

## Bear Aware

“What was that?” Emma snuggled in closer to her dad.

Another twig snapped.

“Probably just a squirrel.” Bill squeezed his daughter close to him and continued walking at a cautionary pace.

They followed the trail up to a small berm that held stagnant water trapped when the river overran its banks then receded. Moss blanketed the pond where the sun peeked through an opening in the forest’s upper canopy.

“Daddy, are we lost?” Emma squeezed Bill’s leg.

Trying not to trip over her, Bill gently untangled Emma’s tiny arms from around his leg. He knelt down and held her shoulders gently in his hands and looked directly into her eyes. “We are not lost. The trail runs along the river and then it will turn and we will follow it out to the road. I promise.”

No compass, no phone, no whistle, Bill strained to recall all his lost in the woods training. He would follow the river, that was easy, then he would follow the sun. The sun. They had to make it out before the sun went down.

Relieved he was able to catch Emma when she slipped, losing the backpack would not make surviving in the forest easy. Bill had held her arm in one hand and a tree in the other as she dangled off the side of the cliff and watched the back pack sail over the edge. Recalling it sent shivers up his spine. How close he had come to losing her? No, he couldn’t think of that now. He had to get them out of the forest before he lost light.

Back on the trail, Emma was now quarantined to the side of the trail that went up the mountain. She would not be allowed near the edge again. What other dangers would they encounter? How would he protect them with only the survivor straw tied to his waist? No compass, no phone, no whistle. No flashlight, no first aid kit, no food.

Emma whined. She had walked miles longer than they had planned. They needed to rest.

“Let’s explore the pond and maybe get a drink.” Bill guided Emma off the trail and into the trees as they made their way to the top of the berm..

Emma ran down the embankment to the edge of the pond, another twig snapped.

“What was that?” Emma froze.

“Squirrels,” Bill responded without a second thought.

Emma sat down at the edge of the murky water. She splashed away the moss and saw her reflection.

Bill smiled at her beauty wishing he still had his phone to take a picture, to call for help.

Something unnatural caught his attention. He looked across the pond and froze.

Carved in a series of trees just across the stagnant water were one letter per tree, “B-E W-A-R-E”. Bill froze.

“What is it daddy? What’s wrong?”

Bill could not hide his concern. BE WARE of what?

“A Bear” Emma cried out, pointing across the lake where Bill had been staring at the carved out trees.

“It’s just a log. Emma..” Bill took a deep breath of relief. “ It’s just a log.”

Bill studied the warning in the trees. He could now see three missing letters, A-R-A, without thinking he spoke the new words aloud. “Bear Aware.”

“A Bear?” Emma screamed.

“A Bear?” A deep voice echoed. Then a splash and a twig snap, “Where?”

Emma and Bill snapped their heads around toward the source of the gruffy voice. The log they were sitting next to looked up at them and then scared of its own reflection in the water it screamed, “A Bear.”

“That’s just your reflection,” Emma said calmly. “You’re the bear.”  
“The Bear is aware,” Bill pondered aloud.