**FIRE IN THE STARS**

**Chapter One**

Amanda didn’t begin to worry in earnest until a hint of land shimmered through the early-morning fog. Slowly, Newfoundland emerged in a ragged silhouette of rock and the blurred white spire of a lighthouse. The MV Highlanders had ten decks and she was on the top, her favourite place. The powerful engine of the ferry throbbed beneath her and the cold ocean foamed below. She leaned on the railing and sheltered her cellphone from the mist. It had finally registered a signal from the town of Port aux Basques.

No messages. Not one word from Phil. Normally this would be a minor frustration. Black holes could swallow him up for days on end, but he’d spring out of them ebullient and cleansed as if they had never happened. Even my wife calls me Mr. Unreliable, he’d once said with a twinkle in his eye.

But this time was different. For one thing, this camping trip had been his idea, and Amanda had sensed a manic edge to his excitement when he’d begged her to come. You need this, he’d said. *We* need it. There’s nothing like the wilds of nature to heal a broken soul. She wasn’t so sure, but it was the closest he’d come to admitting to a problem.

For another, he’d promised to do all the planning. Newfoundland was his adopted home now, and he wanted to show off its charms. All Amanda had to do was get herself, her motorcycle, and a sleeping bag over to the Rock and he’d find them the perfect getaway. Imagine miles of rugged coast, tangy surf, the wind in her face, and the call of ocean birds. After her long, bleak year spent clawing back from the terror of Africa, it had sounded like paradise.

The problem was, he’d never told her where this paradise was. Now that she was about to disembark on the southern tip of the island, she had no idea where to meet him. Newfoundland’s coastline was ten thousand kilometres of switchback coves and ragged headlands, most of it wild. There were island bird sanctuaries and dark, unexplored inland forests. Its oceans teemed with whales, dolphins, seals, and polar bears, its forests with moose and bears. The perfect getaway was everywhere.

Amanda had always loved nature. As a child trapped in the tidy residential crescents of suburban Ottawa, she had escaped whenever possible to the lakes and forests of the surrounding countryside, much to the bemusement of her parents, who considered a wine tour of Tuscany to be the ideal holiday. During her postings in the hot, arid climates of developing countries, it had been the wilderness that she had missed most about her homeland. The lush green of the forest floor, the delicate birdsong, and the chatter of brooks tumbling over rocks.

The solitude.

There are not many people in Newfoundland in September, Phil had promised her. No machetes, masked marauders, or homemade bombs. Not even many tourists left. We’ll have the campgrounds and coves to ourselves.

The ferry was churning through the narrow channel toward the dock, past the breakwaters and pastel cottages scattered along the barren shore. Passengers had begun to head toward the stairs leading to the car decks, clutching their pillows and bedrolls blearily. *Where are you?* she texted one last time before slipping her phone back into her jacket and heading to the pet kennels. The sound of barking was deafening as the dogs woke to the sight of their masters. For a moment, when she couldn’t hear Kaylee’s bark above the din, she felt a familiar surge of anxiety. *My dog’s safe*, she assured herself. *You know she’s safe. It’s only a seven-hour crossing, and she’s had plenty of water*.

Nonetheless Amanda was surprised by the rush of relief that coursed through her when Kaylee’s high-pitched scream joined the fray. She spotted the frenzy of red fur as she drew closer. Kaylee hurled herself against the door of the kennel, every inch of her wagging. Amanda opened the door and knelt down to press her face into the dog’s long, silky fur.

“Sorry, pumpkin,” she whispered. “No more, I promise.”

Kaylee tugged at the end of her leash as they made their way down to Amanda’s other prized possession, her brand-new motorcycle. Having spent almost all her adult life in the developing world, she was much more at ease on two wheels than on four. She loved the lightness, agility, and thrilling speed of motorcycles. In anticipation of this trip, she had traded her smaller bike and splurged on this latest-model Kawasaki, which could handle a trailer, but she had not yet found the perfect name for it. For now, she called it Shadow, which had an intimate, evocative ring. Not only did it have its own shadow of sorts — the small, custom-built trailer for Kaylee — but it felt like an extension of her soul. It gave her the freedom to roam the wide-open spaces, to race the wind, to follow any whim that beckoned her.

Kaylee leaped eagerly into her spot in the trailer, her tongue lolling and her eyes dancing in anticipation. As Amanda fastened the dog’s seatbelt and undid the straps and cables that secured the bike, she smiled in response to the stares from the neighbouring cars. She suspected the red dog and the lime-green motorcycle made quite a spectacle.

She was almost thirty-five, but, dwarfed in her sheepskin jacket, leather boots, and red helmet, she looked barely fifteen. Hardship had aged her on the inside, but her fine freckles and long chestnut hair belied the decades. Noticing the little boy in the minivan beside her eying Kaylee solemnly, Amanda winked at him.

“She’s looking forward to Newfoundland. Are you?”

He nodded. “What kind of dog is that?”

“She’s a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever. Forty pounds of pure energy. Do you have a dog?”

He shot a quick glance at his father before shaking his head. “What’s her name?”

“Kaylee. Since she’s a Nova Scotia breed, I figured she deserved a good Gaelic name. Do you know what a *ceilidh* is?”

He shook his head again.

“It’s a party. The lively, dancing-singing-making-music kind. And that’s what she is, a party.” Amanda leaned over to ruffle the dog’s ears. “Do you want to pat her?”

The boy glanced at his father again. The two of them were alone in the minivan, father and son on a holiday. The man looked as if he hadn’t slept or shaved in days, but he managed a bleary smile. But just as the boy was opening his door, car engines rumbled to life around them and the vehicles prepared to inch forward. The boy tugged his door shut and gave Kaylee a shy wave.

The long trail of vehicles wound through the ferry dock and out onto the open road, where the fog still hung thick. Amanda could see nothing but a blurry stream of red lights heading north along the only highway toward the interior of the province. Signs and landmarks leaped out of the fog too late to decipher. She longed to lean into the wind and open up the throttle, but decided it was safer just to follow the taillights directly in front of her.

She needed a decent breakfast, and, more importantly, coffee, and just as she was beginning to despair of finding either, the lights of an Irving gas bar and diner caught her eye. She pulled in, fed Kaylee, and took her for a short stroll to a handy patch of grass before tying up the dog and heading inside the diner. The place was bright and bustling as if half the ferry passengers were inside, but Amanda found a small table by the window where she could keep an eye on Kaylee. The waitress was at her side instantly to fill her coffee cup. A woman of experience, Amanda thought with a smile of thanks. Once she’d taken her first sip, she pulled out her cellphone. No response to her text. Mr. Unreliable indeed.

While she looked up his home number in Grand Falls, she braced herself. Phil had confessed that things were rocky between himself and his wife, and Amanda wasn’t sure how Sheri felt about this trip, nor about her. Phil had assured her that Sheri supported it, that in fact the trip had been her idea. Anything to get me out of her hair, he’d joked. She can’t come because she’s teaching, but she knows how much I need this escape.

Amanda hoped that was true. Despite their different temperaments, the two women had once been friends, but that was before Africa, and Amanda knew Sheri could be unforgiving. Did she still blame Amanda for Phil’s decision to go?

It had been nearly two years since Amanda had last spoken to her, but time slipped away the moment the woman answered the phone. The same brisk, no-nonsense voice, with just a hint of Newfoundland.

“Hi, Sheri, it’s Amanda Doucette. How are you?”

A pause, a drop in tone. As if the air had gone out of the room. “Amanda. It’s been a long time. You’re back in Canada for good now, I hear.”

“I am. I just arrived in Port aux Basques.” She paused, listening to the silence. Feeling the chill through the airwaves. Not forgiven, then. “Is Phil there?”

“How could he be? He’s with you.”

“No. I’m supposed to meet him, but I don’t know where.”

“Well, he’s already gone. I imagine he’ll call you, in his own sweet time.”

Bewildered, Amanda plowed ahead. “When did he leave?”

“Two days ago. I’m surprised you haven’t heard from him yet. Well, not exactly surprised, but …”

“Did he say where he was going?”

There was another long silence. Sheri’s voice lost its chill, became uncertain. “He … We … I was out when they left. He didn’t actually say good bye.”

“They? Who’s with him?”

“Well, Tyler. Our son. He’s going with you.” She paused again. Amanda heard a small intake of breath. “Isn’t he?”

Amanda felt her own small quiver of alarm. First, Phil’s manic excitement about the trip, followed by the days of silence. What was he up to? “I’m sure it’s just a misunderstanding,” she forced herself to say. “You know Phil.”

“Indeed I do.”

Amanda rushed on. “He’ll probably be in touch any minute. Meanwhile I’ll head up toward your place.”

“Why?”

Amanda floundered in the heavy silence. “In case he comes back. Or we can at least figure out where Mr. Unreliable has disappeared to.” She hung up before Sheri could object and glanced outside to reassure herself that Kaylee was still there. The early morning fog was lifting, curling off the scoured coastal rock in pale, wraithlike swaths. At this rate, she could reach Grand Falls by afternoon. To what purpose or reception, she wasn’t sure.

Her attempt at levity on the phone was fooling no one, least of all Sheri, who must know how close to the edge Phil could stumble. Indeed, she’d been the one to drag him back more than once over their twelve years together.

Amanda had heard it in her voice at the end. Sheri was angry and fed up, but she was also afraid.