

## ❧ CHAPTER 9 ❧

# Bear!

**A**ndi sat frozen in place. Maybe if she sat still and didn't move a muscle, the bear wouldn't see her. It was still a ways off.

And it was gloomy down here in the gully. The bear might think Cory was a log. It might think she was a rock and pass right by her.

A rock wouldn't have eyes though. She tucked her head down so she would look more like a rock. And so she wouldn't see the bear.

*Don't move. Don't run. Don't leave Cory to the bear.*

Andi couldn't run even if she wanted to. Her throat felt dry as dust although the rest of her was soaking wet. Her fingers dug into her arms. *Hold still!*

It was hard to sit still. Her whole body shook.

A minute went by. Then another. What was the bear doing?

Maybe it had moved away and climbed up the hill. Maybe it was minding its own business and taking a drink.

Andi lifted her chin and blinked the rain from her eyes.

The bear was still there. Only, it was closer now. It didn't seem to mind walking through the water. Another, smaller animal on all fours jumped out from behind the bear.

A bear cub!

A sob caught in Andi's throat. A mother bear with a cub was dangerous. "Go away," she whispered. "Please, God, make it go away."

The bear did not go away. It walked upright on two legs, which made it look even bigger.

Andi felt dizzy. Dark spots danced in front of her eyes. Any second she knew she was going to black out. Then the bear would—

The cub sprang forward and knocked Andi over. She screamed.

A cold, wet nose cut off Andi's scream. A slobbery tongue licked her cheek.

"Get back. You hear me, Dog? Get away from her!"

At the growly words, the shaggy "bear cub" sprang



back and gave a short bark. Thick black fur stuck out from all over the animal. It looked like no ranch dog Andi had ever seen.

"Don't mind Dog," the deep, gravelly voice told Andi. "He ain't seen a young'un for quite a spell. Just got excited about the whole thing, I reckon."

Andi slowly sat up. The voice sounded like a man, but a bear's wide-open mouth and small ears—along with claws and fur—stood over her.

Just then the "bear" threw back his head. Underneath it all, a gray-bearded man with dark eyes looked at her. "Are you all right?"

Andi's thoughts whirled. *It's not a bear.* Her breath came out in a long whoosh. *Thank you, God. It's not a bear.*

As quickly as Andi gave thanks, Zeke's warning came back to her. "*Loony Lou prowls the woods . . . big as a bear . . . covered with hair . . . scares off anybody that comes near his place.*"

If this huge man was Loony Lou, he *was* crazy, just like Zeke said. Who else but a crazy man would wander around the woods dressed up in a bearskin?

Andi stared. Maybe seeing Loony Lou was worse than coming across a real bear.

"Cat got your tongue, child?" His words came out raspy, like he wasn't used to talking.

Andi didn't answer. She stared at the bear's head hanging off the back of the old man's neck.

He turned his head to look behind his shoulder, then grunted. With a little bit of wriggling, he pulled off the rest of his bearskin covering. "It was rainin' somethin' fierce earlier. Ebenezer makes a good rain poncho, but it's too warm to wear him for long."

He dropped Ebenezer to the ground with a heavy *thunk*. "Sorry. Musta gave you a start." He chuckled.

Andi didn't think it was funny. For sure this man was loony. He called an old, dead bearskin by name. He sneaked up on people. His dog was the size of a bear cub. A *big* bear cub.

Zeke and Sadie were right. This must be Loony Lou.

Andi still didn't speak. Her tongue was stuck. She sat where she'd been knocked over and watched the man's every move.

When Andi didn't say anything, Lou bent over Cory. He frowned, clucked his tongue, and scooped Cory up in his arms.

Andi sucked in her breath. Where was he taking Cory? She wanted to ask, but the only word she could get out was a shaky "n-no!"

"Easy does it," he told her. "I ain't gonna hurt him none." He jerked his head toward the top of the gully. "That your horse?"

Andi glanced up. Poor Taffy! She looked unhappy standing under the drippy pine branches. Her