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Yellowstone National Park, Wyoming
Present Day

The five-hundred-pound grizzly bear reared up on its hind legs, towering over the two men with ease. At its tallest point, the animal easily exceeded nine feet in height. The duo stumbled upon the mother and her two cubs while looking for a lost hiker. Now, they were the ones in need of rescuing.

Fred Osman, the missing sightseer, had last been seen two days ago in the area. His cellphone's signal had died six hours ago, leading Yellowstone National Park ranger Jack Reilly to believe that the man had been seriously injured, or possibly had died. It would be rare to find a person alive, given how long he'd been gone, especially with an overprotective grizzly nearby.

Well, I guess we know what killed Mr. Osman, Jack thought, standing still as a statue.

Neither he nor his partner, Tatanka Durham, looked the beast in the eye. Instead, they kept their lines of sight low. Both men held semi-automatic AR-15 rifles at the low-ready just in case the animal charged. The firearms were standard weapons for this exact reason. So far, they had avoided conflict, but only because they were trained to deal with such adversities.

Tatanka's name translated to "buffalo" in the Lakota Native American language—his people's language. So, naturally, when Jack found out what it had meant, he started calling Tatanka "Bull" because of the man's first name's affiliation with his last.

Bull Durham was one of Jack's favorite movies. The 1988 comedy revolved around the Durham Bulls minor league baseball team. One of Jack's favorite quotes was when Kevin Costner's "Crash" Davis dared Tim Robbins' "Nuke" LaLoosh to hit him in the chest with a ball at point-

blank range. Nuke laughed at the ridiculousness of the taunt and warned Crash that, if he did, he could kill him. Straight-faced, Crash replied with, "Yeah? From what I hear, you couldn't hit water if you fell out of a—"

"Steady," Jack whispered, speaking to himself more than anyone.

Bull said nothing because he typically said very little. Bull's people were one with nature, including being silent when at all possible, and enjoying her sweet song.

The sway of the tall grass.

Rain striking the surface of a pristine lake.

The playful chirping of birds in a secluded forest.

Bull was a skilled tracker. Jack's expertise was in search-and-rescue. Together, the duo was formidable against anything Yellowstone could throw at them. They rarely failed.

The grizzly had other ideas.

Her low, guttural bellows genuinely frightened both men. Even as seasoned as they were, the raw power of a creature like this one was nothing to take lightly. If she wanted to, the female could charge them, reaching speeds above thirty miles per hour in seconds. No matter how hard they tried, Jack and Bull wouldn't be outrunning her.

Neither man wanted to shoot her, either.

So, they stood their ground and patiently waited. Typically, bears back down if left unprovoked. Mama bears were tricky, however. They tended to go above and beyond when their cubs were around. But it also depended on how hungry she and her cubs were. Survival was key to every living thing on Earth, and bears weren't picky eaters.

The only other option might be to use the extra-large pepper spray "pistol" holstered on his right hip. It reminded Jack of a pint-sized fire extinguisher. The high-velocity spray cannon, if aimed right, would successfully deter the animal.

The trick to using it was to allow its recipient to get close.

Fat chance, Jack thought.

The grizzly didn't deserve to die. She was doing what all mothers

would do: protecting her children. Jack and Bull, and possibly their missing hiker, not her, were the trespassers here. But with every passing second that she didn't give up and turn away, Jack was worried that her death was inevitable.

"Get ready," he said, looking up.

As soon as his eyes found the bear's, she roared. Jack had just knowingly become her rival. But he had done it on purpose. Even though the female was smart, she wasn't a person—and she wasn't a person like Jack Reilly.

The pair of cubs responded and slunk away into the brush behind their mother. Slowly, Jack shouldered his rifle, but he kept his finger off the trigger.

Like a torpedo shot out of a submarine, the bear dropped onto all fours and charged, head down. She focused on her closest foe, Jack.

But he had an ace up his sleeve. He knew more about the bear than she did about him. Grizzlies were surprisingly agile creatures despite their imposing size. The species had a bite strong enough to crush a bowling ball too. Jack was more interested in this one's body weight, though. That, combined with its impressive sprint speed, made the bear more of an out-of-control, toothy battering ram than a light-footed ninja contortionist.

With only feet to go, Jack shouted, "Now!"

He dove to the left.

Bull dove to the right.

The grizzly frantically tried to course-correct but couldn't. Instead, she stumbled and went down. Then she barrel-rolled into and through a thicket of shrubs, disappearing from view. Instead of getting closer to the bear himself, he had let the animal do all the work.

Jack and Bull quietly got to their feet and carefully listened. The rangers slung their rifles over their shoulders and drew their pepper spray pistols. They could hear the creature wrestling around in the entanglement, although she hadn't yet emerged to re-engage. *Shit.* Jack would never forgive himself if she were hurt.

Slowly, he crept forward while Bull hung back.

Now, there were only three feet between him and the brush. With a lightning-fast swipe, the grizzly's enormous paw lashed out through the thicket, knocking the pepper spray from Jack's hand. One of her immense claws cut his wrist to boot. He swung his rifle up and around and had it ripped aside as well. Then, the bear emerged.

And boy, was she pissed.

Unarmed, Jack backed away slowly, quickly starting to panic. Looking over his shoulder, he saw that Bull had his rifle jammed firmly into his right shoulder. He stalled the man's attempts at shooting the animal with a raised hand. Jack pleaded for more time to get out of this without either him or the grizzly getting hurt. Bull was also the last person that wanted to harm a living thing. He valued the existence of Earth's inhabitants more than most.

Jack had spent the better part of his adult life bumping off a sect of them. Nevertheless, his conscience was clear. He went to bed knowing that the people he had X'd-out had maintained despicable existences. He had specialized in silencing people who took joy in harming others. Now, he was in the profession of preserving life. Everything in Yellowstone was the responsibility of park rangers like him. The animals, plants, rocks, and people within the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) World Heritage Site were under the protection of Jack's employers, the National Park Service (NPS).

On her hind legs once more, the grizzly pushed through the brush, snarling like a demon. The rage on display was remarkable. Jack would've loved nothing better than to watch her from afar, but instead, he was right in the thick of it—and with nowhere to go.

When she dropped to charge Jack again, he closed his eyes and waited for it to be over. Either he'd be killed, or he'd be gravely injured. Regardless, he was about to experience a Leo-style grizzly mauling.

Amazingly, it didn't come.

Jack was startled when he and the bear were doused in pepper spray.

The concoction instantly caused him and the animal to cough and gasp for air. He inadvertently took a deep breath to yelp and took in a small amount of the aerosolized brew. In doing so, he experienced firsthand what it was like to be on the other end of his pepper cannon.

The bear whined, whimpered, and fled, crying like a scolded puppy. Her cubs hurried along after her, skirting around Jack and the remaining spice-filled cloud. With his eyes clenched shut, Jack grabbed at his left side. Tilting his head skyward, he drew another piece of equipment, perhaps the most vital one he carried. He unscrewed the cap of his canteen and splashed his face a half-dozen times, clearing away the worst of the remnants.

Opening his eyes, he sighed and turned. Bull wasn't pleased, but he didn't voice his displeasure. His deep scowl said enough. Jack had just forced Bull to harm one of nature's creations.

"My bad," Jack said, scratching his head. "I pictured that going a lot better in my head."

Finally, the corner of Bull's mouth curled into a small smile. He rolled his eyes and holstered his spent pepper spray pistol, picking up Jack's discarded rifle in the process. Through tear-filled eyes, Jack located his own pepper cannon eight feet to his right.

"You underestimate her might," Bull said, his baritone voice rumbling like thunder.

"Who, Mama Bear?"

He shook his head. "No, the natural world. She is unpredictable and does not bow to man's will so easily."

Jack knew he was right. Even after working as a park ranger for the last four-plus years, he still couldn't get used to the fact that he wasn't in control. This was nature. It wasn't a well-coordinated military strike. Out here, humanity wasn't in charge.

Mother Nature was.

Bull had been a great mentor to Jack thus far. And he was an even better friend. He had once given Jack two handmade bracelets after he had

learned about the soldier's past. They symbolized Bull's admiration for men like him. Jack appreciated the gesture a lot. Not everyone understood why some people served. Even a handful of them had thought Jack was a moron for willingly putting himself into mortal danger.

Bull had never asked him why he had fought against terror. All Bull had done was thank Jack for his service. A few months after receiving the gifts, it all made sense. It turned out that Bull's late father had also been a veteran.

The beautifully beaded bracelet on his left wrist symbolized "strength," while the one around his right wrist represented "courage." Jack happily put them on, and he'd yet to take them off since, except to shower. If it were up to him, they'd never leave his body.

After washing his face off again, Jack and Bull got on their way. Mr. Osman was still missing, and they needed to confirm his whereabouts before sunset. If they didn't, the chances of them finding him would be slim-to-none. The park was just too vast. Rarely did anyone stay in one place for too long. Usually, they'd ramble around until they became exhausted and dehydrated.

That's where Jack was leaning.

The telltale chirp of Jack's satellite phone interrupted the silence. He slowed and removed it from the side pocket of his backpack. The number that appeared was that of their main office. Usually, it was the field man who'd be calling the office, not the other way around.

He answered. "This is Jack."

"Hey, Jack, it's Sally." She wasn't as bubbly as usual.

Sally Siling was the main cog in their team's machine, mostly handling the dispatching duties. But she also coordinated their efforts with local law enforcement. Sally was the bridge between the NPS and the rest of the world.

"Hey, Sal, what's up?" Jack asked, concerned. "Everything good back at HQ?"

"Yeah, everything is fine here." She sighed. "Jack, we just got a call."

Her voice was shaky. “Since you were in the field, we couldn’t guarantee them how long it would take to reach you, so we took a message and—”

“Sal,” Jack interrupted. There was absolutely something wrong. “Take a breath and tell me. What’s going on?”

“I’m so sorry, Jack. It’s your grandmother…”