

HARBORED SECRETS
BOOK TWO

DEADLY DECEIT

NATALIE
WALTERS



a division of Baker Publishing Group
Grand Rapids, Michigan

Natalie Walters, *Deadly Deceit*
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Published by Revell
a division of Baker Publishing Group
PO Box 6287, Grand Rapids, MI 49516-6287
www.revellbooks.com

Printed in the United States of America

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Walters, Natalie, 1978– author.

Title: Deadly deceit / Natalie Walters.

Description: Grand Rapids, MI : Revell, a division of Baker Publishing Group,
[2019] | Series: Harbored secrets ; 2

Identifiers: LCCN 2018057274 | ISBN 9780800735333 (softcover)

Subjects: LCSH: Women journalists—Fiction. | GSAFD: Suspense fiction. | Mystery fiction. | Christian fiction.

Classification: LCC PS3623.A4487 D43 2019 | DDC 813/.6—dc23

LC record available at <https://lccn.loc.gov/2018057274>

ISBN 978-0-8007-3712-2 (casebound)

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19 20 21 22 23 24 25 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

G.I. JOE, your unconditional love
gives me the freedom to dream big
with the security of knowing you're right there beside me.
Without you, this dream never would've happened—
thank you, my love.

ONE

IN THE FACE OF SMALL-TOWN NEWS, all creativity left Vivian DeMarco.

“And Walton Elementary will raise enough money to support Home for Heroes and end the war, bringing peace to the whole country. And everyone will find true love. Have two adorable children. A cute puppy.” Vivian stamped out the words on her keyboard with more force than necessary. “And everyone will be happy and live happily ever after. Forever. And ev—”

Yuck. Vivian stopped typing, leaned back in her chair, and exhaled. *It’s only temporary.* Sitting forward, she tapped the delete key. *Tap. Tap. Tap.* And then held it down until she erased the last paragraph of her story on Walton Elementary’s 5K race to raise money for Home for Heroes.

It’s only temporary.

Those three words had become her mantra every day for the last 180 days, though lately she’d recited them to herself less frequently than she had when she first drove into town. A fact that frightened her a little bit. Those three words were her daily reminder that *this* was not where she belonged. It was a means to an end.

Clackity clack clack. Clack clackity clack clack. Clackity clack. Ding.

Vivian frowned. The vintage typewriter ringtone belonged to only one person and a quick glance at the time on her phone said it was past his bedtime.

“Harold?”

“Oh, good. I was hoping you were still up.” Harold’s twangy voice was barely above a whisper. “Where are you, dear?”

“At the office.”

“So late?”

“Doing the final copy editing on a few of my pieces and finishing up some stories.” Vivian could hear some noise in the background. “Where are you?”

“I just left the g—” Harold coughed. “Excuse me. I’m leaving the basketball game.”

That explained why her boss was still awake at such a late hour. Harold was an avid sports fan, and the Anderson College men’s team had made it to state . . . or was it the division finals? That was the other reason why Harold was at the Friday night basketball game. Vivian didn’t do sports. She had always been the last one picked in PE and the first one targeted in dodgeball when that heinous sport was allowed in schools. Covering sports was the one thing she wouldn’t budge on when it came to her job at the *Gazette*. She’d cover the insane number of festivals, fundraisers, dedications, cook-offs, and 5K races filling the Walton community calendar, but if Harold wanted a sports story, he’d have to cover it himself. Besides, no one was going to respect a writer who didn’t know the difference between an ump and a ref.

“Did they win?”

“They did, but that’s not why I’m calling. Can you meet me at the house?”

“Your house?” Vivian looked at the time. It was half past eleven. “Now?”

Harold coughed again. “Yes, dear. I know it’s late, but I need your help.”

A tingle of worry spread through Vivian’s chest at his ominous tone. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, yes, dear.” He cleared his throat. “They used quite a lot of pyrotechnics at the game. Some of the smoke must be bothering my throat. I’ll be at the house in ten minutes.”

“Harold, are you sure this can’t wait until tomorrow? I’ll even stop by the Way Station Café and pick up some cinnamon rolls. Plus, since Carol’s out of town, you won’t get into trouble.”

Harold laughed, but it came out choked. “I’ve got a marma-

lade dropper, and I think . . . I think it's the story you've been waiting on."

Vivian sat forward. "Marmalade dropper" was Harold's unique way to tell her he had a story. A big one. But even if he hadn't used his familiar phrase, the fact that he suggested this was *her* story captured her curiosity instantly.

"Why? What's the story?"

"Vivi, I'll tell you at the house. Please."

Her heart pulled at the sound of the nickname Harold had dubbed her with almost as soon as she began working for him—ignoring her insistence that her name was "just Vivian." Nicknames were familiar. Familiarity meant affection. And affection was harmful. Still, she couldn't ignore the strain in his voice.

"Fine." She closed her laptop and grabbed her keys. "I'll be there in fifteen minutes."



Ford Avenue was congested with game-night traffic. Vehicles covered in cheers for the Cougars written in shoe polish on their windows honked playfully at residents young and old as they waved their red and silver banners in the air. Kids with faces painted like the school mascot rode on their dads' shoulders or tugged their moms in the direction of Sandy's Ice Cream Shop, which apparently had extended its hours in honor of the win. The town was alive with celebration.

It was all a pitiful reminder of just how lame Vivian was.

Several blocks farther down, Vivian turned into The Landing, a subdivision of stately homes with wraparound porches and wide lawns manicured to HOA standards. She parked behind Harold's white Volvo on Marshford Avenue, the light from his living room illuminating the path up to his porch.

Vivian knocked on the door. What kind of story was important enough for her to be standing here this late at night? She didn't have a clue. This was Walton, Georgia, where people lived

happily ever after. The words she had typed earlier came back to her. She'd been in the news industry long enough to know there was no such thing.

Vivian knocked again, then moved to the front window and peeked in. Her heart stopped at the sight of his body crumpled on the floor.

"Harold!" She grabbed for the doorknob and it turned. Shoving the front door open, she ran to Harold's side. "Harold!"

His face was red, lips blue and swollen. His chest heaved, but only shallow wheezing escaped his throat. "Harold! What's wrong? Are you having a heart attack?"

A subtle shake of his head and Vivian remembered. Harold had a peanut allergy. "Allergic reaction? Are you having an allergic reaction?" More wheezing, but his eyes widened a bit before closing. *No, no, no.* He couldn't . . . "Stay with me, Harold."

She pulled out her cell phone and dialed 911. After Vivian gave the emergency operator Harold's address, the woman directed her to find his EpiPen. Harold had made sure Vivian knew where he kept it at the office, but this was his house. She looked around, not knowing the first place to look. Her eyes swept across the living room until they landed on the familiar briefcase. It was Harold's and she knew he'd have one in there. Vivian squeezed Harold's hand. *Please don't die, Harold. I can't lose you.* "Hang on, Harold."

Vivian popped open the satchel and dug through it until her hands landed on the pen. She grabbed it and then rushed back to Harold's side, where she removed the cap and pressed the pen to his leg and injected the medicine. The 911 operator stayed on the line to explain what should happen next—only nothing was happening. "It's not working. He's still struggling to breathe. Please help me!"

"Ma'am, help is on the way."

"Vivi—" The strangled whisper from Harold's lips hurt Vivian. "Help . . . her."

“Harold, don’t try to speak.” Her fingers trembled as they clutched his hand. “Help is coming.”

He moved his head to the side, closing his eyes.

“No, Harold.” Emotion ripped at her throat. “You stay with me. You made me drive all the way over here in the middle of the night because you have a story that you just *had* to tell me.” Vivian’s attempt at humor felt puny, until Harold’s brown eyes met hers. “That’s right. A real marmalade dropper, remember?”

His lips parted. “Lau-ren.”

What was he saying? Vivian leaned closer. “What?”

“Help . . . Lau—” He gasped. “Marma . . . Lauren.”

Vivian blinked. She leaned in closer. “What? Lauren who?” She felt guilty for making him talk, but the urgency in his eyes pulled at her.

Whatever Harold was trying to tell her fell silent in the desperate gasp. She squeezed his hand, but it fell open. *No!* Panic slid cold fingers around her heart and squeezed. He was dying. Harold was leaving her, and she’d be all alone again.

“Please!” Vivian pressed the phone to her ear. “Tell me what else I can do! Can I give him another shot?”

The blare of sirens outside interrupted the operator’s words. Vivian dropped her phone and yelled. “Hurry! He’s in here!”

Two EMTs ran into the house and started working on Harold. A man wearing a blue shirt with the fire unit’s number on the pocket moved her to the side. “Ma’am, are you his daughter?”

“No.” Vivian’s eyes were fixed on Harold’s body. The paramedics opened his shirt, revealing a chest that wasn’t moving. The wheezing had grown too soft—almost silent. She watched them try to stick a tube down his throat, but it wasn’t working and her heart was shattering. Steeling her emotions, she looked into the firefighter’s concerned eyes. “No, I’m just a reporter.”



Deputy Ryan Frost had no expectations for his first day back on duty. Okay, maybe one—easy. It was Walton, after all, and Friday

nights remained relatively quiet, aside from an occasional noise complaint or juvenile shenanigans happening on the outskirts of town. Possibly a drunk driver passing through from Savannah. But not even the excitement from tonight's basketball championship garnered much more than a few reminders to college students against disorderly conduct.

He was beginning to wonder whether the agency recruiters were right about his skills being wasted in Walton. Then the call came in. He'd been in town less than twenty-four hours, on patrol less than eight, and he was already investigating a death. Ryan spotted the brunette sitting stiffly on a leather chair talking to Deputy Ben Wilson. According to the first responders, she was the one who found Harold Kennedy and called in the emergency.

"Deputy Frost, we're about done here." Troy Bennett walked up, removing his latex gloves. He was the first EMT on the scene and a classmate from high school. "Medical examiner is on the way." He tipped his chin in the direction of the home office. "You might want to let her know that there was nothing more she could do. Allergic reactions are unpredictable. It was just too late."

Ryan looked over his shoulder, his gaze meeting her blue-gray one. A sense of familiarity raced through him. Did he know her? He searched his memory, but nothing came up. "How is she?"

"Seems fine." Troy looked toward the ambulance where his partner was finishing up. "Pretty composed, actually."

"It's not shock?"

"She said she was shaken but okay to go home."

Ryan thanked him and the rest of the first responders after he verified their names for his report. He was taking some pictures of the scene when the medical examiner entered the house.

"Hi, I'm Josie Carlisle, assistant ME for Chatham County." The blonde was half a foot shorter than he was and looked way too young to be a medical examiner. She must have read his thoughts, because she smiled widely and gave him a wink. "Graduated high school last week."

Ryan flinched.

“Just kidding.” She pulled a pair of latex gloves out of her bag. “I really wish I had a camera every time I said that.”

“Deputy Ryan Frost.”

“I’m told you’re the man in charge.” Her blue eyes swept up over Ryan’s shoulder. “Or would that be you?”

Ryan turned to find Deputy Wilson’s hulking frame standing behind him, his smile bright against his dark skin.

“You’re looking at me like I’m gonna have a problem going home tonight when my shift’s over while you stay and fill out paperwork for the chief.” The man was roughly the size of a refrigerator and took great pleasure in intimidating Ryan. “First man on the scene is the rule, right?”

“Guess that answers that. I’ll do the paperwork.” Ryan returned his attention to the ME. “Anything you need from me?”

“Only to stay out of my way unless I have a question.” She pulled the blanket from Harold’s face. “Told this was an allergy-related death.”

“Peanut allergy.”

The medical examiner let out a whistle. “Ain’t it a shame.” She snapped her gloves on. “Okay, boys. I’ll take it from here.”

Ryan and Wilson stepped back, giving her space to work. “What’s our caller’s connection to Mr. Kennedy?” Ryan asked.

Wilson smirked. “You don’t know?”

“Should I?”

“I figured you would’ve recognized her.” Wilson pivoted, giving Ryan a full view of the woman still sitting in Harold Kennedy’s office. She was twisting a piece of dark, wavy hair around her finger. “She practically camped outside our office last year.”

Last year?

“And my wife thinks I’m oblivious.” Wilson handed Ryan his notes. “Check out her name.”

Ryan did and his pulse jumped with recognition. “She’s not blonde anymore.”

“And you ain’t scrawny anymore.” Wilson chuckled. “Change happens—even the miraculous kind.”

“What’s she doing here?” Ryan asked, ignoring Wilson’s jab.

“Works for Harold.”

“Doing what?”

Wilson held up a meaty finger. “I’ll give you one guess.”

Right. Reporter. Really?

“Look, I don’t know what them boys taught you up in Quantico, but gawking at the witness isn’t really professional.”

Heat raced up his face. Ryan quickly looked down at Wilson’s notes again. He wasn’t gawking . . . he was looking. Trying to reconcile the tenacious reporter he remembered from a year ago with the one sitting twenty feet away from him.

“I told her you might ask her some follow-up questions.”

“Right.” He didn’t dare look at Wilson. Ryan could tell from the tone of his voice what his coworker was implying and he wasn’t going to give Wilson the satisfaction. Ryan hadn’t spent the last nine months training with the Advanced Tactical Response Task Force to get tripped up by Vivian DeMarco. “I’ll be back.”

“Famous last words,” Wilson mumbled under his breath.

Ignoring him, Ryan stepped into the office and cleared his throat. Vivian turned and looked up at him.

“Did I do something wrong? Is that why the medicine didn’t work?”

“It’s not your fault.” Ryan felt drawn to reassure her of this fact. He sat in the leather chair across from her. “The EMTs said you administered the EpiPen correctly, but it’s possible the medicine couldn’t react to the allergy fast enough. You did everything you could.”

An empty stare met his.

“How long have you been back in town?”

“Long enough to know you haven’t been, Deputy Frost.”

It took him a second to realize he hadn’t introduced himself and her using his name meant she recognized him. “Right. I was

up in Virginia. Training.” He looked down at his notes, praying Wilson was not hearing this. “Deputy Wilson said you stopped by here because—” Ryan read the note again. “Marmalade dropper?”

“Yes, it’s something Harold liked to say when he had a story idea. Means the headline will be so big it’ll make you drop the marmalade.”

“What was the story?”

“He never got a chance to tell me.”

Ryan saw it. The way her eyes shifted quickly to the side. She was holding something back. “You’re sure about that?”

A flicker of the obstinate reporter he remembered from a year ago lit her eyes. “Yes, I’m sure.”

He studied her features, the set of her jaw daring him to press her further. He wouldn’t. Not because he was intimidated—no. She did unnerve him though. A year ago it was the scrappy way she went after each deputy in the station, hungry for information on Walton’s first murder. Tonight *that* reporter wasn’t sitting here. The woman in front of him now was . . . vulnerable.

“Look, I think we have everything we need for the report.” Ryan stood. “I have your contact information if I need anything else.”

“Yes.” Vivian rose slowly. She glanced over at the ME examining Harold’s body.

“I’m sorry for your loss.”

Her eyes met his, and for the first time all night he saw a shimmer of emotion, but it lasted only a second. She offered a sad smile. “Leave it to Harold to die with a story on his lips.”

“Maybe some stories are best left untold.”

There was a sad tilt to Vivian’s lips. “I don’t believe that.”

An uneasy feeling settled in his gut as he led her to the front door and watched her get into her car and drive away. What story was so important that Harold would call Vivian to his home? Ryan turned on his heel and walked to the place where Harold had died. He began picking up the discarded trash left by the EMTs

and noticed a piece of paper. He was about to add it to the trash when he saw a name on it.

Lauren.

Who was Lauren? Did this name have something to do with Harold's big story? Something told him Vivian had the answers. And if she was still a tenacious reporter, anxious and willing to dig up dark secrets to fuel her need for a headline . . . then she was already a step ahead of him.