

Excerpt: Chapters 1 & 2



HIDDEN SECRETS

A Green Dory Inn Mystery: Book 2

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Hidden Secrets, A Green Dory Inn Mystery, Book 2

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Scripture reference: In Chapter 29, a character paraphrases Revelation 3:20 KJV. In the closing author's note, the quote is restated in the New King James Version (NKJV). Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

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NOTE TO READERS

Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, is a real town—a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Green Dory Inn, Captain Jack’s Pub, and most other places mentioned in this novel are purely fictional and I no way intended to represent real locations. The Ovens Park and Fisheries Museum are real places mentioned in the story.

I have taken considerable liberty with the geography of the inn, as I’ll explain at the end of the book. Please don’t peek there now, or you’ll find spoilers.

Also, for my non-Canadian readers, please note I’m using Canadian spellings in this book. You’ll see words like colour, neighbour, practice, and licence, and they’re not typos. That said, and despite the many eyes that have checked the manuscript, I can’t guarantee perfection. But I’ve done my best!



MEET THE KEY CHARACTERS

- Anna Young:** owner of the inn, recently widowed, 56
- Bobby Hawke:** Roy's grandson, visiting for the summer, 28
- Captain Hiram Hiltz:** built the inn, died 40 years ago at 81
- Ciara Williams:** childhood classmate of Landon, 24
- Corey Seymour:** local teen who does Anna's mowing, 14
- David Hiltz:** Captain Hiltz's grandson, missing for over 40 years, presumed dead as a teen
- Dylan Tremblay:** local police constable, 29
- Elva Knapp:** Anna's neighbour, difficult personality, 57
- Glenna & Ivan McNutt:** guests at the inn, 45 & 49
- Gord Lohnes:** Anna's friend, 59
- Hart Brown:** Meaghan's boyfriend, involved in previous trouble at the inn, 25
- Jaelyn Carstens:** Anna's neighbour, owns a local pub, 30s-40s
- Landon Smith:** Anna's friend, grateful for her love and support, 24
- Maria Hiltz:** previous owner of the inn, daughter-in-law of Captain Hiltz, 84
- Meaghan Lohnes:** Anna's housekeeper, Gord's daughter, 22
- Nigel Foley:** eccentric local man who roams the woods, 58
- Quinn Dyer:** teen grandson of Tricia and Blaine, living with them, involved in previous trouble at the inn, 15
- Roy Hawke:** Anna's neighbour, 77
- Tricia & Blaine Dyer:** Anna's neighbours, mid-50s

Chapter 1

Tuesday

THE AIR IN the university hallway hung thick with dust and summer heat. Dead, even though light glowed through windows in a few office doors.

Landon moistened her lips and drew a deep breath. The polished brass nameplate with its precise black letters reflected her anxiety back at her. Magnified, like a distorting mirror in a creepy carnival. She tried again to calm her thumping heart. Professor Tallin wouldn't have agreed to this meeting if there'd been no hope.

She rapped on the frosted glass pane. Assertive, but not demanding. Tallin should approve.

"Come."

At the brisk command, she eased open the door, the handle slick beneath her sweaty palm, and stepped inside to beg for her future.

The woman behind the plain wooden desk could have doubled as a department store mannequin, with her expressionless face and long white arms. Close-cropped dark hair, ice-blue silk blouse. Except a store display would complete the outfit with a coordinating necklace or wispy scarf. She focused on her laptop screen, eyes tracking side to side. Eventually, she snapped the laptop shut and pinned Landon with a cool stare. "Yes?"

Landon pressed her palms into the smooth cotton of her capri pants and refused to touch the back of her neck. No nervous tics, no sign of weakness. Tallin only respected strength.

“Professor, I wanted to discuss my mark for the last course.”

One pencil-thin eyebrow arched. “I did warn you, Ms. Smith.”

“With respect, your email said if I wasn’t back in class the following Monday, I couldn’t expect to pass.” To which Landon sent an apologetic reply explaining she couldn’t leave her friend Anna in the middle of a crisis. But the crisis had resolved. She’d met the deadline.

She maintained eye contact and kept her tone neutral. “I was present that Monday and missed no more time. While I was away, I submitted my assignments on time and kept up with the readings.”

“Your final exam was weak. And there’s the matter of class participation. Which is hard to do when one is not present.”

“I understand, but given that I accomplished everything else on the syllabus, could you consider my participation while I was here and evaluate based on that?”

The slow shake of Tallin’s head radiated disappointment. “You’re almost twenty-five, older than the majority of the students, and you definitely have more life experience.” Dry and sharp, her tone offered no trace of compassion. “My colleagues may have coddled you, but I expect better.”

Landon’s mouth shot open. She sucked in a mouthful of air, speeding through a silent count to ten. “I’m not asking to be coddled. I’m asking for a fair chance.”

“You wasted your chance when you abandoned your studies to play nursemaid. Or detective.”

“Those were extenuating circumstances. My friend is like a mother to me. She needed support, and no one else could be there for her.”

The professor’s lean cheeks puckered inward as if she’d taken a mouthful of especially sour wine. A sideways pinch of her lips enhanced the impression. Her gaze drilled Landon. “If you were assigned a case and you only showed up half the time, would you be considered an effective social worker?”

“That’s different.”

“It’s not. Nothing must interfere with your work when someone else is depending on you.”

“Someone else *was* depending on me. We thought her life was in danger.”

Tallin flicked an imaginary speck of dust from her desk lamp. “Emotionalism and allowing your personal life to interfere are two weaknesses you must overcome if you ever hope to achieve your degree.”

Landon’s fingers tightened toward fists. She forced them straight and prayed for calm. “So there’s nothing you will do about my mark.”

“No.”

“And because you were ‘delayed’ in processing the marks, my other course options are full.”

Narrow lips formed a crimson line. “Unfortunately.”

The tremors in her core made her strain for every breath. Her lungs ached. “I will be filing a formal complaint.”

Professor Tallin placed her palms against the edge of her desk. In a slow, fluid motion, she pushed her chair back and stood, leaning forward. “Is that an attempt to intimidate me?”

Landon lifted her chin. “I wouldn’t waste my time.”

Eyes narrowed, Tallin mirrored Landon’s motion. “You won’t graduate without my courses.”

“Then I’ll repeat the first one in September.” And miss her fall work-term opportunity because of this woman’s petty power struggles.

Grinding her teeth to block a torrent of angry words, Landon spun on her heel and yanked open the door. She ducked into a connecting hallway and then out a side door before venting a low, primal growl.

In her back pocket, her phone buzzed. She waved it off like an errant wasp.

The phone vibrated again. If these were parting-shot emails from Professor Tallin, they’d be more ammunition for her complaint.

If enough students spoke up, maybe the university could insist on sensitivity training or something. Good thing Tallin wasn’t still carrying a caseload, for the clients’ sakes.

Landon unlocked her phone to two new texts. From her friend Anna, not Tallin. A little of the tension faded from the back of her neck.

You’re on my mind... everything okay?

Are you free to chat?

A longing like homesickness swelled, and she tapped the phone’s call icon. It wasn’t about the location. Nova Scotia hadn’t been home for years. But nothing said “home” like Anna’s heart.

Anna answered. “Hey, how are things?”

The welcome in her voice softened Landon’s mood. “I’ll manage. Just remind me God has this, okay? He’s working it all out?”

“He has good plans for you, and nothing is too hard for Him. Now, what’s wrong?”

Phone to her ear, she walked down the concrete steps and escaped onto the sidewalk as she told Anna the basics. “It’s bad enough I always struggle with the assignments, but what chance do I have against such a vindictive, mean-spirited person?”

“It’s because you stayed to help me, isn’t it?”

Landon kicked at a pebble on the sidewalk. “She had it in for me anyway. Because I’m not ‘strong’ and hard like she is.”

A delivery truck rumbled past. The murky scent of its exhaust soured her stomach. A memory flashed from her visit with Anna—sparkling blue water, circling seagulls’ high-pitched cries, and bracing clean air that tasted salty-good. Not like poison.

She walked faster. She had to get to the park, see at least a bit of nature. A tree, a squirrel. Something to refresh her spirit. For all the positives of the city, buildings and sidewalks never spoke peace.

“You, my friend, have a strength your professor can’t see.” A cool balm, Anna’s voice carried assurance. “Don’t let her diminish that. But what will you do for the rest of the summer?”

One more block, and she’d reach the tiny park, an alcove in the urban crush.

“Try to find a job, I guess. And you know she won’t accept the same papers again when I redo her class.”

A youth sauntered toward her, profanity stamped on his tee shirt and angry beats audible through his bulky over-ear headphones. He sneered as they met.

Right now her emotions agreed, but faith gave her a different choice. She countered his attitude with a deliberate smile and a silent prayer they’d both find peace.

Anna spoke again. “What would you think about coming here for the summer?”

Instinct made Landon’s heart flip, but going back would be okay now. She’d faced that fear and won, even enjoyed her last visit. “I can’t afford the flight, and you need your rooms for paying guests.”

July was peak tourist season, and Anna’s country inn only had four rooms to fill.

“Bookings are a little slow, and I wouldn’t mind keeping it that way this year. I’m still not feeling like I should.”

They'd thought all Anna needed was to catch up on her sleep once the prowler stress ended. Landon pressed the phone tighter against her ear. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know, but my energy hasn't come back. I'm achy, cranky, and still doubting myself, even now that the trouble's stopped."

Ahead, paving stones left the sidewalk for the pocket-sized park. Landon's pace slowed, and a bit of tranquility soothed her spirit despite Anna's news. "Have you seen a doctor?"

She sank onto a shaded bench, thin wooden slats pressing against her thighs, and let her eyes absorb the varying shades of green.

Anna wanted her to move back to Lunenburg. That was no secret. But Anna wouldn't stoop to emotional manipulation. This was real.

"I have an appointment next Monday. I just thought... if you're free anyway, some time together could be good for both of us."

On the street, a heavy engine ground gears. A horn blared, and someone shouted. Landon's ears were tired of tuning out endless traffic noise. Rural Atlantic Canada's appeal grew by the minute.

What did she have to stay for?

Nothing, until September.

She slouched lower on the bench. Anna's neighbour had paid for her last flight because he'd been so concerned about Anna. Landon couldn't ask for another handout.

"Landon? Are you still there?"

"Sorry, just thinking about it."

"If you want to come, I have reward points for your flights. But no pressure. You've met my friends, and you know I'm in good hands."

A siren wailed nearby. Landon cringed.

The city was alive and had so much to offer. She was happy here.

But not today.

It wouldn't be running away as long as she came back in the fall. It would be a summer break. Lots of people took them.

She sat up straight on the bench, pebbles crunching under her thin-soled sandals. "Anna, I'd love to see you. Thank you."

Chapter 2

Friday

WHEN LANDON EXITED security at Halifax's Stanfield Airport on Friday, Anna's broad smile was a beacon among the waiting strangers. Swallowing unexpected emotion, she raced into Anna's arms.

Home. Acceptance. The warm stability that Anna wore like a fragrance. Yet Landon's initial, misty-eyed read of her friend's face caught strain lines that should have faded since June. And a pallor only partly due to the wide white headband holding back her brown, chin-length bob. Amid the chatter of reunions and weary travellers, Landon squeezed her tighter and held the hug longer than usual as if she could love Anna back to health.

Anna had been her mother's friend first. The two were around the same age, now their mid-fifties. But her mom couldn't handle what happened to Landon—or her dad's death because of it—and Landon lost both her parents. When she needed them most.

Thank God for Anna, stepping in and showing all the love she could, including the love of Jesus. Anna's faith and prayers fostered Landon's ability to stand whole today. Scarred, but whole.

And now able to return to the town she'd been taken from, if not to feel at home, at least to find her way as an adult and lay her childhood memories to rest.

A buzzer blared, and the luggage carousel rumbled to life. Anna flinched more than Landon did.

Landon studied the tight jaw, the now-pinched lips. "You okay?"

"Just a bit of a headache. I'll get a coffee before we hit the road."

Pain might account for the brackets around Anna's mouth. But her brown eyes seemed faded, like something dimmed the light inside. Landon's mission for the next six weeks would be to restore the shine.

Watching uniform dark suitcases circulate, she stopped feeling self-conscious about the garishly flowered one she'd bought at the thrift store. At least she'd recognize it.

Beside her, a guy in a suit did a swift lunge-and-grab to wrestle a bulky case off the moving track.

A bright mass of pink and green slid toward them, and Landon pulled it free. She checked the tag to be safe, but there couldn't be a second one. Retro only went so far.

Anna snickered. "At least you won't lose it."

"Unless the airline decides it's too ugly to live."

"But then they have to buy you all new things. Win-win."

Fifteen minutes later, coffee in hand and likely cooling fast, Anna tracked down her car. "I was hurrying to get inside in case you landed early. I should have paid more attention."

Landon dropped her suitcase, and her arm muscles practically cried in relief. Wheels would have been a huge plus. She hoisted the case and her carry-on into the back seat of the bronze Honda and climbed into the front. "Thanks for coming to get me."

"It gives us an hour and a half of uninterrupted catch-up time before we get home and I put you to work." Anna

navigated the concrete maze into the sunlight. “Just let me figure out which lane I need. They’ve changed it again.”

Landon leaned her head back and closed her eyes, basking in the quiet praise music streaming from the car speakers. After the stress with her professor and the scramble to leave the city for the rest of the summer, relaxing felt good. She’d tried on the plane, with limited success.

Here on the ground, she could unwind.

The engine revs increased, and Anna exhaled. “That wasn’t so bad. We’ll be home in time to rest a bit before seeing everyone.”

“I feel like I’m crashing a party.” She’d wanted to come tomorrow, but Anna had several guests booked for the inn. Her housekeeper, Meaghan, could’ve checked them in, but welcoming people was what Anna did best.

Anna’s welcoming heart was behind tonight too. The new neighbours had finally moved in, and she’d invited them and a few friends for a potluck.

She merged onto the highway. “You’ve met most of them.” Her fingertips tapped the steering wheel. “I told Quinn he could come with his grandparents. If he behaves.”

“How likely is that?”

“He’s better than he was. And I couldn’t very well exclude him.”

Landon first encountered Quinn when he picked a fight with the boy who’d been mowing Anna’s lawn. Fourteen or fifteen years old, the two had been friends until Corey decided to straighten out his life. Quinn’s anger may have been what pushed him into the pranks to scare Anna away from the inn—the crisis that brought Landon here a month ago. Meaghan’s boyfriend was the instigator, but Quinn had done his share.

Worst of all, Quinn had tried to implicate Corey, and the other boy had run away.

This time of year, Corey could sleep outside, but what would he do for food and clean clothing? Going back to his troublemaking friends might seem like his only answer unless he hitchhiked into Halifax and fell into bigger trouble. He was small for his age and pretty for a boy. Bigger trouble could be very bad, indeed.

Landon rubbed the back of her neck. “No word on Corey?”

“None. My heart’s breaking for him. And his father doesn’t care.”

Anna’s emotions sounded as raw as they’d been when Hart and Quinn were finally caught. By now, she should be healing.

Seeing a doctor was a good idea.

They sped past trees and exits and a stretch of urban sprawl. Beyond the city, the highway dropped to two lanes with an occasional third for passing.

So many shades of green and sparkling glints of water. Each view expanded Landon’s soul.

Anna took the Lunenburg exit, then bypassed the town for a narrow route that hugged the winding rocky coastline. Choppy ocean waves played in the sunshine to the left, and widely spaced two-storey homes slid past on the right, built well back from the passing cars.

The road kept to a few metres above sea level until Anna reached the final curve before the inn. Then the elevation increased, with a metal guardrail fencing the gravel shoulder from the rock face’s vertical plunge to the waves below.

Ahead, the inn’s sign beckoned—a green dory on an oval of cream-painted wood, framed with thick nautical rope.

Bright yellow pansies and orange marigolds overflowed the signature green rowboat on the front lawn, welcoming visitors with waves of exuberant colour. Typical of the region’s older homes, the grey inn’s twin dormer windows

framed an extended “Lunenburg bump” dormer above a sunshine-yellow front door.

Landon drew another deep breath of salt-fresh air, glad they’d cut the air conditioning and opened the car windows when they dropped from highway speed. “I’ve missed this. Quinn’s doing a good job on the grass.”

“And he’s usually polite about it. He knows it’s temporary until Corey gets back, but this is a chance for some restitution.”

“Restitution would be cleaning up the mess he made in the barn.”

“I don’t trust him in there alone.” In the small lot at the end of a long driveway, Anna parked facing the windowless grey building. “If they were searching for something when they broke in, they didn’t find it.”

“But you said it’s only junk.”

“Nigel still insists there could be something important.”

Nigel also believed in aliens and roamed the woods with a metal detector. “Have you let him look?”

“I think he’s been spending his free time hunting for Corey.”

“Does he have a job?” The man popped up at such odd hours, she’d assumed all he had was free time.

“He stocks shelves at the grocery store. Loves it because they let him bring home the dented cans.”

Now Anna’s voice held its customary soft acceptance. Nigel, Landon, Corey, even Quinn... never a misfit who didn’t fit in Anna’s heart.

Stepping across the threshold from the back deck brought an unexpected mist to Landon’s eyes. Guests used the front door. Family and friends came in this way, from the rear.

An airy hallway ran through to the front entrance, ivory-hued walls catching daylight from the windows in the doors. On this end, it accessed Anna’s private rooms and the kitchen, the inn’s heart.

A warm, spicy aroma teased her. "Mmm, spaghetti?"

"Meat sauce for lasagna. Let's get you settled, first." Anna's heels tapped along the aged-honey hardwood floor to the front of the inn. "Same room as before."

The butterfly-themed room, so clearly decorated for Landon. Since she'd broken the fear of coming back, she could accept the room as a haven to visit, not an attempt to tie her here. She tugged her suitcase up the stairs.

"There are no guests tonight, so enjoy your space." Anna left her carry-on at the door. "Come down when you're ready, but there's no rush. Meaghan will be here soon to help."

Alone in her room, Landon spun in a slow circle amid the soft peach and green tones. She stopped at the butterfly prints, one a monarch with wings spread in full stained-glass orange-and-black glory, the other a Canadian tiger swallowtail, soft yellow with black stripes.

The front rooms with their ocean-facing dormer windows bore nautical themes, but the two at the back reflected the forest behind the inn. Here, the ceiling sloped toward the windows, creating a cozy intimacy.

Landon peered outside. There'd be no prowlers to watch for now. This time of day, she wouldn't even see a deer munching Anna's flower garden. She half expected to glimpse Nigel roaming the woods, but nothing moved. Even Anna's black and white cat would have gone to ground somewhere in the shade.

A deep yawn brought water to her eyes. Time to get away from the bed's lure, or she'd still be here when people started arriving.

She splashed cool water on her face and traded her crumpled travel clothes for a lemon-yellow sleeveless top and colour-swirled skirt. A quick redo of the blond ponytail low on her neck, and she shut the door firmly behind her.

The curved wooden banister slid silk-smooth beneath her trailing fingertips as she skipped down the stairs. She

followed the savoury fragrance along the short hallway to the rear of the inn just as Meaghan stepped through the back door.

“Oh.” The flame-haired housekeeper’s blue eyes rounded, deepening the grey smudges underneath. “Landon. Welcome back.”

Faint hollows in her cheeks hadn’t been there in June. Finding out your loser boyfriend had been terrorizing your employer had to be hard. From what her father said, Hart had cost the girl her last job too.

Anna emerged from the sitting room on the right, her wide smile encompassing them both. “Many hands make light work. I’ll put the lasagna together, and you two can tackle setup. We’ll mingle on the deck and then come inside to eat.”

Even with a square farmhouse-style table and four ample white-and-pine hoop back chairs, Anna’s kitchen had plenty of room for the three of them to work without tripping over one another. White cabinets and brushed stainless-steel appliances lent a professional feel suitable for an inn, with a pale pink tint on the walls reflecting the homey rose and grey flagstone pattern from the vinyl floor.

The sparrow figurine Landon had given Anna last month sat on the window ledge beside a small aloe vera plant in a purple pot.

As Meaghan dropped her purse onto one of the chairs, Anna wrestled a large glass pan from a bottom drawer. When she uncovered the slow cooker on the counter and stirred the sauce, tomato-spiced comfort filled the room.

“Do we need fresh flowers for the tables?” Landon retrieved a pair of scissors from the oak knife block.

“Yes, please.”

When she returned with a cluster of blue and white pansies from the rear garden, Meaghan had the four yellow-clothed tables laid with cutlery and glasses. “We’ll

fill these with water before dinner, and there'll be other glasses on the counter if anyone wants something else."

Landon collected empty porcelain vases from each table and divided the flowers. "I should have done this at the sink."

"One second." Meaghan fetched a plastic pitcher from the kitchen. "Anna said your second summer class didn't work out. I'm sorry." Wistfulness softened her voice.

"It's disappointing." Landon positioned the newly filled vases.

"I wanted to go to university. Although I really liked working in a gift shop in town. And Anna's great, of course."

Hart made so much trouble about her working. Maybe he also kept her back from more education. Her father, Gord, claimed the man wanted her at home to wait on him.

Landon pressed her lips shut. Meaghan didn't need her opinion. "What did you want to study?"
A shriek from Anna froze them in place, eyes locked. As one, they bolted for the kitchen.

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