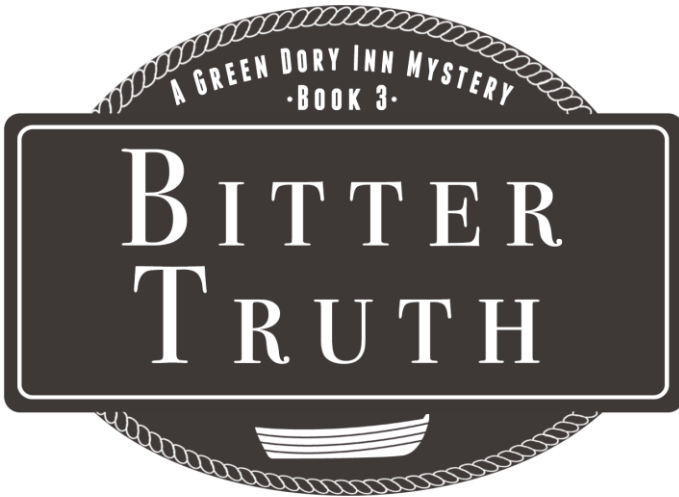


Excerpt: Chapter 1



BITTER TRUTH
A Green Dory Inn Mystery: Book 3

JANET SKETCHLEY
janetsketchley.ca

Bitter Truth, A Green Dory Inn Mystery, Book 3

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The characters and situations in this book are works of fiction and are not intended to represent any individuals, living or dead. The Green Dory Inn is purely fictional and in no way intended to represent a real location. Where real locations are mentioned, they are used fictitiously for the purposes of the story.

Quotations and Scripture References:

Chapter 2: reaping what we sow: Galatians 6:7.

Chapter 8: not despising what God calls clean: Acts 10:15

Chapter 15: “The vilest offender who truly believes...” (“To God be the Glory,” by Fanny Crosby, public domain).

Chapter 15: “Vengeance is Mine, says the Lord.” Deuteronomy 32:35 NKJV, Romans 12:19 NKJV New King James Version (NKJV) Scripture taken from the New King James Version®. Copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Chapter 15: “Father, forgive them,” Luke 23:34 NIV New International Version (NIV) Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV® Copyright ©1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.® Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

Chapter 17: “A cord of three strands is not easily broken.” Ecclesiastes 4:12 CSB Christian Standard Bible (CSB) The Christian Standard Bible. Copyright © 2017 by Holman Bible Publishers. Used by permission. Christian Standard Bible®, and CSB® are federally registered trademarks of Holman Bible Publishers, all rights reserved.

Chapter 24: God speaking through a donkey: Numbers 22.

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NOTE TO READERS

Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, is a real town—a UNESCO World Heritage site. The Green Dory Inn and most other places mentioned in this novel are products of my imagination and in no way intended to represent real locations. Thank you to the kind folks at The Ovens Park for permitting me to set some of the action there. This is a novel, and what happens at the park is pure fiction. The Ovens is a wonderful, safe family campground, and if you're ever in the area, do visit to walk the trails and see the sea caves. South Shore Regional Hospital and Fisherman's Memorial Hospital are also real places. If you've been inside South Shore Regional, you'll know that I've redecorated to suit myself.

I have also taken creative licence with the geography of the inn by elevating that part of the coastline to allow for the sea tunnel beneath it. One of the perks of writing fiction is being able to adjust the facts as needed, for the purposes of the story.

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



DEDICATION

This novel isn't about current events but it was birthed in a very difficult season. In view of that, I offer the following dedication:

To all those who lived through the years 2020 and 2021.

And in memory of those who didn't make it.

With gratitude to the God who carries us.

MEET THE KEY CHARACTERS

Anna Young: owner of the Green Dory Inn

Bobby Hawke: Anna's neighbour

Ciara Williams: Landon's friend

Dylan Tremblay: local police constable

Kenjiro (Ken) and Kimi Sanu: Ciara's former boss and his wife

Landon Smith: Anna's friend

Meaghan Lohnes: Anna's part-time housekeeper

Orran Ashwell: Ciara's old friend and mentor

Phil Kirkwood: Ciara's stepfather

Roy Hawke: Bobby's grandfather, Anna's neighbour

Shaun Riggs: travelling motorcyclist

Tait Hansen: Orran's business partner

Whitney Kirkwood: Ciara's mother

Zander Luca: Landon's counsellor and mentor

Chapter 1

Thursday

“**W**HAT IF I can’t do this?” Landon Smith twisted her fingers together in her lap until they hurt. “Don’t let one toxic prof get inside your head.” Bobby Hawke looped the Corvette around another curve in the narrow coastal road. “She’s behind you now. Transferring to Halifax means a fresh start.”

“I ran away.”

“You made a strategic decision to regroup.”

Landon snapped her stretchy bead bracelet against her wrist. How could she explain her mounting anxiety when she didn’t understand it herself? She’d survived day one on her new campus. Next stop was a South Shore, Nova Scotia beach walk to unwind. Zero stress.

Except the drive from the city had given her time to think about the mountain of readings and the visible cliques among the other undergrads.

“Twenty-four isn’t that much older, but I feel like...” The hypnotic unfolding of the faded pavement drew her gaze. The throaty power of the convertible’s engine had them skimming the shore like a white seabird. “I feel like a trade-in car with dull paint and flat tires. What if I can’t keep up?”

The rays sparkling off the Atlantic Ocean dazzled her vision and churned the nameless dread in her gut, compounding the slipstream effect from the open roof. She ground her molars against a rising tide of heat. Spewing in Bobby's Corvette was not an option.

Bobby slapped the vent control, and cool air blasted her cheeks. The car slowed. "Need me to pull over?"

Eyes closed, she inhaled deeply. The searing sensation ebbed, leaving a manageable queasiness. She gulped. "I'm good now."

He eased back up to the speed limit. "You were getting kind of green around the gills."

An oncoming police car chirped its siren once before whipping past.

Landon twisted to peer after it. "Was that Dylan?"

Bobby slowed again and jostled them onto the gravel shoulder, tires crunching to a stop. "Whoever it was just got a call. They're coming back."

Red and blue lights flashed, and the white cruiser paused alongside, its passenger window lowering. Constable Dylan Tremblay acknowledged them both with a nod. "There's a pull-off around the next bend. Follow me."

He cut the roof lights and drove on.

"Wonder what's up." Bobby signalled and eased the Corvette back onto the pavement.

Landon's heart flipped. "Something's happened at the inn."

With the trouble at the Green Dory Inn this summer, Dylan had been the responding officer so many times that he and Landon had become friends. When she decided to extend her stay in Lunenburg, he'd adopted a protective big-brother role. Not that he or Bobby had more than five years on her.

She focused on the cool air streaming from the dash vent, but her nerves coiled tighter and tighter until she could barely breathe. As soon as Bobby cut left onto a

grassy area and stopped beside the police car, she ran after Dylan toward the lone picnic table.

“Dylan, what’s wrong?”

He chose the bench with his back to the Atlantic. Behind him, the land fell away to where short, choppy waves sparkled like a net full of diamonds. The playful light contrasted with his unsmiling expression.

“Sorry about the theatrics. This needs more than a roadside chat. Anna thought I might catch you at the beach, and I was backtracking from there when we met.”

Landon’s breath caught again.

As if he’d sensed her fear, Dylan’s lean features twisted into a wry smile. “She’s fine, and she didn’t want to call you.”

Despite his reassurance, Landon’s knees wobbled as she dropped onto the sun-warmed wooden bench opposite him. The way the sea air swirled, she had to tuck her skirt beneath her thighs to stop the loose fabric from billowing.

Bobby settled beside her, close enough to support, but not to crowd.

Dylan’s dark eyes shifted between them, then focused on her. “Gord Lohnes was to be in Bridgewater today for a court hearing.”

Not the inn after all. But Dylan’s serious posture, his urgency to find them... Landon’s skin pebbled despite the sun’s heat. “Don’t tell us he escaped.”

“There’s no easy way to say this.” Brows crowding together, Dylan leaned on his forearms, fingers laced. “Gord was shot in the courthouse parking lot. He didn’t make it.”

“But—” Words flooded her mind, too many to channel into questions. She stared at the tabletop’s wide grey planks until they slid out of focus. “It’s finished, then. His case has been escalated to the Highest Court.” No appeals, no mistrials. No dragging victims through their pain again in front of the judge.

Dylan cleared his throat. “The shooter deprived the living of the chance to see justice done.”

“Dylan, the man tried to kill us. You want me to be sorry he’s gone?” Remembered fear shook her breath.

Bobby shifted, the movement flexing the board beneath them. “You said ‘the shooter’—the person got away? Or you’re not revealing a name yet?”

“Gone. The investigators are working on it.”

“Good luck.” Bobby propped an elbow on the table. “I guess his old gang decided he was a liability.”

“That’s the most likely explanation. We’ll be following up on local leads as well.”

Gord—shot. So final. And while Landon might approve, Anna was probably crying.

In her mid-fifties, Anna Young had run the Green Dory Inn alone since her husband’s death. He’d been the first casualty in Gord’s plot to acquire the inn property. Anna had believed Gord was a caring friend until he tried to murder her six weeks ago.

Landon flattened her palms on the weather-beaten tabletop. “I have to get back to the inn.”

Before she could rise, Dylan gave a quick headshake. “One more thing. As a formality, would you each make a list of who would have seen you in Halifax today from about ten on?”

“What?” From Anna’s need to this abrupt request—Landon winced at the mental whiplash.

Bobby’s frown matched the orange cartoon llama’s on his faded tee shirt. “We do have motive.”

She’d seen the protective fire in his eyes when Gord threatened to shoot her. But heroes didn’t take revenge. Even geeky writers like Bobby who couldn’t see that the word *hero* applied to them.

Dylan stood. “We have to cover all the angles. We’ll need to verify your whereabouts and Anna’s. Another

officer will come by for that. But as a friend, I didn't want you to be blindsided about Gord."

As Landon and Bobby stepped away from the table, Dylan seemed to measure the distance between them.

"So are you two a couple now?"

Bobby's laugh sounded uncomfortable. "I just drive the getaway car."

A hint of pink flared under his beard stubble. With her resemblance to the poisonous girl in his past, he'd never want to date her even if he wasn't in a long-distance relationship with someone from home. "I keep telling you, you need to bring Jessie here for a visit so everyone will know you're taken."

His cheeks darkened. "Anna needs you. Let's go."

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As the Corvette retraced the road's curves toward the inn, the wind in Landon's hair pulled and tugged, its turbulence matching her thoughts. She scooped blond tendrils from her cheeks and caught the tousled mass into a one-handed ponytail, twisting it into a rope.

How much more could Anna take? And she'd be so concerned for—

Landon slapped a hand to her mouth. "Meaghan." Anna's housekeeper, Meaghan, was Gord's daughter.

Bobby's fingers tapped the wheel. "Yeah, I was thinking about her. This'll be rough."

They crested a hill, and the Green Dory Inn's rope-edged sign marked the driveway on the left. At the top of a grassy slope, the grey two-storey inn stood well back from the road. Between the twin Cape Cod style dormer windows, an extended dormer jutted over the bright yellow door.

In the small lot, Bobby stopped beside the slate path to the rear entrance. "Anna would rather see you alone. I'll pass the news to Gramp."

“If he doesn’t already know. He doesn’t miss much.” Landon clicked open her seat belt. “Thanks again for driving me. I owe you an ice cream.”

A quick grin eased his serious expression. He gave a double thumbs-up. “I’ll collect on it.”

As she stood from the ground-hugging seat, the screen door banged, and rapid footsteps crossed the wooden deck behind the inn. Anna hurried along the path, plaid shirttail flapping, one arm outstretched as if to stop Bobby from leaving. “Did Dylan find you?”

“He did.” Landon closed the distance between them.

Anna clung to her, then retreated, knuckling moisture from the corner of one eye. “Bobby, come and join us. I need to talk this through.”

Slump-shouldered, she led them onto the deck and waved them into the padded wicker chairs at the table. “I’ll be right back.”

The past month’s slower pace had given Anna time to recover from the mental trauma Gord had put her through. But perhaps the biggest difference came as her body rid itself of the low-level lead poisoning he’d added to her shampoo. Although she still wasn’t wholly herself, the tiredness and the emotional fragility were mostly gone. Now the shock of his death could trigger a relapse.

The door opened, and Anna carried a tray of glasses and golden, sugar-topped cookies to the smoked-glass tabletop.

Bobby whistled. “Homemade gingersnaps. I’m glad I stayed.”

Anna sank into her chair like a spent helium balloon. Her broad, generous features lost even the pretense of a smile. “We do need to talk about what happened but first, how did your classes go?”

The reminder stirred a fresh ripple of fear, but Anna didn’t need anything else to brood over. “Both profs have high expectations, but they seem fair.” As long as neither tried to use their power to squeeze the students into their

own image. Landon's fingers closed around a cool water glass. "It helped to know Bobby was writing in the library in case I needed to bail."

He lifted his half-eaten cookie in salute. "You can thank me in your graduation speech."

Anna nudged the tray nearer to him. "Bobby, I haven't seen you or Roy since you came home. How was your road trip?"

"Gramp won't admit it, but the drive was tough on his leg. Good thing he flew out in the first place."

After Anna's neighbour Roy fell off a ladder in the spring, Bobby had come for an extended stay. With Roy mobile again, the two had set off for Ontario to visit his son and daughter-in-law, Bobby's parents.

Roy had been itching for a chance to drive Bobby's Corvette on the highway. Grinning, Landon pictured the mischievous old man behind the wheel. "So did he get a speeding ticket anywhere?"

"Nah, we took his truck. Even he can't make that thing fly. I had some things I wanted from my apartment."

Anna rested her arms on the table's wicker rim. "So you're staying longer? I thought with Roy mobile again we'd lose you."

"He said he'll put up with me for the winter. Provided I keep cooking."

From the few meals Landon and Anna had shared at Roy's place this summer, the joke held a kernel of truth.

Bobby stretched back in his chair, reaching overhead and dropping his clasped hands on top of his head, mashing his hair out like straw. "I like it here, and the writing flows well. Assuming you two don't find another mystery."

Anna palmed her chin-length bob away from her jawline. Released, it fell into the same lines, silver strands glinting among the brown. "We'll leave the mysteries to the police. But we do need to talk about poor Gord." She blinked back tears. "What did Dylan tell you?"

“That he’d been shot outside the courthouse.” Bobby tilted his glass to catch the last of his water. “And that, although it’s likely an outside job, they want an account of our whereabouts.”

A wan smile tipped Anna’s lips. “Motive-wise, we’re all possible suspects: the three of us plus Hart, Meaghan, Elva, and Nigel.”

Gord had coerced his daughter, Meaghan, and her boyfriend, Hart, into his plot. And he would have killed Anna’s neighbour Elva if the ever-watchful Nigel Foley hadn’t rescued her.

Landon gazed out over the short grassy lawn to the mixed forest behind the inn. Hart had skulked through the trees and fired paintballs at cars in the inn’s parking lot, but that didn’t mean he could hit a human target. Plus, he and Meaghan had avoided arrest by giving evidence against Gord. Shooting him now would lead to prison.

Watching the trees’ gentle sway, she drew a deep breath of fresh country air. “I hope Nigel didn’t do this.”

Bobby laughed. “Now you’re really reaching.”

“You didn’t see him the morning after the fire.” The tang of smoke had clung to the man after he’d dragged Elva from the blaze meant to kill her. Nigel had sat at the inn’s kitchen table, burned hands wrapped in bandages. Avenging fury in his face. Warning Dylan to find the culprit before he did. She shivered. “If he’d known Gord set it—if Elva had died—I think maybe Nigel could have killed him.”

Behind the gunmetal-framed glasses, Bobby’s blue-grey eyes widened. “Soft-spoken, metal-detector-toting Nigel, whose main goal is preventing the alien invasion?”

“Nigel, the protector of woodland creatures and wounded humans.” She locked his gaze.

“I guess. But Elva lived and Gord was arrested. There’s no need for vengeance.”

Cold gelled in her chest. “Gord’s death means she won’t have to testify about their shared past.”

“He couldn’t!” Anna’s vigorous head shake refused to allow the possibility.

“Somebody did, though.” Landon placed a gentle hand on Anna’s arm. “Gord is dead. Did Dylan give you any details?”

“He was being escorted from the transport van to the courthouse when glass shattered in the parking lot and car alarms started going off. Everyone turned to look. The deputy sheriffs kept hold of Gord so he couldn’t run, but Dylan said all the shooter needed was a clear line of sight. Because they turned, the bullet impacted the back of his head.”

Anna’s clinical words came out heavy. She swiped at her eyes. “The court’s in a quiet part of town, and the killer got away unseen. They found his sniper rifle, but Dylan didn’t expect there’d be any prints.”

It sounded like an execution. Who would have the precision—and the hate—to kill one man without harming his guards? In an area where there would be civilians too?

Bobby chose another cookie from the plate. “Remember he was trying to get himself reinstated in that gang. The gun supports the theory of it being an outsider. There are plenty of hunting rifles in Lunenburg County. Why spring for a high-end assassin’s weapon?”

Half the tension drained from Anna’s posture. “The court dockets are posted online for anyone to see. They’d have plenty of time to send a killer.”

“Now you’re thinking like a writer.” But his expression stayed serious, and he made no attempt at his chin-stroking supervillain pose.

Landon waited. “What is it?”

“Remember in the barn? I told him he wouldn’t see it coming.” Bobby pushed his chair away from the table. “On that sunny note, I should go see if Gramp knows yet.”

“He reaped what he sowed.” As sad as this was for Gord’s daughter and Anna, Landon couldn’t regret his

death. But Bridgewater, where he'd been gunned down, was less than half an hour from Lunenburg. If the gang considered Gord a risk, they might come after Meaghan and her boyfriend too.

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Janet Sketchley is an Atlantic Canadian writer who likes her fiction with a splash of mystery or adventure and a dash of Christianity. Why leave faith out of our stories if it's part of our lives?

Janet's other books include the Redemption's Edge Christian suspense series and the devotional books, *A Year of Tenacity* and *Tenacity at Christmas*. She has also produced a fill-in reader's journal, *Reads to Remember: A book lover's journal to track your next 100 reads* (available in print only, with two different cover design options). You can find her online at janetsketchley.ca.

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