

PORT ASTER SECRETS • BOOK 1

deadly devotion

a novel

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For my husband, Michael—who believes in me so much, he’s not the least bit worried to find me thumbing through a *Book of Poisons* at the kitchen counter.

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1

Kate Adams slammed the Port Aster weekly onto Detective Parker's desk and jabbed at the headline blazed in one-inch letters: HERBAL RESEARCHER'S DEATH RULED SUICIDE.

"How could you let the editor print this?"

Parker frowned at the headline, muttered into the phone wedged between his shoulder and ear, then pressed the Hold button. "Have a seat, Miss Adams." He motioned to the chair facing his desk.

"Don't you *Miss Adams* me. There is no way Daisy killed herself." Kate drilled her finger into the newsprint. "I demand you reopen this case."

The roomful of officers fell silent. Parker, his gaze direct and unflinching, seemed to measure her resolve before gesturing to them to go about their business.

Let them gawk. She didn't care. The more people who knew about the injustice done to her friend, the better. Thanks to the cramped quarters, they'd hear what she had to say whether Parker liked it or not.

Except that when Parker returned his attention to Kate, he regarded her with such sympathy that her courage faltered. She dropped into the chair and tucked her trembling hands under her legs.

Parker read the article while she chewed her bottom lip into mincemeat over her grandstanding tactics. Maybe she hadn't needed to come in with guns blazing to get someone to listen, to care enough to find Daisy's killer.

Around them, the buzz of conversations resumed as if nothing had changed.

But something *had* changed.

Her friend's good name had been smeared for the whole town to see. And the police had given up on finding the real cause of her death.

A radio crackled and Kate's insides jitterbugged like Mexican jumping beans. She empathized with the toddler at a desk near the door, burrowing against his mother's chest. The squad room, crowded with more than a dozen desks and twice as many people, wasn't exactly a picture of the peace the police were paid to keep.

Kate drew in a wobbly breath and focused on the man she needed to win over. He didn't seem to fit with the other officers milling about the room, dressed in their dark blue uniforms, faces stern. Of course, his sympathetic expression might be a ploy to placate her. In his charcoal suit jacket and striped tie, Parker looked like he belonged in a boardroom, not a police station, although his chiseled good looks likely charmed the most resistant of suspects into cooperating.

He set the newspaper aside. "I'm sorry you had to hear the news this way."

The quiet compassion in his voice buoyed her determination. “The story’s not true. You have to make the editor print a retraction.”

“As the article explains, our report simply stated the poisoning was self-inflicted.” Parker turned the newspaper facedown, removing the painful article from her view. “The sensationalized headline is inexcusable.”

“My friend didn’t kill herself,” Kate repeated, hating the way her voice hitched. “Accidentally or otherwise.”

“Your loyalty is admirable, but as a research scientist, you should understand better than most that we deal in facts.”

Kate stared at his desktop. Memos, files, empty coffee cups, a gum wrapper, even a pair of handcuffs lay like strewn rubble. The debris of a man caught in the daily skirmishes of the war against crime. No wonder he’d written Daisy off—forgotten her.

But facts?

Kate clenched her fists. The facts didn’t add up in the least. “Consider these facts, Detective. Daisy Leacock was an expert botanist. She would no more confuse a calendula with a tagete than you’d mistake a water gun for a pistol.”

The muscle in Parker’s stony jaw worked back and forth as if he were grinding his response between his teeth. He drew a file folder from his desk drawer. Daisy’s name had been printed neatly across the tab.

The contrast to his messy desktop caught Kate by surprise. Not that neat handwriting meant Parker cared. To him, Daisy was just another case.

To think that during the interview following Daisy’s death he’d been kind, even compassionate. Clearly, she’d mistaken professional interrogation techniques for genuine empathy.

Anyone who would let the newspaper defame the dead like this didn't know the meaning of the word.

"I'm afraid your friend's expertise makes the evidence all the more irrefutable." Parker handed her a report. "As you can read, the coroner found no evidence of trauma to the body. Only elevated levels of this toxin." Parker pointed to a scientific name.

"Thiophene," Kate pronounced the term for him. "Found in marigolds."

"That's right. Miss Leacock's nephew said she often drank a variety of herbal teas."

"Yes, but thiophene is a phototoxic chemical, which means Daisy should have suffered nothing worse than painful skin blisters." Kate searched the report for details that might point to another cause of death. "The coroner noted the presence of hemorrhaging."

"Yes."

"But that's not a typical reaction to phototoxins."

"Nevertheless, he is the expert."

"How'd he find the thiophene? It wouldn't be identified by a routine tox screen."

Parker tapped a pen on his ink blotter in the rapid-fire *tit-a-tat* of someone whose patience had worn thin. "We provided him a list of the dried plants stored in the house, which included a half-empty jar of dried marigolds."

"Did you identify them?" Kate doubted Parker knew the difference between a marigold and a mum, let alone between the toxic varieties and the ones used as herbs.

"Yes." Parker stabbed his pen into its holder. "Most of the flowers were calendula, the beneficial variety that perhaps Miss Leacock had intended to use. However, some tagetes were mixed in."

Kate winced. Okay, maybe he did know the difference. So if the cops could figure out the mix wasn't pure, why hadn't Daisy?

Unless someone planted the dried flowers in her kitchen—after she died. Except . . . she had the toxin in her system. “The coroner must have missed something. One or two cups of the wrong tea might make Daisy light-headed, maybe even nauseated, but the dose wouldn't kill her.”

“I concede you know more about the effects of these plants than I do, but the coroner was satisfied that enough toxin was present in Miss Leacock's bloodstream to suppress her breathing.” Parker glanced tiredly into each of the three coffee cups sitting on his desk, stacked them, and chucked them into a wastebasket.

Kate pulled the report to her side of the desk and flipped through the pages. “You're saying the toxin paralyzed her lungs? She couldn't breathe? How do you know someone didn't hold a pillow over her face?”

“There was no evidence of a struggle, and she'd vomited. The toxin caused her death.” Parker's gaze flicked to the flashing red light on his phone. “The toxin. Not suffocation.”

“Daisy had access to more than half a dozen herbs that kill within minutes. Why would she poison herself with one that made her sick for hours before succumbing?”

Parker studied Kate for so long she started to feel like one of the specimens under her microscope. He took back the file. “What makes you think Daisy was murdered?”

“She. Didn't. Kill. Her. Self.” Kate's voice cracked. She glanced away. “Daisy wouldn't have. God meant everything to her. She never would have taken her own life. Never.”

“I understand that you want to believe that.”

“It’s true.” Kate blinked hard to stave off tears.

Parker reached across the desk, and the warm pressure of his fingers on her arm almost undid her. “I understand how you feel,” he said softly. “I lost my mother not so long ago. Denial is the first natural stage of grief.”

Kate’s gaze snapped to his. This was not about her grief. “If your mom’s name was in this headline, would you sit here and let a cop tell you the case is closed?”

“No.” Parker withdrew his hand. “I suppose not.”

For a moment he stared at the back page of the newspaper, and she thought she glimpsed a muscle twitch in his cheek as if her words had found a crack in his stoic demeanor.

Then he glanced past her and the moment evaporated. “I assure you, we conducted a thorough investigation.”

She turned to see what had caught his attention and found the chief of police leaning against the door frame of his office, watching them. She rounded on Detective Parker. “I’m not interested in your double-talk. Are you going to find Daisy’s killer or not?”

“The case has been closed.”

“If you won’t investigate, I will.”

“I can’t stop you.” Parker’s lips pinched tighter than her snakeskin pumps. “As long as you don’t break the law.”

He didn’t have to say what he’d do if she broke the law. His tone made his threat abundantly clear. And affirmed every apprehension she’d ever had about cops . . . since the day one stole her dad.

She tried to believe the best about everyone she met—even Parker’s kind—but when he extended an open palm across his desk like a benevolent minister, she had to wonder if the gesture was another manipulative technique to gain her trust.

“We found no evidence of a struggle,” he repeated, apparently still hoping to convince her to let this go. He thumbed through the pages in the file. “Daisy’s nephew didn’t think anything was missing from her home, which ruled out robbery.”

From the doorway, the woman with the toddler blurted, “Please don’t make me go out there. He’ll come after me again. I know he will.” Her child whimpered.

The sound twisted in Kate’s chest and left a bitterness in her throat. Another victim let down by the system.

Parker, evidently as oblivious to that woman’s torment as he was to her own, peeled a business card from the holder on his desk. He jotted something on the back and pressed the card into her hand. “If you can give me a reason to suspect foul play, I’ll look into it. That’s my cell number.”

Taken aback by the gesture, for a moment Kate could only stare at the bold strokes he’d penned. So maybe he wasn’t completely oblivious, but . . .

She crumpled the card in her fist. “I’ve given you reasons.”

“If your friend was murdered”—he held up a hand—“I’m not suggesting she was. But *if* she was, why would you risk your neck to go after a killer?”

“Because she believed in me.” When no one else had. Kate shoved Parker’s card into her pocket. “Daisy risked her career to get me hired at the research facility. If not for her guidance and friendship, I’d still be waiting tables at the tea shop.”

“But you must see that your reasons for thinking she couldn’t have killed herself are based on who you thought she was. Nothing else.” He bit off the words and looked away. When his eyes met hers again, they were filled with pity. “One thing you learn in my line of work is that people are rarely what they seem.”

Kate sprang to her feet and braced her fingers on his desk-top. “Well, in my world, Detective, people stand by their friends. I won’t rest until I find out who murdered Daisy. With or without your help.”



Tom Parker flicked off the recorder next to his phone and watched Kate Adams stomp away, her long red curls flouncing in her wake. If Daisy Leacock had known what a loyal friend she’d had, perhaps she wouldn’t have killed herself.

He closed the case file and shoved it back into the drawer. Despite Kate’s anger, he’d heard the tremble in her voice, seen the red in her eyes, and almost felt sorry for her. But the last thing he needed was a maverick challenging his competency. He’d landed the coveted detective position from outside the force, so he already had enough rabble-rousers on *that* bandwagon.

Miss Adams let the door slam behind her, and two or three of the guys snickered in his direction. The chief silenced them with a glare, then, with a coffee in each hand, sauntered to Tom’s desk like a cowboy who’d spent too many hours in the saddle. His gait was about the only thing that hadn’t changed in the fifteen years Tom had been away from his hometown.

Tom couldn’t get used to the idea of Hank Brewster being his boss. In their teen years, Hank had always looked to Tom for help out of a scrape. Now, since returning to Canada after his ill-fated stint south of the border, Tom was the one looking for favors.

Hank passed him a steaming mug. “She didn’t like the coroner’s report, huh?”

“I’m sure Miss Adams would have had an easier time accepting the facts if the newspaper hadn’t sensationalized the story.”

Hank took a long draw on his coffee. “Don’t know about that.”

Yeah. Tom knew firsthand how hard accepting the facts could be. Especially when the facts contradicted what he’d thought to be true.

Leaving his own coffee untouched, Tom walked to the window and surveyed the parking lot. Kate climbed into a yellow VW Beetle. Five feet four inches of pure loyalty. Would she be able to handle the disillusionment when she finally faced the fact that her friend died by her own hand?

The sun glinted off Kate’s fiery hair, reminding him of the spark he’d seen in her determined green eyes. She had the grit to tackle just about anything life threw her way.

When he’d interviewed her after Leacock’s death, Kate had spoken of her friend in glowing terms—from her expertise in the field to her heartfelt faith. The faith part had stuck in his mind because for a moment, a look of pure joy had pushed the grief from her eyes. Or maybe because he’d recognized something he’d lost.

Joy. The reminder stung.

Given Kate’s faith and unwavering belief in her friend’s expertise, was it any wonder she’d refused to accept the coroner’s verdict? Tom’s gaze drifted skyward. Clouds floated across the blue expanse like giant puffballs. He’d forgotten how serene Port Aster’s patch of sky always seemed. Unlike DC, where most of the time the gray sky had been crammed with thunderheads.

Hank clapped him on the shoulder. “She got to you, huh?”

Tom shrugged off Hank’s hand. “It’s been a while since I felt as certain about anything as Miss Adams seems to be.

One thing she said made a lot of sense. If Daisy wanted to kill herself, why didn't she take a faster-acting poison?"

"You think the coroner is wrong?"

A radio squawked and two officers hustled out the door. Until Kate had flinched at every sound, Tom hadn't realized how well he ignored the racket around here. What else might he have ignored?

He turned on Hank. "I think the coroner is a young hotshot trying to get his name in the paper, because I sure didn't leak this report. Did you?"

Hank squared his shoulders and dropped the jovial tone. "Watch it. I'm the boss now. PR decisions are mine to make. And you can't afford to be on my bad side."

Tom slumped into his seat. Not only had Hank stuck his neck out to get Tom this job, but Tom had pulled the lone ranger routine one too many times for the FBI to take him back into active duty anytime soon. If he burned his bridges here, he'd be walking security duty at Walmart.

Hank scooped up the newspaper and tossed it into the trash can. "Forget her. You have enough to deal with between open cases and your dad."

"Dad!" Remembering that he'd put his dad on hold, Tom grabbed the phone receiver and pressed the line button.

A dial tone droned in his ear.

"Great, he hung up. Something else to apologize for when I get home. Why do I even bother?"

Hank straddled the chair Kate had vacated and plopped his coffee mug onto Tom's desk. "Because he's family."

"Yeah." Tom scraped his fingers over his eyelids and let out a groan that had been building in his chest for weeks.

Across the room, a female cop exhaled an identical sound

as a woman sporting a shiner shuffled out with the smooth-talking jerk who'd likely given her the bruise in the first place. The same scene played out too many times to count. Rarely did they make a real difference.

Tom looked from the empty spot on his desk where the newspaper had been to Hank. "Miss Adams seemed so convinced Daisy wouldn't have committed suicide."

"Could be compensating for a guilty conscience. She plays around with those herbs too, you know. Maybe she slipped the wrong one into her friend's tea."

"If you thought that," Tom shot back with more sarcasm than he'd intended, "why'd you insist I close the case?" He knew Hank was joking around, but his decision to cut short the investigation had irked Tom almost as much as Hank's unexpected appearance at Daisy's autopsy. He'd been prepared for the don't-trust-the-new-guy mentality from the officers on his shift, but not from Hank.

"Lighten up, man. This is Port Aster, not DC." Hank propped a foot on his knee. "I'm just saying Adams is the only person I know who drinks flower tea."

"You're forgetting your grandma."

"Oh yeah." Hank puckered his lips like he'd sucked back a lemon. "She has a different tea for whatever ails ya."

Tom studied his buddy-turned-boss. Hank's hair had thinned on top, and he'd shaved his goatee into a mustache, but he hadn't shed his ingrained suspicion of people's motives. In the old days, Tom would've been the one telling Hank to lighten up. Although they'd grown up in the same neighborhood, they'd always seen the world from opposite sides of the street—Hank, as the son of a convict, and Tom, as the son of a cop.

Yet, for a brief moment, hadn't he too entertained the idea of Kate as a suspect?

Maybe his years in the FBI had made him more like his old buddy than he wanted to admit.

Tom replayed in his mind the exchange with Kate. Her bravado had been just that—a futile attempt to make sense of what had happened, to cling to the image she wanted to remember her friend by. He knew what that felt like.

Tom gulped the now-cold coffee and handed the empty mug to Hank. “You’re right. The case is closed. Let me get back to work.” He snatched up the digital recorder he’d instinctively activated the moment Kate slapped the newspaper onto his desk. His years as an agent had taught him how to read people, and when he’d looked into Kate’s clear green eyes and seen her heart laid bare, he knew she was as innocent as they came.

He shoved the recorder into his jacket pocket.

Naïve. But innocent.

His index finger lingered on the recorder’s Play button. Then again, people were rarely what they seemed.