

## *Timing is Everything*

*Barry Claude Dearborn*

Six miles south of the Stikine River Bridge, the Cassier Highway stripes the foothills of Bear Mountain, which drops off sharply to the broad, deep canyon below gouged by the rugged river. High over the snowy summit, bald eagles soar. The mountaintop, almost 5200 feet above sea level, its barren rock and alpine tundra mostly covered with snow, is more like a dome than a peak. Shrubs begin about 500 feet down from the top, followed by small trees. A gradually descending ridge runs over six miles southwest, terminating in a sharp drop-off about a mile from the Cassier Highway. Lower on the northern slope, brushy gullies channel the melting snow towards the Stikine. At the base of the mountain, leaves, delayed by cooler-than-normal May temperatures, are beginning to break out on the trembling aspens and balsam poplar. A generous sprinkling of white spruce and sub alpine fir, few approaching 50 feet in height, offer perches for ravens and smaller birds. Pockets of willow, mountain-heather and scrub birch fight valiantly for a share of the resources.

A moderate breeze usually flows down from the ramparts, but not yet today. Away from the flowing water, the woodland was quiet – too quiet. A dense layer of clouds filled the depressions like so much fluffy cotton, stretched gently to its limit. The air smelled fresh, not sweet like spring flowers, but with a light dank aroma of last year's leaves, heavy with the moisture that will push stems through the matted cover. Now and then, there were signs that the overcast would fracture, allowing slivers of penetrating sunlight.

North of the highway nearly four miles downstream from the Stikine Bridge, a large grizzly was on the move. He was heading up a brush-filled creek, a minor feeder to the Stikine, which crossed under the highway in a three-foot culvert. Emerging from hibernation last week, the ravenous bear had not been successful in filling his stomach. The grizzly had just picked up a game trail leading away from the creek and up onto the high bluffs overlooking the river canyon.

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Claude reckoned they were about 35 miles from Dease Lake, where he expected this ride to end, based on what Rufus had said about an installation there. Suddenly, Rufus slowed the vehicle and turned left onto a narrow, unmaintained access road, bending back parallel to the highway, and rising gently onto a 12-foot hill.

“Gotta answer the ‘call of nature’,” he said, killing the engine and putting the ignition key, attached to a ring with another smaller key, into his jacket pocket.

“Not stopping again.” Rufus added, grabbing a roll of toilet paper from under the seat. He turned and stared at Claude, with a look that said ‘get out and do it’.

Well, he did feel the urge and replied, “Good idea.” Within seconds after both men had disembarked and the doors swung shut, Claude heard the sound of the locks engaging. Rufus strode away from the vehicle.

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Only a few vehicles had passed along the highway since the night before – the Explorer, being the most recent. The grizzly had moved over the ridge of the canyon bluff and was now moving steadily up the slightly inclined, winding access road, his massive head wagging back and forth. Peering through heavy brush almost 100 yards off the highway, he saw the vehicle stop and the men get out. Moving back into the under brush where soft shallow banks of snow remained, the hungry bear slowed his pace and eventually stopped behind a willow curtain.

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Rufus followed the access road around a sharp bend, 60 feet from the Explorer. Claude saw him disappear behind a thick stand of black spruce. He wondered why Rufus had used his remote to lock the vehicle, finally concluding that some people just did not trust anyone. He stood beside the Explorer, awaiting Rufus’ return.

Nearly five minutes later, he heard Rufus yell, “Hey Claude – I lost my keys out here somewhere. Come and help me find them!”

Claude hesitated. He thought it odd that Rufus would lose the keys, having shoved them into his pocket. Remembering that once he had lost a pocketknife through a hole in the front pocket of his khakis, he quickly waived his reluctance. Without the keys, he was back walking.

“Be right there,” Claude shouted back, hoping Rufus would find them before he had gotten very far.

As Claude rounded the sharp bend, he saw Rufus standing in the short brush about 100 feet beyond, looking down at the ground. Approaching Rufus, Claude spotted the keys

hanging from a stubby willow, just clear of the ground.

“Here they are,” Claude announced, feeling relief that the trip could now continue.

With the keys in his out-stretched hand, Claude closed within two yards of Rufus. At that instant, Rufus, his right arm concealed by his sidewise profile, spun to face him. As Rufus’ right arm cleared his bulky body, Claude felt deep chill. In his grip was a gun pointing directly at Claude’s head.

“You really fell hard for the old ‘lost key’ trick, didn’t you?” Rufus growled, facing away from the thicker brush and woodland beyond.

“What, what – what’s going on?” Claude stammered.

“I ain’t no good guy, and you ain’t no lucky guy.”

“Here, take my ring and watch, if that’s what you want. I can walk on in from here,” Claude pleaded.

“You think I enjoy putting up dishes? It’s just a cover for our drug operation. Got me a foolproof scheme for lifting prescription drugs. Fair money now, but its going to get better. Even that is work – risky work. But *here’s* where the excitement is. I killed a man 7 years ago. Planned it but not well enough. Cost me six in the slammer. I learned a lot. Told myself I’d do it right next time. Well, next time is now. I wasn’t looking for you in particular, but the circumstances are just too right to pass up. Think about it. Statesider, no vehicle, no outside contacts, no witnesses, out-of-sight from the road. A bear will get your body before anyone discovers it in this brush. It’s the perfect murder.”

Claude saw the futility in protesting. To survive, he would have to come up with a major distraction quickly. No way to reason with a psychopath, Claude thought, fighting back the panic.

“Got any last words, kid?” smirked Rufus.

Just then, Claude spotted a motion behind Rufus. What appeared to be a large bear behind a clump of willow, rising on its hind legs, looking intently in their direction.

An idea, from a third-rate movie he had recently seen, sprang to mind. Overtaken by a surprising calm, Claude knew he would have to put on the performance of his life, without any acting experience or a rehearsal.

“Rufus, I was recently told by a palm reader that I would be killed in a robbery but the robber would be eaten by a bear!”

Tauntingly, Rufus snarled, “Not bad. Half right. Now it’s time.”

Undaunted, Claude quickly concluded with the make-or-break finisher.

“Yes, but not the half you think. Better take a look at that large bear behind you!”

“Nice try kid. Only I ain’t biting.”

“RUFUS, I’M NOT KIDDING!” Claude screamed.

Rufus hesitated to let his excitement peak. This was going to be better than he had hoped. During his pause, the grizzly had dropped to all fours and was now moving towards the pair.

“RUFUSSSSSSSSSSSSSSSS!”

As Rufus took dead aim, his index finger poised over the trigger, the big bear stepped on a dead branch, which snapped loudly.

“What the hell?” bellowed a startled Rufus, spinning, swinging his gun away from Claude toward the bear.

“Shee-it!” Rufus erupted, his voice rising with tension. Sizing up the situation, Rufus raised his aim just over the bear’s head. *One shot to scare the bear away and then back to my fun, he thought.*

Rufus’ quick motion froze the bear in its tracks, less than 150 feet away. This was exactly the result Claude wanted. With Rufus now facing the bear, Claude knew the time had come for action. He bolted forward with the intent to jolt the gun loose. Claude’s impact into Rufus’ broad back coincided with a loud explosion. Instead of whizzing harmlessly over the bear’s head, the bullet found its left eye. Knocked forward by Claude’s daring move, Rufus put out both hands to break his fall. The pistol came loose and fell onto a bank of hard snow. The much lighter Claude bounced off the big man without losing his balance. As he turned and raced for the Explorer, the enraged bear charged.

Quick for his size, Rufus grabbed the pistol and leaped to his feet. Claude heard two quick shots followed by a loud expletive. More than halfway to the SUV, he heard the sound of a heavy body colliding with a much lighter one. Claude dared not look over his shoulder as he finished his adrenaline-fed dash.

Claude grabbed the door handle and yanked it back. Nothing happened. With a new level of fear, Claude recalled Rufus had locked the doors. Looking over his shoulder, he saw the grizzly rise again and quickly drop into a run, on a direct route to the Explorer. Then, he remembered --- he was still holding the keys! He had never unlocked or entered a door faster. Claude threw himself inside and jerked the door closed, leaving the keys outside, dangling

from the lock. Turning toward the passenger window, he saw that the massive bear, blood dripping from its left eye, had halted only a few paces away from the Explorer. Following his guide training, Claude remained motionless. After what seemed like an eternity, the bear lost interest. Swinging its bloody head, it spun around and moved slowly toward the woodland from which it had come. The bear stopped under the first black spruce and turned his head toward the Explorer, holding that position as if daring Claude to get out. After several minutes, the injured grizzly moved slowly out of sight, on a direct line to where Rufus had gone down.

The present serenity was unreal. What had just happened now seemed like a ludicrous impossibility.

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