Jude County wildland firefighters.

They followed the broken branches and bits of silky fabric into the tangles of the forest. The pine trees closed in, shaggy arms clawing at them, the spindly, crooked fingers of poplar saplings slapping his face, his arms.

*Please, God, let her be alive.*

The prayer felt too familiar—too futile.

"Bella!" Quinn tried to push ahead, but Sam caught him, shoved him back. "We got this, kid."

He heard sniffing and ignored it.

There would be plenty of time for blame and grief later.

"Bella!" Pete's voice boomed out.

"Here! Help me!"

The high voice shrilled into the darkness, and Sam turned, cast his flashlight over the limestone rocks, mossy-edged boulders, the ravine—*there*. She was huddled into a ball, wedged so far back under a ledge of rock that they might have never found her except for her call. Her bright yellow dress, neon under his light, dripped out from under the ledge.

Quinn raced over to her, hit his knees. "Bella, are you okay?" He reached in to tug her free, but she cried out.

Sam crouched next to Quinn. "Bella?"

Filthy, her hair matted with leaves, her dress torn, Bella appeared as if she had fled into the forest, come what may. Her mouth bled from the corner and her eye was blackened.

And then he saw the blood. It pooled into the loamy soil under the enclave.

"You're hurt."

She had her arm curled into herself. Sam shone his light on it. A long, nearly bone-deep laceration.

He winced and, not knowing what else to do, reached for his jacket.

But Quinn had his shirt off, had wriggled in next to her and was now wrapping the shirt around her shredded arm. "C'mon, baby. I got you." He took her into his arms and eased her out of the hole.

She whimpered, her breathing falling over itself, her pretty brown eyes wide with terror. "I tried to climb like you said, but my dress—it caught, and I fell. And then there was the bear, and I didn't know what to do—so I ran. I just . . . ran and ran . . . and . . ."

Quinn sat behind her, his arms around her, holding her as she shook.

"How did you find the hole?" Sam crouched down and examined the wound. So much blood had started to congeal around the edges. The rip in her skin—Sam guessed a claw rather than teeth—started at the shoulder, curled down in front of her bicep, and ended in the forearm. As if she'd been holding it up to protect herself.

"I fell. I just *fell* right off the edge and hit the rock. And I think I might have knocked myself out, but then suddenly, there was the bear . . . just on me. I thought—yeah, I should play dead. And . . ." Her eyes widened, and she closed her mouth, swallowed, as if she were sucked back to that moment.

"Bella," Sam said quietly. "You're safe now." He pulled off his jacket, wrapped it around her.

She looked at him. "He sniffed me. A lot. And . . . I don't know. Maybe I didn't smell good, because then suddenly he just walked away. And I thought maybe he was gone, so I scooted back, and



I found myself in this cave. And that's when . . ." She closed her eyes. "That's when he came back."

Behind him, he heard Pete on the walkie, calling in their position to PEAK Rescue HQ and asking Kacey for an extraction.

Yes, send in the chopper, soon. Because a press to her neck, at the carotid artery, told Sam that Bella's blood pressure was dropping.

She could go into shock.

"He slashed at me. I put my arm up over my head and tried not to scream. I don't know if he couldn't get to me, but he gave me another swipe and then just . . . left. And I couldn't move, couldn't scream because—because . . ."

Quinn pressed his forehead into her neck. He was sobbing. And probably, Sam should forgive him.

Except, as he stared at this kid, a quiet rage boiled up inside him. If Quinn hadn't been so—

"Bro," Pete said, "the chopper is on the way. We need to get these two down to the gravel pit—"

A roar echoed out of the woods, shivering the trees.

In the silence that followed, Sam's heart stopped in his chest.

"That's an angry bear," Pete said quietly.

Sam scrambled to his feet. "Get her up." Gage came over, lifted Bella into his arms, then he handed Quinn the flashlight. "Go."

Quinn took off through the woods, Pete behind him, clearing a path for Gage.

Sam's feet slipped on the loamy soil, his shirt catching on brambles. Another roar bellowed out, this time closer, and Sam could nearly smell the hoary breath on the breeze, skimming down his shirt, his sweaty back.

Then they hit the trail, turned, and headed toward the pit.

Sam nearly slammed into the back of Gage, who'd stopped.

"What—"

"Shh!" Gage was backing up the trail, Bella curled into his chest. Pete, too, began to back up.

Pete held the ax up in front of them like a shield.

Because there, in the middle of the trail, smelling rank, like pungent, rotted garbage, stood a mama sow.

And just up the path behind Sam, ten feet away, her two precious babes began to bawl.



The perfect night could be summed up with a bowl of popcorn, a Lord of the Rings marathon, a fuzzy blanket, and a golden retriever puppy named Gopher on her lap.

Never mind the bits of toilet paper the pup had strewn around the house; Willow would pick that up as soon as the movie ended. She didn't want to disturb the ten-year-old snuggled up next to her. Her brown hair tousled, her mouth open in sleep, Thea had surrendered to slumber long before the Orcs attacked Frodo's measly band.

Royal, age twelve, and too old for a babysitter, thank you, watched the Orcs with wide eyes as he fished out the last of the old maids from the bowl.

Willow still remembered the first time she'd watched *The Fellowship of the Ring* during one of those precious times when her father had been home on leave.

Willow glanced at the clock. Right about now, her father would be bending his knee and popping the question to Terri, Thea and Royal's mom. Digging out the black ring box from his flannel shirt. Just like they'd rehearsed.

Willow couldn't be happier for him.

She watched as Samwise Gamgee waded into the river after Mr. Frodo, until the hobbit deigned to reach out and drag Sam aboard his boat.

That's what friends—no, family did. They showed up to help each other. At least, that was how she imagined it.

She pulled a pillow from the end of the sofa, then eased the dog off her lap and put the pillow under Thea's head.

Thea barely moved, and Willow pressed her finger to her mouth as she looked at Royal. As the final credits rolled, she picked up the remote from the coffee table and clicked off the television.

Quiet descended upon the small ranch house, only the refrigerator humming in the kitchen.

Royal picked up his phone and started up a game. Willow gathered up the pizza box and dropped it into recycling. Gopher danced around her feet, his soft brown eyes bright with excitement. He pawed at the door, nearly let out a yip, and she opened it. He ran out into the night.

She followed, prepared to call the pup back to the yard.

She loved where Terri and the kids—and soon her father—lived. A small home, yes, but on a street with other tiny ranch houses, each housing a family. Minivans in the driveways, a couple bikes propped up against garages, neatly clipped lawns. Lights glowed from over the doors, leaves blanketed the yards, the scent of pine stirred the air. And along the far horizon ran the jagged edge of the Rocky Mountains.

This was the kind of house, the kind of neighborhood she'd dreamed of growing up in. With welcoming porch lights, warm cookies after school, scary carved pumpkins on the stoop, and Christmas lights ringing the rooftops. And in the summer, sprinklers spraying emerald lawns, and kids running from one yard to the next playing Kick the Can.

Safe.

Willow tucked her arms around herself against a slight nip in the air. "C'mon, Gopher, do your duty."

The pup sniffed at her feet, then around the yard, probably re-visiting old accomplishments. He'd found the proper place for his job when headlights cut down the street, then into the driveway.

Her father's truck.

Gopher chased it in, yipping. Willow lifted her hand, wanting to give Terri and her dad a minute to themselves, and headed

inside, calling Gopher, who barreled in, nearly taking her out at the knees.

Thea leaned up, creases from the couch drawn in her cheek. She turned and looked out the window. "Mom's home!"

Willow held Gopher's collar as Terri and her father came to the door.

Willow liked Terri. Dark sable brown hair, not unlike her father's, with deep amber eyes and a wide smile, Terri worked at the church office, where Jackson part-timed as a handyman.

Although, to Willow's eyes, her father looked more war hero than handyman, with wide shoulders, strong hands, his brown gaze resonant with dependability and strength. He'd taken his breakup with her mother hard.

No wonder he'd run away to the military.

"Well?"

Terri flashed a solitaire diamond in a platinum setting that Willow knew set her father back about a month in pay. "Your father did it!"

He grinned at Willow, gave her a wink.

Thea had come off the sofa, the blanket wrapped around her shoulders. "Mom, does that mean you and Jackson are getting married?"

"It does, baby," Terri said and caught her daughter as she flung her arms around her waist.

Even Royal stood up, pocketed his phone, and walked over. He looked at Jackson, and a hint of a smile edged his face. "Cool."

He lifted his hand in a high five, which Jackson smacked.

See, that's what happened when you waited for the right man. Even after the tragedy this family had endured with the loss of their father three years ago in a wildfire, God healed wounds, offered a fresh start.

Willow just had to wait. Her happy ending was out there. After all, her sister Sierra, too, was proof of that. Who could be a better catch than Sam Brooks? Solid, strong, devastatingly handsome

with his brown hair laced with the finest gold threads when he came in from the sun, and blue eyes that crinkled around the edges. His laugh was hard-won but oh, so worth it, rippling down right to a girl's insides.

His smile too. Gentle. Sincere.

And, not to mention, hot. Willow had nearly melted into a puddle when he showed up on the porch in a black T-shirt that outlined all those hours he spent at Ian Shaw's personal gym, pounding away on his heavy bag.

However, she loved it best when he wore his PEAK Rescue team uniform—brown jacket, Gore-Tex pants, boots. Capable and exuding the sense that if you were lost, he was the one to find you.

Yes. *Rescue me.*

Shoot. Even she knew that thought was inappropriate. Because, hello, Sam belonged to Sierra.

Full stop. Amen. And frankly, hallelujah, because Sierra deserved a man like Sam after pining for her aloof and unavailable billionaire boss, Ian Shaw.

So now, Sierra just might be the luckiest woman on the planet. Next to Terri.

And maybe herself, because finally, Willow too was getting a family.

Gopher yipped at her feet, clearly wanting to join in the fun. In his excitement, he piddled on the linoleum.

"Oh no! Goph!" Terri picked him up, holding him out like he had a disease. "Really, Jackson. I think this is an outside dog."

"No, Mom!" Thea shrieked.

But Terri put the dog outside and headed to the kitchen for paper towels.

"He's too young—" Willow started, but then noticed her father returning with the puppy in his arms.

"He can come home with me, honey," Jackson said. "Don't worry. We'll get him house-trained. He's just excited."

Terri dropped paper towels on the floor. Stepped on them and looked at Jackson, her mouth a grim line. "I don't know, Jack . . ." And then her face curved into a smile. "Should we ask them?"

Jackson looked at the kids and then Willow, warmth and a tiny grin in his expression.

She knew that look. His I-have-a-surprise-and-you-have-to-guess look.

He toed off his boots and walked into the family room. Sat on the sofa.

The kids bounced in beside him.

Terri lowered herself onto an overstuffed chair. Her father took Thea's hand, moved her to the ottoman. Patted it for Royal to join her.

The kids faced him, wearing an expression Willow understood—like the time he told her he wanted to take her to Disney World.

If not for her mother's hatred of all things commercial, she might have gone on that trip.

Especially if he'd asked again later, when Mom stopped competing with her ex. When she stopped caring what Willow did altogether.

"So, you know your mom and I are getting married," Jackson said. He glanced at Willow, smiled.

Willow sat on the floor.

Jackson ran a hand over the pup, calming it. "And we've decided that, since we're all starting out as a family, you should come on the honeymoon with us."

Willow frowned at him. Her father *did* have a generous dose of unconventional. After all, he stayed with her mother for nearly seven years. Then, after he became a Christian, he had even proposed.

"We're going to take homeschool on the road, rent a motor home, and visit the Grand Canyon."

*The Grand Canyon.* Willow had only seen pictures, but yeah, it was on her list.

In truth, *anything* outside the borders of Mercy Falls was on her list. "Are you sure, Dad? That's very . . . generous of you."

Her father looked at her. "If we're going to be a family, we should start it together."

Gopher squirmed out of his hands, ran over to Willow. She let the pup climb into her lap.

"When?" Willow asked, mentally checking her schedule.

"Oh, next week," Terri said. "We've waited long enough, and we don't want a wedding. Just a quick ceremony, and then we're off." She reached over and caught Jackson's hand. Squeezed.

The timing wasn't great—not with the meeting about the new youth pastor position scheduled for next Friday. The church search committee hadn't asked her to present a résumé, but maybe they didn't need anything formal. She was a shoo-in for the job. She'd been at the church for three years, tirelessly working with the teenagers.

The kids loved her. Needed her. And the parents—especially Pastor Hayes and his wife, Carrie—treated her like family. If anyone would recommend her, it would be Walt and Carrie Hayes.

Probably she didn't even have to be there at the meeting. So, except for the upcoming youth trip, which she could possibly postpone . . .

Willow nodded. "I think I can make it work."

Terri turned to her. "Oh, really? That would be so fantastic, Willow."

"I'd be glad to. I can't wait. I've never seen the Grand Canyon."

Terri's mouth remained opened for just a moment. Then she closed it. Swallowed and looked at Jackson, wearing something of a stricken expression. She turned back to Willow. "I'm so sorry—we didn't think you . . . well, we know how busy you are, and . . ."

Oh.

"We were actually hoping you might watch Gopher for us."

Willow swallowed.

Watch.

Gopher.

Her throat thickened. She shot a glance at her father, who looked pained. "Willow, I didn't think you'd want to come along—I mean, you're so busy with the youth group and work and . . . I'm so sorry."

Willow cleared her throat. "No problem. Really. I am busy, and of course I'll watch this little guy." She leaned down to the puppy, blinking fast. "We'll have a great time, won't we, Gopher?"

A lick across her nose. At least someone liked her.

"Oh, thank you, Willow," Terri said, relief in her voice. "You can even stay here, if you'd like. I know your own living quarters are a little iffy right now."

By iffy, did she mean the sleeping bag on a blow-up mattress at Jess's house, where they were holing up after Sierra's house collapsed from the flood earlier that summer?

"I'm fine."

"Oh, you're the best, just like your dad." Terri was beaming. "C'mon, kids, it's time for bed. Say good night to Willow." Terri got up, ushered the kids away.

Willow was going to rise, take her leave when, "Willow."

She couldn't look at her dad. Not without tears edging her eyes. "What?"

"I'm sorry. That was . . . I didn't think. I mean, *of course* you're part of this family."

"I'm not, Dad. And it's okay. I have a family. You. Mom. Sierra."

"It's not the same thing. I know you always wanted your mom and I to be married . . ."

She looked at him then, her eyes betraying her as they glossed over. "No, Dad. Actually, what I always wanted was for you to show up and rescue me, just like you did them."

Jackson's brow furrowed into a pinch. "What do you mean?"

She forced a smile. "Nothing. I'm just happy for you."



Gopher had one of her shoes. She wrestled it from his mouth and slipped it on.

"Honey, please tell me what you're talking about."

It was the softness of his tone that nearly broke her.

But she couldn't mar his joy with the wounds of yesterday.

"I just wish I'd had more of you when I was younger, is all. Like they will."

He sighed. "Willow, I wanted to . . . your mom—"

"Dad. It's all good. Listen, I gotta run."

And, as if the cosmos might be on her side for once, her cell phone buzzed in her pocket. She fished it out. Read the text.

Everything inside her stilled.

"It's the prayer chain." She looked up at her dad. "There's been a mauling."