

Impatient

by James Lynn Smith

Shivering, Bruce pulled himself out of the water, detached from the harness, and collapsed on the bank. Though late spring, the cold seeped through his wet denim jeans and jacket. Fortunately the creek running through the forest had cushioned his fall from the zip line. He pushed the short, blond hair back from his forehead and looked upward but saw only one side of the line dipping down toward the water. *Why would it break?*

He knew he should have waited for Sam, his usual partner on vacation adventures, but had been too impatient to reach the high launch platform. The zip line had exceptional length, and he wanted to experience it ever since they came to the park. When he reached it, the launch crew was absent and a tape with words “Do not enter” stretched across the bottom rungs of the ladder. Undaunted, he climbed to the top and saw all necessary equipment was present. But his bold, unassisted ride ended moments later when he heard the “twang” of the line and plummeted toward the forest below.

To get back to the park camp, he would have to slog through rugged forest terrain populated only with wildlife, some dangerous. Muttering to himself he turned upstream. “This creek might lead to the lake and a boat landing. Maybe less than a mile past the launch site.” The stream was circuitous and a much longer path back than the direct course of the zip line. However the direct line passed over steep escarpments and dense brush, so trudging alongside the water was his only option.

After half an hour he stopped and listened. He heard a cracking noise, like a dry branch breaking. His gaze wandered about and rested on two dark shapes on higher ground. A chill ran through his spine when he recognized them as brown bears. *Maybe they'll stay there.* His hopes abandoned him when the larger one lifted its head and stared at him. Then it came toward him a few yards and stopped. The beast grunted and shook its head from side to side, then roared. When it started snapping its jaws, Bruce began a gradual backing away. *Don't run, face it but don't look it in the eyes.* His wilderness survival training five years ago was hardly much comfort.

The massive bear began a charge. Deep, rapid thumps issued from feet pounding the forest floor. Panic clutching his guts, Bruce turned and ran toward the creek. He ran into a shallow area, vigorously splashing water as high as his chest. Knowing water would not restrain the creature, he hoped it would stop by considering the creek a territorial boundary.

The bear did stop and lingered at the water's edge. The beast knew its environment better than Bruce who was bogging down in quicksand, each step harder than the last. Then he could no longer pull his feet up and felt the sandy ooze creeping up to his knees. At this point, he was almost across the creek, but not far enough. There was nothing within reach. Each effort to free himself sank him deeper.

The bear huffed and moved upstream, splashed across the creek and came back toward him, but moved uphill into a thicket and lay down. Fear turning to frustration and anger, Bruce yelled, "Laying in wait if I get out, huh?" The outburst calmed him a little. *Bears not usually predatory to humans. Something's wrong.*

He looked down, the surface water was only a few inches deep, but he was down to his thighs in the underlying quicksand. The process of sinking was slowing. He tried to remember survival lectures through which he often dozed.

Think. Closing his eyes he recalled snippets. “*Most quicksand victims don’t sink under, they die of exposure and thirst.*” After a deep breath, recollections of a demonstration video came to mind. Quicksand is too heavy, dense and adhesive to pull directly up from, even if there were a rope to grab. The key was to somehow push sand away from his legs and let water flow down into the resulting space. *Shimmy, shake, bend back and forth.*

It seemed to work. Though gross movements were impossible, rapid, small movements allowed a narrow sleeve of water to separate his legs from the sand. He turned his shoe toe downward and was able to pull his leg upwards slightly. Then he twisted his foot perpendicular to the hole and pushed downward, leaning toward that side. *Okay, now the other leg is up a little.* It was tiresome work, but Bruce managed to get loose, collapse forward, and crawl, distributing his weight over a larger area, toward the other creek bank. Water splashed against his face and it was difficult to keep his head high enough to breathe.

He heard a deep, hollow grunt and knew the bear was no longer lying down but alert to his possible exit.

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Feelings of doom crushing his hopes, Bruce lay nearly motionless until he heard a sharp crack of a rifle. The bear snorted and retreated into the brush.

A man with bright red shirt and overalls walked up to the bank. “Looks like you done got yourself in a fix,” he said. The ruddy face with scruffy beard grinned. Unkempt hair strayed from underneath his cap.

To Bruce, it seemed the face of a saint. He could make out letters “H-A-Z” on his cap.

“Thank God you came along, it was either sink in quicksand or get mauled by the bear.”

“If you mess with nature, she can turn on you,” the man said. Squatting

beside the water, he held his rifle by the stock, extending the barrel for Bruce to grasp. “My name’s Rob.” He snickered as though it were a private joke and pulled Bruce nearly to the bank but stopped short.

“That’s far enough; don’t try to stand,” he said, jerking the rifle back far enough to break Bruce’s grasp and get his right hand to the trigger. He aimed the barrel at Bruce’s head. “Now reach in your back pocket and give me your wallet. No tricks now, I ain’t got nothing to lose by puttin’ a hole in your head.”

Of course you don’t—Rob. Facing possible death the fourth time in one morning, Bruce felt numb. He reached his back pocket and pulled out the muddy wallet. “Don’t suppose you just want to check my ID? I fell from a snapped zip line and need help.”

“Now you’re bein’ cute. No good reason for a line out in these woods, anyhow. Like I say, mess with nature, she can turn on you. And I think you been turned on.” The man grinned again, showing yellow teeth, one with a chip. Behind him a shadow loomed. “Come on. Hand it over. Don’t need no more funny business.”

Bruce delayed, pretending he needed to reposition himself to keep from rolling over. *Maybe, just maybe.*

With a loud roar, and swipe of a mighty paw, the man was knocked to one side and the bear jumped upon him. Screaming and kicking, the man was ripped open by long, sharp claws. Then the bear caught the man’s head in a skull-crunching bite and it was over. After grunting and huffing, the bear dragged his prey uphill. The site of attack displayed only a few scraps of red shirt and blood stains on the grass.

Pulling himself onto the bank, Bruce waited until the bear, trophy in tow, crossed the creek upstream and moved back into the brush on the other side.

Feeding time for mamma and cub.

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After an hour of plodding along the creek bank, muddy and exhausted, he heard a faint buzzing sound. It grew louder, and, upstream where it was wider, a small fishing boat with outboard motor was coming toward him. The occupant directed the boat as far as a narrowing, swift area with logs obscuring passage and began a wide turn.

“Hey,” Bruce yelled. “Over here, come back.” The boat occupant appeared to be looking around, but gave no indication he saw anyone. Waving his arms and running along the bank did not help. The boat turned away and the sound of its outboard faded. Bruce fell to his knees, breathing hard. “Great, now all I need is to meet Bigfoot.” His intended humor only raised other concerns. *No telling what’s out here.* After a brief respite, he shakily stood and trudged onward.

He heard something behind him. Turning, he saw nothing but heard a distant, deep huffing. His pace quickened. *I’m being stalked.* Ahead he saw patches of color cluttering the ground. When he arrived, it was trash paper and cans. He looked around for something he could use for defense against his pursuer. All that came close was a drum ring that clamps the top onto a drum. *Better than nothing.* Picking the ring up, he saw the drum it came from. The contents had spilled out and were running toward the creek which widened to a channel leading toward a small upstream lake. Other rusted drums with rings still intact were lying around.

Looking about, he saw two wheel ruts. *A truck backed in here and dumped this stuff.* “This is a park, for god’s sake,” he mumbled. But the creature pursuing him was his concern for the moment; he had to get somewhere safe. *Maybe a tree.* Knowing big browns don’t climb as well as black bears, he liked the idea. *But I could be trapped up there while it waited below.*

He needed a distress signal. Listening carefully, Bruce felt the distant grunts and rustling were moving away from him, at least for now. *Maybe there’s time to*

set up a signal on the bank. Scurrying about, he picked up three, mostly white, plastic sacks that apparently fell from the bed of the truck as it dumped the drums. *Now they need visibility.* While pulling up obscuring weeds alongside the bank, he was startled at a quick swish in the tall grass. A water moccasin streaked past his foot and slithered into the water. After a moment to calm, he continued placing his makeshift signal on the bank. *Three bags in a row. Hope it says S-O-S.*

Snorting and huffing sounds grew nearer. *Yeah, coming back again.* After a quick selection, Bruce began climbing a tree. *Get above 14 feet.* The drum's ring was difficult to carry so he discarded it. When he reached the height he sought, he looked down with renewed alarm. Foliage below rustled as a gigantic brown bear appeared. Bruce realized his safety was precarious because his stalker was a huge male capable of pushing the slender tree down.

The bear wandered about and sniffed. It looked upward, saw Bruce, and growled, then snorted and lay down under the tree. Bruce studied the bear, trying not to stare, which could provoke a challenge.

It was a faint buzz. He listened carefully. *An outboard.* He could barely see the water but the sound was increasing. "Please check out my signal," Bruce pleaded under his breath. When the sound indicated it might be level with his site, the buzz stopped. Silence might mean the operator wanted to fish or saw something interesting.

He took in a deep breath. "Hey, over here," he yelled. "Help, bear." Again another breath and shouts at the top of his voice. Disturbed by the yelling, the bear rose from the ground and roared. Bruce felt a jolt against the tree. The bear was standing on hind legs with front paws on the tree only a foot below where he was perched. Leaning back and ramming into the tree again, it was obvious the bear was weakening the tree so it could be pushed down.

Amid the mutual fracas, Bruce barely heard the sound of the outboard

starting again. *No, don't leave.* After another jolt on the tree, the buzz was louder. With a loud crack, bark flew off a nearby tree. The bear snuffed, came down on front paws with a grunt and stared at the approaching boat. Another gunshot rang out, and it turned and lumbered away, as if its intended meal had become too much bother.

Bruce descended the tree, scraped and dirty, and approached the boat. He saw it was Sam, and his spirits soared.

“It’s a good thing these big jokers know about guns,” Sam said.

Exhausted and grateful, Bruce smiled. “I think it was my name-calling that did it,” he said. “I told him he was a big stinky and that his breath smelled like a dead cow’s behind. He was too embarrassed to stay around.”

“Yeah, you wish—man, you were screaming your head off.” He frowned. “And it was your impatience for the zip line that got you in this jam. I’ve been circling around in these waters for hours; figured you’d come back by the stream. And guessed it was you that put those three white bags on the bank.

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The brisk wind passing over the boat was chilly but welcome because it meant they were headed back toward the boat launch. Bruce told Sam about his experiences with the zip line, bears, quicksand, and the man “Rob” who tried to take his wallet.

Sam said, “This morning I got to the zip line launch after you did and saw the ‘do not enter’ tape, too. So I went back to camp headquarters and asked about it. They said yesterday they’d spotted a man at the zip line tower messing with the line. They sent someone to inspect and found the cable had been partly cut through.”

“Must have been someone who didn’t want tourists zipping through the forest. What would they see, marijuana or what?” Then he remembered the drums.

“Not sure, but they also said someone’s been fouling the streams with toxins. The fish are dying. Bears rely on that for a lot of their food so they get hungry. That makes them dangerous.”

Bruce recalled the cap the robber wore. The “H-A-Z” letters he saw could have been part of the abbreviation “Hazmat” as in something like “Hazardous Materials Service”. A scenario unfolded in his mind. “Think about this, Sam: A low cost contractor sneaks toxic materials into the park because it’s a quick dump. Maybe a bribe helps. Avoids fees at an approved site. The guy who wanted to rob me could have been an employee who went bad.”

Sam raised his brow. “Trusted agent, but secretly pocketing toxic dump fees?”

“Yeah. Did the park office describe the guy they saw at the launch site?”

“Only that he wore a red shirt and overalls.”

Bruce started to comment but stopped with open mouth. He recalled the robber’s words, “If you mess with nature, she can turn on you.” The irony was poignant. *It certainly was true for you—Rob*. He turned toward Sam. “High five, man. We’ve got news for the camp office. Then let’s get out of here.”

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