

CHAPTER ONE

OF

DEADLY BURDEN

A Green Dory Inn Mystery: Book 4

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Deadly Burden, A Green Dory Inn Mystery, Book 4

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Quotations and Scripture References:

Chapter 7: “In wrath, remember mercy.” Habakkuk 3:2, NIV

Chapter 8: “Marley was dead, to begin with.” From *A Christmas Carol*, by Charles Dickens. Public domain.

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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.

I have also taken creative licence with the inn's geography 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 to accommodate the story.

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.



Chapter 1

Saturday

THIS ELF COSTUME itched. Tugging at her too-short skirt, Landon Smith reached her free hand under the community centre's Christmas tree for the final present—a mug-sized box wrapped with holly-red paper and a silver bow and marked “open last.” She crossed the stage to where Santa waited, white-gloved fingers spread on his knees, his red velour coat straining over a plump pillow.

A snowy beard covered his extra-wide jaw, but his smile twinkled in his sea-blue eyes. One lid dropped in a wink. “You’re a natural.”

It had been more fun than she’d expected. Bending nearer, she passed him the gift. “What I am, Roy, is a soft touch who can’t say no to my favourite neighbour.”

“Favourite, am I? Don’t let my grandson hear that.”

Santa Roy peered at the printed tag, then leaned toward the microphone. “Phil Kirkwood. Didn’t I see you already with the other board members? You must have been an

extra-good boy this year.”

Around the tables, a few people paused their conversations. Heads turned to track the blond man who stood and made his way to the stage. He took the stairs at an easy jog.

The light caught a piece of glitter on his suit jacket sleeve and flared it like a sequin. Landon repressed a grin. Not even Phil’s designer elegance could escape the hazards of the season.

Roy held out the box in one hand. “Tag says to open it on stage. I won’t make you sit on my lap.”

Phil eyed the spindly white chair. “Good call.” He glanced at the gift tag. “What’s this about?”

“One way to find out.” Roy covered the mic. “Open up so we can be done. I’m melting in this getup.”

With a smile for the crowd, Phil pulled the ribbon free and let it fall. “Thank you to someone.” The red paper ripped and dropped. Then he removed the box lid and passed it to Landon.

Sparkly tissue paper rustled—more glitter for his suit—and he drew out a small jar. “A Christmas treat.”

He focused on a printed label on the lid. “Christmas twenty years ago.” The words came out low and hoarse. His throat convulsed.

He flipped the jar upside-down. Not cranberry sauce or pepper jelly after all—clear, sparkly liquid. A homemade snow globe.

All colour vanished from his face. His whispered curse came out like a sob. Blindly, he thrust the jar into the tissue paper and pushed the box toward Roy.

Landon raced after him to the stairs. “Phil, slow down. Let me help.”

He brushed off her grasp, then clutched the railing, and descended at a cautious pace. His weaving steps carried him

to his table where his wife stood to meet him, hands outstretched.

“Phil, dear, what is it?”

Even visibly pregnant, Whitney Kirkwood reminded Landon of a china doll. Petite, with long blond curls, peaches-and-cream skin, round blue eyes, and now, pink lips forming a perfect *O*.

Phil’s brief touch to her fingertips cut short. He sank into his chair at the wide round table. “Get your coat, darling. We’re leaving.”

She studied him, teeth worrying her bottom lip. Then she whirled and dashed toward the coat check.

Landon perched on the edge of Whitney’s seat. “Let someone drive you home. Get your car tomorrow.”

“I’ll be fine.”

The conversation level rose around them, people at the other tables dismissing Phil’s reaction or speculating about the cause. Around the circle of his table, faces turned to him in concern and open curiosity.

Into the pause, a brown-clad arm shot between Landon and Phil and plucked his half-empty water glass from the table. “Drink.”

Landon slid her chair sideways to make space for a wiry little woman with sharp brown eyes like a robin’s.

The woman kept her focus on Phil until he obeyed.

Sputtering, half-choking, he drained the glass and set it on the white linen with a shaky hand.

On stage, Roy hefted his gift sack. “Ho! Ho! Ho! Santa says, have a merry Christmas. And he hopes there’s some turkey left for him in the kitchen.”

He navigated the stairs. Without appearing to hurry, he reached the table quickly.

“Vi.” He nodded a greeting to the unfamiliar woman. Then, laughing, he clapped one white-gloved hand on Phil’s

shoulder. His sea-blue eyes shone hard and serious as he leaned in. "Don't give them the satisfaction."

Phil tipped his head and gave a good impression of sharing a joke. Anyone at a distance might buy it, that nothing shattering had happened. Close up, his pallor and a tightness around his eyes gave him away.

Landon knew him as her friend Ciara's stepfather. Stiff and purposeful. The one soft spot she'd seen came from concern for his wife, and even then, he'd maintained control.

Whatever this snow globe meant, it mined something deep. About Whitney? He'd mumbled "Twenty years ago." That would be before they'd met.

Landon gathered her hair in one hand and let the blond strands slide through her fingers. Whatever had followed Phil from his past would touch Whitney with her high-risk pregnancy in her forties. Could it affect the babies?

Beside her, the woman in brown—Vi—stepped up to Roy. "Show me."

The old man might not have the belly for a traditional Santa, but his white eyebrows and deep laugh lines fit the role perfectly. Now, those eyebrows arched into the fur trim of his Santa hat. He looked at Phil and hefted his not-quite-empty sack.

Phil glanced in the direction his wife had taken. "I have nothing to hide. But I don't want to upset Whitney."

When Roy set the box on the tablecloth, Vi plucked the jar from the tissue paper. Instead of holding it high to catch the light, she cupped it as if to shield the contents from view. Her breath hissed through her teeth.

Fingers spread wide, Phil bounced his palm on the table. He lifted his gaze to Roy. "Who gave you this?"

Landon shook her head. "It was with the others when we arrived."

Roy dug an index finger under the furry Santa hat. "Evidence for a mischief charge. Person should know better than to mess with a lawyer."

The lines around Phil's mouth dug in deeper. "I've never been able to locate her. This time, she must be here." He pushed to his feet, narrowed eyes scanning the room.

"Oh, she's here all right," muttered Vi. "But she's not who you think."

The wiry woman darted crablike between the round tables to clutch the sleeve of a tall girl in a puffy silver coat. Despite the size difference, she hauled her toward Phil like a runaway child.

Phil stood to meet them.

The girl's sullen gaze pinned him. Stormy red surged in her cheeks. Lips locked in a tight line, she let her glare say it all.

Feet anchored in place, grip firm on the girl's arm, Vi assessed her. "That was spiteful and cruel."

The girl continued her stare down with Phil. "Why accuse me?"

Vi shook her arm. "Everyone else looked shocked or concerned. You were satisfied."

Phil broke eye contact, but with no evidence of defeat. He held up the snow-globe jar for his tablemates to see. "It's a truck smashed through lake ice. To remind me of the loss of a good friend."

Landon had barely glimpsed it on the stage before he rushed away. Not round or dome-shaped like a traditional snow globe, it was a small jam jar filled with glitter water. At the base, the tail end of a brown toy pickup truck stuck out of a dark-blue opening in the white "ice" with the cab submerged.

Phil set the jar into the box and tucked the tissue paper over the top. He spun to confront the girl. "What's your

connection with Pattie Garner?”

She yanked her arm free of Vi and folded both tight against her chest. “She’s my mother.”

He matched her posture. “I had assumed she was sending the cards. Was that you as well?”

Behind him, Roy planted hands on hips, scowling. The Jolly Old Elf’s evil twin. Angry twin, at least. The image made Landon want to grin.

The girl’s mouth tightened.

A deep breath strained Phil’s suit jacket lapels. Gone was the shaken recipient of an unwanted gift. His impassive features, his set shoulders—arms uncrossed now and at ease—and his voice when he spoke were pure professional lawyer.

“I have to ask why this matters so much to you. The accident happened before you were born.”

“Yeah, before I was born. My father died that day because of you. It should have been you.”

Sweat popped on Phil’s forehead. His lips pulled in like he’d had a rush of saliva. Or bile. “I gave up wishing for that a long time ago. Regret won’t bring anyone back.”

He paced a slow, careful circle that brought him into her space. “Your father. That would make you nineteen. Born in August.”

“So you can do math.”

Phil groped for the table behind him, barely missing his dessert plate. The weight of his palm hitting the surface rattled the cutlery. He kept the eye contact. “What’s your name?”

Before the girl could answer, Whitney rushed past her, wrapped in a blond-tipped fur coat. “Phil, whatever it is, let’s go.”

When he hesitated, she plucked at his suit sleeve and pressed her other hand on her rounded stomach. “Please.

Stress isn't good for the babies."

He blinked at Whitney, down at the tan leather glove splayed across her coat front, then focused on the girl. Waiting.

"Kenzie." Her chin lifted. "Remember my name. And his."

Phil winced. "There's more you need to know. Where can I find you?"

"I'm leaving in the morning. Expect a card next Christmas."

As Phil allowed Whitney to draw him away, he focused on Landon. "Is there a vacancy at the inn?"

"Yes." Bookings were scarce this close to Christmas.

"Bill me for her room. Vi, convince her to stay."

Phil settled his hand over Whitney's grip on his arm and dipped his head to speak softly as they made for the exit.

Landon stared after them. This bitter, disruptive stranger had hurt—and shocked—Phil deeply, and the man wanted to land that kind of a guest at the Green Dory Inn? It could be a tense few days. Followed by a barbed review if anything went wrong.

So they'd serve with their customary hospitality. And Landon would keep her thoughts to herself. She stood and offered the girl a friendly smile. "So, I'm Landon, and my friend Anna Young over there runs the Green Dory Inn. We'd be happy to have you stay with us if you'd like."

Kenzie glanced at the box Phil had left on the table. "What could he have to say that's so important he'd pay to keep me here?"

"Might be worth finding out." Landon couldn't wait to see Phil's stepdaughter's reaction to this. In the past, Ciara had accused Phil of throwing money at her to leave town. Now, he funded a malicious stranger to stay.

He'd better not be setting the inn up for any more

trouble.

Vi jabbed a crooked finger at the girl. "Behaviour like yours, you don't deserve to know the rest. You have to earn the right to hear it."

Kenzie's eyes slitted. "That's not what he said." She turned her back on her accuser. "Hag." The hiss slipped out so low Landon barely heard it.

From Vi's grin, she'd heard it just fine.

Landon stifled her own mirth. "I don't know Phil well, but he doesn't waste time. If he has information to share, it's important."

"Go home," Vi taunted. "And always wonder. He knew your father better than anyone. Bet he could fill in some gaps."

Kenzie zipped her coat. "Give me the details about your inn and maybe you'll see me tomorrow."

Landon wove her way among tables of chattering people until she reached her friends. Kenzie wouldn't stay. And Phil? The gift had shaken him. Humanized him enough that she found herself praying he'd find peace.

Anna looked up at her approach, a welcoming smile curving her generous lips. A pearly enamel snowman pin shone against her fir-green sweater.

Landon took the empty seat beside her and gulped a glass of water. Elf duty was thirsty work, especially in this hot, scratchy, and short costume. "The things Roy cons people into."

Across the table, Bobby Hawke smirked. "You're one to talk. Who nearly got me arrested in September?"

Heat prickled under her collar. It hadn't been her fault... exactly. Definitely hadn't been his.

He was the self-proclaimed "getaway driver" who'd agreed to help her. A few years older than she was, maybe in his late twenties, he lived with his grandfather, Roy, next

door to Anna's Green Dory Inn. With his perpetually shaggy hair and goofy tee shirts—today's was a cartoon raisin with stick arms and legs sporting a Santa hat—this geeky writer had become her best friend.

“Ho, ho, ho.” Roy deposited a steaming plate of turkey dinner in front of Landon and another at his spot next to Bobby. “Those ladies in the kitchen are treasures.”

He had shed his gloves, and now he swiped the plush Santa hat from his head. A quick finger-scrub left his thick white hair sticking up like frosty grass.

The other six at the table were enjoying a second cup of coffee or tea and finishing their pumpkin pie. Roy and Landon, his last-minute helper, had rushed from distributing gifts to the children and mothers at the local shelter to a repeat performance here at the community centre for the shelter volunteers and board members.

Roy split a dinner roll and slathered it with butter.

Bobby elbowed him. “Better not do that when Mom and Dad come.”

Sea-blue eyes sparkling, the old man took an enormous bite, chewed, and swallowed. “My body, my choice.”

“Gramp, that's not what that means. At all.”

“Still true.” Roy waved the remaining morsel at Anna. “Prepare for a guest tomorrow. A girl named Kenzie. Landon'll fill you in later.”

Her heaping plate wafted Christmasy goodness, but she didn't reach for her utensils yet. “You think she'll come?”

His grin stretched until he resembled a satisfied cat. “Vi played her like a master. She can't leave now.”

“This is the girl you were talking to with Vi and Phil?” Anna's expression clouded. “Phil seemed upset.”

“It was mean, what she did to him.” Scowling, Roy described the snow globe and Kenzie's accusation about her father. “I thought Phil was going to keel over on the spot.

And now he wants her to stick around and talk to him.”

Landon cut a strip of turkey. “Vi seemed to have an inside track. Who is she?”

“Vi Foley. Nigel’s mother.” A furrow rippled Anna’s broad forehead. “I’m surprised you haven’t met her yet.”

To the right of Roy, their neighbour Elva set her mug down with a firm rap. “Vi knows the skeletons in every closet.”

Bobby drained his coffee cup. “Most people have things they want to keep quiet. Even the geezer in the red suit.” He gave his grandfather another elbow dig. “Says he’s waiting for the statute of limitations to run out. I think he’s kidding. I hope he’s kidding.”

Roy held a finger to his lips. “Some things go to the grave.” He winked at Landon. “Don’t tell that good-looking young cop who’s been hanging around.”

“You’re incorrigible.” Not the first time Landon had told him that. She focused on Elva. “Vi was furious Kenzie breached Phil’s privacy in public.”

“A real Ghost of Christmas Past.” Bobby gave an exaggerated shudder.

Elva’s lips made a sour twist. “That girl is trouble.”

The silver strands in Anna’s brown bob glinted in the overhead light. The last of her smile faded. “There’s hurt there, beneath the anger. Imagine never having the chance to know your father.”

“Means he could never let her down.” Elva’s words, sharp and final, drew a swift study from the younger woman she’d brought as a guest.

The guest, Hope, would be left to wonder. Even Anna, with her heart for misfits and the wounded, hadn’t been able to crack Elva’s barriers.

Landon and Elva had begun a cautious friendship after events this summer, but Landon had no idea what Elva’s

father had done to earn her scorn.

Unlike Kenzie with Phil. If the girl did show up, could the two trust one another? Should they?

Trust. A shaky subject for Landon these days. The risk of loss cut too deep.

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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?

She's the author of the Green Dory Inn mystery series, the Redemption's Edge Christian suspense series, and the daily 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). Find her online at janetsketchley.ca.

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