

Bear Weather

by Jenny Gumpertz

It was snowing, really dumping. The old mountain cabin was slowly getting buried, and him in it. The place was abandoned—half a dozen matches on the fireplace mantel, but nothing to burn, not even a few sticks of furniture. After getting himself this far down the mountain, he was stuck. With the remains of his plane covered by snow, they wouldn't even know where to start looking for him. If he couldn't figure a way out, someday they'd find his own remains—a skeleton in khaki pants and leather jacket, hunkered down here on an old black bearskin rug that somebody left behind, minus its head and claws, poor bastard.

Gregory had heard that death by freezing wasn't painful, just cold, and then finally drifting off. But damn! That wasn't what he wanted—a peaceful death. He wanted a hot life. Hot like blood, like his girlfriend's crotch, like coals, like piss, like split pea soup, like barbeque sauce with Tabasco. Like Hades.

The windows were getting snow packed, and he couldn't tell what time of day it was if his shatterproof watch didn't say 3:30. Nice afternoon for bears. He'd seen a thing on TV about brown bears hibernating in the snow.

He was shivering in his jacket, collar turned up, and he jogged around the room a little. The three hundred bucks in his Harley wallet was enough to make a fire for a couple of minutes—money to burn. Or he could set fire to the cabin and go out in a blaze, like he nearly did in his plane.

Gregory wondered how long it would be before he got drowsy and fell asleep forever. The thought made him lonely, and he wished he had someone he cared about to think goodbye to. No parents, no wife, no kids. Just his Harley buddies and girlfriend Tara with the butterfly tattoo on her hip. Tara would find another guy, about ten minutes after she heard he was missing.

Gregory gave a little grunt of determination. *Don't write me off so fast.* He rolled off the bearskin and knelt beside it, and it

was so old and dry it crackled as he tugged it over his thin shoulders. He'd show them all. He and his bearskin coat would walk out of here. He grinned, imagining their surprise when he showed up out of nowhere.

Man, this bearskin rug was a big, awkward sonofabitch on his back even without the missing parts. He stuck his neck where the bear's head should be and looked around the place like he imagined the bear would've done if he was wearing the fur himself. He swung his body around, and lumbered across the room and put his shoulder to the door, pushing it against the snow piling up on the outside. As he shoved his body out the door he pulled the rug through after him.

Gregory stood, face lifted into the biting air, nostrils taking in the crisp, wet smell. Big silent snowflakes floated in front of his eyes. He took a couple of steps, listening to the crunch of his feet. He was thirsty and scooped snow into his mouth, tilting his head back to let the stinging cold slide down his throat.

In the dim light, through the falling snow, he made out the shapes of enormous trees. When he'd been half climbing, half sliding down the mountain after the crash, scenery was the last thing on his mind.

He needed a closer look at the awesome shapes out there. He struggled through the snow, and the bearskin got tougher to hang on to and wasn't keeping him warm anyway, and he finally left it behind like the original bear had done for a different reason. He wanted to reach the trees, put his hands on them. By the time he got to the first one he was creeping through deep snow on all fours. He reared up and rested his hands on the trunk, leaning his face into the bark. It smelled sweet, like vanilla. Like he knew. He dug his nails into the tree and thought about climbing, but something else called to him.

He flexed his massive shoulders, ripping away the windbreaker and T-shirt. Flakes clung to his thick, hairy arms. Dropping on all fours, he began tunneling in the snow against the slope of the mountain. He dug with both arms, clawing more and

more snow out of the way, digging and packing, digging and packing, till he had a hole big enough to crawl through and smelled a dry, warm space opening ahead of him inside the mountain. His clothes were too small and he clawed off the shoes and pants and jockeys and slid his huge hairy body the rest of the way through his snow tunnel.

Gregory-no-more curled up inside his warm cave. He thought about how drowsy he was and how good it would be to sleep awhile, now that he was finally here.

The bear slept. And in this dead of winter he dreamed of early spring. He saw green shoots poking their heads through the snow, and streams beginning to trickle. Some of last summer's berries still clung to the vines, and the pine cones were fat with nuts.

