



## Canyon

Carol Kavanagh

A great deal of bustle in the family cabin on Saturday morning involved packing lunches, filling water canteens and stuffing packs. “Auntie Kate, we’re going to the caves, right?” said five-year-old Tyler.

“That’s the plan, Stan.”

“Why are you calling me Stan?”

Kate laughed. “We’re going to the caves, but there’s more. Did you know?”

He shook his head of tawny hair that hung over his eyebrows.

“Okay, sis,” Kate said to Darla, “Time to halt the packing and lay out the plan.”

“Right,” Darla said. “Gather ’round. Meghan, where are you?” Eleven year old Meghan came from the bedroom lugging her back pack.

“Here’s the plan,” their mom said. “We’re going to the caves.” A chorus of ‘yays’. “Then the waterfall, and if the water isn’t too cold you can swim in the cove.” Tyler jumped up and down. “We’ll have a picnic up in the meadow, then climb right out the other end of the canyon onto the ranch land, unless we see what we’re looking for before then.”

“What are we looking for?” Meghan asked.

“We want to see if they’re building vacation condos at the other end of the canyon.”

“That wouldn’t be good, right?” Meghan asked.

“That’s what we think,” Darla said.

“The Ministry of Parks and Recreation had said no more development in the park, but now they’re going against that, right?” Meghan said.

“Wow. How do you know all this?” her mom asked.

“I have ears,” Meghan.

Kate and Darla looked at one another and smiled.

“But we’ve got squatters rights from forever,” Tyler said. “Grandpa told me.”

“Right,” Darla said. “Okay, let’s get going.”

When they arrived at the bottom of the canyon, Kate gazed up at the massive rock — burnt sienna in the early morning light. She smiled. “Just look at that will you?”

“Yes we know,” said Darla. “This canyon is your natural cathedral.”

“That huge slab of rock isn’t called Cathedral Spires for nothing. But I also love the dark spruce forest, wild animals and fast flowing water. This canyon is one great doorway to God.”

“Your description makes it sound wild and scary to me.”

Kate laughed. A whiskey jack perched on a nearby pine branch taunted her.

Darla bent and unleashed the family's old black lab, Pal, who remained beside her and leisurely wagged his tail. Kate had seen Big Red, their Irish setter leap off into the woods, but he kept racing back.

Kate felt Meghan tug at her sleeve. "Yes my love."

"Auntie, can you identify a flower? Its not in my guide book." Kate felt herself taken by the hand and tugged off the path into the forest and over a patch of spongy moss. Meghan pointed to a flower. "That one."

"Oh, that's a white Mountain Aven. Pretty, eh?"

"I like the field guide Auntie, but it's missing things," Meghan said.

"That's a beginner's guide, sweetie. Looks like the next one I get you will be more advanced, eh? Maybe you'll write your *own* field guide."

"I'd like that."

Kate watched Meghan's pony tail swing back and forth as they returned to the path.

Tyler was on the path wielding a stick over his head, his eyes focused on a crow's nest high in a pine. Big Red bounded up, his ruddy coat shining in the morning light, sniffed Kate, then tore off.

"Tyler, hold off with your stick," Kate said. "Listen for a sec." She gently took the stick from him and pointed to a wizened pine leaning on an aspen that was dead but still standing. As a gust of wind whirled through the forest, the trees rubbed against one another, squeaking and groaning.

"Weird!"

"Hey guys," Darla called, "lets pick up the pace. We don't want to be coming back in the dark. As the kids ran off toward the bend and out of sight, Darla said, "Don't get too far ahead."

"We won't," the children droned. The sisters could still hear them through the dense forest.

Kate and Darla walked along, both pensive. The tall dark green spruce hugged the path. Overhead they heard the screech of a hawk interspersed with a chipmunk that chattered a call of alarm. Pal was still walking beside Darla. "Pal's sure getting stiff, isn't he?" Kate said.

"Yeah, one of these days he won't be able to make it into the canyon, will you, old chump?" Darla took the dog's black head between her hands and rubbed his ruff. He responded with a tail wag, then trundled off to catch up to the children. "He limbers up once he gets going." Darla said.

Kate remembered, but the kids wouldn't have, when the canyon became Canyon Provincial park and there were just a handful of cabins like theirs. The Ministry of Parks and Recreation cut down trees, put in barbecue pits, picnic tables, toilets — the whole nine yards. After

that Kate hardly ever heard the whoops of coyotes in the night. The elk were still around, but greatly reduced — the deer completely gone. Kate shared what she was remembering with Darla.

“Yeah, I remember,” Darla said, “Now it’s a question of just how much development the canyon can handle.”

“None in my mind,” Kate said.

“Or mine.”

Kate wished that her Dad who actually owned their cabin had been on top of the condo issue, but you couldn’t blame him what with their mom suddenly passing. From a newsletter he’d gleaned that there had been a public meeting and a lot of opposition to the condos, but he only told Darla this yesterday evening, so she couldn’t even phone anybody to find out what had happened.

“Lets not talk about it now. Let’s just enjoy the hike,” Darla said.

“You’re right. I have to get my “nature fix” over three short days on this long weekend.”

Kate glanced down, saw something out of the corner of her eye. She stepped towards it, riveted, as her hand flew to her chest and her heart suddenly lurched. She nudged Darla and pointed to the ground.

“Bear scat. Fresh!” Darla whispered hoarsely. They both glanced around. Kate felt suspended between thinking that this wasn’t a big deal and a deep sense of foreboding.

“Hey kids, where are you?” Darla called, urgency in her voice and ran ahead with Kate on her heels. Kate could see the children already at the clearing with the caves in full view.

“Both of you, come here now,” Darla yelled.

“Aren’t we going to explore the caves? We brought flashlights this time,” Meghan called.

“We’re gonna bypass the caves. Come here right now!”

“Mo-om!” Meghan called. “You’re acting weird!”

Red bounded up to Darla, who bent to grab his collar and leash him, but he dodged and charged back to the children. He joined old Pal who was intently sniffing in circles in the clearing. “Pal, come here, now!” Darla commanded. He looked up at her for a second, then put his nose back down. Then, in unison, spurred by some invisible force, the dogs rushed to one of the cave entrances, barking and growling. Kate and Darla yelled, but both dogs charged into a cave.

An enormous bear bolted out of the cave chasing the dogs who tore ahead, tails between their legs. Kate was paralyzed. *A grizzly*. Her heart hammered against her ribcage. Instinctively, both children turned to run, Tyler closer to Kate and Darla, Meghan further ahead.

“STOP! BACK UP SLOWLY! NOW!” Darla yelled at the children. The bear stopped chasing the dogs and lumbered towards the children. Kate and Darla screamed and both dogs raced to distract the bear. Big Red circled the bear a flurry of legs, with bared teeth, vicious

growling. Old Pal meanwhile stood his ground, white canines fully exposed, lips lifted, slavering. The bear's hibernation fur rolled as it lunged at one dog, then the other.

Meghan sobbed, but started to back up. Tyler froze.

Darla's face contorted. "TYLER, BACK UP!" He didn't move.

Kate grabbed Darla's arm when she was about to dart to Tyler. "You'll just alarm the bear more." Darla jerked her arm free, sped to Tyler, grabbed him and ran backwards with him in tow, but tripped and they both fall. They hurriedly tried to get up. The bear charged towards them, but the dogs closed in. Red circled the bear again and forced it to turn. This time the bear swung wildly at Red, nearly making contact. The dogs keep up their harangue, but suddenly the bear ignored them and moved abruptly towards Meghan who turned and ran and Kate knew this would be her end. Everything was happening too fast. On instinct she sprinted towards Meghan, waving her arms wildly over her head and screaming. The bear hesitated long enough for Kate to grab Meghan who clutched onto her aunt. The bear reared onto its hind legs and Kate smelled its fetid breath, saw its open mouth, its incisors, pink tongue lolling, its claws like half moons of stained ivory. The towering bear roared, swiped at Meghan and Kate. Pal jumped to block the bear's powerful swing which missed them and struck the dog. Pal howled crashing down with a thud, a gash of red pouring over black. Everyone screamed. Kate continued to raise her arms and wave wildly. The bear meandered off toward the river's turmoiled water. Standing on the edge of the bank, the bear swayed its head back and forth, huffing, watching them. Kate, stunned, breathing heavily and shaking didn't want to risk tending to Pal, but Meghan screamed "We can't leave him," and Darla and Tyler reluctantly, but quickly, reached Pal and they all huddled over him while everyone kept glancing up at the bear. The gashes showed bone and tendon. Tyler was shaking and Meghan was crying. Darla pulled them to her, put her arms around them and said, "It's okay. We're fine." But Kate was only too aware of the bear's presence. One fast lunge and he'd be on them again.

She quickly stripped off her shirt, made a tourniquet out of it, staunched the blood as best she could, hurriedly slipped on a fleece from her back-pack and zipped it up.

"He's still breathing. Let's get going." Kate picked him up. He was heavy. As they quickly took the path to the top, they glanced back at the water but the huge animal was gone.

Half-way up, they switched off, and Darla carried Pal. As they got closer to the top Kate said, "I'll run ahead to the cabin. I'll have a signal at the top and I'll start phoning to find the nearest vet that's working the long weekend."

"Yeah, go," Darla said breathing heavily.

The next morning, Kate said to Darla. "Sis, I have to go back down."

"You've got to be kidding."

“I want to find out about the condos.”

“It’s not worth it. We can phone on Tuesday.”

“This isn’t just about us, you know — preserving our little corner of paradise. If people keep occupying this bit of land and that bit of land, before you know it, all the land will be gone and with it, all the animals. Where does it end?”

“I get that, Kate, you know I do, but do we have to pursue it *today*. Let’s stay up here and play games with the kids.”

“Are you going to play games with them forever, now, because of the bear?”

“No, just this weekend.”

“Look, Darla, I want to see if there’s a conservation officer in the park so we can alert him or her to the bear. We don’t want anyone going through what we went through. You have to see the sense in that.”

Annoyed she said, “Of course I see the sense in that, but there never was a conservation officer in this park. It’s a *provincial* park. Why would there be one now? You’ve already tried phoning a bunch of emergency numbers. They’re only concerned about rescuing *people* and we survived. So there’s nothing we can do.”

If they’re putting in vacation condos maybe now there’s an officer stationed in the park. I have to try, Sis. Please. Can you understand?”

“Go, go,” she said waving her arm, but I’ll worry about you.”

“I’ll avoid the caves. I promise.”

Kate was on high alert as she descended into the canyon glancing left and right, surveying the underbrush, ever watchful. This hike was no carefree jaunt in search of flora and fauna, no nature hunt for the sacred or the breathtaking.

Heavy cloud descended, grey, leaden. At the bottom of the canyon, she sprinted past conifers like dark sentinels. An eerie silence surrounded her in this fast chasm. She hurried along the path they had taken yesterday, came to the caves and climbed up and over. She was breathing heavily as she heard the snap of a twig, glanced around and waited, frozen. Nothing. A figment. She picked her way through the forest parting branches, ducking under others. A tiny stem she didn’t see sprung just over her eyebrow stinging her.

At the waterfall, a cold mist descended on her cheeks and she brushed it off like she had the tears, yesterday, speeding down the gravel road to the vet, Darla cradling Pal on her lap in the front, the kids in the back, reaching around the front seat to stroke Pal’s forehead. Pal quivered and jerked in Darla’s arms; she felt for a pulse and Meghan said in a tiny voice, “Is he okay?”

Kate stopped to catch her breath, looked back over her shoulder and glimpsed the tops of her cathedral spires levitating above the cloud. The rock face was flat-grey and sombre. She

scanned up the limestone walls of the canyon and across the forested areas for a ranger's stovepipe smoke. Mist lazed through the pine tops mimicking such smoke, but that was all.

As she hurried on and stopped at the avalanche area, spitting rain dropped dark circles on the boulders. She slipped on her rain jacket and ran on beside the turquoise water that flowed treacherously over glacial rock.

"No, honey. I'm sorry," Darla had said about Pal, her voice quivering. Kate pulled off the road to quell her shaking and to let the tears flow. Meghan burst into tears, but Tyler seemed too shocked to cry. Later that night, he said, "Pal's a hero dog," and a smile touched the edges of Meghan's lips.

Ahead, the dirt path abruptly ended and an asphalt path took over. *This is new.* Kate followed it up where it emerged onto a parking lot. *Surely this is just parking for hikers, not infrastructure for the vacation condos.*

Her attention was diverted when an official-looking van pulled up and two uniformed men emerged. She heard the groan of their gear, leather against leather; they carried heavy caliber rifles and held back a German shepherd on a tight leash.

Despite the drizzle she unzipped her jacket. "Are you conservation officers?"

One of the men, heftily built, said, "Yes, ma'am. What can we do for you?"

"Working in Canyon Park?" She looked at the lean tall one.

"No ma'am," said the hefty one. "We got called in. We're Following up on a grizzly attack on cattle."

"On cattle!"

"Ranchers who graze their cattle at the south end shot at a bear and tried to run it off, thought it came this way."

"My family and I encountered a grizzly yesterday. It killed one of our dogs and got awfully close to me and my niece. We're okay, but —"

The men exchanged glances. "Don't worry. We'll get that bear," said the lean one lifting his rifle.

She stared at him. "You're not going to kill it."

They looked at one another. "Yes ma'am," the lean one said.

"You don't have to kill it, do you?"

"We can't have a rogue bear terrorizing people," the hefty one said, "And now with the condos about to come up —"

*Damn!*

"No wonder it's rogue. It was chased and shot at," she said.

The hefty one shrugged, pulled out yellow tape and began to unroll it.

"What about relocation?" Kate asked.

“Our budget is limited,” the hefty one said.

“A bigger budget would relocate the bear,” she said.

“Talk to your MLA on that one, ma’am. We don’t make the policy or allocate the money.”

The lean one added, “The policy is to balance animal habitat with recreational interests. That’s just what we’re doing.”

“Now, where’d you say you encountered that bear?” the hefty one said.

She looked away. “We were — near the old avalanche area.” She lied.

“Don’t go back down. Tell anyone you see to stay clear.” They strung yellow tape across the path and put up a sign: Bear sighted. Canyon closed. They headed down the path.

Kate stared after them.

The sky was somber, the drizzle continued as she scuffed her way down a road that rimmed the canyon. In the distance, Cathedral Spires had disappeared in fog, but for a second the clouds parted and the wet rock glistened from the sun’s rays. Beside her, the conifers’ dark gloom had dissipated and the aspen leaves flickered in the soft wind like a thousand little fans.

The sharp bark of a rifle echoed through the canyon, followed by two more shots in quick succession.