

The Hidden Keys

André Alexis

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This is a joyful and intelligent adventure, populated by honorable thieves and winsome misfits.

André Alexis's *The Hidden Keys* is set in the back alleys and concealed corners of Toronto, places populated by honorable thieves and winsome misfits, peppered with penetrable fortresses and colored by hope. In this novel that teems with quiet beauty, a troubled woman's treasure hunt sends those around her tumbling toward discovery.

When Tancred first encounters Willow Azarian at a decrepit bar, she does not appear to be the kind of woman who transforms a man's fortunes. In the last thralls of drug addiction, she relates to him a story: she is the daughter of a billionaire, bequeathed one in a series of elaborate clues that may lead to fortunes unfathomable. Tancred is dubious, but Willow's story checks out, and he is bound to follow the trail, even after her death.

Tancred proves to be a gentleman of a thief: he is reluctant to break any promise made to Willow but is equally reluctant to involve his friends, particularly Daniel, the detective working to discover who's stealing the Azarians' artifacts. He compromises his own safety more than once, to protect others, and preserves his own integrity, even when deceiving his way into Azarian homes. Two less savory figures from the neighborhood are at his heels, though, and are determined to snatch away whatever treasure awaits him.

The narrative unfolds with elegance, following Tancred through a series of improbable heists that involve directions relayed in verse and microchips embedded in prosthetic parts. Compelling family stories—from Tancred and Willow, but also from those who revolve around them, including the novel's villains—drive the plot as much as the promise of wealth, and Tancred's sense of honor, even in the midst of violence and betrayal, is a continual source of charm. Philosophical musings, biting humor, inventive details, and evocative lines only add to the story's appeal.

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.

MICHELLE ANNE SCHINGLER (Winter 2017)

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