

PORT ASTER SECRETS • BOOK 3

desperate measures

a novel

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Sandra Orchard, *Desperate Measures*
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Scripture quotations are from the King James Version of the Bible.

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To my children,
whose part-time greenhouse work
originally sowed the inspiration for this series,
and whose love and support helped grow it to fruition.

1

Squinting against the bright grow lights, Kate Adams slipped into her fruit cellar in the back corner of her basement and shut the door. She couldn't risk anyone discovering her little greenhouse. Enough people had already died.

The musty humidity in the tomblike room squeezed her chest. The walls were concrete, but mildew had already infiltrated the wooden ceiling, like GPC Pharmaceuticals' insidious blight in her life. Mildew was a price she'd gladly pay—if it meant getting her dad back.

She blinked away the image of him lying in a coma in a nameless hospital and forced herself to focus on the plants. She pressed her fingers into the soil of the nearest pot to gauge its dampness and smiled at the new buds peeking past the succulent, dandelion-shaped leaves. The virtually extinct plants were thriving in the tropical microclimate she'd recreated.

Her heart hiccupped. If only Vic Lawton hadn't run her father off that ravine to try to recover the plants, she might be enjoying a sweet reunion with Dad even now. Part of her

didn't want anything to do with the plant that had cost her so much. But after Detective Tom Parker's "executive decision" to send her father back into hiding, figuring out what gave amendosi the extraordinary curative properties it seemed GPC would stop at nothing to exploit might be her only hope of ever convincing the people safeguarding Dad to let her see him again.

Why, Lord? Why bring my father back into my life, only to take him away again?

No answer came. Not that she'd expected one. Lately she felt as if even God had abandoned her.

She squirmed at the irreverent thought. Her dad hadn't really abandoned her by faking his death twenty years ago. No matter how much it felt like it. He'd been trying to protect her and her mother. And if she were honest with herself, lately she'd probably been shutting God out, more than the other way around. How many times had Daisy reminded her to take God at his Word, not trust emotions that surged and ebbed like the tide?

Kate rubbed her knuckles over the ache in the vicinity of her heart. She'd have an easier time leaning on God if Daisy hadn't been murdered and every other person she'd ever trusted hadn't lied to her face or hid things from her—big, monumental things, like the fact her father was alive.

Shoving aside the thought and ignoring for a few more minutes the paint job awaiting her upstairs, she snatched up her spray bottle and misted the plants. "What's your secret?" she whispered as she deadheaded a spent aster-like flower.

What could be so special about this plant that a multinational pharmaceutical company would burn down a remote Colombian village to control it? So special that her father

would sacrifice a lifetime with his family to keep it out of their hands? So special that all these years later, his former employer, GPC Pharmaceuticals, would track it down to Port Aster and kill a man to safeguard its existence?

Kill *her* if they found out she had it.

Her chest squeezed tighter. If she ever needed police protection, it was now. But with GPC vying to partner with the research facility where she worked, she didn't dare tell anyone about the plants.

Detective Tom Parker least of all.

If he'd separate her from her comatose father to ensure her safety, he'd never allow her to experiment with the plant responsible for Dad's fate.

She jerked the mist bottle's trigger. *For her own protection*, he'd said. And she appreciated his concern. She sincerely did. But she couldn't trust him not to do the same thing again.

The doorbell sounded.

She froze. Who'd come around on a Saturday morning? Especially this early?

Glancing down at the painting clothes she'd tugged on first thing, she palmed the perspiration from her brow. *Pull yourself together. No one's gonna suspect you're up to anything.*

The doorbell chimed a second time.

She closed the fruit cellar door and hurried upstairs, still puzzling over who could be here. Tom would call first. *Unless . . .*

Her pulse quickened. Had he finally brought good news? That her father was out of his coma, that she could see him again?

She peeked out the front door's peephole, her hopes deflating like a pricked balloon. She turned off her security alarm

and unlocked the dead bolt. “Patti, what brings you by on a Saturday?” Kate did a double take at her lab assistant’s faded jeans and the ratty T-shirt straining at her ample hips. Since Patti had started dating the mayor’s son, Kate hadn’t seen her in anything that wasn’t designer fashion. “What’s wrong?”

Laughing, Patti pulled her long, dark hair into a ponytail and snapped on a hair elastic. “Nothing. You said you were painting your bedroom this weekend. I came to help.”

She had even worn an older pair of glasses instead of the funky new ones she’d been wearing lately, Kate couldn’t help but notice. “Really?”

“Don’t sound so shocked. I do know how to paint.”

“No, I—” Kate motioned her inside. “I just assumed you’d be hanging with Jarrett. You two have been inseparable lately.”

Patti shrugged. “A girl’s got to spend some time with her girlfriends. Right?”

Speechless, Kate relocked the door. Patti was her assistant, a graduate student, her co-worker. She’d never really thought of her as a girlfriend. But she’d missed having a friend to turn to with her former roommate, Julie, newly married and Daisy, who’d been so much more than a colleague, gone and Tom . . . not an option. “I’d love some help. Thank you.” Kate led the way to her empty bedroom, her heart lightening at having company. “I laid old bedsheets over the carpet so I wouldn’t have to worry about paint splatters.”

“Smart idea.” Patti grabbed the stepladder and set it up along the far wall. “I can do the top and bottom edges with a paintbrush if you want to handle the roller.”

“That would be awesome.” Kate poured half of the

lemongrass-green paint into the tray, then set the can on the ladder's pail shelf for Patti's easy access.

Patti started in immediately, saying little except that she liked the color.

Kate loaded her roller and concentrated on making long, smooth strokes. "You seeing Jarrett later?"

Patti shrugged.

"Did you two have a fight?"

"No, nothing like that." Patti's brushstrokes grew jerky, as if it was *exactly* like that.

A real girlfriend would commiserate with her. But Kate couldn't. Truth be told, she'd be happy to see the pair break up. She didn't trust Jarrett. It was too coincidental that he'd started dating Patti at the same time Kate took her on as a research assistant, especially when his father—the mayor—was so set on helping GPC partner with the research station.

Kate slanted an uneasy glance in Patti's direction. Was there more to her assistant's visit than a little altruistic bonding?

Patti jabbed her brush into the paint can. "Whoa. You might want to wear a ball cap. You're speckling your hair green."

"Red and green. Terrific. I'll be all set for Christmas." Kate set down her paint roller and ran her palm over her long waves. Yup, she could feel the wet, sticky spots.

Patti muffled a giggle.

"What?" Kate pulled away her green-smearred hand and groaned.

"At least it's not speckled anymore." Patti returned to her painting, still chuckling.

Kate went to the bathroom and washed out the paint as

best she could, then squashed a ball cap over her hair. By the time she got back to the bedroom, Patti had already cut in the tops of three walls. “Wow, you paint like a pro!”

Grinning, Patti slid the ladder in front of the final wall needing to be edged, climbed two rungs, then swayed precariously.

Kate dropped her roller and lunged for the ladder, scarcely stopping it from toppling, along with the can of paint.

Patti stumbled off the bottom rung and struggled to recover her balance. “I’m sorry.” She pressed her palm to the side of her head. “I don’t know what’s wrong with me. I keep getting these bizarre dizzy spells. Last night I tripped up my porch steps.”

“You should see a doctor.”

Patti dropped her hand and laughed off the suggestion. “I don’t think it’s that serious. Probably just low blood sugar or something.”

“Then let me get you a glass of apple juice.”

Patti retrieved the roller Kate had set on the drop sheet. “That’s okay. I can get it. How about you finish edging the top of the wall and I’ll take over the roller?”

“Okay, but”—Kate pried the roller from her hand and set it in the tray—“first get yourself that juice. There’s a bottle in the fridge.”

Patti saluted and headed down the hall.

Kate climbed the ladder and continued painting where Patti had left off. But when Patti hadn’t returned by the time she reloaded her brush for the fourth time, she called out, “You okay?”

No response.

“Patti?” Kate dashed down the hall. An empty juice glass

sat on the table, but Patti was nowhere in sight. Kate skidded to a stop at the top of the basement stairs beside the kitchen. “Patti?”

Halfway down the steps, Patti whirled at her name. “Ahhh!” Her arms windmilled, and in that sickening millisecond when she knew she’d fall and couldn’t stop herself, sheer panic blazed in her eyes. She tumbled backward, catching her heel on the tread. Her head slammed into the cement floor, half her body sprawled on the steps.

She shifted awkwardly and her screams escalated.

“Don’t move!” Kate raced down two steps at a time. “You might have broken some—” *Oh, no.* Bile stung her throat at the sight of Patti’s badly broken leg. She was lying at such a horrible angle; Kate prayed the leg was all that was broken.

Patti collapsed back against the floor. “I can’t believe this. I saw you’d left a light on, and”—she gasped for air in short, painful sounding gulps—“I was just coming down to turn it off for you.”

Kate’s gaze shot to the fruit cellar. The door was closed like she’d left it. But no light that she could see seeped around the edges.

Was Patti lying? Had she snuck into the fruit cellar? Had she seen the plants?



The derelict Potter farmhouse crouched like a duck blind in a haggard marsh of overgrown hay fields, a quarter mile in from the road. Trespassing calls weren’t normally his territory, but Tom had a hunch this particular trespasser might

be the missing teen he'd been trying to track down. The place was a runaway's dream home.

Unwilling to risk a busted axle, Tom parked at the end of the driveway, if it could still be called that, and buttoned his sport coat to conceal his shoulder holster before climbing out.

He scanned the horizon for signs his arrival had been noticed. The young Conner family, who'd made the call, lived to the south of the twenty-acre property. Their youngster stood on a tire swing, pointing Tom's way. Shading her eyes, Mrs. Conner followed the direction of her son's finger. Tom waved, then radioed dispatch to alert them in case Mrs. Conner mistook him for another trespasser thanks to his unmarked car.

Beyond the fields to the north lay the Goodman place, a virtual castle, fortified by a six-foot stone wall. If the person Mrs. Conner saw wasn't his missing teen, he could be someone scouting out the estate Kate's research assistant recently inherited.

Too bad it was Saturday morning. Questioning Patti Goodman about any suspicious activity she might've noticed on the adjoining property would have been a great excuse to stop by Kate's lab.

Remembering Kate's parting words, *There is no we*, after he'd arranged, against her wishes, for her dad to go back into hiding, he kicked the dirt. Yeah, wake up and smell the weeds. Stopping by wouldn't change anything. If he weren't the only connection to her father—as tenuous as that connection was—she probably wouldn't talk to him at all. Never mind the danger he feared she was still in.

Despite his certainty that GPC must have recovered the plants Vic Lawton stole from her father after running him off

the road, the pharmaceutical company was still maneuvering for a stake in Port Aster's research station. And Lawton's subsequent murder proved they didn't leave loose ends.

Tom returned his attention to the task at hand. Multiple bicycle-tire-sized ruts through the grass confirmed someone had been around. He scoped the area for any evidence he might walk into more than he bargained for, like some gang's hideout.

A murder of crows perched on a dead tree limb, cawing noisily as if to warn of his arrival. But no shifting shadows at the windows betrayed a response to the birds' alarm.

He tried the front door. It held fast, and from the look of the crusted edges, it hadn't been opened in years. A glance through the dirty window revealed only an old sofa, its stuffing puffed out the corner, in an otherwise bare main room. A staircase with ratty carpet curling on the treads stretched to the second level. In the dim light, it was impossible to tell if anyone had recently traipsed across the floor.

Tom strode around the perimeter, but the hard-packed mud revealed no footprints . . . like every dead-end lead in this case. A pillared wooden porch spanned the length of the house's driveway side, its paint gray and peeling, its shingles curled, its floorboards pitted with rot, but he'd seen teens hole up in worse. Much worse. He yanked open the storm door and reached for the doorknob. It turned easily. The reek of animal waste bit his nostrils as he stepped inside. A chrome-legged kitchen table and faded red vinyl chairs sat in the center of a floor layered in years of dust and . . . man-sized scuffs.

"This is Detective Tom Parker. Anyone here? I just want to talk to you."

Skittering from inside one of the kitchen cupboards answered his call, nothing more. The footprints were concentrated outside a closed door in the back corner of the kitchen. He jerked it open and shone his flashlight down rickety stairs leading to a mud-floor cellar. “Anyone down there?” Hearing no scuttling, he descended slowly into the cool, dank cellar, batting cobwebs from his face. He flicked his light into every corner, but there was no sign of anyone, just old farm baskets and gardening implements and shelves upon shelves of ancient canning jars, many still filled with food. He returned to the kitchen, then moved from one room to the next, checking closets. Although someone had clearly wandered through the place, nothing suggested anyone lived there, besides mice and a feral cat or two. Tom grabbed the stair rail, glanced up the open staircase, and tested the bottom step.

His cell phone rang. He cocked his head toward the top of the stairs, thinking he’d heard movement. The phone rang again. Seeing his dad’s name on the screen, he punched it on. “Just a second, Dad.” Tom stole up the stairs and quickly scanned the top floor. The three bedrooms with slanted ceilings were empty, save for threadbare sheers dangling from the narrow dormer windows. He edged aside the sheers at a window with a view of the hip-roofed barn he still needed to check and unmuted his phone. “Sorry about that, Dad. What is it?”

“I just heard on the police scanner that an ambulance was dispatched to Kate’s house.”

Tom’s heart pitched. “Did you catch any details?”

“No, but I’m on my way over now.”

“Thanks, Dad,” Tom said, already hoofing it back downstairs. The scanner had been a fixture in their house since Dad’s days on the local police force. But he’d been paying

much closer attention to it since Vic Lawton's death intensified their fears Kate might be next. "I'll be right there." Tom bolted outside just as a motorcycle roared up the rutted driveway.

Tom took cover behind a porch pillar, his hand settling on his gun.

The bike swerved to a stop at the foot of the porch, kicking up a cloud of dust.

"Hold it right there," Tom shouted.

The driver yanked off his helmet, revealing dark hair and blue eyes Tom would know anywhere—Jarrett King, the mayor's son. "What's going on, Detective?"

Leaving his weapon holstered, Tom refastened his sport coat. "What are you doing here?"

"My girlfriend lives next door."

Right. Patti Goodman. How could he forget, after catching the pair nosing through Kate's house little more than a month ago? Was it only a month? Tom glanced at the yellowing fields of late September. Seemed like a lot longer with Kate avoiding him most of the time.

Jarrett tucked his helmet under his arm. "I saw the car at the end of the driveway and got curious."

"The neighbors saw someone skulking around the place and called it in. Has Patti mentioned seeing anyone?"

"No." Concern rippled Jarrett's brow. "Are we talking kids, or someone she needs to be worried about?"

"I don't know yet, but if you notice anyone around the place, I'd appreciate you giving me a call."

"Will do." Jarrett yanked on his helmet and wailed out of the driveway before Tom's long strides ate a quarter of the distance.

But instead of turning north toward Patti's, Jarrett turned south. So why had he really happened by?



On the sidewalk outside her brick bungalow, Kate spun from the departing ambulance to a car screeching to a stop behind her.

Oh, no!

Tom jumped out of his car, looking way too good with his dark hair newly trimmed.

She should've known he'd follow his dad here.

His dad! Where'd he go?

She darted a glance back to the house. Was that a basement light that just flicked out? By the plants! "What are you doing here?" she snapped at Tom.

"A 911 call from your house, Kate? Where do you think I'm going to be?"

Yes, of course he was here. He was always here for her when she needed him. She darted another glance at the basement window. Whether she wanted him or not.

His gaze travelled up her paint-splattered clothes. "What's going on?"

"Oh." She waved her arm mindlessly toward the house. "Nothing you need to worry about. Patti was helping me paint and fell and broke her leg."

"I'm sorry."

Spotting his father through the living room window, Kate crowded Tom back toward his car. "I appreciate you checking on me, but I need to go to the hospital."

"You might want to clean up first." He reached out a hand to her cheek.

She jerked back, then felt foolish when he presented a lemongrass-green-smearred fingertip. She swiped at her face

with her shirtsleeve, trying to ignore the tingle on her skin where he'd touched her.

He was sweetly gallant, but his protectiveness had already cost her too much. Before her father was run off the road, he understandably might've still thought of her as a little girl that needed protecting, but Tom should've known better. She didn't need other people making her decisions for her, and she couldn't sit around waiting for someone else to make a family reunion possible. Even if it meant keeping her own secrets.

Tom jutted his chin toward Patti's car blocking hers in the driveway. "If you give me the keys, I can move her car out of the way for you while you change."

Kate glanced helplessly down the now-empty street and groaned. "Patti took her purse with her."

"No problem. I can give you a lift to the hospital."

"Uh . . ." If her insides were already doing gymnastics over keeping secrets when he was being so nice, they'd be nothing but knots after a twenty-minute car ride together. She'd probably end up confessing to digging up the plants and everything.

And he'd take them away, just like he did her dad, and she'd never figure out what was so special about them and gain enough leverage to get him back.

Squinting at her blocked car, she shifted from one foot to another, not wanting to depend on Tom. "Aren't you supposed to be working?"

He shrugged as if it was no big deal. "I'll take an early lunch."

Oh, she was in trouble.

Tom's father emerged from the house. "Since you said

you'd be going to the hospital with your friend, I emptied your paint tray into the can and sealed it up and washed your brushes in the basement.”

“The basement?” She swallowed a gasp, then tried to cover with an innocent smile. “That was nice of you. Thanks.”

Tom's eyes narrowed, and Keith gave him a look she couldn't read but that made her stomach churn.

Did he know? Would he tell Tom? “Um . . . I'll just go get changed real quick.” She hurried inside, dead-bolted the door behind her, and raced downstairs. Her pounding heart roared in her ears as she opened the fruit cellar door. At the sight of the grow lights still burning, she exhaled, then charged back upstairs and snuck a peek out the front window. Tom and his father were in deep conversation. *Okay, that might not be good.* She quickly washed and changed and raced back outside. “Ready,” she said, breathlessly.

The smile that crinkled the corners of Tom's eyes as he held open his passenger door for her sent a too-nice zing right to the center of her chest. Oh boy.

He hadn't even turned the corner before diving into the questions she'd dreaded. “Dad said Patti was at the bottom of the basement stairs, but that all the paint and brushes were upstairs. So why did she go downstairs?”

“Uh . . .” Kate clutched her thighs to still her fidgeting hands. Tom was far too adept at reading her body language. Maybe Patti had just been going to turn off the light, like she'd said, but Kate wasn't sure she believed her. “She said she saw a light on and she was going downstairs to turn it off.”

Tom glanced from her lap to her face. “Hey, it's not like you pushed her. It's not your fault.”

Softening at his caring tone, she tried to relax, except one

look at his deep blue eyes and her anxiety only morphed into guilt over how nice he was being. Of course it was her fault. She was harboring a fugitive plant in her basement.

He reached across the seat and squeezed her hand. “I’m glad *you’re* okay. I was afraid GPC had gotten to you.”

She stiffened at his touch. GPC *would* be after her if they knew. And Tom would have a hairy canary fit if he knew.

Tom put his hand back on the steering wheel and sighed. “Kate, you have to know that I’m doing everything I can to figure out a *safe* way to reunite you with your father.”

“I know,” she mumbled, sorry that he’d misread her reaction, taken it personally. But she couldn’t explain. So she turned to the window and watched the landscape sliding by. She’d been deprived of her dad for twenty years for her own safety. Now that she knew he was alive, she intended to do whatever it took to be reunited, safe or not.

Tom parked near the ER, and as he guided her inside with a gentle touch to her back, she tried not to think about the last time they’d visited the ER—the night Vic attacked her in the woods, the night he rammed her father’s car over a ravine, the night Tom finally told her the truth.

Her heart ached at the memory of the precious few minutes she’d had with her long-lost father.

As if reading her thoughts, Tom rubbed soothing circles on her lower back.

She arched away from his touch, willing her anger at the unfairness of it all to dispel the impulse to turn into his arms. She didn’t have time for a pity party. Patti needed her.

The ER doors slid open and Jarrett, looking way too pale, pushed through the door separating the waiting room from the patients.

Kate ran to him. “Is she okay? Have you talked to the doctor? How did you know she was here?”

“I called him when you were changing,” Tom whispered.

Jarrett raked his fingers through his hair. “It’s bad. A displaced fracture, the doctor said. They won’t be able to cast it until the swelling goes down. They just sent her for a CT scan. She hit her head hard.”

“This is all my fault.” Kate sank onto a molded plastic chair standing by itself next to the door, as disconnected from the others as she felt. “As soon as she told me how dizzy she’d been feeling, I should have told her to rest.”

“You knew she was dizzy?” The urgency in Jarrett’s voice made Kate’s heart race. “Did she suspect what caused it?”

“She said maybe low blood sugar.”

A nurse carrying a clipboard interrupted them. “Are you Kate? Miss Goodman said you’d be able to tell me the policy number for your work’s medical insurance.”

“Oh, yes.” Kate dug into her purse and produced the card. “The group policy number is on the top.” She frowned uncertainly at the number beneath it. “But I don’t know her personal ID number.”

The nurse tapped her pencil in a quickening staccato as she studied the card. “You work at the research station?”

“Yes.”

“Could Miss Goodman have drunk an experimental concoction that might have caused the dizziness?”

“No, we don’t ingest things we’re studying.”

The nurse handed Kate back her card. “Of course. Well, if you think of anything she might’ve consumed that could explain the dizziness, please let us know.”

As the nurse walked away, Tom pulled up a seat beside

Kate. “This scenario sounds too uncomfortably like your friend Daisy’s.”

Kate stared at him, her heart pummeling her ribs. “You think someone poisoned Patti?”

“No, I—”

“Daisy had complained of dizziness a few times before she di—” *Oh no. Oh no. Oh. No.*

Tom pulled his seat even closer. “Kate, it’s okay. Take deep breaths.”

“It’s not okay. *It’s not!* What if they poisoned Patti to get to me?”