

## Nowhere to Go

“Oh, God! Help me! Please!”

The man, in his early twenties and bleeding from cuts on his hands and arms, had burst into my tent just after midnight. He collapsed on the floor in front of my sleeping bag, breathing heavily.

“What’s going on?” I was still a little groggy. I’d been up late reading, and liked to sleep in until noon when I was camping. But it looked like that wasn’t going to happen.

“Of course I’ll help. How did you cut yourself?”

His presence was a complete surprise. I’d chosen this lake in northern Alberta for its seclusion. To reach it, I’d had to drive thirty kilometres or so down an overgrown cutline, and then canoe down the lake for another ten kilometres. I had never seen anyone else on this lake; we were over two hundred miles from the nearest town. I’d been coming here every summer for the past five years.

“Please, you ... please. You have to help!” He was almost incoherent with fear.

“Here, give me an arm. Let me look at those cuts.” I tried to calm him down. His arms were bloody, with slashes across both of them. His hands were cut up pretty badly too. A bear, maybe.

I’d been using this particular campsite for years. Every summer I came out here for several weeks of fishing and relaxing. I’d left word with friends back in town; they knew roughly where I was, and would send help if I didn’t show up at the end of next week. Cell phones didn’t work out here; at least, mine never had.

Bears were a problem. I had to be very careful to keep all my food stored in airtight containers, and I was fanatical about cleaning up after eating. Everything got burned or buried. My tent was right near the water, and I had several trip wires, tied to pots set up along the perimeter of the clearing, near the edge of the bush. More than once during the nights I’d been here, I’d had to retreat to my boat while a foraging bear made a mess of my campsite. But I didn’t mind ... I was intruding in their territory. And I kept most of my gear in the boat anyway.

“Was it a bear?” I asked him.

“Oh, God, no! It was these two guys ... they’re crazy! Help me, OK? My wife and our friends are back at our tent. I got away. You have to help us!”

My remote campsite was starting to seem like a busy downtown street corner. Where had all these people come from? In the summers I’d been coming here, I’d never seen another person. Ever. Just bears.

“OK, listen.” I told him. “Start from the beginning, OK? Tell me who you are, and what you’re doing here, and what happened. My name is Steve, by the way.”

“Oh, God, all right, I’ll try. It’s Jimmy. My wife ...” He paused for a moment, as if to collect his thoughts. “My wife Barbara and I came out to the lake to spend a week camping. With our best friends Andy and Sandra. We’ve never been to this lake before. Andy said he’d been here once, and he said it was really isolated, and quiet, and that the fishing was great. But, oh, shit!”

He had to stop. He was shaking pretty badly. As he talked, I was cleaning up the cuts on his arms. They weren’t from a bear. They were knife wounds.

“Jimmy, tell me what happened. Where is your wife? Where are your friends?” Jimmy looked to be about twenty-five or so.

“I can’t ... I didn’t ...” He was trembling.

“Jimmy, settle down. Whatever happened, you’re safe now. Where is your campsite?”

He made an effort to calm himself. “We’re several miles ... uh, north of here, I think. On the shore where the lake curves around. I didn’t know you were here ... I just sort of stumbled into your camp. I was just running. I didn’t know what I was going to do ...”

During the next half hour, Jimmy told me everything that had happened. Two days after setting up their large, multi-roomed tent on a flat area of shoreline just up the lake, they’d had visitors. Two guys had shown up in a canoe. Jimmy and the others had invited them to stay for supper. After the meal, they’d left.

But they’d returned in the middle of the night. They both had guns, and they pulled Jimmy, his wife, as well as Andy and Sandra, out of their tent. They’d made them lie down in the dirt with their hands behind their heads while they ransacked the tents.

“We thought they were just looking for cash, or maybe food. I don’t know.”

But that isn’t what they’d wanted. They’d wanted to have some fun. Sick, twisted fun.

The two had made Jimmy and Andy watch while one after the other, the two of them raped Barbara and Sandra.

Andy had tried to stop it. One of the two had hit him with a rifle butt, and left him bleeding on the ground. Then Jimmy and Andy had been tied to a tree while the intruders sat around the fire, drinking from a bottle and laughing to themselves.

“I was frantic!” Jimmy told me. “They had a rifle, and I think a shotgun, and I’m sure they both carried knives on their belts. I know one of them did.”

He told me how he'd waited until the two men had passed out, and then used a small penknife he'd kept in his back pocket to cut the ropes. He hadn't been sure what to do next, but it didn't matter. One of the men had woken up, and grabbed him, pulling a hunting knife from his belt. Jimmy had managed to fight him off, getting cut up pretty badly in the process. And then he'd run.

"I didn't know what else to do! I couldn't do anything to help Andy or the girls. They had guns. My cell phone can't get a signal. I know we're a long way from anywhere. Can you help us?"

What he'd told me was a shock. This kind of thing didn't happen in real life ... I wasn't sure what to do.

As a Christian, I knew there was evil in the world. But I hadn't seen much of it. My job as a teacher in the school back where I lived kept me busy, but the worst thing I'd ever had to deal with was Junior High boys who liked to sneak a smoke out behind the school. I'd never been in a real fight, although I'd taken some self-defence courses when I was younger.

But this was way beyond anything I'd ever dealt with before. These two men were obviously capable of anything, including killing us. I knew I had to help; trying to get back to town, and then getting the police out here, would take most of a day. What would happen to Barbara and their friends in the meantime?

"What do you know about these guys?" I asked him. "Have you ever seen them before?"

"No, never," he answered, "but I know their names. The big one is called Ricky. He looks like a bodybuilder or something. And his arms are covered in tattoos. He called the other one 'Gary'. Gary is shorter, and he has a thick red beard."

He paused for a minute. "These guys are really nasty, Steve. They've already hurt Barbara and Sandra. God knows what they're doing to them now! What are we going to do? Can you help me?"

"Jimmy, of course I'll help. But we'll have to think about this first, all right?"

"To hell with thinking! They raped my wife, and Sandra. They may have killed Andy by now. You have a rifle. Let's just go back there together and kill them. They deserve it."

It was true, I did have a rifle with me. I'd brought it just in case a persistent bear had decided to swim out to my boat. Jimmy had noticed it lying on the floor of my tent.

But there was no way I was going to use it to kill anyone. As a Christian, I couldn't. Well, maybe if one of them was about to kill me or one of Jimmy's friends ... I might be able

to. I didn't know what God would want me to do in a situation like that. The possibility had never come up.

But I knew I wasn't just going to head over there and kill them both. There had to be a better way. We'd have to plan what we were going to do carefully.

"No, Jimmy. We're not going to kill anyone. But we are going to rescue your wife and friends somehow. And those two guys will go to prison. For a long time. I promise you."

Promises were easy to make. But at the moment, I had no idea how we were going to do it. I decided to take stock of what we had.

There was my rifle. I had a full box of bullets, and I'd used the rifle on occasion ... but not to kill anything. Just targets. And I wasn't a very good shot. I'd been hoping the bears wouldn't know that.

I had a can of bear repellent. Probably pepper spray ... I'd never used it. Banging pots together had usually worked.

I had a good hunting knife, and lots of rope.

Aside from various camping supplies, that was it. Oh, and Jimmy had a penknife.

We were armed and dangerous! Hah!

I was perfectly prepared to use the rifle as a threat. But I wasn't sure I could shoot anyone. There had to be another way.

After some thought, I told Jimmy what we were going to do. He wasn't happy about waiting around, but we needed those two men to be tired, and hopefully drunk. Three in the morning is when most people are at their lowest ebb; I wanted them as out of it as possible. And they weren't expecting anything. As far as they knew, Jimmy had run off into the bush, and there wasn't any help anywhere close. I wanted them to feel safe.

We loaded what we'd need into my canoe, and I paddled us along the lake in the direction of Jimmy's campsite. I had a pretty good idea where it was; it was one I'd rejected on my first trip here. The trees were too close to the water; I'd wanted more room between me and the bears. Lots of room.

That would work in our favour now.

I worked the canoe silently along the shore. After about a mile or so, I could see the dim glow of their campfire. Cautiously I grounded the canoe and motioned Jimmy to take the things we'd brought and step out. I followed right behind him, tying the bow of the canoe to a tree branch overhanging the water.

I'd brought the rifle, but I left it in the canoe. If this was going to work, we'd need the element of surprise. And I really couldn't see myself shooting anyone. Although I thought that Jimmy might not hesitate to use it. Maybe that's the real reason I left it in the canoe.

We moved as slowly and as quietly as we could through the trees. Within a few minutes we were at the edge of a clearing, and could see the tent clearly.

One of the men was sitting in an old beat-up lawn chair next to the fire. He had his back to us, and appeared to be asleep. From his size, it looked like it might be Gary. There was no sign of Jimmy's friend Andy or their wives.

The one called Ricky was nowhere in sight. But then sounds from the left no doubt where he was, and what he was doing.

"Steve, oh shit!. We have to stop him. Let's go!"

He was about to leap up and run toward the tent. I couldn't blame him. But I grabbed him and held him down.

"Jimmy, listen to me! We have to do this the way we planned it! We can't help the women or Andy if those guys kill us. Look, there's a gun beside that guy there in the chair."

It appeared to be a shotgun. We'd have to be careful. I took out my knife.

"Are you ready? Just follow me, and do what I told you to do, OK?"

We'd been prepared to wait in the bush until one or both of them had gone to sleep. This would have to do.

I got up and moved slowly into the clearing. The man in the chair was snoring loudly.

I ran the last few steps, and grabbing the sleeping man from behind by the hair, I put my knife under his throat. I bent over and spoke slowly into his ear.

"Don't move. Don't even twitch. If you so much as move a muscle, or say anything, I will cut your throat!" I pushed the knife against the skin of his neck so he'd know it was there. "Do you understand?"

He nodded. I had no intention of cutting his throat. I couldn't ... I'm not someone who could do that. But he didn't know it.

Jimmy moved up and did what I'd told him to do. He slapped a piece of duct tape across the guy's mouth, and then quickly wrapped rope around him and the chair. It should do.

I gave Jimmy the knife, checked that the guy in the chair was secure, and then moved toward the door of the tent.

I signalled to Jimmy, who gave a loud yell, as we'd planned. "Hey!"

I had the can of bear spray ready. When Ricky came out of the tent, I gave him a blast right in his face, from three feet away.

I'd never used bear spray before. I knew that some women carried it in their purses in the city, for protection. Probably illegally, I didn't know. But I did know it was potent stuff ... the guy I'd just sprayed grabbed his face and went down on his knees, screaming. My eyes were watering just from what was in the air, and I'd been three feet away!

I jumped on him, and knocked him to the ground. He wasn't in any shape to put up a fight, so it wasn't more than a few seconds before I had his hands duct-taped behind his back.

It should have worked. Everything had gone perfectly. My mistake was giving Jimmy the knife.

When I looked over at him, Jimmy had pulled the chair over. He was on top of Gary, beating him with his fists.

"You bastard!" He kept on hitting him.

"Jimmy, no!"

But it was too late. The ropes had loosened when Gary had been pulled onto his back in the chair, and despite being bloodied by Jimmy's fists, the man had managed to work an arm loose and grab the knife from the ground where Jimmy had dropped it.

He slashed out at Jimmy, opening a cut in his arm. Jimmy cried out in pain, and fell backwards onto the ground. Within a few seconds, Gary had shrugged off the rest of the ropes and managed to stand.

He looked over at me and Ricky, but grabbed Jimmy off the ground, holding him from behind with the knife to his throat. He looked directly at me as he spoke.

"Get your ass away from him and move over there." He pointed to a tree. "Now. Fucking right now!"

He wasn't too pleased with what we'd done to him, or his friend.

I left the guy I'd pepper-sprayed, and moved over to the tree.

"Sit down against the tree. Put your hands behind your head. Now, asshole!"

I didn't have much choice. As I was sitting, he threw a now struggling Jimmy to the ground and kicked him solidly in the head. Jimmy stopped moving.

He picked up the rope, and moved in behind me. Within a moment he had tied the rope around my waist and the tree.

"Stay there, you fucker. Don't move!"

OK, these guys were definitely not pleasant.

He moved back to his friend, ripped off the duct tape, and helped him to his feet.

"Ricky, you OK, man?"

Ricky did not look pleased. He looked in my direction, wiping at his eyes. I imagined he was still having a little trouble seeing.

"I'm going to kill that son of a bitch!"

He headed in my direction, and stopped several feet in front of me.

I looked at him. "Ricky? You know you're already in a lot of trouble. Don't make it worse, OK? Why don't you just untie me and we can talk about this."

I wasn't really expecting him to listen. I just wanted a few extra seconds to move my legs under me. I knew what was coming.

"Fuck that, asshole."

I saw the first kick, and was able to twist out of the way enough so that it glanced off my shoulder. The ropes weren't very tight, and I was able to crouch lower to the ground, in an attempt to protect my head.

The next three kicks connected with my ribs. I'm sure a few of them broke. The pain was indescribable. I lay there not moving.

"Gary, tie him better to that tree. I'm going to check out the other one."

But Jimmy was still out of it. As Gary lifted me up and ran the rope around me and the tree, more securely this time, I feigned unconsciousness. I was hurting, but I wasn't too far gone to try to stiffen my arm muscles and push outwards as the rope was wound around me.

It worked. As Gary left me to join his buddy, I relaxed. The ropes went slack around my arms. Possibly slack enough to let me get out of them on my own. We'd see.

I moved my head just enough to see what was going on. Gary was tying an unconscious Jimmy to another tree. Ricky was washing his eyes with water from a pot near the fire. He still seemed to be in a lot of pain, judging from the swearing he was doing. Too bad.

I looked around some more. The two of them had scattered camping gear everywhere when they'd first ransacked the tent. There were cans, napkins, ketchup containers, all sorts of stuff.

A few feet beside my left foot was a can of bug spray.

Slowly, while keeping my eyes on Gary and Ricky ... Gary was now helping Ricky to wash out his eyes ... I moved my leg. I could just reach the can. With my foot, I slowly dragged it backwards until it was beside me, out of sight of the two of them.

Now I went to work on the ropes. They *were* loose; within a minute I had one arm free, and then the other, and I was sure I could get out of them quickly when I had to. I removed the cigarette lighter I kept in my pants pocket for lighting fires. I grabbed the can of insect spray, and then held both tightly behind my back, out of sight.

Now I needed a distraction. I hoped it wouldn't be too painful. For me.

I called over to Ricky.

"Hey, Ricky. What's in the tent?" I'd meant to sound cocky, but the pain in my ribs made it sound more like a whine. I improvised with a lopsided grin. "Anything you want to share?"

Ricky stood up, wiped his eyes, and glared at me. I wanted him to go back into the tent.

"I'll show you what I've got in the tent, you shithead! And then you can watch! Your friend there really enjoyed himself last time!"

He turned and ducked into the tent. It was now or never.

"Hey, Gary. You are such a loser, do you know that?"

Gary did what I thought he would. He walked over to me and grinned. "Loser? You're the one tied to the tree, asshole!. And we're not finished with you yet! Not by a long shot!"

He bent over to look me in the face. Probably to gloat. But he was close enough.

I brought out the can of bug spray and sprayed it into his face, flicking the lighter on in front of the spray.



If you've ever done what I'd just done, you know that the resulting stream of flame was a pretty potent weapon. Gary's beard was covered in the spray, and the flames engulfed his face. He fell to the ground, pawing at his eyes as his beard burned. He was yelling.

I didn't waste any time getting out of the ropes, and I moved towards the lawn chair and grabbed the shotgun just as Ricky came barrelling out of the tent. He stopped when he saw the shotgun pointing at his chest.

I'd moved to the right a little so the tent wasn't behind him. He took a step towards me and laughed.

"You asshole. You haven't got the guts to shoot me!"

I pulled the trigger and unloaded one shell into the ground in front of him. Dirt flew everywhere as he fell to the ground, holding a leg.

I'd had no idea that a shotgun could pack such a kick. And I didn't know there'd be such a scatter. Apparently part of the load had hit him in at least one leg.

Oh, well. I'd had no intention of killing anybody, but I wasn't going to worry about a little collateral damage.

I went over to him, reversing the shotgun in my hands, and gave him a good whack on the back of the neck. He hit the ground and was still. Hopefully not too damaged.

I turned to see what Gary was doing, but he was still rolling on the ground, pawing at his face. Another whack, and he went quiet too. I was getting good at this. Too good. I sincerely hoped I hadn't permanently injured either of them.

Jimmy was still unconscious, although he was showing signs of coming around. But first I had to deal with Gary and Ricky. I grabbed the rope that had been used to tie me to the tree, and bound both of them as tightly as I could, making sure there was no way they could work themselves loose.

Then I went to Jimmy. He was awake, and he looked at me with wide eyes. "Steve! I don't know how ... get me loose. I have to get to Barbara."

We went into the tent. Andy was bound hand and foot on the floor, with a rag stuffed into his mouth, but he was awake. I helped free him, while Jimmy untied the women. Both had been gagged and tied to the camp cots they were lying on. Both were fully dressed, but they looked on fearfully as Jimmy and then Andy worked to loosen and remove the ropes.

The women were weak with fear, dehydration, and were both probably in a lot of pain. I left Andy and Jimmy to help them, and went outside to wait for them.

A little while later, Jimmy and Andy and the two women, Barbara and Sandra, came over to where I was standing. "Steve", Jimmy said, "I don't ... I don't know how to ...". He wanted to thank me, but he didn't have the words. A hug would have to do.

Everyone wanted to leave this place as quickly as they could. I didn't blame them. Andy and I bandaged Jimmy's arm; he'd lost some blood, but it wasn't a deep wound. Their boat had a motor on it, so they'd be able to head out without too much difficulty. They'd driven in to a flat rock-strewn beach at the other end of the lake, one I hadn't known existed. So much for seclusion.

I volunteered to stay with Ricky and Steve, while Jimmy and the others drove out; Jimmy promised he'd call the police as soon as his cell phone picked up a signal.

"Steve, I'll never forget what you did for us, man. You were incredible!"

I thought I had just done what anyone else would have. But that wasn't important. We said our goodbyes, and the four of them piled into the boat. Within a few minutes they were far down the lake.

I'd volunteered to stay behind because I didn't want to leave Gary and Ricky here just tied up like that. There were bears. I didn't want to be responsible for them ending up as lunch for some hungry bruin.

I'd also had it in my head that I might pick up my vacation where it had left off, but now I realized that I couldn't; I had at least one broken rib that would have to get looked at. I wasn't even sure I could paddle out of here. Maybe I could hitch a ride back with the cops.

Sometime late that afternoon a police boat showed up, and I spent several hours describing everything that had happened. The cops weren't too pleased about the fact that I had used a shotgun on Ricky, and burned up half of Gary's face. I was wondering if they were going to charge me with something. One of the officers took a closer look at Gary and decided that the damage wasn't that bad, and his eyes were apparently uninjured. But then he looked carefully at Gary again, and went into a huddle with two of the other officers.

They came over to me. One of them had a grin. It was all smiles after that. It seems that Gary was on their list. He was wanted for wounding two police officers and killing another, in Manitoba a few weeks ago. They seemed quite pleased that he was now in custody.

So eventually I got out of there. The cops helped me gather all my stuff, including my canoe, which they tied to the side of their boat. I didn't look back.

Had I acted as a Christian? That worried me for a while. I certainly hadn't turned the other cheek. And I had intentionally injured two people. But not in anger. And I was pretty sure I could forgive them for what they'd done ... although I wasn't sure that Andy and Jimmy would feel the same way.

In any event, I hadn't killed anyone. That would have been the easy way, but I couldn't have done it.

The next year I returned to my campsite for another two week vacation. But this time I'd come prepared. I had a very expensive satellite phone that was guaranteed to work anywhere. My wife said I'd probably just lose it. But I wanted it. Just in case a bear got too close.