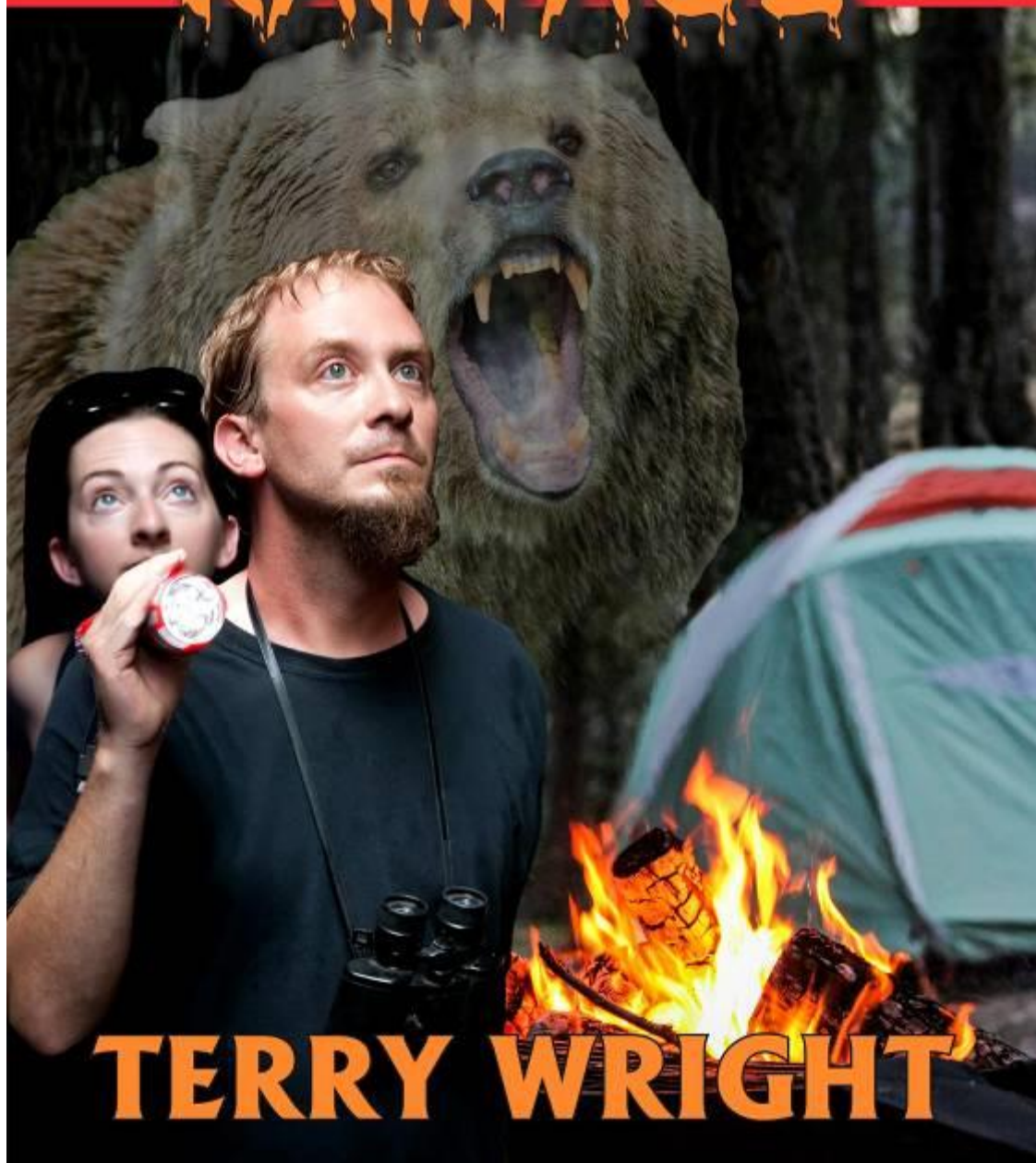


# WILDERNESS RAMPAGE



TERRY WRIGHT

Wilderness Rampage

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# WILDERNESS RAMPAGE

**By**  
**Terry Wright**

A mountain breeze rustled the pine trees surrounding Stillwater campground, high in the Flattop Wilderness of Colorado. Sam Mason lit the evening fire, and as smoke leaned across a nearby brook, he surveyed his lonesome campsite. Earlier, he'd set up the family-sized tent next to his Ford Explorer, which was parked just off the dirt access road. Being late September, he and his family had the campground to themselves. Cold autumn nights usually kept the less-hardy campers away, and this time of year the weather was unpredictable. However, Sam relied heavily on the fact that he was a seasoned outdoorsman. He was prepared for anything.

As the sun dropped behind Trapper's Mountain, he settled in for the first night of a week-long vacation.

His wife, Jean, emerged from the tent carrying cups and plates, which she arranged on the picnic table. "Where did those kids go now?" She scanned the wooded hillside.

"They're at the pond." Sam stoked the crackling fire.

"Billy," she called out. "Jan. It's suppertime."

No response.

"I'll get them." He left the fire and walked a few yards up a knoll that overlooked a trout pond on the other side. In the muddy bank, he found footprints: tiny tennis shoe impressions followed by huge bear claws. His breath seized as he searched

the shadowy forest skirting the pond. A black bear in these parts wouldn't have been uncommon, but these prints were unmistakably Grizzly: wedge-shaped footpad, toe indents in a straight line, and claw pokes extending a good four inches in front. Surely the kids would have screamed if—

“Daddy,” Jan sang, running toward him. Billy lagged behind, swishing a stick as if it were a sword.

Sam exhaled a gust of relief. “Let’s get back to camp.” In haste, he led them away from the pond and back to the safety of the fire.

After supper, as he helped Jean clean up, the kids went inside the tent to get ready for bed. A glowing lantern cast their small shadows on canvas walls. Sam smiled at his wife. “Ah, this is the life. Paradise.”

She hugged herself. “It’s getting cold.”

The rattle of worn suspension springs and the rumble of a bad muffler roared from the forest.

“What in the world..?” Sam looked down the dirt road where a pair of approaching headlights bounced in the darkness. “We’ve got company.”

Then Heavy Metal music tore through the din.

“Teenagers, probably. There goes our peaceful night in paradise. They’ll probably party ‘til dawn.”

“The rangers will tell them to be quiet.”

“Not this time of year.” Budget cuts furloughed three out of four rangers during the off season. It’d be a miracle to see one come through the campground once a month.

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Radio blasting, Clem wrestled the Chevy truck up the rutted dirt road toward Stillwater campground. This high up in the Yampa Range, folks seldom ventured here

during the winter. The fishing reservoir was a hefty hike from the trailhead where the dirt road dead-ended, too much trouble to get to on a good day of summer much less this time of year. The out-of-the-way campground lay to the north next to a natural trout pond. Clem knew of this place from when he and his brother were kids, before they'd killed their dad.

His brother, Clyde, passed him a bottle of whiskey. "They'll never find us up here." He was referring to the statewide manhunt for two escaped killers.

"Ma would be proud." Clem guzzled booze. They'd stolen the truck from a fisherman on the Blue River. Cut his throat for the junk-heap. "Too bad the old man didn't have no food."

Clyde grabbed the booze bottle back from his brother. "This is better." He took a solid swig. "Ma always said the good Lord would provide."

"I hope the good Lord comes up with some food for us. I'm starved."

As the truck banged into the campground, Clem saw a lighted tent up ahead. Two small shadows frolicked on the canvas wall; two larger shadows appeared to be arranging their sleeping bags. "Well looky here. Ma was right again. I bet them campers got food."

Clyde licked his greasy lips. "Let's eat."

Stopping the truck behind a Ford Explorer, Clem left the engine running and got out. The knife he'd used to kill the fisherman was tucked behind his belt. Clyde joined him, stalking toward the tent. He felt no pity for the family in the campsite, only rage against society and a sense of entitlement unfulfilled. Ma had taught her sons to prey on other folks. It was the way of nature, she'd told her boys: survival of the fittest. Daddy hadn't seen it that way and had to be silenced before he went to the cops. Ma had explained life this way: *There are sheep, and there are wolves; it's better to be a wolf.*

When they left the campsite, they had a week's supply of food free for the

taking...and more blood on their hands.

\*\*\*

The road to Stillwater wound up the valley through some of Colorado's most beautiful scenery. With the sun rising behind them, Paul Barnes and his wife, Sarah, took in breathtaking views through the windshield of their new 35-foot motor home. The turbocharged diesel made the climb easy, and Paul smiled with satisfaction. His two-hundred-thousand dollar RV had quickly become his newfound symbol of success.

"Did you see Sorensen's face when we pulled up to the house in this rig?" he asked Sarah for the hundredth time. Their next-door neighbor had scoffed at the little popup camper trailer he used to own. Now the neighbors had stared in open-mouthed awe. There was something good to be said about keeping up with the Joneses, better yet, leaving them behind in a cloud of diesel fumes.

"I love the kitchen in this rig," she said. "It's better than the one we have at home."

Paul agreed. Sarah's mobile kitchen had modern appliances and spacious countertops and cabinets. She kept it all spotless. They'd spend the rest of their lives working hard to pay the mortgage on their new motor home, but meanwhile they could travel anywhere in comfort, style, and safety.

The cell phone rang. Sarah retrieved it from the console and eyed the caller ID. "Hello, Jeffrey." It was their eighteen-year-old son calling from Denver. "Yes, we're having a wonderful time."

"Life is good." Paul settled into his high-backed captain's chair and easily steered the rig up the winding two lane highway that cut alongside lush pastures and rustic ranch houses. As Sarah talked on the phone, Paul thought about their vacation. During

the past two weeks they'd toured Yellowstone Park and Dinosaur National Monument. On the return leg home, they had enough food and water left for one more night, so they'd decided to spend it in the Flattop Area, a place they'd visited many times before in that little, and embarrassing, popup trailer.

The highway narrowed and the pavement ended, the road abruptly turning to rutted dirt, proof that rain could turn the final miles to Stillwater campground into a mud bog. Paul slowed the rig to keep the dishes from rattling. After topping a hill, he began the winding descent into Stillwater Basin, an area rich with fishing ponds, streams, and rustic campsites that dogged the Yampa River tributary known as *The Bear*.

"Oh, dear," Sarah said, looking at the cell phone. "I lost him."

"There's no signal up here," he replied. "Just think, peace and quiet all night."

Sarah sighed and set down the phone.

Soon, Trapper's Mountain came into view. Storm clouds shrouded its slopes, and nestled in its forested bosom, a wilderness campground sign appeared. *Cold Springs – Fee Area*.

Two thin men sporting beards emerged from the woods alongside the road and waved them to a stop. Paul noticed blood on their clothes and assumed they'd been hunting and had gutted a deer. He rolled down the window. "You gentlemen need some help?"

"I reckon," the taller man said. "Name's Clyde. This here's my brother Clem." He cocked his head to the shorter man. "We're in need of some water."

"Our tank is almost empty," Paul replied. "The trout pond over there is mountain fed spring water."

"Fish shit in that water," Clem spat out.

"We don't need much," Clyde said. "A glassful would be fine."

Paul asked, "Where are you camped?"

"Just around there." Clem pointed to the campground. "Looks like we're gonna be neighbors." He smiled an ugly, gummy smile.

Paul glanced at Sarah. He wanted to tell her these guys looked like trouble, but before he could say it, she shrugged. "We can spare a glass of water."

"Wait there," Paul told the men, thinking he'd pass a water glass to them through the open window.

A sudden gust of wind shrieked through the forest and raindrops the size of quarters started pounding the windshield. The men cowered beside the rig. One shouted, "We're going to get soaked."

"We should let them in," Sarah told Paul.

"I don't think that's a good idea—"

"It's the neighborly thing to do, Paul." She leaned over his shoulder and shouted out the window, "You gentlemen better come on in."

"Thank you, ma'am," Clyde said. They hustled around the front to the coach door.

Sarah worked the lever, and the door folded open with a hiss like any big city bus.

Both men sprang inside, the smell of alcohol preceding them. She shut the door to keep the rain out.

"Now ain't this right friendly of you," Clem said.

Paul turned in his captain's chair. "These mountain cloudbursts don't last long. You'll be on your way shortly."

Moving to the sink, Sarah drew a glass of water. Before it was full, the faucet spit air. "Oh dear." The pump sputtered. "That's the last of our water."

Wind buffeted the motor home. Raindrops rapped on the roof.



Paul wasn't concerned about the lack of water, but he found the bloody appearance of his guests disturbing, up close like they were now. They could have been hunters, though hunting season wouldn't open for another two months. Chances were they'd poached something so he'd have to satisfy his curiosity very carefully. "Did you guys bag an elk?"

"Yeah," Clyde said and glanced around the rig. "Nice setup you got here. Me and my brother been lookin' for one of these."

Clem drank the water and handed the empty glass back to Sarah, his round eyes riveted on her breasts. "Will yah look at them hooters, Clyde?"

Aghast, Sarah stepped back, her hand on her heart.

Clem honked out a laugh.

Paul didn't think it was funny. "You guys better leave."

A knife flashed in Clem's hand. "You better shut up!"

In one swift move, Clyde grabbed Sarah's arms and twisted them behind her, the empty glass shattering on the floor.

She yelped. "Paul!"

"Drive," Clem ordered, the knife point at Paul's throat.

Fear stabbed his brain. "What do you want?"

"This here motor home," Clem said. "We're in need of an upgrade."

"Don't hurt us," Sarah pleaded.

Clyde smiled, showing choppy teeth. "Wouldn't that be fun?"

Clem jabbed the knife at Paul. "Now move it."

A part of Paul's brain told him this wasn't happening; it was just a distorted sense of reality, a mistake, but the point of the knife sobered him. Clenching his jaw, Paul engaged the transmission and moved the rig forward, slowly. He wasn't about to let the brothers take his motor home. How embarrassing would that be, going home

without it? He'd be the laughingstock of the neighborhood.

In the campground, the dirt road branched off into several campsites, each complete with a picnic table and concrete fire pit. Ahead on his right, Paul saw a tent and a Ford Explorer. At first he thought it was the brothers' camp, but when Clem ordered him to drive on, Paul noticed the Ford's windows were shattered and the tires had been flattened. The picnic table had been overturned, and camping equipment littered the ground. It looked as if a bear had attacked the camp.

Bears lived in this wilderness, mostly black bears, but grizzlies had been spotted over the years, though few and far between. He also knew these bears avoided human contact, which left him with only one explanation for the campsite's destruction: the brothers. A question knotted his stomach. "What happened to the campers?"

The storm bore down on Stillwater. Rain pelted the motor home roof loud as machinegun bullets. At Clem's insistence, Paul parked in a camping spot thirty yards from the tent and shut off the engine.

Lightning forked across the sky. Thunder cracked and rumbled away.

Clyde shoved Sarah to the floor, and then started rummaging through the kitchen cabinets. Their contents crashed down around her.

"Hey!" she shouted. "You're making a mess."

Clyde showed her a fist, and Clem snorted with delight.

Sarah glared at Clyde. Paul knew the look and hoped she wouldn't do anything stupid.

Clyde turned his attention to the refrigerator, gathered up the eggs and a carton of milk, and then looked down at Sarah. "Fix us some breakfast." His eyes wandered up and down her body. "Then we're gonna have us some real fun."

Paul didn't like the sleazy tone that came with that statement. "You boys better not touch my wife."

Clem pressed the knifepoint to Paul's throat, drawing a thin line of blood. "And who's going to stop us?"

In defiance, Paul tightened his neck muscles and hissed through clenched teeth. "I will."

"You'll be dead."

"Don't hurt him, please." Sarah stood. "I'll make breakfast." She moved to the stove, got out the frying pan and a spray can of PAM cooking oil.

Clem stepped up beside her and set the milk and eggs on the counter. "That's more like it, little momma."

It happened so fast, Paul didn't have time to register the motion. Sarah whipped around with the spray can and shot oil into Clyde's eyes.

He staggered back, hands on his face. Then she bashed his skull with the frying pan. He slammed into the counter, and dragging the milk carton and eggs down with him, crashed to the floor in a heap.

Clem sprang to his brother's aid. "You bitch."

In that split second, Paul envisioned Clem's knife in Sarah's chest. "No." He flew from his captain's chair and tackled Clem. His head hit the counter on the way down.

Thunder boomed.

Heart racing, Paul got up, looked at both unconscious men, and then noticed the ferocious glare in Sarah's eyes as she held the frying pan over her shoulder like a Louisville Slugger. He couldn't have been prouder and started laughing.

"My kitchen is wrecked." Sarah was nearly in tears. "Why are you laughing?"

"You did good, honey," and still chuckling, he pried the frying pan handle from her fierce grip. "I got it from here."

She fell against his chest. "Let's just go home."

He set the pan on the counter. "We'll be fine now."

She bent to pick up Clem's knife and stared at it with open-eyed horror. It was smeared with dried blood. "I'm not staying here another minute."

Feeling suddenly ill, Paul realized how close they'd come to being murdered, maybe like the folks in that ransacked campsite. The cops needed to know about this. "All right. We'll go down the mountain far enough to get cell service and call the police." He took the knife from Sarah, set it on the counter, and looked down at the unconscious brothers. "But first, help me put out this trash."

Sarah opened the door. Driving rain came down in sheets. Torrents of water ran every-which-way, growing in depth and intensity, transforming dirt into mud and gutters into gushers. Paul feared he didn't have much time before the road out of Stillwater would become an impassable mud bog. He dragged the brothers to the door and shoved them outside. Expecting the rain to revive them quickly, he shut the door, locked it, and jumped into his captain's chair. Engine running, he threw the transmission into reverse and gunned the throttle.

The heavy rig moved twenty feet before the rear wheels sunk in the muddy gutter. He revved the engine. Tires spun. Paul's stomach clutched. He shifted to drive and hit the gas, rocking the rig forward, and then he slammed the transmission into reverse and rocked it backward. The tires only spun, again and again, forward and backward, digging deeper and deeper until the axle bottomed out in the mud, leaving the rig at an awkward tilt. "Damn it!"

Just then, a thump on the windshield grabbed Paul's attention. Clyde's sopping hairy face was pressed against the rain-slicked glass, his demonic eyes blazing with anger. Teeth bared, he pounded his fists on the thick glass. "I'll fuckin' kill you, motherfucker."

Then came a bang at the door, Clem, banging and banging, the handle jumping, the air lock mechanism straining, but it held.

Rain rattled on the rig loud as hail on a tin roof.

Lightning cracked and thunder boomed.

Sarah cupped her hands over her ears and screamed.

Paul went for the cell phone, and hoping beyond hope dialed 911, but got nothing. No service. The greatest technological wonder in the world was useless.

Outside, Clem cackled like a mad scientist wringing his hands over some diabolical experiment. "You're both dead," he shouted. "We're gonna starve you out. You got no food left, no water. You'll die with empty bellies, and for what, to keep hold o' this here motor home? In the end, it's gonna be ours anyway."

Paul and Sarah trembled and clung to each other as Clyde pounded on the windshield, screaming obscenities while Clem banged and banged on the door.

\*\*\*

That first night the rain turned to snow. Two days passed then three, and now on the fourth day of the siege it rained. Nighttime temperatures plummeted below freezing, but Paul had plenty of propane in the tank mounted under the rig. The heater worked. They were warm enough, though a brutal hunger burned in his stomach. Thirst parched his lips.

Sarah wasn't in any better shape.

On top of that, the toilet tank had overflowed, tainting the air with the foul odor of an outhouse.

He sat with Sarah on the canted kitchen floor, backs propped against the cabinets, and guarded the door with a frying pan and oil spray, just in case the brothers found some way to pry their way in. Paul wanted to sleep, but outside, the brothers sat at their campfire fifty feet away, playing loud music, drinking, and making merry. He thought it was a psychological ploy to drive them crazy, but he swore it wasn't going to

work. The brothers weren't getting his motor home.

Then oddly, scratching sounds came from outside the door. Wheezing came next, then a guttural snort.

The hair on the back of Paul's neck tingled.

Sarah flinched. "What was that?"

"Sounds like a bear," Paul rasped. "But I wouldn't put it past those bastards to try a scare tactic to rile our nerves." He crouched, made his way to the door, and peeled back the window curtain. Outside, the brothers' campfire lit the night with a flickering glow. Flames backlit their silhouettes and illuminated a Chevy pickup. "I can see them both."

More scratching came at the door.

"Then what's making that noise?" Sarah whispered.

"I can't see..."

With a guttural roar, window glass exploded in his face, followed by snapping jaws and ivory fangs. He leaped back, his heart seizing with fright.

Sarah screamed.

Shaggy brown fur framed coal black eyes. Drool flung to and fro as the bear roared loud as a fog horn, its hot breath stinking up the air. The rig teetered under the grizzly's ferocity and weight. Door hinges sagged. If that bear broke in, Paul feared they'd be torn to pieces before they could make it to the rear emergency exit window. However, he quickly realized the bear couldn't force its bulk through the small window. The moment of panic passed. Choking down fear, he grabbed Clem's knife and stabbed the bear's mouth. The blade clicked on thrashing teeth and sliced a meaty tongue. Roaring, the bear backed out and lumbered off into the darkness.

"Paul...your face!" Sarah cried.

He wiped trickles of blood from his left cheek. "I don't understand why the bear

did that. Normally they stay clear of humans. They're hardly ever seen."

"Something has this one riled." She dabbed a towel to his cuts.

"I wonder what that could be." Paul said it sarcastically, referring to the noisy brothers. He stalked back to the busted-out window, every nerve in his body on high alert. He couldn't see the brothers anywhere, but he heard them screaming for their momma from inside the pickup, a meager fortress against a grizzly, judging by the damage to his motor home. "How much is it going to cost to fix this door?" he mumbled to himself.

Sarah slumped to the floor by the refrigerator. "Why did it attack us and not those guys?"

He crawled back to sit beside her. "The fire is keeping the bear away from their camp. Now they're holed up in the truck cab, and I bet they'll be passed out drunk by dawn." He handed her the knife and pulled the cell phone from his pocket.

*No Service.*

"Damn." He stashed the phone. "Come first light, I'll sneak out of here. Hike down the road where I can get a signal."

"But what about that bear?"

He looked into her eyes. "It's probably on the other side of the ridge by now." A lame probability, at best, but he had to ease her fears.

"Don't leave me here alone."

"You'll have to watch the fort," he said.

"I can't."

"It's the only way we're going to get out of here."

"We're fighting for our lives, Paul. What's more important, our lives or the rig? Let me go with you."

"Abandon ship? Out of the question."

"Look at this mess. Our motor home is ruined."

"It's all fixable." He set his jaw. "They're not getting our rig."

"But I'm hungry...and thirsty. I want to see Jeffrey again."

"You will, we will, but we're not whipped yet."

"Let them have it, Paul. It's insured."

"It's ours, and they can't have it just because they want it. Insured or not. They didn't work for it. They aren't making the payments on it. We are. So we fight for what's ours. I'll go get help. You stay here and keep them out."

"We're going to die in here."

"Not if I can make the crest of that hill. I'll call for help: the sheriff, Rocky Mountain Rescue, a tow truck. I promise. We'll make it home."

At that, she picked up the knife. "Then I'll watch the fort."

\*\*\*

On the fifth day, dawn came gray and fitful. Paul slipped out the door. The mountain air was icy, damp, and still as death. Nearby, smoke swirled up from the brothers' campfire. They were in the truck, sleeping off a stupor. Satisfied, he trudged down the muddy road through the campground and came upon the wrecked campsite.

Thinking he might find food inside, he approached the tent, which was caved in on one side. Bear tracks in the mud gave him cause for alarm, but hunger drove him forward. As he neared the tent, a sickening stench fouled the air, along with a buzzing sound unlike anything he'd ever heard. Carefully, he pulled back the tent flap. Nothing could have prepared him for the horror he found inside: human bodies, torn and disemboweled and covered with a thick mat of black flies. His hand shot over his mouth. He staggered back from the tent. Now he understood why the rogue bear had attacked them. It had acquired a taste for human flesh. More determined than ever to



escape this wilderness hell, Paul slogged up the muddy road as fast as he could.

He didn't get twenty feet from the tent when a grizzly bear lumbered out of the tree-line thirty yards away. It stopped on the road, sniffed the air, then rose on its hind legs and roared. Paul's heart almost failed him. He couldn't outrun the bear, so he started waving his arms and stepped sideways toward the trees.

Grunting wildly, the grizzly reared up and down and pounded the ground with both front paws, a typical display of aggression. Paul wondered why it was so agitated then realized he was caught between the bear and its tent full of human carrion. Fighting panic, he kept moving sideways and flailing his arms. "Yo bear. Get out of here!" he shouted.

The bear charged, its fur rippling like wheat in the wind, a beautiful sight, yet terrifying, powerful, and probably the last thing he'd ever see. He fought the urge to run, knowing it would only trigger the bear's instinct to give chase. Hot adrenaline spilled into his bloodstream. Still moving sideways and shouting louder at the bear, he prepared to drop into a fetal position and play dead, but the bear changed course and veered toward the tent.

Paul had cleared the path to the bear's food. He made the pine trees, well off the road. His heart beat so hard it hurt.

The bear charge inside the tent. A black cloud of flies escaped. For a split second, he thought about the campers in the tent, what he had seen in that moment of terror, and realized he didn't know how many bodies were in there, torn and scattered as they were. He was about to upchuck when the brothers' truck rumbled to life, spun four wheels in the mud, and fishtailed up the road toward him. The smart thing to do now was run. Crashing through bushes along the brook, he ran headlong back toward the motor home.

The truck left the road and, careening through the campsites, smashed picnic

tables to splinters, bouncing along a course that would cut off his escape. But the drunken brothers' recklessness became their undoing. The truck hit a concrete fire-pit, destroying a tire and launching the truck into a parts-hurling rollover.

Paul kept running. Out the corner of his eye, he saw the bear evacuate the tent and hightail it into the forest. The truck crash-landed on its roof, wheels spinning. Within seconds, the brothers wriggled out busted windows, cursing.

By that time, Paul had reached the motor home. Sarah opened the door. He leaped inside, collapsed on the sloping floor, and gulped shitty-smelling air. "Did you see that?"

"I don't understand." She locked the door and dropped beside him. "The bear ran inside the tent. Why?"

The explanation was simple. The bear only wanted its easy meal, but Paul couldn't tell her that it was feeding on a human remains. "I don't know."

"Please get us out of here."

At that, Paul struggled to his feet and made his way into the tilted captain's chair. He started the engine and again tried to free the rig from the mud, but to no avail. It would take timber and grass and digging and jacking to get this beast unstuck. Defeated, he shut off the engine and wished for his little popup trailer.

With a startling bang, a rock cracked the windshield. Then one after another, rocks began bashing the rig. Clem and Clyde had gone completely mad. Now more than ever, the brothers needed the motor home. It was the only operable vehicle and the only haven from the bear.

"Give it up," Clyde shouted and heaved another rock.

A window shattered in back. Paul jumped from his seat and stumbled to the bedroom to inspect the damage. Shards of glass lay strewn across the slanted bed; a rock rested on a pillow. He looked at the broken window, which was sectioned off in

steel-framed panes as a deterrent to burglars. A release latch allowed the removal of several panes at once, making an emergency exit possible.

Another rock flew in, smashing a lamp. Paul bent to the hole in the window and shouted, "You're not getting our motor home."

"It'll be junk when we're through with it!" Clyde threw another rock.

"Stop it," Sarah shouted.

Clem joined his brother, rock in hand. "We'll make you a deal," he said. "Give us this here motor home, and we'll let you walk away instead of killin' yah like we planned."

Clyde laughed. "Sounds like a no-brainer to me."

Paul looked at Sarah. The thought of giving up sickened his stomach, but her pleading eyes told him she'd rather take the deal than fight any longer. He had to admit, victory seemed hopeless. However, he was sure the brothers wouldn't risk letting them leave and alert the authorities; and even if they did, there was still the rogue bear out there with a taste for human flesh. He turned again to the broken window. "We're staying."

Sarah gasped. "How will we survive?"

"This is the safest place on the mountain."

The brothers started throwing rocks again, an insane bombardment that went on for hours.

\*\*\*

The sun rose on the seventh day. Paul hadn't slept all night. The brothers had built a fire ten feet from the motor home and kept it stoked with plenty of logs. Every time something had spooked them, they'd scrambled up the luggage ladder to the sloping roof. They'd kept watch in shifts, ate and drank in plain view of their captives,

and taunted them with rocks and threats. Paul didn't think he could stand another day of this torture. Hoping for a solar flare or an act of God, he tried the cell phone again, but he got no signal and put it back in his pocket.

Sarah stirred on the floor beside him. Her skin was pale, her eye sockets dark and baggy. Air wheezed through cracked lips. "We're never going to see Jeffrey again," she said softly.

"Don't talk like that."

"We're dying, Paul."

She was right. At the very least, they needed water. The pond was only thirty yards away, but he knew he'd have to kill the brothers to get to it. Then the charging bear came to mind, its wild display of aggression, its ruse to clear the way to the tent. With that thought, he picked up the knife. "I'll be back."

"You're not going out there."

He retrieved the empty milk carton from the floor. "I've got to get to the pond."

"Paul, don't..."

He unlocked the door and stepped out, brandishing the knife in front of him.

The brothers stood at the fire, their crazy eyes wide with surprise. "Looky here," Clem said and spit. "A real live hero." They started toward Paul, arms at their sides like gunslingers, but carrying rocks instead of revolvers.

"Stay back," Paul rasped, lunging forward with the knife.

They didn't even flinch, just grinned and kept coming.

By the time he realized his ruse wasn't going to work, Sarah stepped out the door with a kitchen knife in hand. "You'll have to fight us both," she croaked out and stumbled the few steps to Paul's side.

"Go back inside," he shouted, his voice raw and hoarse.

"We'll do this together," she said.

“But...”

Clem reared back and threw a rock. It came at the speed of a pitched baseball, striking Sarah’s arm. She hollered and dropped her knife. Now Clyde cocked his arm and let loose a rock, which just missed Paul’s head as he bent to catch Sarah’s sinking body. He dropped the knife and milk carton in favor of having both hands free to help his wife.

The next few seconds were complete chaos, a hail of rocks bashing them with fury as he rushed Sarah back into the motor home and shut the door. “You’re hurt.”

She moaned.

Outside, Clem shouted, “We’ve had it with you people.”

Moments later, a bang came from under the motor home. Then the odor of propane gas started seeping in. A hot flush crept up Paul’s neck. The brothers had broken the gas line at the propane tank.

“Come out now,” Clem shouted. “Or die.”

The gas began diluting the already-thin air, starving Paul’s lungs of oxygen. He hoped the broken windows would supply enough ventilation to keep the situation from becoming deadly, but the gas was coming in too quickly. He began to gag with each breath.

Sarah started gasping.

“What’s it going to be?” Clem demanded.

“All right,” Paul shouted out the broken window. The brothers were standing side-by-side, now both armed with knives. He swallowed dryly. “We’re coming out.”

Clem grinned. “Nice and easy like.”

Sarah wheezed. “But they’re going to kill us.”

Coughing, Paul said, “It’s certain death if we stay in here.” He grabbed a towel and wrapped it around his left forearm, a slim defense against a slashing knife, he

knew, but better than nothing. "At least we have a fighting chance out there." Then he armed himself with the spray can of cooking oil. "It's the only way."

Grimacing, Sarah retrieved the frying pan. "I'm going with you."

Paul hugged her a moment, hoping it wouldn't be their last embrace. Then he gritted his teeth and operated the door *OPEN* lever.

*Hiss!*

The grizzly charged out from the tree-line, huffing and grunting, its massive body on a collision course with Clem and Clyde. They shrieked and lunged for the open door.

Paul and Sarah scrambled to the back bedroom. The brothers barely made it inside when the bear crashed through the doorway and landed on them. They screamed. Jaws snapped bones and claws ripped flesh. The motor home rocked on its springs as if a terrible storm had been unleashed inside.

Choking on gas, Paul unlatched the emergency exit window and kicked it open. He helped Sarah get out and then jumped to the ground. When his feet hit the mud, he hurried around to the door and activated the closer.

*Hiss!*

"It's trapped inside," Sarah said, holding her injured arm.

It was only temporary. The bear would tear the rig apart to get out, and then it would hunt them down before they could summon help. There was only one solution. From the brother's campfire, he retrieved a flaming log and pointed Sarah toward the pond.

"What are you doing?" She stumbled backward.

"Ending it, once and for all."

"But our motor home."

"It doesn't matter anymore." He tossed the burning log through the bedroom

window frame.

The motor home exploded. A booming concussion knocked him to the ground and hurled debris in every direction. Flames leaped into the air.

Struggling to his feet, he looked for his wife.

"Sarah!"

Moments later, he found her kneeling at the trout pond, gulping down water with cupped hands.

\*\*\*

The mountain rescue helicopter lifted off from the knoll beside the trout pond. Rangers had spotted the black column of smoke that rose from the burning rig. Fire jumpers were first on the scene. Paul watched out the window as the copter overflew the charred remains. Men in hazmat suits sifted through the wreckage for Clem and Clyde's remains. Yellow crime scene tape encircled the campsite around the tent and the Explorer. A coroner's van parked nearby.

Sarah nestled into the crook of his arm. "We can always get another motor home."

"Yeah." The insurance company wouldn't be happy. "I did the right thing."

The helicopter banked to the east and headed down valley, following *The Bear River* toward civilization.

"Makes me wonder," Sarah sighed. "Why didn't those idiots just drive off in their truck when the grizzly showed up? The motor home was stuck. They couldn't go anywhere in it."

Paul knew the answer, though he had a hard time admitting it. They wanted the motor home for all the wrong reasons, same as him. He was willing to go into debt up to his elbows to keep up with the Joneses, and risk his life, and Sarah's, to hold on to

something that pumped up his ego and made him feel superior to others. That was a brutal lesson to learn.

He hugged Sarah closer, thankful he hadn't lost her in the process. "What do you say we get us a new popup trailer?"



## About the Author



There's nothing mundane in the writing world of Terry Wright. Tension, conflict, and suspense propel his readers through the pages as if they were on fire. His mastery of the action thriller has won him International acclaim as an accomplished screenplay writer. He lives in Lakewood, Colorado, with his wife, Bobette. When they're not writing, editing, or publishing, they enjoy travelling in their motor home and riding their Harley Davidson motorcycle.

## Enjoy these novels by Terry Wright



The 13<sup>th</sup> Power Quest, Book 1 (TWB Press, 2011)

<https://www.twbpress.com/the13thpowerquest.html>



The 13<sup>th</sup> Power Journey, Book 2 (TWB Press, 2011)

<https://www.twbpress.com/the13thpowerjourney.html>



The 13<sup>th</sup> Power War, Book 3 (TWB Press, Coming Soon)

<https://www.twbpress.com/the13thpowerwar.html>



The Grief Syndrome (TWB Press, 2011)

<https://www.twbpress.com/thegriefsyndrome.html>



The Duplication Factor (TWB Press, 2011)

<https://www.twbpress.com/theduplicationfactor.html>



Undead in Paris (TWB Press, 2017)

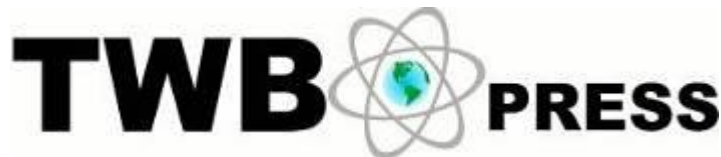
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Justin Graves (TWB Press, 2020)

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