

He was on his feet now. *I need a rock weighing about a pound to tie to the bear-bucket rope – and then I can just toss it over a tree limb. I'll just step a few feet into the woods and grab the first big rock I come across. And if there's a bear already waiting for me in the undergrowth, so be it!*

A few moments later, he was out of the tent and striding purposefully toward the spot where the scratching and rustling had taken place. Laughing, he fought through the fear by announcing in a triumphant shout: “If you're waiting for me, here I come!”

How could he have known that two dark, whispering shadows heard his shouted challenge – and then leaned toward each other in the hazy darkness of the forest?

“Here he comes,” growled Kip.

“Too bad for him,” said Sam.

*

Jim moved forward slowly, almost tip-toeing. The rain had stopped falling now, and the distant stars flashed here and there through the shaggy branches of oak and beech and cedar. So far, so good . . .

Swoosh! – a black shadow lunged past his ear – but it was gone before he could react: a harmless bat!

He began to hum a little song to himself, in order to defend against the fear:
L.A. is a great big freeway; put a hundred down and buy a car.

He took another step forward. He could hear his boots crunching into the leaves and twigs that carpeted the forest floor. Why be afraid? He was tired of living with fear. Fear was the enemy, and it would not be conquered until he found a way to overcome it.

In a week, maybe two, they'll make you a star. . . .

There! Gleaming softly in the moonlight, a large white rock invited his hand. Bending at the waist, he prepared to wrestle it free from the earth – it would be perfect for his bucket –

He heard a brief hissing sound – a snake?

No . . . a net! Stunned, he gaped at the loops of rope that now surrounded his startled body –

Panic rose in his throat – *a strong animal net!*

He thrashed violently, uselessly, against the cords that now bound him. A moment later, he heard a voice shouting above the sounds of his own desperate breathing: “That’s it – grab him – hold him good – where’s the straight-jacket? Come on, come on – knock him out, if you have to. Knock him out!”

Fascinated, horrified, he watched an arm lift a camp shovel high in the air . . . watched the heavy iron whistle downwards toward his head. Watched the pale vanilla moonlight gleam on the edge of the shovel-blade. . . .

Do you know the way to San Jose? I'm headed home to find

Some peace of mind . . .

The air lit up with strings of fiery red Chinese firecrackers – *bap, bap, bap* – and then he was watching a sparkler throw gems of flickering blue light into the mouth of the dark. He shouted something . . . a single word . . . “Joy!” and a moment later, the world went dark and airless, and he imagined that he was lying beneath the big white rock in the heart of the forest, and his eyes were as dead as the stone above them, and his heart was frozen like a hunk of glacier ice on the Arctic tundra, and if this was dying, it seemed quieter, softer, slower than he had ever imagined it would be. . . .

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When Jim came to, he found himself bound with heavy rope and reinforced fish netting. It was daylight. He was seated on the ground with his back against a black oak tree. His body hurt all over – and he could feel where the blood from his head wound had congealed on his face. For a moment, he almost laughed at the absurdity of his situation.

Try as he might, Jim Clark couldn’t seem to overcome the forces that were arrayed against him. For the first time, a sinister thought crept into his fevered brain: *Somebody is trying to prevent me from beating the St. Charles deadline. But who? And why? It didn’t make any sense! What did anybody have to gain from preventing a lone canoeist from successfully completing –*

Then it hit him.

Holy cow!

All at once, he was remembering the furtive, darting look in Jack Spader's eye. Remembering the way the publisher kept staring at the floor, while they discussed the contest that was about take Jim Clark down the Muddy Mo. "This story will draw readers like flies!" the publisher had said. "People love stories where an underdog struggles to succeed against overwhelming odds. And when they find out that you stand to collect a cool one-hundred thou by getting to St. Charles on time, they'll start rooting for you, bigtime.

"If we get lucky, you'll end up on the network news, telling Dan Rather and Peter Jennings why you're so intent on paddling 2,500 miles in three months. It's a natural, Jim!"

But then his eyes had darted away again, as he took a long pull on his Hav-a-Tampa.

Remembering that moment in Spader's mahogany-paneled office, Clark took a deep breath. All at once, he was thinking the unthinkable: *Spader doesn't want to pay me the damn prize-money, and he's hired some thugs to make sure I don't complete the journey in time.*

His theory made sense – ugly sense. And now he was obviously the prisoner of Spader's goons. If there was any good news in his situation, it consisted of a single fact: His assailants didn't have to kill him, in order to accomplish their mission and earn their paychecks from the magazine publisher.

All they had to do was keep him incommunicado for a week or so, and the deadline would be out of reach.

Groaning with pain from the shovel-blow he'd taken, Clark braced his aching head against the tree trunk. Suddenly he found himself praying that Joy hadn't listened to his last, off-hand remark: "Listen, honey, don't worry if I'm a day or two late!"

His only hope now was that she'd become alarmed – and beg the authorities to send out a search party for him. But would the State Police and the DNR cops even listen to her? Moaning with frustration, he could almost hear them telling the frantic woman: "Don't you worry, little lady. This kind of thing happens all the time on the Muddy Mo – and experience shows that sooner or later, the missing canoe turns up on its own. We'll keep an eye out for him – why don't you check back with us in two or three days?"

While the big man sat helplessly bound to the tree, a frantic Joy was engaged in precisely the kind of conversation that Jim had been hoping for. Fighting back tears, she had nearly driven off the road a couple of times in a frantic dash to the offices of the Department of Natural Resources – where a highly skeptical lawman (his silver badge identified him as "Ranger Carter") listened calmly to her torrent of frightened words.

"Ranger Carter, I'm desperate and I need your help. I'm a Forest Ranger, myself – here, take a look at my I.D." She thrust the pale green card under his nose.

The tall, lanky ranger examined the photo I.D. for a moment, then offered her a toothy smile. “It’s good to meet you, ma’am. What seems to be the difficulty?”

She frowned. Struggled for the right words. “My canoeing partner – a guy named Jim Clark – he was crossing Ft. Peck, and he’s way overdue. I’m convinced that he’s in danger.”

The ranger squinted thoughtfully at her. “Yes, ma’am. Ahh . . . what do you think might be wrong?”

She took a deep breath. “I have reason to believe some people might be chasing him. Trying to . . . trying to injure him, maybe even kill him.”

Ranger Carter blinked slowly. “I see. How long has your friend been missing?”

“Only a couple of days.”

“Uh-huh. Well, maybe the weather drove him off the lake. We’ve been getting reports that the wind and rain have reduced visibility to less than 50 yards, in many areas.”

She shook her head in frustration. “No, I’m sure he didn’t give up because of the weather. I think he’s been attacked!”

The ranger nodded. “Okay. Attacked by whom, exactly?”

“By the . . . the *people* I mentioned. They’re trying to stop him for some reason, shut down his canoe trip!”

The tall ranger had begun to chew at his lower lip. “I see. Did these . . . these people threaten your friend, Miz Price?”

She thought about it for a moment. “Well, not exactly. But somebody attacked him before, higher up the river, at Canyon Ferry Lake. And they also stole his canoe at one point – even stole his dog! It’s clear that he’s being followed – these things didn’t happen by chance! And I was abducted, myself, only a few days later!”

The ranger’s blue eyes widened considerably. “How’s that again, Miz Price? Are you saying you’ve *also* been attacked by these . . . these bad folks?”

She shook her head violently. “No, no. My situation was different – it was my former husband who abducted me. He kept me locked up in a cabin for days on end – but I’m convinced he was working for the same people who are after Jim!”

The ranger took a long, slow breath. “Miz Price, I’m afraid I’m going to need more evidence, before I can send out a Missing Persons Alert. How do you know your friend didn’t simply decide to get off the water and wait out the storm?”

Joy had begun to shake her head violently. “Ranger Carter, you need to understand: Clark should have been here 48 hours ago! Call it a woman’s intuition – but I’m positive somebody’s trying to hurt him, probably in order to keep him from a historic accomplishment: solo-canoeing the entire Missouri in 90 days. I’ve got this ominous feeling in the pit of my stomach that he’s been badly injured, somewhere between the western entry to Ft. Peck Lake and here. ”

The ranger nodded. “No offense, but that’s pretty speculative and huge country, Miz Price. How can I assist?”

“Just help me find somebody with a motorboat – and let me leave my dog here – I’ll search for him, myself!”

The tall ranger smiled calmly – and then surprised Joy Price. “I tell you what. I’m off duty in an hour – and I’ve got one of the fastest, safest runabouts on this section of the water. If you like, I’ll take you on a quick run down the river, and we’ll see if we can find any sign of your friend.”

Amazed, Joy clapped her hands together. “Ranger Carter, you’re a gift from heaven above – I can’t thank you enough! Let’s do it!”

Ranger Carter proved to be as good as his word.

Within 90 minutes of their high-adrenalin powwow, the tall man in the jade-green DNR uniform was speeding both of them toward Ft. Peck Lake in his four-wheel-drive Jeep. At the last moment, Joy had suddenly changed her mind about Clark’s loyal canine – which meant that an eager-eye Lab Retriever named Jack now reigned supreme in the back seat.

Ranger Carter drove with his eyes glued to the winding road. But he didn’t remain silent; there were too many things that needed explaining. “Joy, you’re a park ranger, yourself – so I’m sure I don’t have to warn you that we’re heading into some pretty wild country. We’ve had several grizzlies on the move around Ft. Peck in recent months – along with a platoon of cougars and some pretty aggressive

timber wolves. That pal of yours in the back seat should give you some protection . . . but we need to take some additional precautions.

“I’ll stay in the general area while you patrol the lakeshore in your canoe. That way, I can respond quickly, if you suddenly decide you need some help.”

Joy turned to face him, and her warm smile could have heated an igloo in January. “Ranger Carter, I can’t thank you enough for all you’re doing. Just give me time to slip on my backpack – I’m carrying a small tent and some food in metal containers – and I’ll be ready to go. I’m all set . . . got my outdoor clothing and my compass – to say nothing of my mosquito repellent and a hat with a bug-net.”

“I hear you, Joy.” The ranger broke into his drawling chuckle. “I’ve been caught out there on the water a couple of times without repellent, and it was rough, lemme tell you.”

“Okay,” said Carter. “Let’s get down to business. How about if I take you and Jack about 20-25 miles west before I let you out? It’ll take me at least an hour to start hunting for the type of cove where an exhausted canoer would pull into – and where a couple of *banditos* might also be hiding.”

He went on to explain how a series of well-worn trails flanked the lake throughout much of its length. “Maybe you and Jack could pick one of those trails, and give it a run,” he said. “Keep your cell phone humming, just in case. Maybe you’ll get a signal.”

After Ranger Carter selected a good spot and landed the boat, Joy and Jack quickly climbed out and waded ashore, then moved away from the lake. The dog had begun to growl by now, and his neck hairs were standing up straight.

“That’s it,” said Joy. “Now we’re talking! Jack, where is Jim? Go find Jim, Jack!” Joy swung her arm in a parallel arc to indicate to Jack that he should do what he was born for – finding things that had gotten lost. Jack responded with a thunderous bark, and for once his sarcasm had evaporated: *You can count on me, Miss Joy. My best friend may be in trouble – but not for long, if I can help it!*

Suddenly, the growling dog vaulted away into the undergrowth and vanished without a trace. The two rangers paced back and forth beneath the jack pine . . . waiting anxiously for his return. And they weren’t disappointed: Within ten minutes, a triumphant-looking Jack stood in front of them, barking furiously.

“Come on,” hollered Joy. She was already running. “He wants us to follow him back into the woods!” The two of them raced through the undergrowth, with the dog leading the way. They couldn’t keep up, and Joy kept calling, “Wait up, Jack! Whoa! Stop!” But the excited dog only seemed to run faster.

Stumbling and staggering, they moved as fast as they could along the rocky trail. Jack’s bark was louder than ever over the next five minutes. And then it happened.

The frantic dog lurched around a twisting turn . . . and skidded to a stop in front of a large object that appeared to be tied to a tree! The object was wrapped in canvas . . . no, a closer look showed that it was entangled in a heavy net.

Joy felt the wind rushing out of her body.

It was a man!

It was Jim Clark. Would she find him dead . . . or still breathing?

Holding her breath and praying silently, the terrified young woman bent over the man beneath the net. “My God,” she told Ranger Carter with a gasp, “he’s pale as a sheet!” For a moment she was afraid to touch him . . . but then a blast of sheer terror surged through her and she reached out to caress his blood-streaked forehead. “Jim, are you there? Can you hear me? For God’s sake, say something!”

For a heart-stopping moment, he remained motionless, while her hand lay against his cold, white face.

Then he made a groaning sound. One eye fell open, and it stared at her for a few seconds without recognition. Joy could feel her heart beating, pulse by agonizing pulse. “Jim . . . it’s me. Joy! I’ve been so worried; I’ve been half-crazy with fear. Can you speak?”

He struggled for a moment, and then she saw his lips moving. But the words came out in a whisper. “Hey, babe. It’s me, all right. The Clark-man. Never felt better in my life.”

“Oh, my God.” She had begun to stroke his right cheek, where the coagulated blood lay thickest. “Who did this to you, Jim? Who?”

He smiled, or tried to – his mouth twitched a couple of times, and then went still again. “I never got a look at them, Joy. One minute I was wandering through the

underbrush, hunting for a rock – and the next minute, a piano fell on my head. A baby grand. I haven't been hit that hard since I tried to block the middle linebacker in the Oklahoma game!"

Joy breathed a huge sigh of relief; if the big man had started making jokes, it meant he would probably survive.

"Jim, you sit tight – Ranger Carter – he's been a lifesaver, believe me!"

Jim nodded, then winced with the pain it caused. "Many thanks to you, officer. Duty above and beyond the call!"

"No problem," said Carter with a smile. "Looks to me like you're grappling with Excedrin Headache Number 1, Jim. Hang on a minute – I've got some aspirin in my first-aid kit, back in the Jeep."

As soon as the tall ranger was out of sight, Joy bent over the blood-smearred man on the ground. "I'll cut you free in a second Jim . . . but while you're my prisoner, I'm going to take full advantage of you."

She put her mouth against his, and the world dissolved into a smear of wet cotton candy. They stayed like that for half a minute – lost to the great lake beside them, and to the quiet dog who had kept a respectful distance, waiting to see if his master was alive or dead. Their kiss was a world unto itself, a special place in which nothing else existed . . . only the faint, steady, rhythmical sound of two hearts beating as one.

They awoke to the sound of Ranger Carter clearing his throat.

“Okay, I brought you three aspirin, Jim. Whaddaya say we cut you out of this spider web and get you moving toward some serious first aid?”

“Go for it,” said Jim Clark.

While the ranger slashed away at the thick netting, Joy fired off a series of flash photos that would document this part of the adventure for *Wild Rivers*. Within five minutes the injured boatman was free of his bonds, and Joy had begun washing the crusted blood from his forehead and around his eyes, nose and mouth. He smiled at her through blistered lips. He was thoroughly embarrassed by the odor that rose from his abused body; the call of nature had reduced him to soiling himself during his 48-hour stretch as a prisoner.

Still, he hadn’t lost his ability to make fun of himself. “My head feels like Omaha Beach, about 15 minutes after the invasion,” he joked after a bit. “Are my eyes crossed, Joy?”

She hugged him. “No more than usual, Jim.”

“I love you, babe.”

She echoed his phrase, then kissed him gently, with the tears still streaming down her face. The ropes and the netting had fallen away completely now, and Joy untied the straight jacket and removed it. She allowed him a few swallows from her canteen . . . but then made him sip and wait a few minutes before attempting more.

Ranger Carter watched all of this for a few minutes, then decided to get busy. “Jim, do you know how to reach your campsite from here? If we can get you there,

you'll be able to clean up and change your clothes." Jim nodded, and the two of them helped him to his feet. Together they limped toward the campsite. The big man would have fallen two or three times along the way – but they kept a firm grasp on him from one step to the next.

After ten minutes of strenuous effort, they reached the campsite. The tent and its contents were a shambles. The boat contents, including the dry bags, had also been tossed and emptied. Animals had been clawing through Jim's meager belongings, it appeared. Nonetheless, Joy and Ranger Carter were able to assemble a change of clothing for Jim, along with a towel and washcloth. With Joy's help, Jim limped down to the lakeshore, removed his soiled clothing, and began to wash his lacerated body. Joy helped him dress himself in fresh new clothes.

"Hey, I'm starting to feel halfway human again – even though I've been whipped with an ugly-stick!"

"Thank God we reached you in time," said Joy. "I don't want to think about what would have happened without Jack!" She smiled in the direction of the beaming canine, who sat nearby. "That dog was amazing, darling. The moment I told him to start looking for you, he took off like a shot."

Jim laughed. "I'm not surprised, Joy. As soon as we get back to civilization, I'm going to buy him a month's supply of ground chuck!"

The dog shifted his hindquarters, then scowled. *Ground chuck? Hey, pal – I just saved the Clark-man from certain disaster . . . so let's not waste time talking about*

mere hamburger! Tell me, Jim: Do you remember those two French words I love to hear: filet and mignon?

*

By now, Ranger Carter had returned from a brief inspection tour along the waterline. “Jim, you’re in luck. As far as I can tell, your boat has weathered the storm. She looks to be intact, and she’s perfectly seaworthy. You’re one lucky boatman, fella.

“I’ve gone ahead and repacked your dry bags. I righted the canoe, as well – but I only came up with one paddle. Looks like you lost a regular paddle and your double-bladed kayak paddle.”

Jim nodded. Meanwhile, Joy had her hand up, like a kid in a classroom. “Ranger Carter,” she said in a rush, “the wind has calmed and there isn’t much wave action. Perhaps I could paddle the canoe up to my campsite now? Under these mild conditions, we won’t need but the one paddle.”

Jim smiled at her. “I wish you could do that, hon. But unfortunately, the contest rules won’t allow it! As bad as I feel, I’ll have to do the paddling, according to my contract with *Rivers*. But, it would be wonderful if you could make the run with me to your camp. I’ve still got a lot of pain in my ribcage and my back from the beatings – but we should be able to make it in three or four hours, nonetheless.”