

JANN EVERARD

## MOTHER BEAR

FROM HER SEAT IN THE STERN of a double kayak, Amanda placed a restraining hand on the single kayak occupied by her husband, Marc. Their friend, Frasier, in a second double, made the same gesture, sandwiching the smaller craft while the paddlers assessed the possibility of a campsite. Pacific waters rolled beneath the makeshift trimaran, lifting and dropping the boats in small heaves. Amanda shifted on the hard plastic seat, eager to be on land again.

“So, what do you think?” Marc asked. He peered out over the tidal flat that jutted out before them. It was hard to tell if the strip of beach between the distant driftwood marking high tide and the dense forest beyond was wide enough to set up camp.

Frasier looked down at the plastic map case strapped in front of him. “This is the last point of land we have to round before we head back up the sound. It’s definitely the place the outfitter said had a problem bear.” He pulled a wrapped candy from the pocket of his neoprene spray skirt and passed it on the flat of his paddle to his son, Joe, who was twisted backward in the bow.

“But the man on the first island we visited said the bear was shot last year.” Jennie smiled at Joe. “Honey, please close your mouth when you chew.”

Joe rolled his eyes at his mother. She shared a boat with Amanda, who gave Joe a wink and a grin. He looked back at her unmoved. She and Marc were just two more of his parents’ adult friends now that they’d moved away from the coast. No more Aunty Mandy.

Amanda shifted her gaze from the boy, still smiling, although it felt forced. Joe’s lack of answering affection was disappointing. “Look, we’re tired. It’s been a long day. We haven’t really seen any options and we’ll lose our light soon.” Her voice sounded whiny, she knew, but her arms ached from five full days of paddling, her butt was numb, and her blood sugar low.

“Let’s go for it, then,” Jennie said. “It’s an especially high tide tonight. We’re not going to do any better. And there’s a creek here. We’re low on fresh water.” She stretched her arms out, athletic, not muscle-weary, and added, “Besides, I can see that Joe’s tired.”

“I’m not tired,” Joe complained. “You’re tired.” He glared at his mother. Amanda was reminded of fights with her three brothers at Joe’s age. *You’re stupid. No, you’re stupid.* Cuffs to the head. Shared ice cream later.

Jennie’s back revealed nothing—no irritation with Joe’s churlish comments. Amanda wondered if Jennie and Frasier would have more children, younger brothers that Joe could push around. Moving away had put a damper on shared intimacies; the subject of children had not been raised for a long time.

The group continued to look out over the flat, almost the size of a football field. It would take an hour to haul the gear and the three kayaks across the soft sand. As the paddlers drifted closer to the muck, the incoming tide made the decision for them.

Frasier lifted his paddle and pointed to a spot to land. A slight incline at one end, it would make it easier to unload; they wouldn’t have to keep lifting the boats as the tide came in.

“Look, Mom! Moon snails!”

Joe had learned to love the richness of low tide. As soon as he’d clambered out of the kayak and stripped off his PFD, he began collecting the materials to make what he called a “beach golf” course with branches and strands of kelp. Marc threw him a stick that looked remarkably like a golf club. Joe had found it at their first campsite and Marc had ferried it on his single kayak each subsequent day, tied up with a bungee cord beside his fishing gear.

“I’ll beat you tonight,” Frasier said, tousling Joe’s sun-bleached fringe before his son ran off.

With Joe trailing behind, dragging kelp and twigs, Amanda and Jennie patrolled the forest edge looking for a place to set up camp while the men emptied the kayaks’ hatches of dry bags and food barrels. They’d all been unprepared for the difficulty this task would present each evening, expecting the uninhabited islands off the west coast to be full of choices to camp. Instead they’d discovered a very narrow margin between the debris marking high tide and the forest —often too narrow to set up a tent without risk of getting wet. And the forests were solid vegetation—no bare floors spread with aromatic pine needles like the forests in the east.

“Figures,” said Amanda. The women had reached the furthest-most point from where the kayaks had landed.

“I’m afraid this is the best spot,” said Jennie. “We’ll have to put the two tents up close together, though.”

Amanda merely nodded. It wasn’t as if she and Marc would get intimate; it wasn’t the right time of the month to conceive and they were so salt-covered and grimy after five days out that the prospect wasn’t that appealing. And Jennie and Frasier had Joe in their tent—no privacy there.

Amanda dumped several heavy bags in the crotch between two smooth driftwood logs and rolled her shoulders to ease the ache. “What was on the menu for tonight?”

“Joe, please don’t go far,” she added. Joe was already digging small pits for his nine-holed course close to the chosen site. He looked up at her with a frown and a very adult expression of condescension on his small-boy face. “I know that, Amanda,” he said, and she blushed, wondering why she’d blurted out a warning when Jennie was right there watching him. Jennie was always vigilant about his safety, whether he’d eaten, put on sunscreen, peed. She was a great mother. Nothing seemed to get to her.

Consulting a scrap of paper that was their menu plan, Jennie answered, “It’s chowder and apple crumble tonight. We didn’t really stop for lunch today. I’m starved. Where do you want to set up the stove?”

“There’s still plenty of time before the tide comes in. I guess we’ll cook out there somewhere.” Amanda gestured toward the expanse of marine debris in front of them. The evening routine was well set by this, the last night of their trip. The two tramped out onto the sand with the food barrel and cook sets to prepare the meal far enough away from their tent site that no food smells would linger to attract wild animals. Amanda’s stomach rumbled and her head felt light. It was true they hadn’t eaten well that day. It probably explained her crankiness.

“Just when he’s starting to enjoy it, it’s over,” Amanda mused, thrusting a chin in Joe’s direction.

She recalled Joe’s petulance when they’d started out. “I’m bored,” he’d whined. “But look at the beautiful landscape,” his mother had encouraged and he’d replied, “All I see is *trees*. Can I play with your cell phone?” Now he had an armful of the chalk-white moon shells, was washing them in a rivulet that ran from the creek forty feet from their site, holding them up to his ear like a small sea-god. He ran back to his golf course, used the moon

snails to mark the holes. He was a beautiful child. It was hard to look away. It was hard not to be envious.

“Yes, we’ll have to do this again,” said Jennie. “It’s been great having you two back here. I’ve missed our Friday night dinners and our girls’ night out. I’ve missed *you*.”

Amanda nodded. Jennie’s admission brought tears to her eyes, threatened what felt like only a thin sheath of control over erratic emotions.

The two women fell into what was now a ritual division of labour. Amanda crouched in front of a gas stove, primed it, then held a match to the small amount of white gas that she’d released. The stove flamed and, as the gas heated, hummed and produced a tidy ring of blue blaze. Jennie passed her Ziploc bags containing dried milk and vegetables. She dumped them into a pot on the stove, poured in water from a bottle, and then reached for a package of lingcod.

“I guess I have to de-bone the damned fish now. *Shit!*” Amanda’s finger had come into contact with the hot metal of the pot. She thrust it in her mouth. Again, tears flooded her eyes, not from the pain, but from some inexplicable sense of inadequacy next to Jennie’s calm and easy competence.

“Actually, Marc de-boned the fish last night,” said Jennie. She gave her friend a searching look that made Amanda squirm. She reddened, embarrassed. “Are you alright?” Jennie asked. “You’ve seemed a bit...”

Amanda averted her eyes, trying to regain emotional control. She shook her head and gave Jennie a lopsided smile of apology. She’d been snarky with Marc the night before, berated him for pouring over the maps while the rest of them had cleaned up the site after a particularly messy meal of fresh-caught fish. She’d been short tempered during the day, too, couldn’t seem to relax on this trip the way she’d been able to relax on other outdoor excursions. It had affected the groups’ mood. “I’m so stiff,” she complained as she rose from her crouch. “And I can’t wait to have a shower.” She looked down at her black stretch pants. White veins of dried salt ran through the fabric. The salt made her itch. She wanted to peel off her own skin.

Jennie acknowledged her by running a hand through her own hair. Cut short, it was plastered against her head, a bit greasy and dented by the hat she’d worn all day. “Will you look after the two stoves while I go filter some water in the creek? Otherwise we won’t have enough for coffee after dinner.” Jennie had started a second stove near Amanda’s. The sweet aromas of dried apples and cinnamon wafted into the air.

Amanda swallowed back a slight feeling of nausea at the mention of coffee. The acrid aroma of the thick brew they'd been making each night had, for some reason, turned her stomach. She'd been drinking tea. She gazed into the distance until she felt better. She could see the foreshortened figures of the two men lifting the red kayak and moving toward the forest edge. The yellow kayak was gone; the blue one was still resting on the sand next to a pile of dry bags and paddles. "I bet they're having trouble storing them," said Jennie. "Maybe I should go help."

Amanda took a deep breath and tried to find a reserve of energy that matched her friend's. Jennie hadn't complained once on this trip. In comparison, Amanda felt like she lacked maturity, wasn't ready for life's responsibilities. And the trip was not turning out to be the relaxing getaway that Marc had promised. To take her mind off *things*, he'd said. Today, he'd hardly spoken to her. Maybe it was a good thing the past year hadn't turned out as they'd planned.

"They'll be okay. I'll start setting up the site. We'll need kindling if I'm going to make Joe's dream bonfire." She adjusted small knobs on the stoves, listening until the hums became purrs.

Amanda was ready for the trip to end. It had been a wonderful respite from the city, but she was tired. Tired of the constant push-pull on the paddle on unused oblique muscles, the repetitive unpacking and repacking of gear. Truth be told, she was even a bit tired of the company and wanted to roll up in her own bed, knees to chest, alone. She loved Jennie and Frasier, like family really, but she wanted a release from group decision making and the constant companionship. It had all been a bit awkward—being thrown together again after a few years apart—when once they'd lived side by side and shared completely the rhythm of their days, shared, even, the care of Joe. As she moved away from the stoves, the image of a bear, hibernating in its den, seeped into her mind like a craving.

Jennie moved off toward the creek with the filter and empty water bottles. Amanda waved at Joe and began collecting the bone-like branches that would start their evening fire. Joe had been promised marshmallows on the last night. He'd been demanding a bonfire to make up for all the other nights when they'd opted for small fires, just enough to take off the chill once the sun went down. After Amanda had dumped her second pile, she kicked off her flip-flops and went barefoot, enjoying the cooling sensation of the sand against the puckered skin of her feet. They had been constantly wet for

five days and looked, she thought, like plucked, raw chicken. The thought made her slightly nauseous.

Jennie's whistle, high and urgent, broke into her thoughts.

Amanda swung around. It took her a second to pick Jennie out against the glare of the now-setting sun. Jennie was walking backward slowly. Not far from her, just on the other side of the narrow creek, was a massive bear just like the one Amanda had imagined only moments before.

Joe. Where was Joe? Amanda dumped her load of kindling and moved toward him. She didn't want to yell. Her eyes flicked between Joe, the bear and, quickly back toward the men. They were still distant, but were now fully loaded and making their way forward to Amanda's end of the beach. Too far for help, though. The bear was on the move, hunched, prowling, taking in, as she was, the location of each member of the party.

"Joe!" She was close enough now that she didn't have to yell. Sensing something in her voice, his head snapped up. "Come to me. Don't run." She gestured at the bear with her finger. The boy scampered up, eyes wide, arms out toward her like an unsteady toddler.

"Walk behind me," Amanda instructed. She moved crab-like, intent on obscuring Joe from the bear's view as much as possible, as she headed toward the visual protection of the deadfall where they had earlier dropped their gear. *Is the rule to drop and protect the neck for black bears or for grizzlies? Am I sure that's a black bear? I should make myself big. Where's my knife? Was there a stick in the pile I just dropped that was big enough to fight back? I should have grabbed Joe's club.*

The aroma of seafood, apples and cinnamon hit her. *Shit, shit, shit.* A bear brazen enough to appear in front of people like this was habituated to the smells of human food.

"Get behind the logs, Joe." Amanda's command sounded more concerned and authoritative than she intended. Joe whimpered a little but did as he was told.

The bear now looked bigger, pulsed, as if with each of Amanda's rapid exhales, the creature expanded like a balloon. It shook its huge head back and forth, something shiny held under its paw, something held between its teeth.

*Jennie? Oh, God, where was Jennie?* She'd been completely focused on Joe.

Jennie was sliding along the forest edge toward their protective pile of deadfall. As she reached them, Joe scampered to his mother's arms. Jennie mouthed "thank you" to Amanda as she gathered him in, her face crumpled.

Amanda gestured to Jennie to pass her a sack containing the remainder of their food—once filled with bulky breads that did not fit in the plastic barrels. She glanced around the site and picked up the bag containing her personal items. She would not leave so much as a mint-flavoured toothpaste anywhere near them. She rifled for the used tissues, destined for the fire, and was thankful she didn't have her period, although she really didn't know, in this moment of confusion, whether blood scents were an issue or not. Better to be careful. She glanced at Jennie with raised eyebrows, received a small shake of the head, then walked slowly toward the stoves holding her arms up high, forcing herself to be big and bold. She crouched, turned the stoves off, and dropped her handful of packages. With her eyes on the bear's bulk, she eased up and walked backward until her legs hit the logs. Jennie reached for her hand, helped her over.

Now she could check out the whereabouts of the men. They were approaching, unburdened of the heavy packs they used to portage the accumulation of smaller dry bags that fit in the kayaks' narrow hatches. They each carried paddles in one hand, stout sticks in the other. But they were still a distance, and as they picked their way forward, the bear fixed on their movement, and once again, began its slow curve on the flat past the camp site where Jennie and Amanda stood.

*If it runs towards us, how many seconds would it take to get here? How many seconds would it take for the guys to get here? Where's my god-damned Swiss Army knife? Front of neck or back? What about Joe?* Amanda's knuckles were white from the tension of her hand around the stick Jennie had passed her. The adrenaline coursing through her body was reaching every appendage; she tingled. She could hear Jennie's fast breathing, see her chest heaving in her peripheral vision.

The bear lunged forward.

"Shit!"

"Mommy!" Joe struggled up from his seat in the sand and both women put a hand down on his shoulders, pushing him back to the ground. The bear loped, then ran from the beach to the forest, but not toward the women. Toward the men.

It was an illusion. As it got closer to the forest edge, the women could see that the bear's trajectory took it behind Marc and Frasier, closer to where the men had left the gear when they'd become aware of the situation. The bear disappeared into the trees with a few cracks of brush.

Within seconds, within the time it took Amanda to fill her lungs jerkily with gulps of air, Marc and Frasier arrived. Marc gathered Amanda in his arms; Frasier embraced his small family.

“Oh God, I know I’ve been near bears before, but that felt so different!” Amanda whispered. “Maybe because Joe was here. Or the way the bear looked at us. I felt like my instincts were different.”

“You were great, hon,” Marc said. “Perfect—the way you got Joe out of the way. I’ve always said you’re a natural.” Amanda looked at him hard but he was serious. She put a hand out and touched his cheek, acknowledging his underlying message. They were okay. They’d keep trying to have a family.

The light was almost gone.

Frasier took charge. “Let’s get a fire going. Then we’ll go back and get the gear. Come on, Joe, you can strike the matches.” Joe, silent, eager, glued himself to his father’s hip.

*Fire. Of course, fire. Why didn’t I think of that?*

“We can do this,” Amanda said. “You go get the gear. Our headlamps are there. Our...” She mimed the stroke of a blade, nodding to the back of Joe’s head. It was important not to frighten him any more than he’d been already.

Gloom was settling around them. “Go. We’ve got this,” said Jennie. The men set out. The women set the fire. To hurry it along, Amanda pulled the pages from the front of her paperback and shoved them under a teepee of twigs. “I’m past that part anyway,” she said to Joe with a shaky smile. He looked at her, appalled. “Don’t do this at home, okay, big guy?”

Jennie touched Amanda’s shoulder. “We still have to eat. I’ll go finish cooking the meal. It was nearly done. Joe, you’ll be safe with Amanda.”

Amanda reached around, squeezed Jennie’s waist. Her sister again.

“Okay, Joe, laddy! Pile on the firewood. Tonight we’re making a huge fire!”

The five finished their meal. The tide rolled up quickly. The men pitched the tents, stood watch and fed the fire. The flames were really too close; sparks could easily land and burn holes in the synthetic. But the circle of light cast by the fire felt safe. Even the tents, butted up to the forest edge, felt exposed. Amanda imagined paws reaching out and slashing their way through the fabric. She readied another log while the men moved off to bury the remains of the fish and to hang the rest of the food from a tree, away from scavengers, large and small.



Joe chattered, first through the meal and then through the bag of marshmallows that Jennie provided once the men returned. Conversation amongst the adults was muted. They were all listening, lined up, backs against a driftwood log, the fire between them and the wilderness marked by the forest edge.

It was Frasier who raised a finger first, calling for silence. Amanda, sitting next to Joe, put her arm around his shoulder, drew his face into her chest and placed a finger on his lips.

“*Merde!* Damn it all to hell,” said Marc, just under his breath.

“What is it, Aunty Mandy?”

“Shh, Joe. We need to listen.”

“Are you sure it’s the bear, Frasier?” Jennie asked. “Was something left in the kayaks?”

“A pair of Texas, the empty Nalgene bottle that had Tang in it. Shit, there was a bag of garbage. Remember, Marc, we were going to go back to get the garbage when we hung the food for the night. Damn it. This is definitely a habituated bear. He was going for the kayaks when he made a run for it. He knew kayaks were a source of food.”

The group listened. The kayaks were being rummaged and mauled. The noise was startlingly loud given the distance between where they hunkered down and where the boats had been stored.

“What the hell are we going to do if he punctures them? We won’t be able to get out.”

“Will we be stuck here, Daddy?”

“No, bud.” Frasier grinned. “We have some stuff to fix the kayaks. Duct tape! You know how I fix everything with duct tape. Come on, Marc. Let’s see what we have in the repair kit.”

It was an excuse to move out of Joe’s earshot. Jennie took her turn distracting him. Amanda leaned into the distant conversation, heard snippets about one of them going for help as long as one of the three kayaks was okay.

The rumbling in the distance went on and on. Amanda pictured the fragile boats being shoved against the rough bark of the trees by the bear’s great bulk. Jennie reached out and took her hand. “There’s nothing we can do at the moment. But we have fresh water if we need it, and the food can be stretched out a few days.”

Jennie, ever practical. Amanda didn’t relish more days alone here with the bear, while one or both of the men went for help. But if she had to be here, Jennie would be the best possible partner. She wanted her company

now more than anything. She put her head on Jennie's shoulder. Jennie dropped her own head on top.

The rumbling stopped.

"We're going to go take a look," Marc announced.

Amanda's head snapped up. "Are you serious?" She immediately regretted her tone. Joe scrambled away and onto his mother's lap, propelled by his child's need for comfort.

"Surely it can wait until morning..." Jennie frowned at Frasier.

"We need to get that garbage bag away and see if we can protect the kayaks somehow. Lodge them between trees or something."

"I can't believe you're even thinking about doing this. What if something happened to you? What if you were injured, or worse? Marc, please, you have responsibilities!" Amanda begged, shrill.

Where had those words come from? She knew that Marc and Frasier together were strong, resilient men, who would not consciously put themselves or their families in danger. She knew that if their party didn't show up at the outfitters within twenty-four hours of their expected arrival, that search parties would be sent to look for them. She knew that they had enough food and water to last, not just twenty-four hours, but with careful management, much longer. She knew that they were probably quite safe from even a problem bear sitting by the roaring fire, their food safely hung from a tree. They could be singing campfire songs and drinking the small bottle of Courvoisier that Marc had brought to celebrate their successful circumnavigation of the area.

Marc's look of utter astonishment and bewilderment, and little Joe's moans of concern, made her try to cover the awkwardness. She held her arms out to the boy. "Oh, sweetie, I'm so sorry I spoke like that and scared you. Give me a hug. Aunty Mandy is feeling all mixed up these days."

She squeezed his small body against her chest.

It hurt. Her breasts hurt, as if they were swollen.

They *were* swollen.

"Oh!" Amanda's jaw dropped. She placed her hand on her abdomen, just below Joe's sandy bum.

"Amanda, are you alright?" Jennie shuffled closer to her.

"Yes. I'm so sorry. Marc, I didn't mean what I said. My emotions went a little crazy there for a minute." She pushed Joe away just a tiny bit, already her love realigning.

“Here, Amanda, move closer to the fire,” said Jennie. Amanda looked at her friend, whose face was wise, thoughtful and protective. “Yes?” Jenny asked. “Is it possible?”

She’d guessed. Or perhaps, from experience, suspected.

“Yes. Yes, I think so.” It explained everything. Her body flushed and tingled with the knowledge. She wanted to kiss the trees, fill her pockets with warm sand, rub her hands over smooth driftwood.

“Well, if you three are okay then, we should be off to check on things,” said Marc, openly confused, but anxious to get away.

Minutes later, the two men, holding thick branches wrapped in strips of torn t-shirt, doused in white gas and lit, walked down the beach. The two women, Joe between them, fed the fire and sat in its circle of light.