



Kodiak

By A. Scott

Something huge and ugly was clawing at the outside wall of our clamdigger hut. We had heard the stories. Guys gutted with one swipe of a mighty claw. Torn to shreds for trespassing on a favorite fishing hole or for hanging a food bag too low. If what was tearing at our tender shack in the middle of the night was a brown bear, or God-forbid a grizzly, and we were all going to die.

A sudden thunderclap rattled me to my core, but I realized it wasn't thunder I heard. It was the sound of an angry bear breaking tree branches and torturing a trash can behind our hut. Tom looked at me in terror. I watched as he squeezed his hands around a small revolver and prayed. I did the same with my St. Christopher. *Would that thing even fire? How could it?* I wondered. *Like everything else in the hut hours earlier it had been soaked in seawater.*

“That gun won't save us,” I whispered, and Tom nervously nodded in agreement.

It had been an eventful day to say the least. Flying out of Kenai, Alaska, we were ready for adventure. Just three young, college boys, working as roustabouts at a refinery for the summer, going on a fishing trip to Kodiak Island. Tom, Mark, and I were having the time of our lives. But as we neared the island our bush pilot gave us a warning. We were late for a landing on the beach, and the tide had started to come in, narrowing our runway and making the sand too soft. Sure enough, when our four-seat Bear Hawk touched down on the Kodiak shore its front wheel hit a soft spot in the sand, and suddenly the plane jerked violently back into the ocean.

“Everybody out,” the pilot yelled as he reached for the door handle. “Hold onto the plane. Don't let it float away.”

Float away?

My buddies and I looked at each other in horror. We could feel the plane slowly sinking, and when the pilot forced open the door, the sea poured inside and within seconds our

backpacks, food, sleeping bags, fishing gear, and everything we brought for the two-day camping trip was under water.

Jumping from the plane into chest-high water we each grabbed a piece of the plane – a wing, a tail, a wheel – and held on for dear life. The ocean pounded at our faces, and the tide tossed us around like popcorn on a string. The harder we fought the waves, the more we lost ground, and we could feel the plane being slowly pulled out to sea.

In the distance, we heard the faint grind of an engine. Looking back toward the shore, we watched an old tractor barrel down the beach and plow into the surf. Fifty feet from our plane the tractor turned around, slowly backed up, and stopped. Then a scruffy-looking, old man in a yellow rain slicker jumped off his idling tractor and pulled a long iron chain from the back.

“Hook it to a back wheel and get out of my freaking way!” the old man yelled. Then he got back on the tractor and slowly pulled the Bear Hawk out of the drink. “Beach is good for business,” he said minutes later, laughing hysterically as he drove away with fifty new dollars in his pocket.

On dry land, the news got worse. Saltwater had soaked the plane’s engine, and the pilot worried it might not start. But when it did he said he would still have to fly back to Kenai alone.

“Only three good cylinders left,” he explained, “not enough power to fly back with all this weight,” pointing at us and our soaked camping equipment and fishing gear. “You’ll need to stay here and fish,” he added, “I’ll come back for you if I make it.”

If you make it? I wondered. *What if you don’t make it? How would we know? How would anyone know?* It was 1972. There were no phones on the island. No phones in our pockets. No phones period.

When the plane took off it began to rain hard. In minutes we soaked again. We gathered up our stuff and ran for a small clamdigger's hut we had seen on the beach. It was cold and damp inside. No cookstove or fireplace to warm ourselves. Shivering, we laid down on hard, wooden bunkbeds for the night. Then we heard the bears.

The next morning, the rain stopped, and we ventured out to see long, deep claw marks on the hut's outside walls. A large, plastic trash bin had been ripped apart and rotted garbage was scattered everywhere. A small, innocent tree nearby had been splintered into toothpicks.

It was overcast for most of the day, and the air was misty and damp. We built a fire on the beach and took off our wet clothes to dry them. The food we brought – some bread, peanut butter, and fruit – had all floated away the day before, so we decided to go fishing, not for sport but to eat, to survive. We would have to live off the land until our pilot returned, *if he returned*.

Not far from our camp, a freshwater stream was teeming with salmon. We caught several large Kings in less than an hour, but as we were leaving we heard rustling in the trees across the river and realized we had trespassed onto the bears' favorite fishing hole. They didn't sound happy, and we ran back to the beach as fast as we could.

Grilled salmon never tasted better. We stuffed ourselves and then laid next to the roaring campfire. The day passed with no sign of our returning bush pilot, and we reluctantly marched back to the clamdigger's hut for another cold night.

The next day we heard nothing until mid-day. Then a gleaming, bright blue Bell 47 helicopter with white pontoons dropped down through the clouds and landed two hundred yards from our campfire. We watched as three men in fishing vests and rubber boots jumped out of the helicopter, waved, then headed toward the freshwater stream. We walked over to the chopper and

told pilot our story, how our plane was nearly lost at sea, how our pilot had left us behind, and how we were now stranded on the island. The pilot was sympathetic but said he couldn't help.

“There's no room for you on the chopper, I'm afraid,” he told us. “You'll have to stay here and wait. I'm sure your pilot will be back if he made it across the channel.”

Why did everyone keep saying that? If he made it?

Three hours later we watched the helicopter take off with a load of fish and its fishermen. Then it began rain again, even harder this time.

The temperature was dropping as we reached the clamdigger's shack for third night. My clothes were damp again and smelled of day-old fish and campfire smoke. So, I stripped them off and wrapped my naked body in my wet sleeping bag. I had never felt so cold, so exhausted. No bears came out that tonight, but I still shivered until I finally fell asleep.

On the fourth day, the sun came out early, and by noon my clothes felt almost dry. We fished again but soon lost interest. ‘All-you-can-eat-salmon’ sounds delicious until all you can eat is salmon.

I had never been so depressed. A week ago, I had been a happy-go-lucky college boy enjoying another Alaskan adventure. Now I felt so alone. Abandoned on a deserted island crawling with bears. I smelled. My long, stringy hair was matted with sand and saltwater, my clothes had mildewed, and my face and hands reeked of fish and wet sand. I hadn't brushed my teeth in days. I looked like a bum and felt much worse. Even the bright sun hurt my eyes, so I closed them and begged for salvation.

Lying there depressed as hell I heard a light buzzing sound overhead. Faint at first, the buzzing grew louder. Just another chopper full of fishermen I decided, so I didn't even look up. I

didn't want to. I couldn't handle the disappointment. I was angry. I hated this beach. I wanted off this island. I wanted to go home. Take a shower. Sleep in my bed. Be warm. Be safe.

But the buzzing wouldn't stop, so I finally opened my eyes. From out of nowhere, a big, beautiful Bear Hawk flew low over the beach. The plane circled back and softly landed on two hundred yards of dry sand.

"Could land a frigging 737 on that beach," I yelled, as my buddies and I jumped up and down and waved our hands.

As we packed up our stuff, the pilot told us he'd gotten fogged-in for several days back at Kenai, but we were too happy to care. All we knew was we were leaving this God-forsaken-island and going home.

"Bet you're glad you came after all?" he said, smiling, as we loaded the last of our gear and a dozen large King salmon into the cargo hold.

My buddies and I looked at each other and began laughing for the first time in days.