André Alexis was born in Trinidad and grew up in Canada. His debut novel, *Childhood*, won the Books in Canada First Novel Award and the Trillium Book Award, and was shortlisted for the Giller Prize and the Writers' Trust Fiction Prize. His previous books include *Asylum*, *Beauty and Sadness*, *Ingrid and the Wolf*, *Pastoral*, which was also nominated for the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize, and *Fifteen Dogs*, which won the Rogers Writers' Trust Fiction Prize and the Scotiabank Giller Prize. In 2017, he was named a winner of the Windham-Campbell Prize for his body of work.

Praise for The Hidden Keys

'This gorgeously written, funny adventure tale will keep readers up finishing it while also quietly breaking their hearts with Alexis's keen observations of people, kindness, and cruelty' *Publishers Weekly*, starred review

'Even though the book is an old-fashioned quest yarn, Alexis's immense talent gives it an archetypal patina, glossing characters with shades of honor and subtlety that might have been missed in lesser hands' *Kirkus Reviews*

'A witty, punchy, loquacious novel ... Fun, propulsive reading that really is about the hunt, not the treasure' *Library Journal*

'The mystery itself does not disappoint, though the events that lead up to the reveal are as much of a gift as the endpoint itself. This unique adventure is a joyful and intelligent undertaking' *Foreword Reviews*

'Alexis is a literary cartographer of the highest calibre and *The Hidden Keys* should be book-marked on everyone's map' *Hamilton Review of Books*

'Though Tancred contains multitudes, one of Alexis's best tricks involves diverging from his hero's point of view to introduce a whole host of peripheral figures ... Nobody is a mere archetype in Alexis's universe, and far from digressions (or generic concessions), these subplots suggest the humane, egalitarian sensibility of a writer who's reluctant to simply instrumentalize his characters' *Quill & Ouire*

'Alexis shapes his mash-up of ancient tropes and ironic flicks into a wonderful story about fate and family, mainly by peopling it with characters who are simultaneously archetypes and believable individuals. And the puzzle is pretty good, too' *Maclean's*

'It is difficult to convey how gracefully Alexis is able to conjure such baroque minutiae without slipping into mannered excess. Just as it is difficult to convey Alexis's way of avoiding the trappings of genre while offering, in this case, all the essential pleasures of a crime novel: *The Hidden Keys* is somewhat akin to Elmore Leonard in its attention to idiosyncratic personal style and providing even minor players with active inner lives' *The Globe and Mail*

Praise for Fifteen Dogs

'Alexis excels at sparking drama from collisions between the canine and the human. He is also well versed in Greek myth and legend, yet where Fifteen Dogs really succeeds is on an allegorical level. There are superficial similarities in approach to Animal Farm, but Alexis's dogs are drawn with greater depth than Orwell's menagerie and he goes beyond politics, using them to look at human issues of fulfilment, happiness, and love. These sensitive explorations help to make this startlingly original novel as thought-provoking as it is enjoyable. In sum, this is the dog's bollocks' Peter Carty, Independent

'Spry ... Impressive ... I loved this smart, exuberant fantasy from start to finish' Jonathan Gibbs, *Guardian*

'An elegant cross-breed of magical realism, moral fable, owner's handbook and philosophical treatise' Frances Wilson, *New Statesman* Books of the Year

'Thought-provoking and moving ... a canine version of *Lord* of the Flies' Good Housekeeping

'Intensely moving and heartbreaking in turn ... An original idea brilliantly executed' *The Lady*

'An elegant cross-breed of magical realism, moral fable, owner's manual and philosophical treatise ... This is a wonderfully weird and spare reflection on the nature of dogs and poetry' *Times Literary Supplement*

'Alexis manages to encapsulate an astonishing range of metaphysical questions in a simple tale about dogs that came to know too much. The result is a delightful juxtaposition of the human and canine conditions, and a narrative that, like just one of the dogs, delights in the twists and turns of the gods' linguistic gift' *Publishers Weekly*

What does it mean to be alive? To think, to feel, to love and to envy? André Alexis explores all of this and more in the extraordinary *Fifteen Dogs*, an insightful and philosophical meditation on the nature of consciousness. It's a novel filled with balancing acts: humour juxtaposed with savagery, solitude with the desperate need to be part of a pack, perceptive prose interspersed with playful poetry. A wonderful and original piece of writing that challenges the reader to examine their own existence and recall the age old question, what's the meaning of life?" Scotiabank Giller Prize jury citation

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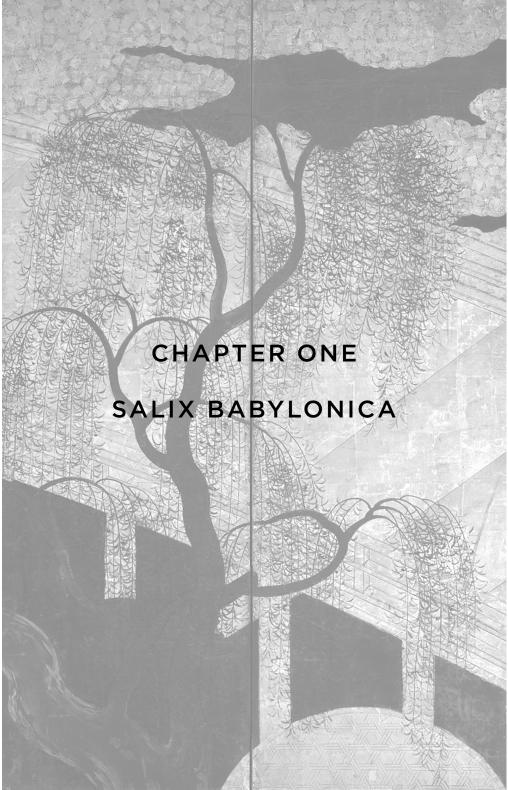
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1 A Willow in Parkdale

Tancred Palmieri was sitting in the Green Dolphin thinking about how best to dispose of a black diamond he'd stolen from a house on the Bridle Path. He was twenty-five years old and he'd been a thief from the age of eleven, but this was the first time he'd had difficulty deciding what to do with a stone. It was as if the diamond had a personality.

Tancred was a tall and physically imposing black man, but he was also approachable. He could not sit anywhere for long without someone starting a conversation. This was, his friends liked to say, because his blue eyes were startling and his voice deep and avuncular. So, when he wanted to be alone without necessarily being alone, Tancred answered in French – his maternal tongue – when spoken to by strangers. Few who came into the Dolphin knew the language. But Willow Azarian did, and she took the fact that Tancred spoke it as a portent. They would be friends. She knew it and, touching his arm, she blithely began to tell him about her family.

Tancred interrupted her. In French, he said

- You know, I'm not really one for family stories.

In French, Willow answered

- What have you got against them?
- I just don't like them, said Tancred.

Willow nodded in sympathy and patted his leg. Then she carried on from where she'd left off, speaking about her family as if its story were something Tancred had to know. Willow was in her fifties, more than twice his age. As he was chivalrous by nature, he listened to her, skeptical but polite.

To be fair, there were a number of things that made Willow's story implausible. To begin with, she was a junkie. Tancred himself had seen her, either high or strung out, stumbling around Parkdale like an outpatient from Queen Street Mental.

Then there was what she told him. Though they were meeting for the first time, Willow expatiated on her family's wealth. The Azarians – about whom Tancred had heard – owned property all over the world. Her father had been brilliant, generous, wonderful! He had always treated her – his youngest – as if she were a princess. She had millions, thanks to him. A fortune. Enough to last a hundred years.

Of course, he didn't leave as much as he could have, she said.
It all sounded to Tancred like the daydreams of an orphan.

Then, too, there was her appearance. Willow was thin and pale. She was in her fifties but his impression was of someone older. Her hair was greying. There were crow's feet at her eyes and her lips were those of a smoker, puckering when she spoke. Her clothes were out of style: a green-and-white floral dress with padded shoulders, a felt hat with wilted green plumes curling around to the side, a white sweater and clunky black shoes. It was not a getup you'd associate with wealth.

Finally, there was the place itself. Why would a rich woman hang around the Dolphin? Tancred came to the Dolphin in the afternoons to think things through, to stand at the bar and withdraw. At night, the Dolphin was a different story: noisy, filled with regulars or stragglers or cops. He went then to be with people he knew – thieves, dealers, users and prostitutes. Seeking company, he would stand at the bar and talk to whoever was there. One night, for instance, he spoke to a Salvadorean refugee whose family had been wiped out by death squads. On another night, not long after, he'd listened to a Salvadorean refugee who'd been a member of a death squad. Neither had looked like victim or executioner.

Though he did not often drink alcohol, Tancred had been going to the Dolphin since he was eighteen. In all that time, he could not remember meeting anyone posh. The place was too rough for it. Even Willow's dealer – 'Nigger' Colby by name, though he was albino – preferred to drink across the street, at Jimmy's. As far as Tancred knew, the most common reason for strangers to choose the Dolphin was the price of beer: it was twenty-five cents cheaper there than it was anywhere else. But Willow did not drink beer. She drank vodka

and orange juice, and it seemed to Tancred that if she had really been wealthy, she'd have frequented better places, junkie or not.

Then again, who could tell about the rich? In '03 or '04, there'd been a politician caught trawling for prostitutes on Queen Street, not three blocks west of the Dolphin. In those days, the most unfortunate women worked Queen between Lansdowne and Triller. The wealthy men who came around looking for sex must have been attracted to something in Parkdale: the lawless, the sordid, the unlikeliness of being recognized. For all Tancred knew, the streetwalkers' desperation was itself what turned these men on. It may have been something similar that brought Willow.

He found her difficult to credit, but she was also amusing and surprisingly sympathetic. He listened to her for an hour, listened until she spoke again about her father and then faltered and then stopped.

- I'm sorry, he said, but I've got to go. It was nice to meet you.
- You speak English, said Willow.
- Yes, said Tancred, but I prefer French.
- So do I, she said, but Japanese is my favourite.

She held up a hand, limp-wristed. Unsure what he was meant to do, he held it. He felt faintly ridiculous, but that was part of what made the encounter memorable.

Their second meeting was more memorable still.

One night, Tancred was at Close and Queen, walking home. Behind him, toward Parkdale Collegiate, he heard a cry. Turning, he saw three young men pulling at a woman. His adrenalin immediately spiked. He walked toward them. The woman called for help, as two of the men tried to keep her quiet.

The third and most imposing came forward. Tancred calmly said the first thing that came to his mind

- Are you guys holding?

before running at him, catching the man by surprise, punching him (accidentally) in the throat and then (somewhat purposely) in the face. The man growled and hit out but lost his balance, ending up

on his hands and knees. Tancred kicked him, very hard — not in the ribs (where he was aiming) but only in the arse. The man swore and tried to get up but, as he did, Tancred kicked him (accidentally but with a physically pleasing *thuck*) in the face, breaking his nose.

The man stayed down, loudly cursing and holding his face.

Thirty seconds of close-quarter chaos that might have gone either way. But Tancred was fortunate. Fortunate, not only because he was unhurt (though his foot had hit the man's arse at a bad angle and would later swell slightly from the sprain) but also because the other two, seeing their friend incapacitated, backed away, forgetting about the woman – Willow Azarian! – as they prepared for Tancred's onslaught.

It was an onslaught that never came. It seemed to Tancred that a beating would have done them good — high school students, they looked like, five or six years younger than he was, thin as whippets. It would have given him pleasure to hurt them, but instead he helped Willow up and led her past the one who was groaning and complaining as he tried to stand up.

They reached Dunn, a block away, when Willow stopped. She could not go on. She stood shaking, her hat almost falling off.

- We should keep going, said Tancred. Where do you live?

It was a while before she could answer. Tancred waited, looking warily west to where they'd left her assailants and east at all the lights along Queen Street, the city stretching from the small desolation of Parkdale to the tall buildings and illuminations in the distance.

- I can't go home, Willow said.

What she meant was that she did not want to be alone, and Tancred understood. The problem was, he knew nothing reliable about her and nothing about what had happened. What had the three men been after? Were they after her still? Who could he trust to take care of her? All he knew for certain was the reality of the human being beside him: thin, a foot or so shorter than he was, her lipstick smudged so that it looked like a reddish cloud on her cheek, streaks of grey in her bottle-blond hair. Seeing her like this, by street light, it added up only to distress and need.

 I don't live far, he said. We can wait at my place while you decide what to do.

They made their way to King Street, then past old apartment buildings, rooming houses, big homes and corner stores to Temple, where Tancred rented an apartment. A fifteen-minute walk during which neither of them spoke.

There was a moment, as they climbed the stairs to his place, when Tancred questioned the wisdom of what he was doing. He allowed few strangers into his home. It was his sanctuary. He took pains to keep it as he wished it to be: four rooms (living room, bedroom, small kitchen, bathroom), white walls with ocean-blue trim. There was little furniture. He had a bed from IKEA, a table with four chairs, a blue sofa his mother had insisted on buying for him, above which hung a painting she had made for his home: a portrait of the goddess Oshun in the shade of a tall tree, the goddess — breasts bared — wearing a bright yellow skirt and an ankle bracelet, the whole scene set under a cloudless blue sky. He had lived in this apartment since moving out of his mother's home on St. Clarens. Though he could have afforded something bigger in a better neighbourhood, it had never occurred to him to move, the simplicity and warmth of his rooms being a tonic to the complications of his life.

On the landing, Tancred looked back at Willow, forlorn as she stood on the step, her hand on the banister shaking, blood on her knuckles. What was this person to him? Nothing, really, but that she needed help. He opened his door for her.

He made her tea, after helping to clean the blood and dirt from her hands, knees, elbows and cheek – the places scraped when she'd fallen. Her clothes – flimsy-looking – had not torn, despite being pulled about. Somewhere between Dunn and his apartment, she had lost her hat. Two or three of the hairpins she'd used to keep her hair tucked in dangled like clots.

Willow was in shock. The only words she managed – insistently repeated – were

– I won't forget your kindness.

Somewhere around two in the morning, after they'd spent hours quietly speaking of personal things, her words of gratitude gently met by his assurances that he'd been pleased to help, he asked if she wanted to sleep.

- I think I should, she answered.

So, Tancred gave up his bed and slept on the sofa.

He came to think of this as a second first encounter with Willow. This time, his impression was of a woman in distress. But there was more to it than that. As she recovered from the indignity she'd suffered, there were also moments when he sensed strength in her, a resolve. These were unusual things to sense in an older, frail junkie, but they struck Tancred the way the integrity of her clothes had: flimsy-looking was not always flimsy. The glimpses he had of her resolve and determination were what interested him most. He was not moved by weakness, though he felt bound by vulnerability.

This was a precept Tancred had taken from his closest friend, Daniel Mandelshtam, one of two friends he'd had since his childhood in Alexandra Park. As Daniel put it, weakness was a habit, one that led to a kind of contented incapacity. It made no sense to help the weak, because that was what people called 'enabling.' But as to the vulnerable – there was a different story. Anyone might, given the circumstances, find themselves in above their heads. And it was dishonourable, Daniel thought, to let such people sink. Tancred had agreed. But the distinction was neither clear nor absolute to the young men since, as Daniel said, the weak, too, could be vulnerable. A further twist: Daniel was now a policeman, paid to protect the weak and the vulnerable indiscriminately.

Early the following morning, Willow emerged from his room and thanked him. She would not hear of his accompanying her. She was not afraid of the boys who'd attacked her. It had all been a misunderstanding, she said, an accident for which she blamed herself. She'd spoken of her wealth to the wrong people, that's all. Tancred was not to worry about her safety. She would be grateful if he forgot the night they'd just passed. It was too humiliating for words.