

## The Challenge

A reader asked whether an intense moment from *The Search for Braddock's Lost Gold* could be rewritten as a comedy, without changing the situation, only the tone.

This scene is the result.

The circumstances remain the same. The characters remain the same. The outcome does not change.

Nothing here is canon. Nothing alters the story.

This is a craft exercise, an experiment in voice, timing, and restraint under a different constraint.

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### The Bear Incident – *The Search for Braddock's Lost Gold*

#### From the original Chapter 18

#### Deep Creek Lake, Maryland

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The bear had been gone for thirty seconds. Emma's legs still weren't working right.

"You okay, Em?" Jack knelt beside her, arm around her shoulders.

She nodded, though her breathing remained ragged. "That was something."

"Let's get back to the SUV," Steve said, scanning their surroundings. "No telling if there are more."

Emma stayed between the two men during the trek back, her head swaying slightly as she glanced nervously over her shoulder.

Silence held for maybe forty feet. Then Steve cracked his neck and glanced at Jack.

"So. Collapsible shovel, huh?"

"It's a legitimate tool."

"Against a bear."

"You had a metal detector."

"I had *presence*," Steve squared his shoulders. "That bear saw three hundred pounds of American muscle and reconsidered its life choices."

Jack snorted. "It saw a guy doing a bad Schwarzenegger impression and got confused."

"Confused? That was *intimidation*. 'Come on, you ugly motherfucker' is a classic deterrent. Scientific fact."

"Is it? Which journal published that?"

"The Journal of *Predator*. 1987. Peer-reviewed by a Xenomorph."

Emma exhaled slowly, steadying herself against a tree. The boys didn't notice.

"You know what actually works?" Jack said. "Staying calm. Controlled retreat. Making yourself appear larger. Textbook bear protocol."

"Textbook." Steve's voice dripped skepticism. "You were singing to it, Jack. 'Hey bear, hey.' Like it was a toddler."

"It's called vocal modulation. Bears respond to calm, steady tones."

"You know what else they respond to? *Fear*. And that bear smelled none on me."

"That's because it couldn't smell anything over your Whopper breath."

Steve clutched his chest. “Low blow. The Whopper gave me strength.”

“The Whopper gave you heartburn.”

“Heartburn of *champions*.”

Emma looked between them, color slowly returning to her face. Her voice came out steadier than she expected.

“I wasn’t scared of the bear.”

Both men turned.

“I was scared I’d be stuck in the woods with just *one* of you.”

Steve blinked. Jack’s mouth opened, then closed.

A beat of surprised silence. Then Steve laughed, pointing at her. “Okay. Okay, that’s good.”

“She’s not wrong,” Jack admitted, grinning.

They resumed walking. Emma allowed herself a small smile.

It lasted eight seconds.

“Still,” Steve said, “I think we can agree I was the primary deterrent.”

“*Primary deterrent*? You raised a metal detector like it was Excalibur.”

“It’s about *commitment*, Jack. The bear sensed I was willing to go the distance.”

“The distance? You were ten feet behind me.”

“Strategic positioning. I was protecting Emma.”

“You were protecting yourself.”

“I was protecting *morale*.”

Emma rolled her eyes but said nothing. The SUV was visible now through the trees.

Jack pressed on. “You know who else thought they could intimidate a bear? Timothy Treadwell. Lived with grizzlies for thirteen summers.”

“And?”

“There is no ‘and.’ That’s the point.”

Steve waved dismissively. “Different situation. Grizzlies. I’m talking about black bears. Totally manageable.”

“You didn’t know it was a black bear.”

“I assessed the situation.”

“You yelled a movie quote and hoped for the best.”

“And it *worked*.” Steve spread his arms. “Results, Jack. Results.”

They reached the Suburban. Steve leaned against the door, arms crossed, wearing the satisfied expression of a man who believed he’d won.

“Face it,” he said. “When the chips were down, I stepped up. Metal detector. Arnold voice. Pure instinct.”

Jack shook his head, reaching for his keys. “You’re unbelievable.”

“I’m *undefeated*.”

Emma had stopped a few feet back. Both men turned to look at her.

She tilted her head, studying them with the same expression she used when examining a questionable artifact.

“For the record,” she said, “that was a three-hundred-pound black bear.”

Steve nodded, vindicated. “See? Black bear. Like I said.”

“You two held it off with a collapsible shovel and a metal detector.”

Jack shifted. “Well, technically the shovel is military-grade—”

“The Smithsonian doesn’t have an exhibit for whatever that was.”

She opened the passenger door, got in, and closed it.

Silence.

Steve stared at the closed door. Then at Jack.

“Did she just—”

“Yeah.”

“That was—”

“Yeah.”

Steve exhaled slowly. “I think she won.”

Jack nodded, walking to the driver’s side. “She won before we started.”