

The Guide

Stephanie begins to regret taking this assignment as her clients relax by the campfire, waiting for her to cook the first night's dinner. The two boys—the bold one 10 years old, the 7-year-old stuck to him like a shadow—are whining. “We’re bored,” the older one declares, and they run off to find sticks so they can bat pebbles into the ocean. It’s a harmless game, but the shouts and plunks soon get under Stephanie’s skin. Plus, now she’s alone with Gail and Steve, and she still doesn’t know what they’re doing here, why these city people chose a guided trip to the bear-viewing station at Pack Creek over the chance to play tourist in town.

Now she needs to keep the boys in sight without messing up dinner. They don’t make this easy, scooting up to the forest’s edge for bigger sticks, darting back to the shoreline to take turns batting. Their parents relax on rocks near the fire, nursing glasses of wine, unconcerned. It’s obvious the boys are Steph’s problem, but being treated like a babysitter never sits well with her. She prefers to be valued as a naturalist, appreciated for everything she knows about the Southeast rainforest.

They haven’t asked about the salmon runs, or the sheltering spruces, or even the patterns of weather and tide. Maybe watching bears along the creek tomorrow will tune them in, Steph thinks. It feels like that to her: nature humming along in its own quiet key, people playing their rightful parts if they pay attention. Maybe that’s why the boys’ noises bother her—they’re out of sync with the music she wants to hear, shush of breeze through spruces, splash of silver salmon.

That’s when she notices she can’t hear them; the boys, that is. Absorbed in the drudgery of cooking dinner for five, she’s lost the thread leading to their location. She looks to their mother, instinctively, but Gail and Steve have moved to the same rock and Stephanie now sees why they came here with a guide, her vision of herself as a babysitter firming into certainty.

Where are the boys? Stomach dropping, Stephanie scans the cove’s forested edge, eyes tracing from tree to tree. She doesn’t want to alarm her clients, but this is a wilderness, not a baseball diamond, and the boys aren’t schooled enough in its dangers to go off on their own.

She still doesn’t see them. Dropping her head, Stephanie draws a long, settling breath and sets down the ladle she’s been using to stir the fragrant stew. “Gail, Steve,” she says quietly. “The boys.”

