**THE TRICKSTER’S LULLABY**

**Chapter One**

The stranger who hammered on the door made no apologies or introduction. She stood in the doorway, braced against the cold, her breath swirling in the frosty air.

“Amanda Doucette?” she demanded.

At her tone, Amanda stepped back warily. Dressed in a frayed navy parka with a red cloche hat and matching mittens, the woman looked harmless enough, but her tone held an edge of desperation. From her years in international aid work, Amanda knew desperation could make people dangerous. Even in this quiet country cottage in the backwoods of Quebec, trouble could still find her.

“Are you Amanda Doucette?” the woman repeated, even more sharply this time. A faint Québécois inflection was now audible in her speech.

Amanda glanced at the small Honda parked in the snowy drive. The car had once been white, but layers of salt and rust gave it a mottled look. One headlight was broken and the fender was dented. Like its owner, it looked battered by time. She softened.

“Yes,” she replied. “May I help you?” Kaylee had raced up to greet the visitor, and she held the dog back. She should have invited the woman in, but even after a year and a half, trust was still a fragile ally for her, fleeing at the first hint of threat. This cottage was her private sanctuary, hidden and unpublicized in order to keep curiosity-seekers at bay. Almost no one knew where it was.

“I want you to take my son on your trip.”

Amanda’s heart sank.This was a pressure she had not anticipated when Matthew Goderich persuaded her to launch her Fun for Families charity tour last September. The idea had been inspired: to take disadvantaged youth on adventure trips that provided a brief escape from the daily struggle of their lives. And Matthew, the consummate salesman, had promised her, “You plan the fun, I’ll find the families.” But the demand for the adventures had been huge and the selection of participants agonizing. So many needy children, so few spaces on her trips.

“Is he on the list?” she asked, hearing the echo of a thousand bureaucrats in her words.

“He should have been, but the college said he was unsuitable because of his past. An eighteen-year-old isn’t allowed to make mistakes? To take a bad path?” Her fingers dug into Amanda’s arm. “He’s a good boy, but he needs encouragement to find his way. Please.”

Amanda wrapped her baggy fleece tighter against the cold air blowing through the open doorway. She had two choices: either to turn the woman away with that dreaded bureaucratic sleight of hand — *I don’t make the lists* — or to invite her in to tell her side of the story. Amanda had fought arbitrary bureaucratic obfuscation in the international aid world for too many years to have any stomach for it herself.

A smile of gratitude brightened the woman’s face when Amanda invited her in. As she tugged off her boots, she apologized for the snow on the pine floorboards. “*Merci milles fois*,” she said. “Just to have someone listen and not reject my son as a bad apple.”

“What’s his name?”

She looked up, her blonde curls falling across her eyes. The blonde was out of a bottle, and an inch of grey showed at the roots, but she’d done her best to style it. “I’m so sorry. I’m Ghyslaine Prevost, and he’s Luc Prevost. Well, technically he’s Luc Prevost-Maclean, but he doesn’t like the Maclean part. Ever since his father left us. I don’t like to upset him by insisting.”

Amanda had seen the list of twelve youths who were enrolled in her Laurentian Extreme Adventure, and the son’s name had not been on it. Nor had it been on the longer list of thirty submitted for consideration to Matthew Goderich by the youth counsellor working on the project.

International aid had been Amanda’s life passion for more than ten years, and she had never planned to give it up, but Boko Haram’s murderous rampage in the Nigerian village where she worked had changed all that. Nearly two hundred school children abducted or killed, their parents slaughtered, and their village torched. Two years later, the memories of that night and her own terrifying escape were still so vivid that she doubted she could ever go back overseas.

When, while in search of a new way forward last fall, she had conceived of Fun for Families, the premise had been simple: a charity fundraising tour centred around adventures in iconic settings across the country. The adventures would nurture joy, a sense of belonging, but most of all hope for the future, for her as well as the families and youth involved.

However, the logistics of the projects were proving a whole lot more complicated than she’d imagined. Choosing the venues and the adventures had been easy — this one was six days of snowshoeing, cross-country skiing, and winter camping near the world-renowned Mont Tremblant National Park north of Montreal — but selecting the participants had not been. Ever since her fundraising idea had hit the news, partly because of Matthew’s hyperactive talent for galvanizing social media, she had been flooded with suggestions for needy groups and pleas from parents to include their own children.

It had been Matthew’s idea to insulate her from the crush — and the resulting resentments — by assuming that job. Although he claimed it allowed her to face the groups unencumbered by a history, she suspected he also saw her mental strength wavering. Matthew knew her better than anyone; since he was an overseas journalist, their paths had often crossed in remote trouble spots in the world. He had been in West Africa covering Boko Haram; he had seen her in the aftermath of the massacre, and again after her terrifying ordeal in the Newfoundland wilderness last fall. He knew her stress points, perhaps even better than she did.

When she ushered Ghyslaine into the main room, the woman perched on the edge of the sofa near the door like a bird poised for flight. Kaylee jumped up to nestle next to her, instinctively responding to the woman’s distress. Amanda was about to call the dog away when the woman sank her fingers into Kaylee’s silky red fur and smiled as if the dog had already performed her magic.

“What a cute little Golden Retriever,” she said. “What’s his name?”

“Kaylee,” Amanda replied, warming immediately to the woman. At the mention of her name, the dog perked up. “It means party. She’s actually a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever. They’re sometimes called little Goldens with attitude.”

The woman looked around the spartan cabin, furnished by Amanda’s aunt from yard sales and flea markets. Aunt Jean had the good sense to spend the winter in Florida, which left her cottage and her car free for Amanda’s use. The woman had no aesthetic sense, so the only criterion had been comfort, which suited Amanda just fine. It was to this simple, remote Laurentian refuge that she came to recover from Nigeria and later from Newfoundland. The only nods to modernity were the phone and the laptop open on the desk by the front window. From there, Amanda could see the road and always knew who was coming. A small measure of reassurance.

Her guest seemed to register the lack of opulence, for she lowered her head. “I’m sorry to disturb you. I know you are busy preparing for the trip, but M. Zidane is not returning my calls. He says the decision is made. A violent criminal record, he said. That wasn’t Luc, I told him, that was the drugs. Yes, Luc was angry and confused, but it was the drugs that made him desperate.”

*Drug and violence,* Amanda thought with dismay*.* “Has he done jail time?”

Perhaps the woman saw the door swinging shut, for her eyes hardened. “Yes, but—”

“How many times?”

“Only once—”

“How many convictions?”

“Why do you people only pay attention to the bad? Why did Luc take drugs? To feel happier, to forget his father’s rejection. That’s what’s important. Luc needs some hope, some light to shine on his world.”

“But the drugs, Madame Prevost—”

“Please. Ghyslaine. He’s clean now. It is M. Zidane himself who counselled him and said he’s better. Then suddenly he turns his back on him, just when Luc was finally beginning to trust him. What kind of counsellor does that? It was like a rejection all over again!”

“How long has he been clean?”

“This time, three months.”

*This time*. Not a promising sign. Amanda’s heart felt heavy as she steeled herself to face the woman. “You understand that we cannot have any risk of drug use or violence on the trip? We will be five days in the wilderness, living together in tents, without Internet and out of touch with help. That’s part of the experience.”

“There are satellite phones,” Ghyslaine said.

“Only for extreme emergencies. The group is fragile, Ghyslaine. I have to protect all of them, some recently arrived from violent homelands. There are other groups more suited to teens with your son’s problems.”

“Sure. Throw him in with a bunch of druggies and gangsters. That will help him find the path!”

At the woman’s sharp tone, Kaylee raised her head and edged away. Amanda couldn’t argue with the mother’s logic, so she searched for a more positive answer. The woman, and her son, needed help, and Amanda hated to turn her back. Had always hated to turn her back on need.

Ghyslaine took her silence as refusal, for she stood up and reached for her parka. “M. Zidane only cares about the Muslims. That’s his loyalty. Luc is a spoiled little Canadian brat who doesn’t know what real suffering is.”

Amanda mentally reviewed the list of the twelve candidates. A small niggle of doubt took hold. Had M. Zidane deliberately turned his back on a needy young man, simply because the boy was Canadian? Amanda had found the counsellor guarded and inscrutable, but the college had been effusive in its praise of his work. It was true there were several Middle Eastern and North African names, but then the college Zidane worked at was in a largely immigrant area. That was one of the reasons she’d chosen it. Immigrant children struggled to feel at home in Canada and often had no chance to experience the rugged charms of their chosen land, which was so removed from the hot, crowded countries they had left behind.

Almost as if reading her mind, Ghyslaine glared at her. “And don’t tell me that nonsense about exposing them to Canada. We live in the same shitty neighbourhood they do, see the same drug deals in the parks, the same girls selling themselves on the corner. We hear the same crying babies and smell the stench of their cooking. You need to care about Canadian kids, too. Does Luc have less right just because he was born here? Will you punish my son because his father cheated us and left us with nothing but black eyes and a mountain of debts?”

The images flashed before Amanda’s eyes as she followed Ghyslaine to the door. Unknowingly, the woman had articulated the exact reasons Amanda had conceived of Fun for Families in the first place — to give beleaguered children a glimpse at hope.

“I’ll talk to Mr. Goderich,” she found herself saying. “I won’t promise anything, but I’ll see what he says.”

Matthew Goderich tipped his chair and pushed his fedora back in frustration. His little office was housed in the minuscule bedroom of his third-floor walk-up in Lower Westmount, and it was overflowing its space. Three laptop computers sat on the desk, open to different news websites; books and papers threatened to explode from the bookcases lining the walls, and more papers were spread out on the unmade single bed. It looked like utter chaos, but Amanda suspected he knew the location and contents of every scrap of paper.

Matthew was a seasoned journalist used to setting up shop and reporting from the most inhospitable corners of the world. He was accustomed to travelling with only the essentials he could fit into a backpack, and this cluttered apartment, rented on a short-term sublet, was testimony to how much he’d settled down since he returned to Canada.

“Luc Prevost is a heap of trouble,” he said.

She smiled indulgently at him. She loved Matthew, every crag and bulge in his rumpled, middle-aged body, but sometimes he tried too hard to run her life. All in the interests of protecting her, but that in itself was annoying. If he continued to treat her as broken, how would she ever feel whole? How often she wished that she’d never confided in him about her harrowing escape through the Nigerian countryside.

“Hear me out,” she countered and went on to sketch out Ghyslaine’s plea. Before she was even halfway through, Matthew snorted.

“Mothers! Their precious babies’ bottoms are always as pink as the day they were born.”

“But she has a point. If ever there was a young man in need of a glimpse beyond his walls, it’s him.”

“Him and hundreds of other punks running around our inner cities. Amanda, even you can’t save the world, so we have to pick our battles. Zidane doesn’t trust this kid. He says he’s a misfit — surly and defensive when he’s sober, explosive and paranoid when he’s high. His drug of choice is cocaine, which makes him feel powerful and on top of the world. Putting him in with this group would be like tossing a match into a pile of kindling.”

“Zidane dumped him as a client.”

“And what does that tell you?”

“His mother says he’s been clean for three months.”

“And you and I know that’s not nearly long enough. First hint of trouble — and there will be that, guaranteed — he’ll be looking to score some coke on the slopes of Mont Tremblant itself.” He leaned in, softening. “We’ve got twelve really nice kids who are all eager to do this. Why would Luc Prevost even want to? There’s no fun in spending a week cut off from all his buddies, his music and Internet, and his evening hangouts, all to freeze his ass off in a tent listening to the wolves howl. No, this is his mother’s agenda. Why drag a surly, antisocial kid into the middle of this trip?”

She twirled her coffee cup, steeling herself to take a sip. Matthew’s coffee could power a jet engine, and she always wondered how he could consume ten cups of it without taking off into the ether. “Maybe precisely because he *is* surly and antisocial? And his mother says he does want to go.”

“Like I said, mothers.”

“The mother also says Zidane is favouring Muslims. You know I want a mixed group so people can learn about each other.”

“And it is. Haitians, Asians, Africans. It’s true it’s about half Muslim, but that’s the demographic Zidane works with, and I’d say the mother’s comment gives us a glimpse at the subtext here. And where Luc gets the great big chip on his shoulder from.”

To buy herself time, she ventured a cautious sip of her coffee, and her pulse thrummed even as the rich, smoky flavour hit her tongue. She knew Matthew was right on all points. The trip could be ruined for everyone if a disruptive, possibly criminal element was introduced. Yet she had embarked on this odyssey to help young people caught in the world of their adults’ making. To help change the course of their lives.

“Let me talk to him. I’m not going to promise him anything, but I want to see for myself what kind of kid he is before I toss him aside as unsalvageable.”

Amanda had been prepared for just about any version of Angry Young Man. A Goth rebel dressed in black, complete with clanking chains and black eye makeup. A burly, bearded gorilla covered in snake tattoos. Or a wisp of pale skin, sunken eyes, and trembling limbs. But the young man who hesitated at the entrance to the restaurant was none of these. Beneath the parka, he was impeccably dressed in black jeans and a turtleneck sweater that matched his eyes. His mother’s eyes, sky-blue and fringed with dark lashes. He sported a neatly trimmed hipster beard and looked like someone from exclusive Lower Canada College, not some east-end tenement.

His gaze settled on her, and he smiled — an eager smile with a hint of shyness. She was dressed in her usual understated fashion of jeans and fleece, and with her soft, honey-coloured hair pulled into a ponytail and no makeup to mask her freckles, she suspected she looked more like a petite college co-ed than a burned-out thirty-something woman of the world. But he clearly knew what she looked like.

He hurried across the room and held out his hand. “Mme. Doucette? Hi, I’m Luc.” His fingers were chilled from the cold, but the handshake was firm. He pulled back the chair, slipped his parka over the back, and folded his gangly, six-foot frame into it. Amanda wondered how much his mother had coached him and how long the façade would last. Or had he titrated his drugs just right?

“Nice to meet you, Luc. I hope you like Vietnamese.” The restaurant had been a careful choice. She had considered a Lebanese place but decided the Muslim reference might be too obvious. Besides being ethnic, this place had excellent food and enough privacy to talk in confidence, but sufficient crowds to provide safety if he proved difficult.

“Never had it.” He glanced around at the neighbouring tables, where most patrons were eating large bowls of soup. “Take-out pizza and St. Hubert barbequed chicken are my mother’s go-to choices.”

His English was flawless, reminding her of the neglected Maclean part of his heritage. Beneath his amiable manner thrummed an undercurrent of nerves. “Where do you live?” she asked to put him at ease.

He named a street she’d never heard of. “East end. It’s tiny but my mother has made it nice. She’s an artist, and she has an eye for that stuff.”

“And how long have you been at College de La Salle?”

He hesitated. “I’m in my second year, with some … interruption. If I can get my grades up, I want to go to university next year.”

“Studying what?”

“Not sure yet. The way my grades are right now, I’ll probably just squeak into a general arts program at Concordia, but I like political science and history.”

At least he was astute enough not to say Global Development, she thought wryly. Naming her own field of study would have been too obvious. “Quebec history?”

He shook his head. “Everybody wants to study that. It’s kinda weird, but after all the stuff on TV — The Tudors, Wolf Hall, Borgia — sixteenth-century Europe seems really cool.”

“The Renaissance?” She masked her surprise with an effort. Luc was proving to be nothing like the sullen misfit she’d been expecting.

His eyes crinkled. “Yeah, right. Rebirth. Seems more like hatred, murder plots, and religious wars, pretty much like today. That’s what’s so cool about history. We really haven’t changed.”

“Maybe that’s just human nature. Goodness is hard to sustain.”

“The world’s not looking good right now, for sure. Well, you know that better than anybody.”

Again she worked to hide her surprise. How much had this young man unearthed about her, and, more importantly, why? Deftly, she avoided the obvious attempt to dig up more and tossed the ball back into his court. “So how are your grades?”

His face fell. “I won’t lie — they suck. I spent the last year — well, the last couple of years — AWOL from school and studies.”

“How?”

He shifted in his chair. “Should we order?”

“I already have, their signature pho for both of us.” She kept her eyes on him. “How?”

He looked nonplussed, affording a glimpse of the eighteen-year-old she’d been expecting. “You read my file?”

“Yes, but I want to hear your version.”

He sighed. “Okay. When I got to CEGEP last year, I started hanging with the wrong crowd. None of my high school friends were going there, so I didn’t know anybody. I admit it was stupid. I was pissed off. My father had just ditched us, sold the house out from under us, buried his money in offshore companies, and moved into Westmount with his new wife. So I was in a new home, new neighbourhood, new college, a bitter kid ripped from his roots. Some kids showed me how to make it all go away. First weed and E, but cocaine worked way better.”

“How did you pay for the cocaine?”

He quivered, but his blue eyes met hers. “How do you think?”

“I can think of several ways.”

“And I did them all.” He looked away. “I don’t like to think about it. It’s like a black hole I’m trying hard not to fall back into.”

“How did you turn things around?”

“Counselling.”

“Zidane?”

He nodded. “First rehab in the group home, but when I went back to school, yeah, Zidane. The college had brought him in to try to help because they had quite a few kids struggling. CEGEP is like junior college, but it has one big problem. Throw a whole bunch of seventeen- and eighteen-year-olds together in a new place, and they’re all going to be trying to find their place. There are lots of temptations to go wrong.”

“So how did Zidane help you?”

“We talked about my father, who he was, who I wanted to be. We talked about respecting myself and taking care of my body …” He flushed and lowered his lashes. “It’s personal.”

She debating asking him about his falling out with Zidane but chose to go to the heart of the issue. She threw the question casually into his embarrassment. “Are you clean?”

“Yes.”

“How long?”

“Three months.”

“A drop of sand in the life of a cocaine addict.”

“I know, but I’m working on it. That’s all I can do.”

“How?” Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the waiter approaching with their pho. She gave him a barely perceptible shake of the head.

Luc was oblivious. He leaned in as if eager to convince her. “I don’t take anything that might harm me. No alcohol, no drugs, no smoking, not even caffeine or sugar. I go to the gym every day. I’m trying to restore my body, and through it, my mind.”

Amanda kept her expression impassive with an effort. Luc was following the same regime she had to expunge the horrors of Africa and to reassert control. As if by building her power and strength, she could vanquish the memory of helplessness. “Is that difficult?”

“Yes. But I also feel way better, and my grades are starting to improve. I’ve got five months to turn things around so I can get into Concordia. Or maybe even McGill.”

“Is that why you want to go on this trip? So it looks good on your application?”

His nostrils flared, as if a foul odour had wafted through the room. He sat back. “I don’t know what to say to that. I’m not playing a game. Yeah, I admit, going on this trip would look good. But really, my final grades are all that matter, and I know I can get them up if I apply myself. But I want to…” He faltered and looked down at his hands, which were shaking slightly now. Emotion or addiction, she wondered.

“You want to what?”

“I want to prove I can do it. To myself. I know I’ve been weak and have failed just about every test of character thrown at me. I want to know … do I have the guts to pass this one? Belief builds belief. I need that.”