

Run For Your Life

The camping trip had been a big success, but it looked like it was going to end with a fizzle.

We'd returned to the end of the lake where the bus was supposed to pick us up, but when we got there, we discovered that our original bus had broken down. They'd sent a small van instead, which meant we had to send everyone out to the park entrance in shifts. The supervisors who had gone out first were busy calling parents to come and get their kids.

I'm a teacher at a small Christian school in Parry Sound. We organized these spring camping trips every year; two weeks camping in the wilderness of Algonquin Park. We'd had to take a bus in to the lake, and then canoe about ten miles to our campsite.

The landing near the lake that we'd returned to was deep in the park, far from any campgrounds or other signs of civilization. But there was a road. We expected the van back in about two hours.

There were only three of us left. I'd volunteered to stay, as had John and his sister Mandy. All of the supplies had been loaded and sent out when the van left for the first time. It had returned once to take out all of the rest of the students and supervisors, except for us. At two to a seat, the small van was packed; the three of us were the only ones left.

"I'm going to explore a little ... that OK, Mr. C?"

It was John. He'd always been restless ... he couldn't sit still for a minute.

"OK, John. But don't go far. Watch out for bears!"

That was our running joke. We'd never seen one, but we knew they were out there. The noise of fifteen teenagers and five supervisors had been enough to keep them far away from our campsite.

As John tramped away through the thick underbrush, I turned to Mandy. She looked sullen. "Everything OK?"

She'd broken up with her boyfriend just before the trip. He hadn't come. Mandy hadn't said much to anyone for the past two weeks, other than to complain about the bugs and not being able to text her friends. The students hadn't been allowed to bring any technology with them. Some of them hadn't known what to do with themselves the first day without a cell phone to constantly text into. I'd always wondered what they were saying to each other, twenty-four hours a day. But it didn't matter anyway; cell phones didn't work this far into the park.

“I guess.” Mandy answered unenthusiastically.

That was probably all I was going to get.

I lay down under a tree and planned on an hour or two of sleep. There wasn't much else to do; we were deep in the park, and while the road passed this spot just a few tens of metres on the other side of a rise, there hadn't been any traffic at all. Just our van.

I couldn't even call my wife. With no cell phone service out here, we'd had to get the kids down to the park entrance to make the calls to parents. Our satellite radio, which we kept for emergencies, had gone out with the first van load.

I lay for quite awhile, trying to ignore the mosquitoes that kept trying to fly into my ear. I was just drifting off when I heard what sounded like three gun shots. I sat up with a start. That couldn't be right ... guns weren't allowed in the park. But the reports had sounded like a large calibre handgun. Even less likely; handguns were illegal. No-one except cops could carry one.

I looked at Mandy. She just shrugged, and went back to doing her nails. I didn't see John. Where was he?

And then I could hear a heavy thrashing in the bush. I looked in that direction as John exploded from the trees, running up to me and collapsing at my feet. “They're ...” He gasped for breath. “They're coming. They saw me! We have ... we have to get out of here!”

“John, calm down! Who saw you? Take a breath and then tell me what's going on.”

He took several deep breaths and started over. “I followed a little path for about fifteen minutes. Then I heard voices, so I looked ...” He took another breath. “I looked through some trees ... to see who it was.”

That was unusual, all by itself. I had assumed there were no other people within ten miles of us. That was why we'd picked this lake.

“There were five of them, and they all had guns ... pistols, rifles, shotguns, I don't know. But they were all pointing them at each other. At least, the three nearest to me were. The other two were arguing.”

He paused for a breath. “And then one of the guys nearest me lifted his arm and just shot the other two. He killed them!”

John was panicking. “Take a breath, John.” I waited. “Then what happened?”

“I must have yelled or something. They heard me. Then the guy who’d shot the other two turned and looked right at me. I heard him say ‘He saw me. Get him and bring him back here.’ That’s when I took off.

The path John had been following was likely an overgrown deer trail. They would be here in minutes, if not sooner.

I stood up. “John, Mandy ... grab those bottles of water and let’s go. That way ...” I pointed away from the road, in a direction opposite to the one John had returned from.

“But the road is” John started to say.

“It’s the first place they’ll look. Come on, let’s go. Mandy, now!”

Mandy hadn’t moved through all of this. She looked a little stunned. “John, grab your sister and follow me.”

We dove into the bush and didn’t look back. We were moving parallel to the lake, away from where the men were. And further from the road, which curved away to the north. But we had to get away from there.

A few minutes later we heard shouts behind us, but we didn’t stop.

Half an hour or so later, I judged it was safe to stop, at least for a few minutes. I wanted to find out more about these men.

“John what did these guys look like. The ones who came after you, I mean.”

“They were just normal looking older guys, I guess. I dunno. They were wearing suits, I noticed that. Ties and everything. And dress shoes.”

That didn’t make sense. Who would dress like that way out here in the wilderness? And then I remembered the float plane. It had flown overhead yesterday morning, as we were preparing to enjoy our last day at the campsite. We’d waved at it. Small planes weren’t uncommon out here; some people used them to get in to lakes that were otherwise inaccessible.

“John, did they get a good look at your face?”

“Uh, I don’t think so, Mr. C. The guy looked right at me, but I was standing behind some branches. Maybe. I’m not sure.”

Mandy spoke for the first time. “Why don’t we just, like, head for the road? And get out of here. Find some cops or something. This sucks!”

That was typical Mandy. Complaining again.

“Mandy, listen. Whoever those guys are, they just killed two people. At least, one of them did. And it sounds like they don’t like the idea that John saw them. They’ll spend a lot of time searching near the road; they’ll expect us to go that way”.

The fact that they’d been wearing suits and regular shoes was good news. It would slow them down a lot. And they probably wouldn’t be prepared in other ways, either. No water, no bug spray, no food. We’d just have to outlast them.

But their guns worried me. I asked John to remember everything he could about them.

“Well, I dunno, Mr. C. I’m not really into guns, you know what I mean?”

“Do you play video games, John?”

“Oh, yeah, man. I just downloaded ‘Call of Duty’. ‘Modern Warfare 3’, the newest release. It’s really ...” And then he saw where I was going. A light went on in his eyes.

“Yeah, I get you. OK, Mr. C. First, they all had handguns. Nine millimetre, I think.” He thought carefully. “But the main guy, the one who shot those dudes, he had a really big handgun. A Desert Eagle .45, I think.”

“That’s good, John. Now what about the rifles?”

John thought some more.

“The main guy had a rifle on a sling, on his back. It looked like the M24 sniper rifle, but I’m not too sure. It had a lot of stuff on top where the scope should be.”

That wasn’t good news. The M24 could take out targets at up to 800 metres. It only had a five round magazine, but at that range, it wouldn’t matter. We’d never see it coming.

“OK, what else?” John really did know his weapons. Thanks to the rather violent video games he obviously spent a lot of time playing.

“One of the other guys definitely had an M16. I’d recognize one of those anywhere. It has a handle on top

It also held a 30-round magazine and could empty itself in twenty seconds. That was ninety rounds per minute, in burst mode. It was a good close-quarters weapon. We’d just have to make sure they didn’t get close. Although the gun was fairly accurate out to about 500 metres. More bad news.

This wasn’t looking good for us.

“You said something about a shotgun ...”

“Yeah. One of the guys who got shot had one. Not that it did him much good!”

“OK, John, you did good. Now let’s get out of here in case they’re following us. We’ll stop in a little while and try to find some high ground. Mandy, are you ready to keep going?”

“Yeah. Whatever.”

So we kept going. During one particularly bad stretch, after we’d had to fight our way through some thick willows, we stopped for a breather.

John said to me, “This is right up your alley, isn’t it, Mr. C?”

He was referring to the fact that I’d been in the Canadian military. In the Infantry, to be more precise. After college, I’d enlisted, for lack of any other career goal. What followed was some pretty intense training, including a stint cross-training with the SAS in the south of England. Somewhere in there I did two tours in Afghanistan. It was during my last week over there, in my second tour, that a big chunk of my upper thigh had disappeared, ripped off by some shrapnel.

I’d seen the writing on the wall, and gotten out. After my leg healed enough so that I could get around, I went back to college for my teaching degree. High school Social Studies. Can you believe it?

I’d found a small Christian private school in Parry Sound willing to hire me, and I’d been there for three years.

John was a ‘graduate’ of our Outdoor Survival course. All the kids we’d brought on the trip were. In order for students to qualify for our annual two week camping expedition in Algonquin Park, they had to take and pass a three day survival course. We camped in the bush a few miles from town, with just the absolute necessities, and the kids learned the basics of fire-starting, shelter-building, and other useful things. With my background in the military, I was the obvious choice to teach it.

“Yeah, John, I suppose. But I was usually a little better ... equipped. But we’ll be OK.”

“Did you ever kill anybody, Mr. C?” That was Mandy.

“I don’t like to talk about that, Mandy. You know that.” In fact, I’d never talked much about my experiences in Afghanistan with the kids, despite their many questions. I’d talked a lot about my training, especially the hand-to-hand and weapons stuff we’d done with the SAS. And in Social Studies we’d had good discussions about Canada’s role in the war, and whether we should even be there.

But I never talked about the horrible things I'd seen in that war. Or about the people I'd had to kill. That kind of stuff was between God and I, and no-one else. I had asked His forgiveness, and I believe He understood what we'd had to do to keep the ordinary people of that country safe. That's all that most of them wanted ... just to be safe, so they could earn a living and raise their families.

"Can we get away from them? Don't lie to me ... are they going to catch us?" Mandy wanted reassurance. I tried to give it to her.

"Listen to me, both of you. I will *not* let these two guys catch us or hurt you. I promise you. So stop worrying ... let me do that, OK?" I was using my teacher voice. The one I used when warning them that they'd better study for the upcoming test. I was never sure how effective it was. But it seemed to have worked this time. Both of them looked a little calmer.

It was about time to head for high ground. I wanted to know if they were still following us, and how far behind us they were.

I looked at Mandy. There was a small red dot moving slowly up her leg, near the knee.

"John, Mandy. Into the trees. Now!" I grabbed Mandy and pulled her down, rolling us into the undergrowth and behind a tree. I didn't know where John was.

The shot followed immediately. It seemed to carom off the edge of the tree just above our heads. I don't believe the shooter had had a clear shot ... he was just hoping for a lucky hit as we dove for cover.

If I hadn't noticed the laser range-finding dot moving up her leg ...

I heard John scramble behind a tree next to ours. "How far away do you think they are?" he shouted. He was scared.

So was I.

"They're about half a kilometre away" I told them.

I couldn't do the math, but at a full second between the bullet striking the tree and the sound of the rifle firing, which I'd clearly heard, and the fact that the bullet, moving at 3000 feet per second, was travelling at three times the speed of sound, the shooter had to be about 1500 feet away. Or roughly half a kilometre.

We'd had to memorize stuff like that when I was in the Armed Forces. It was made harder by the necessity of switching between metric and non-metric units. I'd always disliked math. But I was good at memorizing things. Especially things that could save your life.

“OK, guys ... how are you doing?”

Mandy was shaking. She didn't say anything. Neither did John. He just looked at me, as if expecting me to do something.

“Here's what we're going to do. Do you see that low area about ten metres behind us?”

They both looked.

“I want you to crawl towards it. Don't stop, and keep low to the ground. We should be pretty safe, with those trees in front of us.”

I could see that they didn't want to move, I didn't blame them. But we had to put some distance between us and the shooter. Or shooters. Maybe all three of them were out there.

So I went first. I crawled quickly toward the low spot, which turned out to be an old stream bed. No water, but it would keep us out of sight for a while.

I looked behind me. John and Mandy hadn't wasted any time ... they fell into the depression beside me seconds later.

“OK, now we need to move fast, OK? Keep low, and follow me. Don't stop for anything.”

I set out at a pretty fast clip, bent well over to keep my head from showing above the edge of the creek bed. I could hear John and Mandy right behind me.

The gully ended after about thirty metres. There was a small rise to the left. We went up and over it as quickly as possible, and found ourselves in a small clearing. We could move faster now; we kept going, and pushed our way into the thick undergrowth on the other side. We stopped and crouched down. We were all winded.

“I can't ... this is too much. I need to rest.” It was Mandy.

“OK, we'll stop here. But just for a few minutes”.

I couldn't figure out how those guys were keeping up with us, dressed the way they were. I needed to find a high spot, or a tree ...

There was a tree a few metres away that looked like it was climbable. “Stay here ... I'll be right back.

When I was about ten metres or so above the ground, hidden in the thick foliage of the tree, I spotted them. They were not far from the creek bed we'd used. There were two of them.

They weren't in suits. They were wearing hunting gear, with what looked like sturdy outdoor boots. One of them had a pair of binoculars. Both carried rifles.

Apparently they'd had supplies with them. And for whatever reason, they wanted us. Or at least John. But they must know there were three of us by now. Obviously at least one of them had good tracking skills.

I wondered where the third man had got to.

When I'd climbed down, John and Mandy were huddled together at the base of the tree.

"They're going to get us, man. I know it!" John said. Mandy was crying softly to herself.

I sat down beside them. "Listen, guys. There's just two of them. And as long as we keep out of sight, they can't find us." I wasn't really sure about that. We were leaving sign that a blind man could follow. "It will be dark soon. We can get some rest. They'll have to stop too."

Neither of them looked convinced, but after emptying the water bottles we set out again. I led them back toward the lake.

As we walked, I talked to them about walking carefully so as not to disturb things around them. Being careful not to leave tracks, not breaking branches as they walked, or stepping on twigs that would break. I tried to stay on dry ground as much as possible. But as we got closer to the lake, the ground would get wetter.

When we reached the edge of the lake, I had an idea.

I stamped around on the ground near the water's edge, and I had them do the same thing. Then I took off my shirt. I dropped it on the ground.

"Take off something. Anything. Not your shoes. Leave it on the ground here". Mandy had a sweater that was still tied around her neck by the sleeves. I was surprised she still had it. John took off his shoes, and removed his socks. Then he put his shoes back on.

I wanted the men following us to think that we'd swum across the lake. It wasn't very wide here, maybe half a kilometre. I didn't want to actually do that; if they caught up to us while we were in the water, they'd be able to pick us off easily with a rifle.

"OK, let's go. This way." I led them into the water, and then parallel to the shore. Around the next bend we found some rocks that we were able to climb on to. The same rocky outgrowth led up from the shore and into the bush.

"Stay on the rocks. Keep close."

Although we were leaving wet footprints, they would dry quickly in the late afternoon sun.

We kept going in a straight line away from the lake and the men. After the rocky ground gave way to underbrush, we slowed, but we kept moving. We walked until dusk, with no sign of the men behind us. I found a thick patch of willows with a small clear area in behind it. I decided we'd stop there for the night.

We all collapsed on the ground. It was time to take stock of our supplies, such as they were. None of us was carrying a pack; we'd sent everything out with the first van load. But maybe, between the three of us, we'd have something useful.

I'd kept the empty water bottles. Water wouldn't be a problem, even away from the lake; there were creeks and underground streams everywhere. We'd already passed one, where I'd refilled the bottles. I also had my hunting knife in a sheath at my waist, a fire-starting kit (which we couldn't use, not with those guys so close), and in the cargo pockets on my leg ... some chocolate bars! I'd forgotten about those. I also had a small bottle of bug repellent.

John had a waist pouch, and he surprised me when he showed me what was in it. A compass, some matches, a small mirror, a large coil of thin rope, and some candy.

We wouldn't need the compass. Without knowing where we were going, our best bet was simply to walk in a straight line until we came across a road or trail. I knew there were lots of those in the park, even if they weren't used much. I wouldn't need the compass to keep heading in the same direction; even if we veered a little, it wouldn't matter. We had no real destination, just away from those guys behind us.

Mandy didn't have much. But she did have a rather large tube of mascara. Maybe we could use that tomorrow. We were all wearing dark clothes, but our white faces would show from a distance, even through leaves. Mixed with a little mud, the mascara would help fix that.

We divided up the candy and chocolate bars, and ate everything. After some more water and a discreet visit to the bush for a washroom break. Then I showed them how to dig a small hole in the ground to rest their hips in, so they could lie comfortably.

Before we went to sleep, we prayed together. All three of us asked God to get us out of the mess we'd found ourselves in, without anyone else getting hurt. And we asked that our families would find the strength to believe that we would be found. Mandy prayed that her boyfriend would somehow get over her. I smiled to myself.

Then we tried to get some sleep.

Five minutes later all of us were waving away the cloud of mosquitoes that had found us. I passed around my bottle of bug repellent. The stuff was about 99% DEET, and

would probably remove paint, but it was effective. The mosquitoes still hummed around us, but they didn't land.

We slept fitfully, but we slept.

In the morning, after applying some mud and mascara to our faces, we set out again. Very soon we came across a deer track that was heading more or less in the direction we were, so we followed that.

After two hours of walking we came across another small creek and decided to stop. I was pretty sure we'd left our followers well behind, and was feeling confident that eventually we'd get out of here. But nothing was guaranteed; these guys seemed determined to find us.

We were on another animal trail that had ended at the creek. As we stepped into the bush on the other side, I heard a deep buzzing.

I immediately knew what it was. Yes, there about ten metres in front of us ... a large nest of paper wasps. The nest was suspended in the fork of a small sapling, about seven feet above the ground.

I really hate wasps, but this presented us with an opportunity to maybe slow down the men following us, if they managed to track us this far.

I sat down with John and Mandy and told them what I was about to do. "Isn't that dangerous?" Mandy asked.

"Not if I'm careful. A lot of the wasps will be out foraging, and I'll pacify the ones still in the nest with some smoke."

I took John's thin rope and unwound it. Digging into the moist ground, I coated my hands with dirt and mud, and used it to coat the rope thoroughly enough so that it ended up being dirty brown rather than white. It needed to be invisible against the underbrush. Next I found a stick and wrapped it with dried moss and lichens. I thoroughly soaked it with bug repellent. I sliced some rubber off the heel of my boot for good measure, and stuck that in with the moss. I tied the whole thing together with some of John's rope. Then I borrowed his T-shirt and wrapped it around my head.

"OK, you guys go way around the nest and meet me about a hundred metres or so, towards that rocky outcropping". I pointed to the small rise, which was just visible through the trees.

I gave them a few minutes to get clear. The next step would be a little dangerous. But it would be worth it if it worked.

I prepared some sticks, cutting a V-shaped notch in one of them, on the ground where I was. This would form the release trigger for the snare. Then I lit the moss and lichens. As they burned, they made a thick cloud of acrid smoke. Perfect.

I approached the nest very slowly. I couldn't see any wasps, but I could hear them, and I knew there were probably lots of them in there. I waved the smoke around under the nest, and held it there for almost a minute. A lot of the smoke went up the hole at the bottom. Good ... that should make them drowsy. I hoped.

Carefully I attached an end of the rope to the sapling just below the nest, and even more carefully I backed away. When I reached the spot where I was going to set the snare, I carefully pulled on the rope, bending the sapling over so it was almost to the ground.

I pulled the rope around the base of a small tree and set the trigger. Actually this was going to be a snare in reverse; when someone walked through the rope, it would release, allowing the sapling to snap back to vertical. I was hoping the wasps wouldn't be happy with their sudden carnival ride.

I put out the burning moss, and buried it. Then I headed over to where John and Mandy were. "It's done. Let's get out of here."

We walked for about half an hour. We were in a clearing when we heard the float plane. Now I knew where the other guy had gone. He'd returned to get the plane, and was helping to look for us.

"Run", I yelled at John and Mandy. We headed for the trees ... but it was too late. I could see the plane now, passing across the sky in the distance, and I'm sure it was banking towards us as we plunged into the trees.

"Keep moving", I yelled again. "Don't stop".

We were running now. If I'd been alone, I would have turned back toward the two, and tried somehow to ambush them as they'd passed by me. I'd done more dangerous things in Afghanistan. But I couldn't risk it, not with Mandy and John with me.

Another twenty minutes. And then we had some luck. An old cabin, probably used by a trapper or someone like that, long abandoned. It was in a small cleared area.

All the walls were still standing, and most of the roof remained. And there was a small chimney. We went inside.

"Can we hide here? I'm tired of running." Mandy was looking like she was at the end of her rope; she was perspiring heavily, like all of us, and the mud and mascara were making long streaks down her face. And she was bent over, breathing heavily, and I'd noticed she was limping a little.

“How are you making out, Mandy? We can’t stop here. What’s wrong with your leg?”

“I’m just so tired, Mr. C. I didn’t get much sleep last night ... the mosquitoes kept me awake. And I think I tripped over a root or something. I twisted my ankle.”

I had a look. It wasn’t swollen, or sore to the touch. But it was causing her some pain.

“You’ll just have to limp for a while, until we can find some place safe to rest. I’m going to try to slow them down a little.”

I looked around the cabin. There wasn’t much here ... a wood stove, some very old and dry wood, some boards, and old blanket ... and hanging on the back wall, four leg hold traps!

Knowing exactly what I needed to do, I first started a fire in the wood stove, and when it was burning steadily, I ripped apart the blanket and threw it on the fire and closed the grate. The smoke should bring them right to the cabin.

They’d figure we thought we were safe, and would be confident. I wanted them confident.

I pulled the traps down off the wall. None of them was really large, but they would do some damage to a foot.

Outside the door, the ground was rough and uneven. I set all four traps and put the biggest two on the ground in front of the closed door. It was the only way into the cabin ... there weren’t any windows. The other smaller ones I set out on either side of the door. Then I carefully covered all four with leaves and small twigs. I took my time, making sure the traps were nearly invisible in the clutter on the ground.

Then we set out, *back toward where the men were coming from*. I thought we had maybe twenty minutes before they showed up. I wanted them to pass us, so we could head back toward the landing and the road. They wouldn’t be expecting that.

I steered John and Mandy at a right angle away from where we expected them to be coming from. We moved a good two hundred metres in that direction, and then headed back towards the lake. After about five minutes, I found a thick wall of undergrowth, and we burrowed our way in.

We were completely out of sight, unless one of them stumbled over us. We waited, and listened. I told John to wrap something around Mandy’s ankle so that she would be able to walk with a little less pain.

We didn't have long to wait. We heard them as they approached. It looked like they would pass about fifty metres in front of us, through thick bush. We could hear them talking.

"I don't care how long it takes. I want those three bastards dead. Especially the one who saw me. They're out here alone, unarmed. We'll catch up to them eventually."

"But, Allen ... I can hardly see. And my arm ..."

"It's just a few bee stings. Get over it! Now shut up ... we should be getting close to where we saw the smoke."

They moved past us.

I smiled. It seemed that my jury-rigged wasp nest had caught at least one of them. Maybe the leg-hold traps would get the other one. In any case, we weren't going to stick around to find out.

We waited five minutes, and then carefully and very quietly started walking in the direction of the lake. As we were moving out, I heard screaming in the distance behind us. Bingo.

John laughed quietly. "You got them, Mr. C!"

Maybe. It would slow them down some, but a leg hold trap wouldn't incapacitate either of them. I was hoping that they would keep searching in the direction we'd been heading.

We must have fooled them. We didn't see or hear them again that day. Late in the evening we arrived at the lake.

I thought we must be quite a ways down the lake from the landing. That was OK; I knew which way we had to go to cut across the road. But that would have to wait until morning. We were all exhausted.

We all needed to wash. John and I went back into the bush a ways, out of sight of the lake, to make a campsite, while Mandy went for a swim and washed out her clothes. When she rejoined us, the two of us went to do the same thing. The water was wonderfully cold, and it felt good to be clean again.

Our campsite was pretty simple ... a cleared area with room for all of us to stretch out, which we promptly did. I passed around the rest of the bug repellent, and all three of us managed to get some sleep.

Early the next morning I pulled one more chocolate bar from my pocket. I hadn't told John and Mandy I'd been saving it, and I let them share it. Our bottles were full of lake water when we set out along the shoreline towards where I hoped the road would be.

After hiking for most of the day, we still hadn't reached the landing we'd used, and there was no sign of the road. I knew we'd cross it eventually, but at least there was no sign of our pursuers.

And then it happened. Mandy was stepping across a fallen tree when we heard the rattle. She screamed, and stumbled away from the log.

I got to her as quickly as I could. She was on the ground, holding her leg just above the boot. John was frightened: "It was a rattlesnake, wasn't it? Where is it? We need to kill it!"

I calmed him down. "It's gone, John. It won't stick around". It was a Massasauga rattler. They avoid humans whenever possible, and will only strike if they're disturbed or stepped on, which is what Mandy must have done.

"Is she going to die? We're a long way from help!"

Mandy was crying. "It hurts!"

I pulled up her pant leg. Massasauga rattlers have short fangs, and the cloth of her pants had absorbed much of the bite. There were two tiny puncture marks on the skin, and some swelling, but it looked like only a tiny amount of venom had penetrated.

"She'll be all right. But we'll have to do some things for her."

This particular rattlesnake is the only one native to Ontario, and it's relatively harmless to healthy adults. There would be antivenin available in the nearest hospital, but as long as Mandy didn't exert herself, and the leg was kept lower than her heart, the minimal amount of venom she'd received shouldn't do her any permanent damage.

I'd been trained in cutting between the fang punctures and extracting the venom by suction, but that needed a special device; sucking with my mouth wouldn't do much good. But I tied a piece of rope loosely around her leg to help keep the venom from moving up into her body; I'd loosen it once in a while.

I told Mandy to relax. I boosted her onto my back, and we set out again.

An hour and a half later, we hit the road. I wasn't sure what the guys following us were doing or where they were, but they could be back at the original campsite by now, or even on the road looking for us. So we camped in the bush a few metres from the road, out of sight, and waited for a vehicle to come along. The fact that we'd been missing from our pickup location should mean that people were out looking for us. I hoped.

And, yes, within fifteen minutes I heard a vehicle slowly making its way towards us. I risked a glance out through the foliage. Miracle of miracles, it was a police car! I jumped out and waved him down, as I called to John and Amanda. The pair came out onto the road with me, John now carrying his sister on his back.

The cop got out and walked towards us. "You must be the three we've been looking for all this time. Are you all right? Where have you been?"

John burst out: "Did you find the bodies? The guys who did it have been following us for two days. They tried to kill us too!"

"Bodies? What are you talking about? Maybe you'd better start from the beginning!"

So I told him what had happened. I'm not sure he believed us. But he said, "You say they left two people dead ... how far from your drop-off point?"

"I think about half a mile" John jumped in. "You didn't find them?"

"We've been searching the roads, and we did do a search of your campsite area. But not that far out. We were planning to bring in some dogs and do a massive search of the area tomorrow. But let's go; you can show me where the bodies are. There are a couple of detectives from our office in North Bay who've been here all day, coordinating the search. They're at your drop-off point."

We all piled into the officer's car. I took the front seat beside him, and John and Mandy sat in the back. "The girl was bitten by a rattler about two hours ago" I told him. "Not much venom went in; at some point we'll have to take her to the hospital."

"There's an antivenin kit at the main park office" the officer told us. "We can look after her there."

The drive back to the site took about twenty minutes. We had to stop once as a bear ambled across the roadway. I was glad we hadn't run into him in the bush!

We approached the site slowly. I could see the two detectives standing together near the water. They were looking our way. One was tall, the other short and muscular. I'd take them over to show them the bodies. John and Mandy could ...

I noticed that one of them, the short one, had a lot of swelling on his face, particularly around the eyes ...

"Mr. C! Mr. C! It's the guy! The tall one! That's the one who killed those other two!"

I yelled at the cop to stop the car. He slammed on the brakes. "What ...?"

The tall man was raising a rifle he'd been concealing at his side. He took aim at the car and fired. I heard the bullet shatter the front glass. The officer beside me grunted, and slumped over, his blood spraying everywhere.

I reacted without thinking. The car was still in gear; I reached over with my foot and mashed down on the accelerator. As the cruiser leapt forward I aimed it at the two. The rifle was coming up again, but he didn't have time. The car ploughed into both of them; they bounced off the hood, and the car came to an abrupt stop with its nose buried in the edge of the lake.

Mandy and John were both yelling, but I ignored it. I jumped out and went back to the two men on the ground. Neither was going to be a problem for us; it looked like both had at least one broken leg, and probably internal injuries as well. I took their weapons and emptied them, and then went to see if the kids were all right.

Both were fine, although they were pretty shaken up. I helped them out of the car and led them over to a shady spot where they could rest while I dealt with some other things.

First I got on the car's radio and explained what had happened, and asked for immediate help ... everything they could send. The police officer was barely conscious, but he had a massive wound in his shoulder and was in a lot of pain ... he would need immediate medical care. I helped him out onto the ground, made him as comfortable as possible, and tried to stop the bleeding. I was still with him when the ambulances and more police cars started to arrive. It was over.

Later, while we waited for a ride, John and his sister sat down beside me. It looked like Mandy wanted to talk.

"Mr. C, you probably could have killed those two guys any time you wanted to. How come you didn't?"

"Mandy, I'm a Christian, and so are you. You know that wouldn't have been the right thing to do. Besides, I think God meant for me to keep the two of you safe. I couldn't do both things."

"But in Afghanistan ..."

"I know, Mandy. But I don't think they're the same." Actually, I wasn't sure what the difference was. I just knew that I didn't want to kill anyone again. I'd already asked forgiveness for what I'd had to do.

"Anyway, Mr. C, I'm sorry for being such a sh.."

"Mandy!" She laughed.

“Such an unpleasant person,” she continued “on the trip, I mean. And afterwards, when they were chasing us. You were saving our lives, and I was acting like a ...”

“Spoiled brat!” John helped out.

We all laughed, and then hugged each other as our ride arrived.

In the aftermath, it was determined that the two detectives had been involved with importing guns and drugs. They’d been arranging drop-offs at the lake for years. Something must have gone wrong; they’d killed two of their suppliers, probably hoping to bury them where they would never be found. But they’d realized that their whole operation would collapse if they didn’t deal with John.

The third man, the one flying the float plane, was never identified, although the plane turned up several days later at the island airport in Toronto. The two who had been chasing us survived, and were currently in custody in the hospital. Our testimony would help put them away for a long time.

John and Mandy returned to their family with a great story to tell. I heard later that Mandy and her boyfriend got back together. I was happy for them.

The school authorities weren’t sure what to make of our adventure. We’d been running this trip safely for years, and what had happened probably would never ever occur again. There was talk of cancelling it next year. But I talked them out of it.

Although I couldn’t help wonder if a nice safe trip to Canada’s Wonderland every year might not be a lot more restful!