

A GRIZZLY —TALE—

A Father and Daughter
Survival Story



Johan Otter

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— TABLE OF CONTENTS —

PROLOGUE	7
CHAPTER 1: August 25, 2005: Glacier National Park	13
CHAPTER 2: The Netherlands and the Stubbornness of the Dutch.....	15
CHAPTER 3: An Immigrant’s Story.....	19
CHAPTER 4: A Family’s Story	25
CHAPTER 5: Life Interrupted.....	47
CHAPTER 6: The Rescue.....	61
CHAPTER 7: Life, Reset	73
CHAPTER 8: The Road to Recovery: Seattle	91
CHAPTER 9: The Road to Recovery: San Diego	97
CHAPTER 10: Discharge: Going Home	103
CHAPTER 11: The New Normal	117
CHAPTER 12: Return to Glacier	127
POSTSCRIPT	137
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	143



Grizzly bear next to the road in the Many Glacier area. This time I was inside my car.

These bears are much better looking from a safe distance than at arm's length away.

— PROLOGUE —

by Marilyn Otter

It is 6 p.m. on August 25 in Escondido, California, just north of San Diego. Although my birthday was yesterday, nothing eventful has occurred. That's because half of my family—my husband, Johan, and my eldest daughter, Jenna—is away on a two-week hiking trip through Wyoming and Montana. We'll do the birthday celebrating when they return, which makes more sense since Johan's birthday is on September 8. We'll just have one big shindig then. Besides, I am so bone tired right now that a party would be wasted on me. I am a tenth-grade English teacher, and my students have already been in school for fourteen days. The honeymoon period of easy review assignments is over and now the work begins. I cringe when I think of grading those soon-to-be-written essays.

The phone rings. Normally I would let it ring and listen to the message. This time I decide to answer, thinking it might be my daughter, Jenna, or my husband, Johan calling to wish me a happy birthday.

"Hello, Otter residence."

"Mrs. Otter?"

"Yes."

"This is Kalispell Emergency Room. I have Jenna with me, and she'd like to speak to you."

"...OK."

The hairs on the back of my neck awaken and I feel a slight tingling sensation down my spine.

"Mom?"

“Jenna?”

“Mom, dad and I got attacked by a grizzly bear when we were hiking!”

[Pause] *What? What do you mean?”*

I think, “Yeah, right. What really happened? This is not funny!”

Jenna’s voice, slightly calmer now, answers, *“Dad and I were attacked by a grizzly while we were hiking.”*

How does one reply to this?

“Are you all right? Is Dad ok?”

“I’m cut up and bruised, but all right. Dad is being taken to another hospital, but he’s doing OK. The nurse is going to talk to you now.”

“OK, Jen.”

I am very focused and methodical, perhaps in a bit of shock. A calm adult voice speaks.

“Mrs. Otter, I’m a nurse here in the emergency room at Kalispell Hospital in Montana. Johan wanted us to let Jenna talk to you first so you wouldn’t be as worried. We tried to call you a couple of times earlier, but no one was home and we didn’t want to leave a message for something like this.

“First of all, Jenna and Johan are safe and they’re going to be all right. They were mauled by a grizzly bear. Jenna is doing well. Her wounds have been treated. She’s going to need a short surgery to fix a tear in her shoulder.

“Johan had it worse, but he’s going to be OK, too. His injuries require a transfer to Harborview General in Seattle. We’re preparing him for helicopter transport right now. The doctors in Seattle have the facilities to treat his injuries, and they’ll be waiting for him.”

Stephanie, our younger daughter, who is 16, has wandered in from the other room. She doesn’t hear the whole conversation, but senses something is off. After I hang up, she looks at me, quizzically.

“Steph, first of all, I don’t want to panic you. Jenna and Dad are all

right, [well, not really all right] but they were attacked by a grizzly bear when they were hiking.”

Steph’s wrinkled brows and tearing eyes show her fear and disbelief. “*What do you mean?*”

I finally notice her friend Kate is here, too. She is clearly concerned and looks ready to offer her help.

“I just talked to Jenna from the emergency room in Montana. She and dad got attacked by a grizzly bear in Glacier. I don’t know much more. They are flying dad to Seattle. Jenna is staying in Kalispell to get treated there. I’ve got to go to Dad.”

I really don’t comprehend Steph’s reply.

I phone Kate’s mother, Laura. Meanwhile, Kate and Steph go upstairs, where they frantically rummage through my clothing drawers and closet to pack an overnight bag for me. (Later, when I am calmer, I can’t help chuckling over some of the fashion statements they’ve selected—the tackiest, overstretched sweatshirt I own coupled with a pair of high water pants—much of it stuff I meant to throw out or give away).

Downstairs, I’m on the phone.

“Laura, Johan and Jenna were attacked by a grizzly bear while hiking.”

“What! Oh my god; oh my god! What do you need me to do for you?”

“I need a ride to the airport.”

“Ok, Marilyn. Don’t worry. I’m calling the airport right now to get you on a flight tonight. I’ll get it. You can pay me later. You just get yourself ready. I’ll call you back in a few minutes.”

Maybe it’s my automatic stress response, but I am amazingly calm as I methodically plan how to manage the situation. I phone my sister, and we arrange for my brother-in-law to connect with Jenna in Montana and pick up Johan’s truck, which is still parked at the lodge in Glacier National Park. I call my sister and ask her to check in on Steph back home in Escondido. I’ve already decided Steph will stay with Kate and Laura during the school week so she can maintain some sense of normalcy.

Everything is moving like clockwork.

Laura has secured a 9:00 p.m. flight to Seattle for me. Stephanie and Kate have packed my overnight bag with the basic necessities—fashion be damned. By 7:50, all of us are on our way to the airport.

Sitting in the car allows me the first chance to get a grasp on my feelings. Bodily, I am in the van, but mentally I am in a state of free-floating anxiety. I do not feel the pressure of the seat, yet I am hyperaware of every air molecule brushing against the hair follicles of my arms. It's quiet in the car; none of us knows what to say.

Laura breaks the silence. *"I'm sure everything is going to be fine. Johan and Jenna are both strong and determined."* I realize these are just the usual comments one makes to support a friend in need of hope, but I appreciate them anyway. I nod to her, silently chanting a mantra as we speed down the freeway: *"I will get there on time; I will get there on time."* Do I mean in time for the flight, or in time to see Johan before the unthinkable?

Both seem plausible.

I am roused out of my Zen-like chant as we decelerate toward the off-ramp. Soon we will be at the airport with twenty minutes to spare.

I have a sudden surge of energy and clarity, bolstered by my assurance that I will get to the airport on time. I will make my flight. Therefore, I will see Johan. He will survive. Besides, he is too obstinate to die. I know him. I can picture him telling the bear, *"You think you got me? I don't think so."*

This small relief is short-lived.

As we approach a set of railroad tracks between the freeway and the airport, flashing red lights and ringing warning bells announce a train—a really slow train.

I become tearful.

I can't believe this ten-mile-per-hour train, clanking against each rail tie like a ghost dragging a chain, is going to destroy my chances of making it to the airport on time.

Each second drags by like a minute.

We all sit tense, silent, still.

Once again, Laura breaks the silence. "*We still have plenty of time.*"

I wonder how many cars are on this damn train, anyway.

The next car is adorned with graffiti art depicting a life-size image of the grim reaper. So immense and detailed is the image that every trace of his dark, shadowed cloak and gleaming scythe is perfectly outlined against the car's steel surface. If I were an author, I could not have dreamt up a more fitting foreshadow.

My eyes—and Laura's—grow huge.

"*It doesn't mean anything,*" Laura bursts out.

Maybe not, but a sense of urgency has returned to my internal chant. "*I will get there on time!*"

The reaper turns out to be one of the last cars on the freight train from hell. Soon we are allowed to finish the remaining four minutes of the drive. I exit the van. I kiss Stephanie and rush to the Frontier Airlines counter.

"*I will get there on time!*"

My mind is in a haze, yet my body is in overdrive. I give the agent my boarding pass.

"*Excuse me, ma'am,*" a TSA officer motions to me as I stand in line for security check, "*I need to search your bag, ma'am. Please step over to the side.*"

What the hell is this? I never get called out for random baggage checks. Full panic mode.

"*Ma'am,*" I say, "*you don't understand, right now my husband is on a life-flight to a trauma center in Seattle. He and my daughter were attacked by a grizzly bear! I can't miss my flight. This is an extreme emergency—please, must I do this?*"

I am near hysteria.

"I am sorry, ma'am. It is a random check, but it's moving fast."

"Oh my god."

This is not happening.

I am certain to miss my flight.

I heard the boarding call already.

I go through the pat-down.

My bag is handled and brought back to me.

The security guard has some mercy after all.

She has retained a cart and driver to whisk me over to my gate.

"God bless you and good luck, ma'am," says the security officer as she waves me off.

I hop off the cart at my gate.

I am the last one to be seated, but no matter.

I have made it.

I got there on time.

— CHAPTER 1 —

August 25, 2005: Glacier National Park

“**A** flash of fur, two jumps and 400 pounds of lightning.” These words, from a *Los Angeles Times* article masterfully written by Thomas Curwen, vividly encapsulate the first seconds of my experience of being in the wrong place at the wrong time in Glacier National Park on August 25, 2005.

Holy crap, this is weird.

Look at that mean old badger.

Jenna, stay behind me!

What do I do now?

These were the thoughts racing through my mind in the first few moments. The grizzly bear attack would last anywhere between five to fifteen minutes. But time, measured in minutes, made no sense during the attack; it felt at times as though it would never end.

Talk about being in the worst place possible for something like this to happen. Here we were, on an upward sloping leg of Grinnell Glacier Trail, rock cliffs on the right, a vertical drop on the left, and a grizzly bear in my left thigh.

How did we get here?

The perfect confluence of unlikely events, big and small, had conspired to bring us to this place.

We were here because I had wanted to see a grizzly bear—something I had never seen growing up in Holland.

Yes, we made many family trips to Scandinavia, but the biggest animal we had seen even a glimpse of was a moose. Holland (or the Netherlands, technically) is the most densely populated country in Europe. There wasn't much nature left.

Growing up with a brother only about a year younger than me, we had always played together in whatever nature we could find. I am sure I would have decided to become a national park ranger if there had been enough wild places back home, but there weren't. Instead, I became a physical therapist (PT), and because there was no work for me in Holland I had immigrated to the United States. There I met the girl of my dreams, got married, started a family, bought my first house, upgraded to a bigger house and had a great career. The American dream, personified.

But that dream did not include a bear in my thigh.

A bear in my camera or binoculars, certainly, but not this up-close or this personal.

This is going to leave a scar or require some surgery! I remember thinking. Surgery? I've never even been hospitalized before!

Where had this story gone wrong?