



# ROGUE BEAR ON THE RAMPAGE

By LYN HANCOCK

On her way to start a new life, Patti McConnell and her children stopped for a dip. Their timing couldn't have been worse

**H**AVING DELIVERED the last of his explosives to seismic crews working on the Alaska Highway in Canada's far north-west, Ray Kitchen, a 56-year-old truckie from Fort Nelson, British Columbia, decided to stop off at the Liard River Hotsprings Provincial Park. There, his 11-year-old daughter, Joline, and her friend Sarah, who were along for the drive, could enjoy a swim.

A tropic-like oasis in the boreal forest, the hot springs were a popular tourist haven complete

**Kelly McConnell** - The sight of his mother's blood on the bear's canines spurred the 13-year-old to action

PHOTO: JACQUELYNNE WOODS/MICHELLE/ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

with campsites and a playground. It was August 14, 1997.

As Kitchen relaxed beside the springs, watching the girls play, terrifying screams suddenly erupted from the park's famous Hanging Gardens. The sound jolted Kitchen to his feet.

He rushed along a rain-slicked boardwalk and up some wooden stairs to reach the gardens' viewing platform - and stopped, horrified. On the wooden structure, a huge bear straddled a young boy beside the motionless form of a woman. Both were covered with blood from deep gashes in their swimsuit-clad bodies.

**P**ATTI McCONNELL had been driving north from Paris, Texas, for over a week, heading for Alaska to start a new life. The vivacious 37-year-old mother hoped to get a job there and raise her two kids, Kelly, 13, and Kristin, seven.

It had been a tiring trip, and the children were delighted when McConnell turned off the highway and into the Liard River park.

The family wasted no time slipping into their swimmers, and in bare feet they hurried along the boardwalk and into the crystal-clear 53-degree water of the lower pool. After a long, hot soak, they headed for the more secluded upper pool some 340 metres farther into the bush.

Kristin soon got bored and raced

back along the boardwalk to the lower pool, where she'd made some friends. "Slow down or you're gonna slip!" McConnell yelled as her daughter tore off round a bend. She and Kelly got up to follow. As they reached the turn-off leading to the Hanging Gardens, Kelly said, "Let's go see them, Mum."

Climbing a flight of steps through the bush, they came to a viewing platform. So intent were mother and son on identifying the exotic plants, they paid no attention to a rustling in the bushes beside the boardwalk. McConnell glanced at her watch. "Kelly, I'm worried about Kristin. I'm going to find her."

McConnell started down the wet steps. As she reached for the railing to steady herself, something drew her attention. She looked up into the eyes of a black bear - a big adult male sitting in the shrubbery chewing on a dogwood branch.

McConnell froze. "Kelly... bear!" she hissed.

"Sure, Mum!" With his back to her, Kelly thought she was joking.

"Kelly!"

This time he turned round to find an animal taller than him staring intently at his mother. Remembering what he had heard about bears, he said, "Mum, don't make any sudden movements."

Cautiously, Kelly edged towards his mother. The bear snorted, then lunged through the railing and



onto the boardwalk. "Mum! Run!" Galvanised by her son's screams, McConnell moved as fast as she could, the bear charging after her. She ran up the steps to the viewing platform - and was trapped.

Kelly saw in horror the bear engulf his mother's almost naked body with its own. Despite his slight stature, the 13-year-old ran at the creature and kicked it in the face. "Get off my mum!"

The bear looked up, grunted and went back to its prey.

Searching for a weapon, Kelly snatched up a sawn-off tree limb. With a strength born of anger, he

smashed at the bear's head, all the while screaming for help.

The sight of his mother's blood on the bear's canines spurred Kelly on. Lunging furiously with his stick, he hit the animal squarely on the nose, drawing blood. The bear growled and swung a paw at Kelly, ripping deep claw marks into his neck and shoulders.

Then he came after the terrified boy. Kelly crumpled under the animal's massive weight. He felt its teeth crunch round his waist as it lifted him into the air and swung him around like a dog playing with a rag doll. Just as he was about to pass out, the animal flung him to the deck. Kelly rolled into a ball.

His mother lay beside him, her skin ashen, her eyes open and unblinking. He tried to crawl towards her, but the bear pounced again, tearing chunks out of his flesh. The animal's foul, rancid breath made Kelly want to vomit. He closed his eyes. He knew he was about to die.

**R**AY KITCHEN quickly took in the horrifying scene. Grabbing a fallen tree branch, he hammered it against the railing.

"Hey! Get off!" he yelled. The bear paid no attention. Kitchen tore off a bigger branch and rammed it into the bear's stomach, hoping to push the animal away from the child.

The bear rose from his victim and charged towards Kitchen. The impact

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## Clad only in swimmers, Ray Kitchen tried to pry

knocked him right through the railing, bear and man tumbling into the bush. Clad only in his swimmers, Kitchen tried to protect his body from the bear's slashing claws by scrambling on his knees to a tree and covering his head with his hands. He began yelling for help.

**F**RANK HEDINGHAM, 71, was lounging on a deck overlooking the lower pool when he heard the screams. Just a bunch of kids, he thought. Then Hedingham heard shouts: "Help!" "Bear!" "Get a gun!" He immediately took off in their direction.

Just ahead of him on the boardwalk were Ingrid Bailey, a wilderness firefighter and paramedic from California, and her friend, Brad Westervelt. News that a bear was about had spread quickly, and frantic people were fleeing towards the car park.

But Bailey, who regularly parachuted into fires in remote areas, was used to bears. She, Westervelt and Hedingham pressed on, gathering sticks and chunks of wood as they ran.

At the viewing platform, they saw two bloodstained bodies on the deck. But it was the terrifying scene below the deck that riveted them. Kitchen, still alive, was struggling weakly. The bear's jaws were clamped tight round his upper arm and shoulder, its claws slashing at his already torn and bloody body.

Bailey began hurling her chunks

of wood at the bear. "Get off him," she screamed, stamping her feet and pounding the railing with a stickless as her efforts did nothing to distract the animal.

Hedingham and Westervelt, meanwhile, had spotted a long, thick tree trunk. It was heavy and cumbersome, but they levered it over the railing. Using it as a battering ram, all three heaved together, but that, too, failed to drive the animal off.

*We need a gun, Bailey thought desperately. Where's the park ranger?*

As if reading her thoughts, Westervelt dropped his end of the tree. "I'm going to find a ranger," he yelled and raced off. Hedingham, with a history of heart attacks, was exhausted but vainly continued to pound away at the bear.

Suddenly the bear shifted its position, clamped its jaws round its victim's neck and threw him into the air. "No!" Bailey screamed frantically.

The bear hesitated and dropped Kitchen to the ground. His face gouged, his windpipe ripped out, his neck almost severed, Kitchen was dead.

Bailey turned to the other victims. She knelt beside McConnell and felt for a pulse. She knew the woman was dead, but her training dictated that she try to resuscitate her. She set to work.

Just then Kelly moaned, and Hedingham rushed to his side.

Suddenly the bear's left paw

is body from the bear's claws by scrambling on his knees to a tree

curled over the edge of the deck centimetres from Kelly's feet.

Panicked, Hedingham stood up and delivered a vicious kick with his boots. The animal staggered back, but instead of retreating, it moved down the slope towards the boardwalk, where people were still passing.

Hedingham turned back to the boy, who was trying to crawl to his mother. "Help my mum," he pleaded in a whisper.

"Don't worry," Hedingham said. "We're doing all we can. You mustn't move. Breathe slowly."

Hedingham, who had first-aid training, took a handkerchief from his jacket to mop blood from the worst of the gashes. "What we really need," Bailey said, "are towels to act as compresses and two more pairs of hands for CPR."

As if in answer, several men bounded up the stairs. One had a towel and knew CPR (cardiopulmonary resuscitation). He helped Hedingham bind the boy's wounds. Another man assisted Bailey, compressing McConnell's chest while Bailey breathed into her mouth.

The bear had gone. *But where is the ranger?* Bailey wondered.

"We must get them to hospital," Hedingham said desperately. "I'm going for help."

Suddenly, they heard new screams

ringing through the trees. Oh, God, Hedingham thought, the bear is at it again!

ARIE VAN DER VELDEN, 28, a university research assistant, had been soaking in the upper pool when he



Raw courage - Kelly McConnell and Frank Hedingham were an inspiration to author Lyn Hancock (left)

became aware of a commotion coming from the bush. Along with other bathers, he left the pool and hurried down the boardwalk. He had almost reached the turn-off to the Hanging Gardens when someone yelled: "A bear's coming! Run for your lives!"

Everyone turned and ran, but Van der Velden slipped and fell into the bush. In seconds the bear was there

and launched itself on top of him, slashing at his body. Van der Velden kicked the animal's nose, he even tried pulling the bear's ears, but nothing could deter the beast. Van der Velden felt a searing pain as the bear's claws hooked into his flesh, and then the bear bit deep into his left thigh.

**D**AVE WEBB, a 49-year-old businessman from Alaska, had just arrived at the park when an exhausted man dripping blood from his temple ran up. "You've got to do something. There's a bear up there!" Hedingham panted, explaining what had happened. Webb nodded, raced back to his caravan and brought out two rifles.

To a young man standing nearby, he shouted, "Do you know how to use a gun?"

"I do," said Duane Eggebrotten, 27. They loaded up and set off at a run down the boardwalk.

Eggebrotten arrived at the scene first. He heard low groans coming from below the boardwalk. The bear now had Van der Velden propped against a log and was feeding on him. Eggebrotten aimed carefully for the back of the bear's neck, then fired.

The bear slumped down. Eggebrotten knew it was dead, but he fired twice more to be sure.

Up on the viewing platform, Bailey still tending to McConnell and her, heard the shots. All the pent-up tension and anger poured out of her. "Shoot again!" she cried. "Shoot it again!"

The horror at Liard River Hot springs was finally over.

*PATTI MCCONNELL died that afternoon. But thanks to the courage of Ray Kitchen, Ingrid Bailey, Frank Hedingham and the others, Kelly McConnell and Arie Van der Velden survived. Flown out to a hospital, they both eventually recovered from their terrible wounds.*

*In Fort Nelson on August 22, more than 500 mourners turned out to honour the bravery of Ray Kitchen. In a letter to Kitchen's wife, US President Bill Clinton wrote, "The heroism and selflessness that your husband displayed coming to the aid of Patti and Kelly McConnell is an example of all that is noble and good in human nature."*

*From the Canadian government, Kitchen received the Star of Courage posthumously in September 1998. Frank Hedingham, Kelly McConnell, Ingrid Bailey and Brad Westervelt were also awarded decorations for bravery.*