
The Secret of Kite Hill

Chapter 1: I'll go in if you go in.

By Bradley, Liam & Luca Charbonneau

There's safety in numbers. Right? Hello?

“Keep an eye on it, Lu! Watch where it goes. If it goes into the spooky brush, I'm not getting it!” I said, not really joking. The brush was spooky. There are some dog ball products that are too bouncy. The orange ones with the blue stripes. Maybe they're good on the beach or in the desert or on the moon, but in a smaller park with boundaries—especially haunted ones—they're just too bouncy.

The ball ricocheted like an exaggerated cartoon bouncy ball and went right into the brush. Damn.

I'm the adult, I should be able to say, “OK, kids, now don't try this at home, but I'm going to get the ball.” I should be able to say that. Well, I can say that, but then I'm supposed to go get the ball. What happens when the adult isn't sure what's in that brush? It's not like there are rattlesnakes in the city. Or bears. Or mountain lions. But there might be raccoons, coyotes or worse, rats.

The three of us plus the dog made it down to the edge of the brush. I had gone near it once, to get a ball, of course, but hadn't really gone in. It was overgrown with ivy and vines and I wasn't sure where one bush started and the other ended. There were some two-by-fours on the ground, maybe someone had camped out. A huge mound of brush seemed to lead down the hill and it was hard to judge how deep it went.

“Did you see if the ball went right here, Lu? Right in this opening? This door?” I asked.

He nodded hesitantly. I'm not sure if he was hesitant because he didn't want to give me bad news or if he didn't want to think about going into the dark den.

It was dusk, the sun was setting over the hill and we didn't have much time. I'd just have to go in and get the ball. But it was so small. We all three inched closer to the opening. It did seem like a bear den. The portal would almost let my 8-year old walk in without ducking. But then it was hard to judge what was next. Our dog Pepper inched closer, but also wasn't bounding around in a big hurry to enter. That was concerning. Although he did often bark at structures that looked like small robots, his sense of judgment and danger weren't those that you'd want to rely on in an actual dangerous situation. This wasn't dangerous, this was just spooky. Right, Lu?

As an adult, I was trying to act adultly. Trying.

The vines and brush provided something of an optical illusion. If you moved just slightly to a side, the entrance was almost completely camouflaged, but if you moved a little more, you could see it. The vines and twigs and leaves were somehow naturally arranged to provide a secret entrance that was secret from most perspectives, but not all. It was something like those postcards with the ribbed covering on them where if you turned it to an angle, it would show a photo of a coyote but then if you turned it slightly, it was another photo, maybe the coyote looking fierce with its jaws open and dripping with drool. Maybe the coyote example isn't the best one at this point.

"So did it go in to the left or to the right?" I asked anyone who would listen. The question itself didn't make much sense as the opening wasn't that large and there almost wasn't a left or right to speak of. No one answered anyway. I looked at my boys. They looked at me, but didn't say anything. I wonder if they were thinking the same horror movie thoughts that I was. I hope not, they haven't even seen horror movies yet. I inched closer.

We were at the entrance. I poked my head in. It seemed impossibly dark inside. Even just inside. It didn't make sense that just a few vines, branches, and leaves could provide such cover from the sun. I reached out

for my 10-year old's hand and even made the excuse that it was steep and that I needed to hold on for balance. He held on.

"Do you see it?" asked Li, but his voice, although not loud, made me jump and I slipped and slid into the cave feet first. I thought I was going to keep sliding, but I stopped abruptly as my feet hit something down further below. "Are you OK?" asked Lu.

"Yeah," I said from my position on the ground. From where I was, I could see deeper into the brush, but I couldn't judge how deep it was. I turned and sat down and stabilized myself just inside. It was getting darker quickly. It occurred to me that we weren't going to find this ball. But at this point, I was mesmerized by the depth perception as I still couldn't see so well. I squinted and pushed my head forward just a little, tried to focus, tried to see where this went.

I looked down and to the left. It couldn't be. From the outside, it was just a spaghetti of twigs and not taller than me. But I looked again down and in. I silently turned to my boys, put my finger to my eye and then moved my hand so they would follow my finger and look where I was looking. They did.

They slowly squinted and jostled and moved their heads closer in as well. It took just a few seconds for them to see what I was seeing. But I know when they did. Their mouths dropped open slightly and slowly. Both of their eyes grew wide and then they both looked at me.