

An underwater scene looking up from a dark, rocky crevice. A bright beam of light shines down from an opening above, illuminating a large school of small fish swimming upwards. The water is dark blue, and the surrounding rock is dark and textured.

**VICKI
DELANY**

**CORAL
REEF
VIEWS**

AN ASHLEY GRANT MYSTERY

CORAL REEF VIEWS

VICKI DELANY

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Coral reef views / Vicki Delany.

Names: Delany, Vicki, 1951– author.

Series: Rapid reads.

Description: Series statement: Rapid reads

Identifiers: Canadiana (print) 20190168846 | Canadiana (ebook) 20190168854 |
ISBN 9781459822955 (softcover) | ISBN 9781459823501 (PDF) |
ISBN 9781459823518 (EPUB)

Classification: LCC PS8557.E4239 C67 2020 | DDC C813/.6—dc23

Library of Congress Control Number: 2019943959

Simultaneously published in Canada and the United States in 2020

Summary: In this work of crime fiction, paramedic Ashley Grant helps her visiting father solve the mystery of a missing neighbor.

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Orca Book Publishers gratefully acknowledges the support for its publishing programs provided by the following agencies: the Government of Canada, the Canada Council for the Arts and the Province of British Columbia through the BC Arts Council and the Book Publishing Tax Credit.

Design by Ella Collier

Cover photography by gettyimages.ca/JefferyRichards

ORCA BOOK PUBLISHERS
orcabook.com

Printed and bound in Canada.

23 22 21 20 • 4 3 2 1

ONE

MY FATHER DOESN'T do vacations well. It's hard for him to relax. He'd rather be working in the garage, puttering about fixing things, or taking care of the garden. He also likes to help around the house. When he does that, my mother follows him, putting things back where they belong.

He didn't want to retire. But when he realized he was being offered a retirement package instead of being laid off, he took the package.

He wanted to go to on a cross-continent RV trip, but my mother had always dreamed of a Caribbean beach vacation.

Mom won.

At the moment I'm living and working in a Caribbean tourist destination. So here they are in the Victoria and Albert Islands. Visiting me.

Mom's loving it. The hot sun, the cool sand, the warm ocean. Relaxing in a lounge chair with a book on her lap and a cold drink by her side. Getting up now and again to splash in the waves or swim in the pool.

Dad's bored.

He doesn't read, and he doesn't relax. He doesn't like the food here much. He's not fond of fish, or so he says. He seems to like fish when my mom cooks it at home.

I took a couple of days off work to spend some time with them. I wanted to show them around Grand Victoria Island, which I now call home.

CORAL REEF VIEWS

That took about half a day. Then we stopped at Club Louisa, one of the nicest hotels on the island. Mom and I had conch fritters and margaritas under umbrellas on the patio restaurant and enjoyed a swim in the infinity pool.

Dad had a burger and a beer inside, where he could catch a football game on the big-screen TV.

The next day we went on a boat tour in the morning and snorkeled in the afternoon. Mom loved being out on the water. She also loved the attention of the handsome young tour guide who showed her how to breathe underwater. Dad talked to the captain about football. He checked the weather forecast on his phone and worried that the driveway at home wouldn't get shoveled.

Tuesday I went back to work. I left Mom making breakfast and planning a morning on the beach followed by a walk to a beachside

hotel for lunch. Dad was reading the weather report for Toronto again. "Another two feet of snow tonight. I told you we shouldn't have left, Donna. I don't trust that guy you hired. I'll have a heck of a mess to clean up."

"He'll do a fine job, dear." Mom flipped the bacon.

I gave her a kiss and headed out. I'd called my regular cabbie to come and pick me up. I'm lucky enough to live in a small vacation complex. While I waited I popped into the office to say good morning to Darlene, the day manager.

I found her slamming down the phone, her face twisted into a dark cloud. She is about my age and very attractive, with big dark eyes and perfect bone structure. Her hair is shaved down to the scalp on one side and tied into long braids on the other. The look suits her.

"Problem?" I asked.

“Ashley, good morning. Sorry about that.” She gave me a weak smile. “Nothing I can’t handle. Actually, it is something I can’t handle, which is why I need a plumber. We’ve got a broken pipe somewhere in building two, and the ground-floor units are flooding. George and Philip are running around with buckets, but they’re having trouble keeping up. I’ve been trying everyone I know, but they all say they can’t come for hours yet.”

“You need a plumber? You’re in luck. My dad’s a plumber.”

A spark of interest showed in her black eyes. “He is?”

“Fully licensed and employed as such until he retired a couple of months ago. I’ll go get him.”

The spark faded. “I can’t ask him to work on his vacation,” Darlene said.

“Believe me,” I said. “He’ll thank you. My mother will thank you.”

“I don’t know that I can pay Canadian rates. Whatever they are.”

“Don’t worry about that. He’ll pay you to let him do it.”

“He’s not enjoying his vacation?”

“When my mom said she wants to stay longer next time, I heard him mutter the word *divorce*.”

We both looked up at the sound of a car horn. I waved to Henry, the taxi driver. “I’ll get Dad and meet you at building two. He doesn’t have any of his tools, but he can make an assessment of what you need and maybe do a temporary fix.”

Darlene leaped up from behind her desk. “Unit twelve is the worst.”

I went to the taxi and asked Henry to wait. He leaned back in his seat and pulled out his phone. I ran upstairs and explained the situation to Dad. He got to his feet so fast he almost knocked his chair over.

“Aren’t you going to finish your breakfast?” Mom asked.

“It can wait,” he replied, heading for the door.

If Darlene’s problem turned out to be nothing, I might have to go to some of the other hotels on the island and sabotage their plumbing.

Dad charged off to building two, a man on a mission. I headed for the cab and another day in the ambulance.

TWO

MY SHIFT WAS busy. The near-drowning of a Japanese tourist who couldn't swim but thought he'd dive into the deep end anyway. A fender bender caused by an American who rented a car but forgot we drive on the left-hand side of the road here. A couple of locals in a bar brawl—at ten o'clock in the morning. A call came in from one of our "frequent flyers"—a lonely old man who used a ride in the ambulance and a chat with the hospital

nurses as his regular social outing. I'd once suggested he join the bridge club in his apartment building. He told me he didn't like any of the members.

We'd been busy, but I managed to get off shift in time. I found my mom reading in the shade of a royal palm on my small private patio. I gave her a kiss on the top of her head and asked, "Where's Dad?"

"At work."

"Work? You mean working on the plumbing? That's taken all day?"

"No, but he decided all the taps needed inspection. He's been doing that."

I laughed. "I've invited a friend to join us for dinner. I'll find Dad and let him know."

"A friend. That's nice."

"My friend's a Canadian police officer who's working with the V&A police. I thought Dad would enjoy having a man to talk to."

Mom's eyes opened wide. "A man?"

“Yes.”

“A man? As in a gentleman friend?”

“A man. As in a friend who happens to be a man.”

“Oh,” she said, trying to hide her disappointment. I’m the youngest of four daughters, the only one not married. Even with three sons-in-law and ten grandchildren, Mom still has hopes for me.

“I’ll go find Dad,” I said. “We’re meeting Alan at seven.”

I headed over to building two. Four buildings make up the complex where I live. It’s pretty nice, with two pools, beautiful gardens, walkways and a thirty-second walk to the beach. I was about to phone Dad to ask where he was when I heard his laugh.

I smiled to myself. My dad has a deep, rolling laugh, the sort that makes everyone around him laugh too. I hadn’t heard that laugh much on this visit.

I found him sitting under a palm tree, beer in hand, with a man about his age.

“Hi,” I said.

Dad’s new friend stood up.

“Paul,” Dad said. “This is my daughter, Ashley. Ashley, meet Paul Saunders.”

Paul thrust out his hand. He was a big guy, tall and broad with a shock of curly gray hair and a deep tan. He wore baggy shorts, a Toronto Blue Jays ball cap and an Ottawa Senators T-shirt. His handshake was warm and friendly. “Frank’s been telling me all about you,” he said. “How are you enjoying living on Grand Victoria?”

“It’s different,” I said. “The work is challenging but interesting. Did you fix the problem, Dad?”

“Got that leak shut off with no problem at all. But the pipes here aren’t in good shape, so I gave them all a once-over.” He shook his head. “I told your friend in the office she

better see to that right quick before the whole place is underwater.”

“I’m sure she appreciated your help,” I said. “I came to tell you we’re going to dinner at six forty-five.”

He lifted his beer bottle. “Water,” he said to Paul, “is a dangerous thing when it’s where it isn’t supposed to be.”

* * *

My friend Alan Westbrook is an RCMP officer on temporary assignment with the local police. The Victoria and Albert Islands is a small country in the Western Caribbean. It’s made up of numerous islands, many of which are uninhabited. I’ve been to concerts where there are more people than this entire country has. Grand Victoria is the biggest and most populated island. But it’s not more than sixty square kilometers in area and just

four kilometers wide at the broadest place. It's still a British colony, now mostly self-governing. It's a major tourist destination, and the tiny local population can't support it all. So plenty of Canadian and British people work here. Like Alan and me.

Alan and I are...I don't quite know what Alan and I are. I like him. He seems to like me. I'm a paramedic and he's a cop. This is a small island, so we bump into each other at work a lot. We've been out a couple of times. To casual dinners or to a bar to hear local music. But nothing more than that, and nothing has ever been said about it becoming more.

I noticed my mom studying him. Clearly she approved—he's a good-looking man, tall and fit with hair streaked golden by the sun, a huge smile and warm blue eyes. He gave her no signs that he and I were more than friends.

My dad seemed to like him a lot. Or maybe he just liked having the chance to talk

to someone new. He asked about policing in the islands. Alan told him the funny stories. He didn't mention that Grand Victoria, like everywhere, has its dark side.

The restaurant we'd chosen was a casual place right on the beach. The sun was setting as we arrived. Torches lined the walkway. The tables were lit by candles in hurricane lamps. Lights from boats in the harbor rose and fell on the gentle waves. The surf murmured lightly as it touched the beach.

It was a nice evening, and I was glad to see Dad enjoying himself. He even agreed to try the restaurant's specialty, conch chowder.

* * *

Dad's good mood didn't last long. When I got home from work on Wednesday, my parents were playing cards. I gave them each a kiss and went to change out of my uniform.

"I'll go and check, see if he's in yet. Maybe he forgot his phone," Dad said.

"Don't badger the man, Frank," Mom said.

I heard the door open and shut.

"What's the matter?" I asked Mom.

She let out a long breath. "Your father was supposed to be meeting his new friend Paul for lunch. Paul didn't show. So your father spent the entire afternoon trying to find something to do." She gathered up the cards. "A woman can only play so many hands of gin."

"Feel like a walk?" I asked.

"Sure."

* * *

We had a long, lovely walk along the beach. When we got back, Dad was playing solitaire at the dining-room table.

"I'll cook tonight, if you like," I said. "I can do chicken on the barbecue and make a salad."

“He’s not home and not answering his phone,” Dad said.

“Who’s not home?”

“Paul.”

“Leave the man alone, Frank,” Mom said. “He went out for the day and forgot he’d made plans with you.”

“He’s not the sort to forget.”

“You don’t know what sort he is,” Mom said. “You only met him yesterday.”

“I left a note on his door to call me when he gets in.”

“I’m ready for a glass of wine,” Mom said. “I hope we get another beautiful sunset like yesterday.”

* * *

By the time I left for work the next morning, Paul still hadn’t called. Dad was getting ill-tempered, and Mom annoyed. “The man has

a life, Frank. He might have met people. Made friends.” Mom glanced at me and wiggled her eyebrows. “Maybe even a lady friend.”

“Have a nice day.” I grabbed the bagged lunch Mom had made for me. It was like being back in school.

I was enjoying that lunch—cold tomato soup and a ham sandwich—when Dad called.

“I need you to contact the hospital for me,” he said.

“Are you okay? Where’s Mom?”

“She’s gone to the beach. I’m fine, but I’m worried about Paul. Maybe he’s had an accident.”

“Dad.”

“I called the hospital, and they said they had no one of that name. He might be unconscious or using another name. You can find out, can’t you? It’s got to be a small hospital.”

“Yes, it’s a small hospital.” That was an understatement. “But...”

“If he’s not there, ask your friend Alan. The police wouldn’t talk to me, but he can get things moving.”

“Dad! I’ll speak to someone at the hospital next time I’m there, but I can’t tell Alan to get the police involved. Your friend is an adult. He can go away for a couple of days if he wants to.”

“But we were going to have lunch yesterday. Today he was going to take me to the conch farm. He said it’s an interesting operation.”

“Dad...”

“I asked Darlene, and she said he’s booked the room for another two weeks. I...uh...just happened to be passing when the maid went in to clean, and I peeked in.”

“Dad!”

“His stuff all seems to be there. Two suitcases are in the closet.”

“You don’t know what stuff he has. Maybe he brought three suitcases.”

“No one travels with three suitcases. Not with airline baggage fees what they are these days. Ashley, can you do this for me? Please. I have a bad feeling about this.”

I sighed. My dad didn’t ask me for much. “Okay, I’ll call the hospital, and I’ll contact the police about any John Does.” Meaning unidentified males. “If I find out he’s with a girlfriend, I’m not going to tell you where.”

“I just need to know, honeybunch. Thanks.”

Reluctantly I put down my sandwich. There really is nothing like a Mom-made lunch. Feeling slightly embarrassed, I made the calls. No one knew anything about a man matching Paul’s description.

* * *

When I got home, I found Mom reading by the pool. I dropped into the lounge chair next

to her. I tilted my face toward the hot sun. “Another book?” I asked.

“A novel a day,” she said. “The perfect vacation.”

“Where’s Dad?”

She put down the book. “Not having the perfect vacation. He called a taxi and has gone into town.”

I didn’t like the tone in her voice. “Why? What’s wrong with that?”

“He’s still worried about his friend. Paul told him about some beach bar he likes. Frank’s gone to check it out. See if he’s there.”

“Jeez, Mom. Didn’t it occur to Dad that Paul might not have thought having lunch with some guy from Toronto was important? Or that he’s gone off to do whatever he wants to do?”

“I tried telling him that, Ashley. But you know your father. When he gets an idea in his head...”

“I know.”

“He’s so dreadfully bored here. He asked Darlene if he could start repairs on the plumbing. She told him she can’t hire him, as he doesn’t have a work visa. He said he’d do it for free.”

“Doesn’t matter,” I said. “That would still take the job away from a local.”

“She told him that.”

“Next time you come for a visit, maybe you should come alone.”

“He did enjoy Thanksgiving at Marlene’s cottage,” Mom said. “They enjoyed having us. They got a new deck out of the visit.”

I chuckled and stood up. It was too hot sitting in the sun in my dark uniform.

At that moment Dad came around the corner. I could tell by the look on his face that he hadn’t found his friend.

“No luck?” Mom said.

“He hasn’t been into the bar he likes for a

couple of days. I asked Darlene for his contact info back in Canada.”

“Why would you do that?” Mom asked.

“I want to check with his family. He’s a widower, but he has two kids. Maybe he told them where he’s gone.”

“I trust Darlene didn’t give it to you,” I said.

“No. She said it’s private.” He looked at me. “Could you—”

“No,” I said. If I’d gone off for a couple of days with a new boyfriend, I sure wouldn’t want some nosy neighbor calling my mother.

Dad dropped into a lounge chair. He looked like a total tourist. Bermuda shorts. Blue-and-orange shirt. White socks in sandals. Bright-pink nose.

“Come on, Dad,” I said. “You’re in one of the most beautiful places in the world, and you’re making yourself sad. You said he’s a widower. If Paul met a nice woman and went

away for a few days, that's a good thing. Maybe he turned his phone off. Some people do that when they want to get away."

"Maybe," he said. "I know it's not really my business. It's just...it's because he's a recent widower that I'm worried, honey-bunch. His wife died a couple of months ago, and he says he's lost without her. He came here to get justice for her, he said. I don't know what that means. I'm afraid he's done something foolish. Or is going to. If I can't find him."

VICKI DELANY is one of Canada's most prolific and varied crime writers and a national bestseller in the United States. She has written more than twenty-five books, from clever cozies to Gothic thrillers, gritty police procedurals to historical fiction, and novellas for adult literacy. Under the name Eva Gates, she writes the Lighthouse Library Mystery series for Penguin Random House. Her latest novel is *Elementary, She Read*, the first in the Sherlock Holmes Bookshop Mystery series from Crooked Lane. Vicki is the past president of the Crime Writers of Canada. Her work has been nominated for the Derringer, the Bony Blithe, the Ontario Library Association Golden Oak and the Arthur Ellis Awards.



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ISBN 978-1-4598-2295-5



9 781459 822955