

PORT ASTER SECRETS • BOOK 2

blind trust

a novel

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Sandra Orchard, *Blind Trust*
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For my parents-in-love, Greta and Peter,
for their supportive encouragement of my writing
and their penchant for nutmeg.

1

DIAMOND HEIRESS ESCAPES MURDER CHARGES.

Kate Adams snatched a copy of the *Port Aster Press* from the newsstand next to the grocery store checkout. How could they drop the charges when Molly Gilmore confessed?

Kate's throat squeezed at the memory of finding Daisy's cold body.

The young clerk pointed to the newspaper. Tears stung Kate's eyes as she dropped it on top of the groceries she'd picked up for her elderly neighbor. Her dear friend and mentor was dead because of Molly Gilmore. If not for the sting Kate had devised, the police would still be calling Daisy's death a suicide. As if she would have killed herself when they'd been on the verge of a breakthrough in their herbal research project.

The clerk placed the newspaper on the other side of the register. Kate shifted so she could read the article as the teen scanned the groceries. *Insufficient evidence*. How could they say that?

Kate studied Molly's photo. No hint of the crazed glint

that had flashed in her eyes when she lunged at Kate with that syringe. Kate shuddered at the thought of how close Molly had come to killing *her* too.

Now that the syringe had conveniently disappeared, she prayed the judge didn't drop the attempted murder charges against Molly on grounds of insufficient evidence too. If attacking her with a hypodermic full of poison wasn't attempted murder, Kate didn't know what was.

Except the attempted murder charge was not enough to keep her behind bars. They let the woman out on bail, even though she practically had flight risk emblazoned across her Dolce pantsuit. In the photo, her face showed no trace of concern. And why should she worry? By trial time, her five-hundred-dollar-an-hour lawyers would have the charge whittled down to jaywalking.

Kate cringed at her negativity. Only Molly wasn't the hard-working young woman struggling to make ends meet that Kate had once thought. Molly hadn't shown a speck of remorse when her fatally flawed plan to poison Daisy and pin the crime on her ex was exposed. And sadly, with how powerful Molly's family money was proving to be, Kate feared Molly wouldn't be held accountable for her crimes either.

"That's \$28.37," the clerk said, bagging the last of the groceries.

Kate handed over the three tens her neighbor had given her to pay for the items and continued reading: "A source close to Molly Gilmore claims the incident involving Kate Adams was a setup and that Gilmore was the victim of police entrapment."

"Ma'am."

Kate reached for the two bags of groceries, her gaze still pinned to the article. *Entrapment?* Molly was no victim.

Someone tugged the bags back.

“What—?” She looked up into cool gray eyes.

“Ma’am, could you come with me please?” The voice belonged to a security guard. At least that’s what was embroidered on his crisply ironed shirt with chevrons on the shoulder. Since when did the store hire a security guard?

“Me?” she squeaked, sounding as guilty as a pilfering mouse. She cleared her throat and forced backbone into her voice. “Why?”

The line of customers behind her gawked, eyes rapt with morbid fascination. She recognized a couple of faces and felt her own face heat. In a town this size, whatever was going on would be common knowledge by suppertime.

The pimple-faced cashier held one of the ten-dollar bills she’d given him under a blue light and showed it to the towering guard who still had his hands on her groceries. “See? Counterfeit! All three of them.”

A collective gasp sounded behind her.

“Good work, kid.” The security guard released the bags to accept the evidence.

Heart pounding, Kate gaped at the bills. “My neighbor gave them to me to buy her groceries.”

The guard nodded, but he didn’t look like he believed her. “If you’ll follow me, ma’am”—he shot a pointed look to the ogles behind her—“we’ll sort this out in the manager’s office.”

“What should I do with the groceries?” the clerk asked.

The guard steered Kate toward the office. “Have a stocker put them back.”

“No.” Kate whirled around. “I need to take those to my neighbor. She’s elderly and not feeling well. She needs—”

“Okay.” The guard waved off the cashier, curled the newspaper

into the top of one of the bags, and hoisted them off the counter. “Follow me.”

Fevered whispers rose in their wake.

The guard closed the office door behind them and set the grocery bags on the manager’s desk. From the front page of the newspaper, Molly’s victorious smile mocked Kate.

Suddenly, she had the sinking feeling *she* was the one being entrapped.

Her breath came in gulps. What if the manager didn’t believe her? Or worse, what if he did and the police went after Verna?

Kate dug around her purse for other cash, her credit card, something. She couldn’t let her sweet old neighbor take the fall for trying to pass off counterfeit bills. How had Verna even ended up with a wad of counterfeit cash?

Kate zipped closed her purse. She must’ve left her wallet on the bed when she’d switched purses this morning. Chewing on her bottom lip, she eyed the guard. “Are you sure the bills are counterfeit? I mean, that cashier didn’t look old enough to know the difference.”

“No, ma’am. I don’t know for sure.” The guard positioned himself in front of the door, his expression impassive. “That’s why we’re waiting for the police to sort this out.”

“The police?” She swiped slick palms down the sides of her slacks. “Is that really necessary?” She’d never liked the police. Not since her father died in police custody when she was ten. “I mean, I can pay for the groceries . . . some other way. My neighbor will be worried.”

A loud rap sounded on the door.

Kate jumped at the sound, knocking a soup can out of one of the grocery bags. As she scrambled to stop it from toppling off the desk, the guard pushed open the door.

Detective Tom Parker strode into the room looking every inch her knight in shining armor, just as he'd been when he rescued her from Molly's attack with that syringe. Kate's knees went weak with relief. Tom was the one exception to her police aversion. Although he was not quite as tall as the security guard, with his dark hair, square chin, and piercing blue eyes, Tom's powerful presence dwarfed the younger man. And his warm smile loosened the knots in her stomach.

He'd never believe her guilty of counterfeiting. After how badly he'd felt about taking her into custody for her friend's murder three months ago, he'd make sure she wasn't falsely accused again.

Hopefully the fact that he wore his usual suit and tie instead of a police uniform would also stave off rumors of her being arrested. He glanced around the room, then turned back to the security guard. "Where's your counterfeiter?"

The guard hitched his thumb in Kate's direction.

"Miss Adams?" The surprise in Tom's voice reinforced the absurdity of the accusation against her, but a second later his face broke into a grin. "If you wanted to see me, you could have just called."

Her stomach somersaulted at his gentle teasing and at the disappointment that she hadn't called vibrating beneath his words. If only he knew how much she'd wanted to agree to that second dinner date he'd been vying for. But his warning that Molly Gilmore's lawyer might attack her character in the upcoming trial had her too worried Tom's reputation would be ruined. She knew all too well what guilt by association felt like. She could never willingly subject anyone to that kind of ridicule—especially someone she cared about as much as Tom.

Suddenly aware of the security guard's scrutiny, she schooled

her expression. “Thanks. Next time I’ll keep that in mind.” Tom being a cop made the risk of being romantically linked ten times worse. If Molly’s lawyers didn’t try to shred Kate’s reputation in their effort to make her look less of a victim, they’d certainly question Tom’s objectivity as the investigating officer.

“You know this woman?” the security guard asked.

Tom chuckled. “Yes, she’s known to the police.”

The guard nodded, his expression smug.

“Because I was the victim of an attempted murder,” Kate blurted. “Not because I’m a criminal.” She knew Tom was making light of the situation to put her at ease. But he *wasn’t* helping.

The guard’s jaw dropped, and a smidgen of recognition lit his eyes.

Tom cleared his throat, wiping the grin from his face. “What do you have? I’m sure we can clear this up.”

The guard handed Tom the money. “I believe you’ll find these are counterfeit, sir. They failed our light test. She used them to pay for her groceries. She claims she received them from her neighbor.”

Tom swung his attention back to her, one eyebrow raised.

“You can’t think that I . . . ?” At the amused twinkle in his eyes, she let out a *humph*. “What kind of moron counterfeits ten-dollar bills? If I wanted to defraud someone, I’d at least go for twenties. More likely fifties or hundreds!”

The amusement in Tom’s bright blue eyes intensified, but he held his mouth in a firm line. “You’re not helping your case,” he murmured.

She rolled her eyes. He knew she was joking. Then again—she slanted a glance at the guard—maybe this guy didn’t. She cringed at the idea of him repeating what she’d just said.

Tom studied the currency in his hands. “These *are* counterfeit. Who gave them to you?”

“Verna Nagy, but she couldn’t have known. Someone must have palmed them off on her.” The newspaper poking out of the grocery bag drew Kate’s attention. She passed it to Tom, Molly’s picture face up. “Do you think she could be behind this? You warned me that her people might try to discredit my reputation—you know, ‘try the victim’—to bolster her defense.”

Tom scanned the headline, and the tick of his jaw muscle reminded her of how he’d blamed himself for Daisy’s case unraveling.

The guard shook his head. “I haven’t seen her in here.”

“Could you excuse us for a moment?” Tom said to the guard. “Of course.”

After the door closed behind the guard, Tom turned her way, his expression empathetic but not encouraging.

Kate lifted her hand stop-sign style. “I know what you’re going to say. It sounds crazy. But think about it. Molly tried to get back at her ex by poisoning someone. That’s how she operates.”

“Sure, but have you bought groceries for your neighbor before? Because what else would make Molly’s people think you’d end up with the phony cash?”

“No, I haven’t.” Kate glanced out the office window toward the cash registers. “But . . . maybe the money didn’t come from my neighbor. Maybe they got to that teenage clerk. I’m sure he’s new here.” She clasped Tom’s arm. “I was reading the paper as I handed him the money. He could have easily replaced the bills I gave him with counterfeit ones.”

“He just *happened* to have the exact denominations in counterfeit as you handed him?”

“No, I guess he wouldn’t.” Kate blew out a dejected breath.

“*He wouldn’t!*” Her hope resurged. “If you search him or the register, maybe you’ll find more.”

Tom cast a skeptical look out the office window. “Wait here.” He returned the newspaper to the desk, then let himself out of the room as the guard stepped back in.

Tom waited until the last customer in line exited, then showed the cashier his badge.

The teen nodded and opened the cash drawer.

Tom dug through the drawer, lifting removable parts. Now and again, he held a bill under the ultraviolet light. He said something to the teen, but the teen shook his head and turned out his empty pockets. Tom jotted something in his notepad, then stalked back to the office, grim-faced.

Kate’s chest tightened. She knew Tom couldn’t believe she’d counterfeit, but if the evidence pointed to her, he wouldn’t ignore it. No matter how he felt about her.

Or didn’t feel. After all, a guy could only handle so much rejection, no matter how well-intentioned her reasons. He still sat beside her in church, but he hadn’t tried inviting her to lunch for weeks.

“Thank you for your alertness,” Tom said to the guard. “I’ll take Miss Adams into my custody.”

Custody. She tried to swallow but couldn’t choke down the disbelief balled in her throat.

“What should we do with these?” The guard motioned toward the groceries.

Tom reached for a bag. “We’ll deliver them. I want to talk to this neighbor of hers.”

“They’re not paid for, sir.”

Tom pulled out his wallet and handed the guard a twenty and a ten. “Will this cover it?”

“Yes, I’ll get your change.”

“Thank you,” Kate whispered to Tom as the guard left the room.

“Don’t thank me yet. We’ve had a rash of counterfeit complaints over the last few weeks. The Gilmore reach may be long, but I doubt this counterfeit operation was a setup to destroy your reputation.”

“But you believe me, don’t you? You know I wouldn’t knowingly pass counterfeit bills.”

“Do I?”

She knew he was teasing, but that didn’t arrest the rush of memories of others who hadn’t been, or stop the ache in her throat. She felt ten again, in line for lunch at her school’s hot dog day and accused of trying to pay with a fake ticket. Called a crook, *just like her old man*. Chilled by the frosty doubt in even her teacher’s eyes.

“Hey.” Tom brushed his thumb across her cheek, compassion in his eyes. “I know you wouldn’t.”

Melting at the warmth in his voice, she sucked in a breath and shut out the memories.

“But the chief heard the call,” he added. “We’ve been trying to track leads on this problem for weeks. He’s not going to let the fact you were caught red-handed go.”

“But if you tell him Verna Nagy gave me the money, he’ll haul her down to the police station. The woman is eighty years old. She’s got to be a victim here too.”

“Criminals come in all shapes and sizes, Kate. People are rarely what they seem. Who knows what your little old neighbor lady could be hiding?”



“What do you mean she isn’t the counterfeiter?” the police chief ranted.

Tom tapped down the volume on his earphone as he pulled behind Kate’s car in her driveway. “It’s complicated.”

Kate’s soulful green eyes lifted to her rearview mirror.

More complicated than he needed. He’d barely managed to regain Kate’s trust after hauling her in as a suspect in her friend’s murder investigation. But whether he liked it or not, she *was* now connected to his counterfeiting investigation, however inadvertently, and he had to follow every lead. He just hoped she understood it wasn’t personal.

“I’m about to interview a possible suspect now,” he said to the chief. “I’ll be in touch.” He disconnected before Hank could press for details. The man would not be happy to hear that Kate Adams was back on their radar. Her amateur sleuthing three months ago had caused the chief more embarrassment than he could stomach.

Tom waited for Kate to climb out of her yellow Volkswagen Beetle before getting out of his car. Her tousled red hair didn’t look as fiery as usual, and her stooped shoulders betrayed her unhappiness at having to involve her elderly neighbor. He lifted the groceries from the trunk. “You want to introduce me to your neighbor?”

“Oh, Tom,” she pleaded, sounding utterly miserable. “She’s such a sweet old woman. There’s no way she knowingly duped me into passing counterfeit bills.”

Too many years in law enforcement had drilled reality into him, but he bit back his you’d-be-surprised-what-sweet-old-women-can-do remark. He hated to discourage Kate’s exceptional faith in people. It had served her well when hunting down her friend’s killer. If only Molly Gilmore’s betrayals hadn’t left

it so tattered. “Okay, then we’ll be up front with your neighbor. Tell her what happened and see what she has to say.”

“Right.” Kate strode across her yard, her flowery skirt flouncing with the let’s-do-it attitude he’d grown to appreciate in her.

The bright August sunshine glinted off her hair, and reflexively his fingers tingled. He could almost feel the silky caress of her burnished red curls. In those moments when he let her take over his thoughts, he could still breathe in her lavender scent and hear the sweet ring of her laughter.

She stopped at the sidewalk. “Coming?”

He grinned at the determination blazing in her eyes. He should’ve tried harder to score that second date instead of biding his time until after Molly’s trial. Just his bad luck she’d wind up in the middle of another one of his cases.

Verna Nagy’s front door stood open with only a flimsy screen door between a possible intruder and the inside. A black and white cat met them on the porch and twined between their legs, purring loudly. Kate lifted him into her arms. “What are you doing outside, Whiskers?”

Tom rubbed the little fellow’s neck. “Is this the cat that was cured by Grandma Brewster’s herbal brew a few months back?” The police chief’s German grandmother had been making natural remedies for townfolk and their pets for as long as he could remember—a woman after Kate’s own heart.

“He sure is.” Kate nuzzled her cheek against the cat’s fur. “You can’t chalk *his* recovery up to mind over matter, can you, Mr. Skeptic?”

He feigned offense. “Hey, I never said the stuff doesn’t work.”

She dropped the cat to the ground and rang the bell. “You didn’t have to.” She winked.

At least she didn't take his skepticism about her cure-all teas personally. He admired her work as a researcher. He really did. It was the spin-off industries that preyed on people's quick-fix mentalities that caused him concern. In his FBI days, he'd had one partner who'd overindulged on a diet tea that not only stripped him of a few pounds but also landed him in the hospital.

A sprightly, white-haired woman peered at them through the screen door and pierced Tom with a glare. "I already have a vacuum. The no-good, overpriced one you sold me ten years ago."

"Excuse me?" Tom glanced at Kate. She hadn't told him the woman was senile.

Her eyes sparkled with laughter. "Verna, it's me, Kate. Your neighbor. I brought your groceries. And this is my friend, Tom. Detective Parker. He needs to ask you a couple of questions."

Verna's eyes narrowed as she studied his face. "You're not selling vacuums?"

"No ma'am."

She swung the door wide. "Come in then."

The cat leapt through the open door, leading the way inside the tidy little house. The air smelled like an odd combination of lemon oil and the spicy scent of the town's tea shop. The narrow-planked hardwood gleamed. Sunshine filtered through lace curtains, playing hide-and-seek with the elaborately gowned china dolls adorning the fancy Victorian furniture.

No sign of counterfeiting equipment, not even a computer. With no garage outside, that left the basement and bedrooms.

"You have a lovely house, Mrs. Nagy. May I have a tour?" Brazen, he knew, but it saved him the hassle of a search warrant.

The woman glowed. "Of course, of course."

“I’ll just put away your groceries while you show him around.” Kate fired him a warning scowl before slipping into the kitchen.

Photographs lined the hallway. “These your children?” Tom asked.

Verna peered at the pictures as if she’d never noticed them before. “My son Brian and grandson Greg. My husband passed two years ago.”

“I’m sorry. Must be lonely for you. Does your son visit often?”

“Once a week. He’s a good boy.”

Tom made a mental note to check into her son’s finances and make sure he was as good as his mother believed.

The bedroom housed nothing more than a bed and dresser. The spare room had a sewing machine and piles of fabric and half-finished articles. Mrs. Nagy squinted into the room and swayed a little. Then, as if she’d forgotten him, she strolled back to the living room, sank into her recliner, and clicked on the TV with her remote.

Tom trailed her, wondering how to wrangle his way into the basement without raising any suspicions, because from the looks of Mrs. Nagy, she’d make an easy front for a counterfeiter to exploit.

Kate came in waving a package of frozen fish. “Did you want this in the downstairs freezer?”

“Huh?” Mrs. Nagy looked up from the TV. “Oh, hello dear. When did you get here? Staying for tea?”

Kate paled. “Yes. I’ll make us some.” To Tom, she whispered, “I don’t know what’s wrong. I mean, she’s forgetful sometimes, but never like this.”

Tom relieved Kate of the package of fish. “I’ll take this to the freezer. You make her a cup of tea and then we’ll chat.”

Kate nodded, thankfully oblivious to his motive for offering to take care of the fish. He took his time walking across the basement to the freezer, being careful not to move anything so any discovery couldn't be thrown out of court. The basement was devoid of furniture. Instead, shelves of home canning, coated in a thick layer of dust, lined one long cement wall, while the boxes stacked along the adjacent wall looked like recent additions.

He tossed the fish into the freezer and circled behind the stairs. A dust-free workout gym dominated the space. Her son's?

A large patch of dust was scraped from the floor beyond the workout area, as if something had recently been moved. Not likely by Verna, as frail as she seemed, but not without her knowledge either. With no outside exit on this level, no one could easily sneak into the basement undetected.

By the time Tom returned to the main floor, Kate was sitting next to Verna in the living room. The steam rising from the teacup in her hand intensified the spicy scent in the air. From the TV, a theatric judge lambasted a defendant for his overly trusting nature. Tom turned down the volume, debating how to interrogate Kate's neighbor. Showing signs of dementia, she wasn't likely the kingpin of a counterfeiting operation. But if she repeated his questions to the wrong people, he might lose his trail before he found it. Of course, she could be faking.

Tom took a seat kitty-corner from Verna. "Nice workout gym in your basement. Your son's?"

"Grandson's."

"He live with you?"

Verna glanced from him to the feuding couple standing in front of the TV judge and shook her head.

“Her son’s wife walked out on the family,” Kate whispered. “Greg and Brian had to move into an apartment. I think Verna’s storing some of their stuff.”

“Any idea why his wife left?” Maybe she didn’t want to get caught up in her husband’s illegal activities.

“She ran off,” Verna hissed. “With some handyman drifter she had working on the house. I warned Brian he was traveling too much. She cleaned out their accounts. Mortgaged the house to the hilt and skipped town.”

Sounded like Brian needed money to dig himself out of that mess.

Unless . . . The plaintiff in the TV courtroom echoed Verna’s description. Tom cocked his head to Kate and mouthed, “For real?”

Kate shrugged.

Trying another tack, Tom asked the woman, “Do you get out much?”

“My ladies’ mission sewing circle on Thursday mornings and church on Sundays.”

A religious woman. More reason to doubt her as a viable suspect. Or it could be a front. He’d known plenty of criminals to hide behind a facade of uprightness. “Who takes you?”

She waved her hand in the direction of Kate’s house. “The neighbor.”

Kate frowned and shook her head that it wasn’t her. “What about your groceries?” Kate asked. “Who usually picks them up?”

“I’m sorry, dear. I didn’t mean to put you out.”

Kate patted the woman’s bony hand. “I don’t mind shopping for you. I was just curious. I want to know you’re being taken care of.”

“My son hired a housekeeper who comes in. She picks up groceries sometimes.”

“Do you do your own banking?” Tom asked.

Verna’s attention drifted back to the TV as a red sports car veered into the driveway. Verna upped the volume on the remote.

Tom strode to the TV and hit the Off button. He wasn’t buying the doddering routine. It was too convenient. “Mrs. Nagy, I’m Detective Parker. We need to know where you got the money you gave Miss Adams.”

“Detective?” She turned her attention to Kate. “Are you in trouble?”

“Who’s in trouble?” the lanky, fair-skinned sports car driver said through the screen, then pushed his way inside.

Tom recognized him from the photos in the hallway. From the rumpled suit, the man looked as if he’d been on the road for hours. From the look of his car, his wife hadn’t wiped him out entirely. Tom extended a hand. “You must be Verna’s son.”

“Brian Nagy.” The man clasped Tom’s hand in an iron grip. “And you are?”

“Detective Tom Parker.”

Nagy dropped Tom’s hand like a hot potato and knelt at his mom’s side. “What’s going on? What happened?”

“Your mother came into possession of counterfeit bills, and we are trying to trace their source.”

“Oh, Mom, I told you we need to get you into a nursing home. Things like this wouldn’t happen.” He glanced up at Tom as if he might convince her. “She doesn’t want to go. I worry about her when I’m on the road. But I never imagined anything like this. Where did it happen? What are you going to do?”

“Your mother gave Miss Adams several counterfeit bills with which to purchase her groceries. We’re simply trying to ascertain where they came from.”

Nagy surged to his feet and pointed at Kate. “How do you know she’s not responsible and trying to lay the blame on my mother?”

Kate gasped.

Tom patted the air in a calming gesture. “We’re not blaming anyone, just trying to get some answers.”

Verna’s son gave a stiff nod and knelt next to his mother again. “Mom, do you remember where you got the money?”

Verna shook her head, but the frightened look in her eyes told Tom she was lying. The question was—why?