

# DEAD-END DETECTIVE

AMANDA FLOWER

I BENT AT THE WAIST ON her front lawn and caught my breath. When I stood up again, I examined the house. It seemed perfectly normal. The lawn was mowed, the bushes trimmed, and all the leaves were raked. Samantha had left everything just so. One might think she'd done that because she'd known she wouldn't be back to the house, but that was just Samantha. She was particular.

The wooden front steps to the porch creaked as I walked up them, each sound like a wail in the quiet of the morning.

I slipped my copy of her house key into the lock, and it turned with no problem. The door opened into the living room. I could see past a set of leather armchairs and a side table into the dining room. The stairs to the second floor were on my right. The light was dim, so I had only to guess which lump was the couch and which was a pile of blankets on the couch. That struck me as odd. Samantha wasn't the sort to leave piles of blankets lying about. They would all be neatly folded or, even more likely, neatly tucked into the linen closet and organized by color.

I turned on the light, and the lump moved.

“Ahhhh!” I screamed.

“Ahhhh!” the man tangled in blankets on the couch screamed back.

I grabbed the nearest thing I could find for a weapon. It was a hardcover book lying on an end table.

“Don’t throw that at me!” The man protested, holding up his hands. “I know your mom is the head librarian, so I bet you could do some damage with that.”

I lowered the book. “Tate?”

He smiled. “It’s nice to see you too, Piper.”

A flush came to my cheeks when I remembered. In high school, Tate had called me Piper. I didn’t know how I’d forgotten that.

In high school, he’d always had a trail of cheerleaders in his wake. He’d had an air of danger too, like he was up to no good. But that had been over a decade ago. I hadn’t seen him since he’d graduated and gone into the service.

Tate looked much the same as he had in high school, but he was more muscular. I attributed that to the Army. His dark hair was longer and curled around his ears. Perhaps he’d rejected the short buzz-cut hairstyle after leaving the military. His beard was long and scruffy, and he had a deep tan. I wondered if we’d pulled him away from a Caribbean island. He wore jeans and a button-down shirt that could use a trip to the laundry, or maybe a one-way trip to the trash. His dark eyes bored into mine.

“How did you get in here?” I asked.

He stretched. “Samantha always kept a key hidden

under a potted plant in the back yard for me, since I kept losing my keys.”

“That’s a dumb place to keep it. Someone could have broken in her house at any time.”

“Well, it’s been there for over fifteen years, so I would say it’s okay. Are you going to put that book down now? I feel like the temptation to throw it at me will become too much and you’ll hurl it at my head.”

I dropped the book back on the table where I had found it. “You know about Samantha.”

He broke eye contact with me and stared into the unlit fireplace. “Yes, I do. The police notified me about my aunt dying.”

“Where were you when you heard from them?”

“Why does that matter? I’m here, aren’t I?”

I didn’t say anything, but it mattered because if he was nearby at the time of the murder, he was a suspect. His inheritance certainly gave him a big enough motive.

He seemed to read something in my face, because he said, “I don’t really have a set place to be. I float around and build my life as I go.”

“Not all of us can walk away from responsibility so easily.”

An irritated look crossed his face, but it was only there for a moment and then it was gone. “There’s something to be said for giving responsibilities a break.”

“I wouldn’t know,” I replied.

He smiled. “No wonder my aunt loved you so much. You were cut from the same cloth.”

“Does Patrick Hartwell, her attorney, know you’re here?”

“Not as far as I know.” He cocked his head. “By the way, what are you doing here? How did you get in? I should be asking you these questions, since it’s my aunt’s house.”

“I have a key.”

He nodded. “Aunt Samantha always spoke highly of you.”

My chest tightened.

“Samantha spoke about you often, too. She missed you.”

He winced, and I wished I could grab the words out of the air and shove them back into my mouth. This was no way to start a new working relationship, even if Tate didn’t know about the working relationship as of yet.

He squinted as if he was trying to avoid the sun. There was no sunlight on his face. More likely he was trying not to cry. I bit my lip. He had lost his aunt, the woman who had raised him to adulthood.

“It’s the truth,” he said. “I should’ve been around more.”

I had regrets I had to live with, too, in relation to Samantha, but I knew better than to say that aloud.

He sat up straighter. “The police say she was murdered.” He shook his head. “I know she was a P.I. but I never once thought that her life was in danger. She always seemed to be working on small-time crimes. They won’t tell me if they have any suspects in the case.”

I pressed my lips together. I wasn’t going to tell him

that he was looking at one right now—and so was I, for that matter.

He stood. “I imagine they’re looking at you.”

I gasped.

He chuckled. “Come on. You know as well as I do the people closest to a murder victim are the primary suspects.”

He was right, but it didn’t feel any better hearing it. “I can assure you I didn’t do it. I’m not capable of murder, and I would never hurt Samantha.”

“Anyone is capable of murder with the right motives.”