

Grizzly in Camp

Do not be afraid of the terrors of the night.

PSALM 91:5 NLT



In the white canvas cook tent, waves of heat emanated from the woodstove. Traditionally the last night in hunting camp gets pretty loud, and this night was no exception. Eleven of us, crew and guests, ate steak dinners around the long plank table. We hooted and hollered, trying to “one up” each other as we swapped stories of our adventures during the past nine days. Suddenly the tent flap parted. A frigid breeze blasted through as a wool-gloved hand holding a Coleman gas lantern appeared. Darrin stepped trancelike into the tent. Snowflakes clung to the wrangler’s winter jacket. The light of the lantern eerily illuminated his face. “I was on the way to the corrals to feed the horses, and I almost tripped over a grizzly.”

Everyone stopped mid-motion. We stared at each other. Only the hiss of the lanterns broke the silence. Jack ran his hand through his white hair. “Let’s check it out.” Jack and the guides shrugged on their jackets and pulled on their hats. They grabbed guns and lanterns and then stormed the corrals to check on the horses...and to track the beast.

The plastic plates rattled in the sink as I scrubbed them, my imagination running wild. Cooney Creek Camp, 17 long horseback miles into the wilderness, consisted of a half dozen white canvas wall tents pitched in a grassy meadow rimmed by cliffs that funneled all trails through the center of camp, including the grizzly migration trail. Tomorrow everyone would ride for home except me. I was staying four more days and three nights. My job? To keep the grizzlies out of camp...and they were migrating right now.

A half-hour later Jack and the guides stomped snow off their boots as they stepped into the cook tent. I asked, "What's up?"

Darrin replied, "The horses are bunched in the corral corner snorting. But they're fine."

Jack poured himself a cup of coffee. "What kind of bear is this? He wasn't cautious at all." Jack paced. "That bear boldly checked out the entire camp...and the lanterns were lit in all the tents *and* at the corrals. All of us were hooting and hollering too." He stroked his moustache and nodded his head. "He'll be back, I'm sure. He found dinner—he dredged the dishwater pit."

I retreated to my tent and lay on my cot with my eyes wide open. The biological name for the grizzly, *Ursus arctos horribilis*, translates into "horrible northern bear." It has a reputation of being one of the most ferocious and dangerous mammals in North America. I shuddered as I thought about their attributes. They are nocturnal. *I can't see that well at night.* They can outrun a horse in a quarter mile. *Not me; I'm the poky puppy.* The notorious hump on their back is a mass of muscle that enables them to use their paws with stunning striking force. I'd seen videos of grizzlies running through a herd of elk, swatting their heads and killing them with single blows. Because of their thick layer of fat and slow metabolism, it's hard to shoot them *dead* before they get to you. And I knew they could use their four-inch-long front claws like a can opener when prying open an automobile. *All I have is a thin sheet of canvas between the bears and me.*

After breakfast I walked to the corrals to say goodbye to the guests

and crew. Jack tossed his saddle on his mule. While tightening the cinch he asked, under his breath, “Have you got enough ammo?”

I nodded. My heart pounded as he swung his leg over the saddle. He glanced at me compassionately and said, “Watch out for that bear.”

The guests mounted their horses. Jack reined his mule down the trail and shouted to the guests, “We’re burning daylight.”

The guests tipped their hats as they rode past me, followed by wranglers leading the strings of mules. I watched until the last mule disappeared around a bend. I kicked my toe in the dirt. *It’s going to be a long four days.*

I busied myself chopping kindling. With each swing of the axe I reviewed the facts. Grizzlies gorge themselves in the fall to put on a thick layer of fat that feeds their body all winter while they hibernate. It had been a dry year so berries and their normal food sources were scarce. This bear had eaten a buffet in our camp last night. *He’d be stupid not to come back.* I was sleeping in the grocery tent this trip. My nightstand was a wooden kitchen box brimming with candy bars.

All day long that grizzly terrorized my mind. While pouring Coleman fuel into the lanterns, I summed up my resources: one 12-gauge shotgun, one .357 pistol, two cans of bear spray, and my German shepherd, Rye. Dogs aren’t much use against a grizzly. I’d have to keep her tied to my tent, but at least she’d growl and wake me when the bear came by. I hoped so anyway.

The afternoon lagged. I bundled up my sleeping bag and carried it into a guest tent, far away from the groceries. By dinner I was emotionally exhausted. I plunked down at the kitchen table and sipped chicken soup. I browsed through the stack of mail that had come with the pack string. Thumbing through a magazine from one of my favorite ministries, an article caught my eye. It was about the protection found in Psalm 91. Part of that psalm says, “If you make the LORD your refuge, if you make the Most High your shelter, no evil will conquer you; no plague will come near your home. For he will order his angels to protect you wherever you go” (verses 9-11 NLT). The article

recounted the adventures of soldiers during the World Wars, whole units of them, who prayed Psalm 91 every day. *Every one of them lived. I'm in a war right now with this blasted grizzly. I wonder if Psalm 91 will work for me?*

The sun slipped behind the mountain. Tall shadows crept between the tents. I gathered wood and built a campfire. In the flickering light I read Psalm 91 aloud, ending my prayer with, "Lord, please post Your angels around this camp to keep the grizzlies out." Darkness smothered the camp. A cool breeze whispered through, carrying the clean mountain air down from the peaks.

I hung a glowing lantern in the cook tent. Retreating to my guest tent, I lit the woodstove and tied Rye up. I slipped shells into the shotgun and chambered one. I thumbed cartridges into the .357 pistol and placed it on the cot next to my head by the bear spray and the flashlight. Instead of burrowing into my sleeping bag, I tucked it around my shoulders. I slipped on a black stocking cap so I could keep my head warm while listening for the bear. I rolled on my side, watched the dog, and waited.

The night lingered. A twig broke. I jerked up and reached for the flashlight. Then a couple deer bounced past. I knew if the deer were in camp, the bear wasn't. I lay back down. Just as I started to doze, an owl hooted. The sound floated eerily through the meadow. At midnight and at four I pulled my black jacket over my flannel pajamas and snuck into the cook tent to refuel the lantern. Finally the first rays of sunlight glistened through the canvas. The bear never showed.

The next terror-filled days were followed by sleepless nights. Even though I prayed while sitting by the campfire, I wondered, *Does Psalm 91 really work? Or has the bear left the country?* Every time a twig snapped or the wind rustled through the brush, I sat up and reached for the flashlight. I could barely keep my eyes open by the time I heard hoofbeats the fourth day.

I lumbered through the camp to watch the crew and guests ride through the grassy meadow. Darrin, pulling a string of mules, reined

his horse over. He handed me the rope to the lead mule, dismounted, and asked, “Did you see any grizzlies? There are tracks *everywhere* around camp!”

I nonchalantly shook my head and replied, “Not a one.” On the inside I was jumping up and down. *It worked! It really, really worked!* I didn’t understand it, but reciting Psalm 91—seeking God’s help—had kept the bears out of camp.

As time passed, each time I was in grizzly country and knew they were around, I talked to God, praying Psalm 91. I gained more confidence until I truly learned to “not be afraid of the terrors of the night” (verse 5). Now I pray Psalm 91 over my family and me each day. I might not be facing grizzlies, but I know when I pray God listens and protects us.

Lord, thank You for giving me Your Word, which goes forth to protect me from danger. Teach me to rest in Your promises. Amen.