**WRECK BAY**

**An Amanda Doucette mystery**

**by Barbara Fradkin**

*Times Colonist, September 19, 1971*

*Wreck Bay fire claims one life*

*A fire in a temporary dwelling on Long Beach turned deadly yesterday when the body of a young mother was discovered in the smoking ruins of her beach home. Patricia Decker, 19, lived in the Long Beach community with her six-month-old son and the baby’s father, neither of whom were home at the time of the fire. Police are currently searching for a neighbour who has not been seen since and who may have information relevant to the case.*

*The cause of the fire is unknown, but the commune dwellings are notoriously unsafe, and fires from candles and open fire pits are common. This hazard has been a concern to local officials for years, and with the creation of the national park, efforts are under way to move residents to safer housing inland.*

**[CHAPTERSTART]Chapter One**

“I think that’s a crazy idea.”

Amanda pulled back in annoyance. In true cop fashion, Chris had maintained a poker face throughout her entire explanation, without betraying any reaction until she’d asked him what he thought.

“What do you mean, ‘crazy’?” she demanded.

“I mean you know nothing about the west coast.”

“Since when has that stopped me from doing anything?”

He smiled and leaned over to draw her closer, but she withdrew to the other end of the couch, where she snuggled Kaylee instead. The dog stretched sleepily and thumped her tail. “I’m serious, Chris. I’ve been giving my next tour a lot of thought, and this is a great idea.” Watching him slowly shake his head, her anger flared. “You’ve got to stop going all protective cop on me. I’ve been in more dangerous situations than this and dealt with far more dangerous men.”

“It’s not just the men,” he said. “It’s the isolation in unfamiliar territory. You don’t know the ocean, the tides, the sudden storms. Not to mention the cougars and bears and wolves.”

“I’m not going to be alone,” she shot back. “I’ll have at least one local tour guide, probably two, and a counsellor from the addictions centre.”

He winced. To his credit, he tried to hide it, but in the shadows of dusk, his tightened lips were enough.

“It *is* the men,” she said. “I could take any other group on an expedition out to the Pacific Rim and you’d be fine with it, but because it’s men with an addiction history, you’re all freaked out.”

With a sigh, he unfolded his tall, lanky frame from the sofa and went to fetch the bottle of wine that sat on the table amid the remains of their dinner. He paused to glance out the picture window of their bungalow at the glossy black of Deer Lake. Pinpoints of golden light from other homes flickered against the water, and in the quiet, a distant motorboat droned.

She held up her wine glass for a top up, reluctantly acknowledging that he couldn’t stop himself from worrying. Being a police officer meant he had to respond to people in peril, whether from criminals, accidents, or their own stupidity. He saw dangers where others did not.

She softened. “I don’t want you to worry, honey. I’ve had several preliminary conversations with the executive director of the addictions umbrella organization in Victoria, and she’s all for the idea. She told me she’s already talked to a counsellor who’s keen. A man who grew up on Vancouver Island. The ocean, the islands, and the forests were his playground as a kid, and he’s eager to go. And we’re not talking about active addicts here, or dealers—”

“But—“

“These are guys who’ve gone through the programs and are staying clean. Yeah, some of them have done time for petty theft or other minor things, but now they’re burned out, passed their prime, and just trying to rebuild the lives they messed up. I told the ED that I wanted guys who’d burned their bridges with their families and need some way to reconnect. To find some hope.”

“And they’re going to find this paddling around the islands and hiking through rain forests?”

She gritted her teeth at the hint of condescension. “No, they’re going to find it by working together and sharing challenges. I don’t need your permission to do this, you know. But I’d like it if you cared — at least a bit — about what I’m trying to do.”

He sipped his wine and twirled his glass. “It’s noble. Just a bit …”

“Quixotic?”

He grinned. “I know the guys you’re talking about. We see them all the time, pick them up, put them in the drunk tank, release them in the morning to do it all over again. They’re not bad people. They just don’t know what else to do.”

“But these guys *do* want to do something else! It’s a requirement for the trip. That, and the fact they have an estranged adult son. Taking them out into the wilderness and forcing them to do things together, I hope it will help them both.”

“This woman from the addictions centre …”

“Bonnie Pamiuq.”

“She’s going to vet them carefully? No violent criminal history, no mental health issues?”

She nodded. “No serious mental health issues. No one’s going to be squeaky clean, otherwise they wouldn’t be in this situation.”

“What does Matthew think? Have you discussed it with him yet?”

She sensed him wavering and slid back over toward him. She felt the soft caress of his sweater against her cheek and breathed in the musty scent of wool. How she loved this man! They had survived the entire pandemic in isolation together in this remote corner of the country, and she had found a peace she’d never expected. Never before had she gone months without being on the move, always on to the next project. To the next crisis demanding her help.

Only now, as the days grew longer and the first buds of spring began to emerge, had she felt the first faint stirrings of discontent. Not with Chris, but with herself. She’d spent her life on the front lines, helping those in need in struggling corners of the world, and she felt restless to find that purpose again.

She twined her fingers through his as she considered how to answer him. Matthew Goderich was her oldest, dearest friend. They’d met when she was an aid worker in Cambodia and he a war correspondent covering a regional conflict. When she’d barely escaped from Nigeria after a brutal attack, he had covered every inch of her harrowing journey across unfamiliar, inhospitable land. When she’d fled back to Canada to recover, unable to face another overseas post, and had instead taken up a charitable crusade closer to home, Matthew had returned home to Canada to run it with her. He was her right-hand man and a master of logistics, finances, and technology. He believed in her cause. More, he believed in her. He knew her deepest fears and demons, as well as her propensity for finding trouble, and he was going to hate this idea as much as Chris did.

“I wanted to tell you first,” she replied finally. “I told him only that the next trip would be this summer on Vancouver Island. I’ll probably tell him when we’re standing outside the office of the treatment centre.” She chewed her lip and steeled herself to deliver the next news. “I’ve booked myself and Kaylee on a flight to Victoria in three weeks.”

He recoiled. “Kaylee! Do you have to take her? Poor girl, in the hold for hours!”

“She’s a service dog. She’ll be on the plane with me. And I’ve booked myself on business class.”

Kaylee had raised her head at the mention of her name and was looking at them with concern. When Amanda called her over to join the snuggle, Chris leaned across to scratch her ears. “This place will be so empty with you both gone.”

“I know. But I need her. I’m much better, but I’m not a hundred percent.” *Probably never will be*, she added to herself. But that was something she didn’t dare tell him. He might never let her out of his sight.

[SPACEBREAK]

Amanda had lost count of the number of airplanes she’d flown in, the number of times she’d gazed out the window with curiosity as the plane banked over some faraway land and settled in for a landing. Over flat, ochre deserts, craggy, treeless mountains, tiny, chequered farms, and ramshackle sheet-metal shantytowns.

Very little took her breath away, but as the Air Canada Airbus skimmed over the ocean past scattered green islands and descended toward Victoria International Airport, she found herself holding her breath. Despite travelling all over the world, she had never visited Canada’s far west coast, so she had chosen a window seat for her maiden voyage.

It had been cloudy and raining for much of the flight across the British Columbian interior, robbing her of the chance to see the jagged, snow-cloaked peaks of the Rockies, but the clouds tore apart and the sun broke through just as they left the mainland to fly over the Strait of Georgia to Vancouver Island. The sun twinkled on the waves and on the miniature boats that ploughed a V as they wove through the islands. She felt a rush of joy. It was going to be a beautiful trip. The landscape was perfect for the renewal of hope. No wonder this green, sunny island had been a spiritual mecca for wandering souls for centuries. If it was possible anywhere, this was the setting where the lost fathers and sons in her group would find each other.

Inside the airport, the magic vanished. The building bustled with travellers scurrying through its wide, brightly lit halls, dragging their suitcases and juggling passports, phones, and sometimes small children. On top of the clamour, the constant bursts of PA announcements jangled her nerves. Kaylee clung to her side, wide-eyed. Amanda had brought only a carry-on and Kaylee’s crate so that she could skip the baggage carousel and escape into the midday sun as quickly as possible.

Outside, she ignored the taxis and scanned the line of waiting cars. Matthew had told her to look for an orange Kia Soul. “Trust me, it stands out in a crowd,”he’d said.

And sure enough, she’d only just spotted the little orange box when she saw the dumpy middle-aged man beside it, waving his arms. He was wearing his trademark battered fedora, a cherished legacy from his overseas tenure that also served to hide his bald head, and a brown leather jacket of comparable vintage. A big smile bubbled up inside her. How she had missed him these past two years!

After a long hug and a few minutes of roughhousing with Kaylee, he busied himself loading the suitcase and crate into the hatch, avoiding her gaze. Was he thinner? More haggard? Or did they all look older after two gruelling years of the pandemic?

Finally, seated in the car, he grinned at her. “You look great. Chris been treating you well?”

She nodded, wary of discussing Chris with Matthew, who’d never quite believed that the strait-laced Mountie was wild enough and impassioned enough to keep up with her. “But you’re not looking your best.”

He flushed. “Thanks a lot.”

“Are you hung over, or is there more?”

“Hung over?” He snorted. “O, ye of little faith.”

She said nothing. Waited. He started the car and eased away from the curb. For a few minutes, he concentrated on navigating out of the airport. “I’m having some health issues.”

Anxiety spiked through her. “Matthew!”

“Don’t freak out on me. It’s nothing.”

“What’s nothing? What, Matthew?”

“I think I’m just rundown. The pandemic was a damn hard time. I’m a man of action, and I like to be on the move. To have everything come to a crashing halt, to be stuck in my two-bit apartment by myself for two years — man, that was hard, Amanda!”

As she absorbed this with dismay, guilt settled in. She should have called him more often, talked about projects they could do by virtual meetings or phone. She had been in rural Newfoundland, where the fears and restrictions of the pandemic had barely touched them, whereas he had been in dense, teeming Toronto, the early epicentre of Canada’s pandemic crisis.

“So, anything else besides rundown?”

“I’m out of shape.” He shrugged. “Too much lying around, and I probably drank too much. I know I didn’t eat properly — you know me and cooking — and it caught up with me. I’m not in my thirties anymore, like you and Chris.”

She wasn’t letting him off the hook so fast. “What does out of shape mean?”

“Just tired. No big deal.”

She reached over to touch his arm. “What does the doctor say?”

“We’re working on it. I see the doctor again in a couple of weeks.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t …”

“Shouldn’t what?” He flushed. “No, no, this won’t interfere with anything.”

“But you need to put your health first.”

“And do what? Sit around for another few months doing fuck-all while you’re out here doing another adventure tour? No, this is just what I need. A cause. A new challenge.”

She eyed him thoughtfully. It was true, his colour was better now that they were talking, and he looked energized. But she knew there could be a lot more wrong with him than he was willing to divulge. He would run himself into the ground for her Fun for Families charity. For her. Just as he had run himself close to death chasing down her dangerous story in Africa.

“Okay,” she said, “but promise me— “

“Yes, Mom, I’ll keep you posted. Now let’s get this show on the road. Where are we going?”

Half an hour later, they were parked in a suburban shopping mall lot facing a glass wall of generic storefronts featuring everything from yoga to jewellery. The first to spot their destination, Amanda pointed. “It’s on the second floor.”

The addictions centre offices weren’t flashy. There were no window banners or logos, merely a modest sign on the door next to the jewellery shop: *Island Recovery, Second Floor*. Matthew cast her a doubtful glance.

“It’s an umbrella organization,” she said. “It provides most of its services through other social services agencies. But it’s quality, not glitz, that counts.”

She opened the door, and Kaylee strained on the leash as they climbed the dark, narrow staircase to a glass door with a stencilled logo depicting a family beneath the arch of a rainbow. Kaylee dragged them excitedly through the door into a clean, bright reception area with couches, potted plants, and a receptionist’s desk. Although the hours on the door suggested it was open, there was no one at the desk, and a closer look at the furniture revealed its wear and age.

Almost immediately, one of the doors along the corridor flew open and a woman emerged. Like Amanda, she looked in her mid-thirties but with greater attention to style. Her hair was a soft teal, and discreet tattoos of geometric patterns encircled her wrists and throat. She had chosen a deliberately hip but professional look — jeans and tailored red jacket — and Amanda suspected her suede ankle boots had not come from the bargain bin. But then the woman probably had to spend a lot of her time cajoling public officials and private donors to part with their money. Mastery of PR would be essential.

But the woman who greeted them exhibited neither polish nor artifice as she rushed across the foyer like an excited schoolgirl, hand outstretched and a huge smile on her face.

“Bonnie Pamiuq,” she exclaimed, shaking Amanda’s hand until her teeth rattled. “Ohmigod, what an honour to meet you! I’ve followed your charity since the beginning, and to think you’ve chosen the Island and our very own Island Recovery for your next trip, I’m just … speechless!”

Amanda could almost see Matthew rolling his eyes, but she felt an instant affinity for the woman. Kaylee too seemed to approve, wiggling happily when Bonnie knelt to scratch her ears. Anyone Kaylee approved of won extra points. Once Bonnie stood up, Amanda introduced Matthew.

“Matthew handles all the financial and logistical details. He’ll be the first to tell you I’m no good at either, so if this works out, you’ll see a lot more of him. I’m not looking for a big, splashy event. I want it to be meaningful for the men who participate. If it works, it might serve as a pilot project for other groups. I wish I could help way, way more of them, but unfortunately I’m only one person and I won’t sacrifice quality for quantity.”

“That’s what I love about your work,” Bonnie replied. “You understand change has to be personal. Come into my office. I’ve got a coffee maker in there, and there’s someone I want you to meet.”

She led them down the hall to an open door. Like the foyer, the room was flooded with natural light and crammed with plants. Bookcases overflowed with files, binders, and books on addiction, and the desk half buried in the corner was surrounded by mismatched chairs. A man was settled in one of the chairs, studying a computer propped on his lap, but when Bonnie burst into the room, he jumped to his feet, catlike and agile.

Amanda barely suppressed a gasp. He was built like a weightlifter, almost all muscle and sinew. He had a shaved head but a full beard of greyish red steel wool and startling blue eyes set deep into his leathery face. Tattoos ran up and down almost every inch of exposed skin, including a small one of a peace symbol on his left temple.

Bonnie laughed. “Yes, he makes quite a first impression. Amanda, meet Michael McTaggart. Tag to his friends. He’s the counsellor who will go with you on the trip.”

*Good God, has the man done time?* was Amanda’s first thought. At her side, she sensed Matthew stiffen, as if he’d had the same thought. Perhaps sensing their alarm, Kaylee remained by the door, watchfully still. But Tag merely smiled and extended his hand.

“It’s an honour.” His voice sounded aged by years of cheap booze and cheaper cigarettes, but to her surprise, his hand was soft and warm. “And here’s Kaylee.” He knelt and patted his knee to call her. She came warily, and he held out his hand for her to sniff. Amanda was pleased he hadn’t pushed it. For all his bulk, maybe he had a gentle side.

“In your emails, you mentioned the Tofino area,” Bonnie said. “Have you finalized what you’d like to do on the trip?”

She shook her head. “That’s what the next couple of weeks are for. I’ve done quite a lot of reading, so I know about potential activities. Kayaking, hiking, biking, exploring First Nations traditions. But now I want to visit the area to meet with local tour guides before I decide the exact itinerary. I know Tofino gets a million tourists a year, and I don’t want us to be in the thick of that.”

Bonnie pulled a face. “Tag and I discussed that. We think you should plan for June or September to avoid the crush, and he suggested he go with you on the scouting expedition. He has lots of outdoor experience around here, but he’s eager to see the Pacific Rim.”

“Oh, good,” Amanda said, but doubt must have crept into her voice, for Tag cocked his head.

“Is there a problem?”

Amanda was about to be polite but stopped herself. There *was* a problem. She didn’t know this guy from Adam, and she always liked to do things solo. She didn’t want to be tripping over him every time she set off anywhere. After a moment of tense silence, during which she tried to formulate a tactful reply, Tag finally nodded. “I’ve done time, yes, if that’s what you’re wondering. Two years for assault and robbery. And I’m a recovering addict.”

“But that’s all behind him,” Bonnie interjected. “He upgraded his education in prison and has gone on to qualify as an addictions counsellor. Now he’s continuing his—“

“Book learning doesn’t matter, Bonnie, if Amanda is uncomfortable.” Tag’s tone was gentle, but there was a firmness to the man. A clarity of intent. *What the hell?* Amanda thought. *Is he going to go all alpha on me?*

“It’ll be fine,” she said. “I like to do things my way, and on my own terms. Just so you know.”

“I’m sure Tag can work with that,” Bonnie said cheerfully. “When are you planning to leave?”

“As soon as I can organize the gear and rent a car,” Amanda said. “Thursday?”

Matthew had been sitting quietly, but now he looked both alarmed and dismayed. “Amanda, we have stuff to discuss. Costs, budget.”

She smiled. “That’s what phones are for, Matthew. I have some ideas on paper, but I want to check them out on the ground to see if they’re practical. It should only take a week or two.”

Bonnie was making some notes on her laptop and nodded enthusiastically. “And Matthew, while they’re gone, you and I will go through the list of potential clients. Tag has thrown in some names, and I know others. We can narrow it down and start getting the paperwork rolling.” She grinned. “Consents and waivers and other bureaucratic evils.”