

### **The Birthday Present-Barbara D. Parks-Lee-District of Columbia (DCSO)**

On the first camping trip Baby had ever attended, she started out with concealed apprehension. Darlin,' her gung-ho, outdoorsman of a husband, convinced her they could really get to know a different side of themselves if they managed to spend some quality time amidst the autumn colors.

"You might even get up enough nerve to skinny dip in the pond or to slide down the waterfall. Who knows? You might even get to love being outdoors."

"Look, Darlin,' I'm on this trip because it is your birthday, and I was crazy enough to say we could do anything you wanted to celebrate, but don't push your luck. That water looks COLD this time of year and skinny dippin' ain't for me. Too much cellulite and flab might scare away any fish for the next twenty years."

He winced at her self-destructive comment but said nothing. "This is going to be some birthday present. Man, a whole week with Baby outside is going to be a challenge."

They pitched a tent, gathering pine needles to put under it to soften the ground. The smell of pine needles didn't hurt the romance either. Though Baby did not leave her eye makeup off or protest not having her daily shower, she seemed to be settling in without too much angst. The first two days found them sleeping, fishing (she even cleaned his birthday catch!), cooking on the little, battered, black Sterno™ stove he always carried, and walking along the perimeter of the pond.

Day three's humidity competed with the overcast sky and frizzed her hair. The mountains looked like they wore bonnets of Miracle Whip™ clouds. The sun seemed reluctant to show its face, and rain threatened, but did not fall.

She felt agitated, homesick, and ready to renege on her agreement to stay a whole week in the wilderness. The bugs seemed intent on seeing how fast they could make her scream by crawling on her, and the mosquitoes feasted on her like she was a mobile buffet for them, their relatives, and friends. Her bug repellent might as well have been called "On" for all the good it did.

"Something's not right, Darlin'. Cain't you feel that something is just not right?"

"Oh, Baby, stop being a scairdy-cat! This ain't no place for wimmen's intuition. Only the strong can survive out here."

Just as they finished gutting and scaling the shiny, almost iridescent fish, she heard a sound deep in the woods but could not identify it. She edged over nearer to the tent and fingered the rifle she had never fired, and its closeness made her less—but not a whole lot less—uneasy.

"Darlin', did you hear that strange noise?"

"Oh, woman, that was just the wind in the trees. Baby, stop being such a fraidy-cat. Loosen up a little, will ya?"

Suddenly, she froze, the horror on her face making the blood drain from his, just as the biggest brown bear he had ever seen emerged from the woods and ambled toward them and the bloody remains of the fish. Quickly, the bear began to run toward them.

Baby grabbed the rifle and Darlin' began to pray. "Baby, shoot it! Shoot it now!" was all he could stammer.

"Darlin,' I ain't never shot no gun. I might hit you!"

"Or you might hit the bear. For goodness sakes, shoot..."

The bear edged closer, eyeing both of the interlopers, and sniffing the air. It never knew what the burning sensation was when Baby pulled the trigger and the rifle discharged. Darlin' remembered telling Baby that only the strong survived out in the wilderness as the shot exploded in his ears. His pulse felt like a symphony of tympani in his head. His hands instinctively flew up in the air, and when his nerves calmed down enough for him to remove them, he saw the bear stretched out, its breathing forever stilled.

"Wow, Baby, you shot it! We can take it back to prove to everyone that you shot a bear and saved my life."

"Darlin, you'd better take a picture of it with your cell phone. I'm not riding anywhere with a bear—whether it's dead or alive. I told you somethin' was just not right."

He vowed that on his next birthday, he was going to take Baby to the finest restaurant and spend however long she wanted to stay in a resort spa of her choosing. He appreciated this year's present, his life, and he absolutely did not want to tempt fate again by expecting Baby to rough it.