



Bitter Herbs

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Natasha Cooper's BITTER HERBS, like her previous mysteries A COMMON DEATH, POISON FLOWERS and BLOODY ROSES, catalogues the serendipitous detective work of Willow King, a British civil servant and a writer of elegant "romance-and-revenge novels."

At the beginning of BITTER HERBS, Willow King is under stress: her popularity as a novelist is fading, the Home Secretary persuades her to put off her retirement to head a committee on education in prisons, her police-detective lover Tom Worth has been cruelly sullen toward her of late (upset, apparently, by her intense need for privacy), and her editor commissions her to write a biography about Gloria Grainger, a famous and tyrannical romance novelist who has died of a heart attack.

As she researches her subject, Willow finds that many of those close to Grainger had reasons to want her dead. Grainger mistreated several people, including her young niece and housekeeper Marilyn Posselthwate, her secretary Patricia Smithe and her editor Victoria Taffle. Marilyn Posselthwate stands to inherit much of her aunt's fortune, and Peter Farrfield (the father of Marilyn's daughter Sarah), having charmed Grainger into taking pity on him for the disability he fakes having received from a car accident, expects a share of her estate. Grainger's maid Mrs. Guy will inherit twenty-five thousand pounds. Other suspects include book critic Posy Hackett, who has had a debilitating libel suit brought against her by Grainger, and Dr. Trenor, Grainger's physician, who is infuriated by her treatment of Marilyn.

Suspecting murder, Willow finds out from a physician friend of hers that a heart attack can be brought on by a small stab wound a day before death occurs. Willow discovers that this is what happened to Grainger after examining Grainger's corpse before the funeral. Further, she discovers that Grainger had a mild stroke on the day of her murder, which prevented her from making a fuss about her wound.

After Willow is pushed down a spiral staircase and her car's brakes are tampered with, she pieces the clues together to determine the murderer's identity. She and Tom Worth negotiate a compromise in their affair, and, with Tom's convenient help as a policeman, she confronts the criminal.

Although the author incessantly describes what Willow eats and the rooms—especially the elegant ones—she enters and clutters the plot with Willow's romance, Cooper does a fine job of managing suspects and clues, in the tradition of the English mystery defined by Agatha Christie.

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