

# THREE BEDROOMS, ONE CORPSE

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AN AURORA TEAGARDEN MYSTERY

CHARLAINE HARRIS

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THREE BEDROOMS,  
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BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*A Bone to Pick*  
*Real Murders*

*My thanks to Atlanta-area realtor/broker  
Joanne Kearney, who provided me with much  
helpful information. If I have misused it,  
the fault is mine.*

## CHAPTER ONE

**M**Y CAREER as a real estate salesperson was short and unofficial, but not uneventful. It started in the lobby of Eastern National Bank at nine-thirty on a weekday morning with my mother glancing at her tiny, expensive gold watch.

"I can't make it," she said with controlled savagery. A person who couldn't manage her appointments was inefficient in my mother's estimation, and to find herself coming up short in that respect was almost intolerable. Of course, her dilemma was not her fault.

"It's those Thompsons," she said furiously, "always late! They should have been here forty-five minutes ago! Late for their own house closing!" She stared down at her tiny elegant watch as if she could change its reading by the force of her will. Her slim crossed legs were jiggling with impatience, one navy pump-shod foot swinging back and forth. When she got up, there might be a hole in the bank's ersatz oriental carpeting.

I sat beside her in the chair I would vacate for Mrs. Thompson, when and if she showed up. A couple standing up Aida

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Brattle Teagarden Queensland for their own house closing was simply amazing; the Thompsons were gutsy, or so rich they wore an impervious armor of self-assurance.

"What are you going to be late for?" I was eyeing her crossed legs enviously. My own legs will never be long enough to be elegant. Actually, my feet couldn't even touch the floor. I waved at two people I knew in the time it took my mother to answer. Lawrenceton was like that. I'd lived in this small Georgia town all my life, and figured I'd be here forever; sooner or later, I'd join my great-grandparents in Shady Rest Cemetery. Most days that gave me a warm, fluid feeling; just part of that ole Southern river of life.

Some days it made me crazy.

"The Bartells. He's come in from Illinois as plant manager of Pan-Am Agra, they're looking for a 'really nice home,' and we have an appointment to see the Anderton house. Actually, they've been here, or he's been here, I didn't get the details—he's been here for three months living in a motel while he gets things lined up at Pan-Am Agra, and now he has the leisure to house-hunt. And he asked around for the best realtor in town. And he called me, last night. He apologized beautifully for disturbing me at home, but I don't think he was really a bit sorry. I know the Greenhouses were thinking they would get him, since Donnie's cousin is his secretary. And I'm going to be *late*."

"Oh," I said, now understanding the depths of Mother's chagrin. She had a star listing and a star client, and being late for introducing one to the other was a professional disaster.

Getting the Anderton house listing had been a real coup in this smallish town with no multiple-listing service. If Mother could sell it quickly, it would be a feather in her cap (as if her cap needed any more adornment) and of course a hefty fee. The Anderton house might truthfully be called the Anderton

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mansion. Mandy Anderton, now married and living in L.A., had been a childhood acquaintance of mine, and I'd been to a few parties at her house. I remembered trying to keep my mouth closed so I wouldn't look so impressed.

"Listen," said Mother with sudden resolution, "you're going to meet the Bartells for me."

"What?"

She scanned me with business eyes, rather than mother eyes. "That's a nice dress; that rust color is good on you. Your hair looks okay today, and the new glasses are very nice. And I love your jacket. You take this fact sheet and run along over there—please, Aurora?" The coaxing tone sat oddly on my mother, who looked like Lauren Bacall and acted like the very successful realtor/broker she is.

"Just show them around?" I asked, taking the fact sheet hesitantly and sliding forward to the edge of the blue leather chair. My gorgeous brand-new rust-and-brown suede pumps finally met the floor. I was dressed so discreetly because today was the third day I'd followed Mother around, supposedly learning the business while studying for my realtor's license at night. Actually, I'd spent the time daydreaming. I would much rather have been looking for my own house. But Mother had pointed out cleverly that if I was in the office, I'd get first chance at almost any house that came up for sale.

Meeting the Bartells might be more interesting than observing Mother and the banker going through the apparently endless paperwork-and-signature minuet that concludes a house sale.

"Just till I get there," my mother said. "You're not a licensed realtor, so you can't be *showing* them the house. You're just there to open the door and be pleasant until I get there. Please explain the situation to them, just enough to let them know it's not my fault I'm late. Here's the key. Green-



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house Realty showed the house yesterday, but one of them must have given it to Patty early this morning; it was on the key board when I checked."

"Okay," I said agreeably. *Not* showing a rich couple a beautiful house was bound to be much more entertaining than sitting in a bank lobby.

I stuffed my paperback into my purse, put the Anderton key on my key ring, and kept a safe grip on the fact sheet.

"Thanks," Mother said suddenly.

"Sure."

"You really are pretty," she said unexpectedly. "And all the new clothes you bought are so much better than your old wardrobe."

"Well . . . thanks."

"Since Mary Elizabeth Mastrantonio was in that movie, your hair seems to strike people as fashionable rather than unmanageable. And," she went on in an unprecedented burst of candor, "I've always envied you your boobs."

I grinned at her. "We don't look like mother and daughter, do we?"

"You look like my mother, not me. She was an amazing woman."

My mother had stunned me twice in one morning. Talking about the past was something she just didn't do. She lived in the here and now.

"Are you feeling okay?" I asked nervously.

"Yes, fine. I just noticed a little more gray this morning."

"We'll talk later. I'd better get going."

"Goodness, yes! Get over there!" Mother had looked at her watch again.

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Luckily I'd met Mother at the bank instead of going with her from the office, so I had my own car. I got to the Anderton mansion in plenty of time to park to one side so my practical little car wouldn't mar the view from the curb. Two months ago, when old Mr. Anderton had died, Mandy Anderton Morley (his sole heir) had flown in from Los Angeles for the funeral, put the house on the market the next day, and flown back out to her rich husband after clearing her father's clothes out of the master bedroom and emptying all the drawers into boxes that she had shipped to her home. All the furniture was still in place, and Mandy had indicated to my mother she would negotiate with the buyers if they wanted some or all of the furnishings. Mandy had never been a sentimental person.

So when I unlocked the double front doors and reached in to turn on the lights in the cold, stale two-story foyer, the house looked eerily as it had when I was a child. I left the front doors open to let in some fresh air and stood just inside, looking up at the chandelier that had so awed me when I was eleven. I was sure the carpet had been replaced since then, but it seemed the same creamy color that had made me terribly conscious of any dust on my shoes. A huge brilliant silk-flower arrangement glowed on the marble table opposite the front doors. After you circled the marble table, you arrived at a wide staircase that led up to a broad landing, with double doors across from the top of the staircase echoing the double front doors below. I ran to turn the heat up so the house wouldn't be so chilly while I was not-showing it, and returned to shut the front doors. I flipped on the switch that lit the chandelier.

I had enough money to buy this house.

The realization gave me a tingle of delight. My spine straightened.

Of course I'd be broke soon after the purchase—taxes, electricity, etc.—but I actually had the asking price.

My friend—well, really, my friendly acquaintance—Jane Engle, an elderly woman with no children, had left me all her money and belongings. Tired of my job at the Lawrenceton Library, I'd quit; tired of living in a row of townhouses I managed for my mother, I'd decided to buy my own house. Jane's house, which I now owned, just wasn't what I wanted. For one thing, there wasn't room for our combined libraries of true and fictional crime. For another, my old flame Detective Arthur Smith, with his new wife, Lynn, and their baby, Lorna, lived right across the street.

So I was looking for my own new home, a place just mine, with no memories and no nerve-racking neighbors.

I had to laugh as I pictured myself eating tuna fish and Cheez-Its in the Anderton dining room.

I heard a car crunch up the semicircular gravel drive. The Bartells were arriving in a spotless white Mercedes. I stepped out onto the large front porch, if you can call a stone-and-pillars edifice a porch, and greeted them with a smile. The wind was chilly, and I pulled my wonderful new fuzzy brown jacket around me. I felt the wind pick up my hair and toss it around my face. I was at the top of the front steps looking down at the Bartells as he helped his wife from the car. Then he looked up at me.

Our eyes met. After a startled moment I blinked and collected myself.

"I'm Aurora Teagarden," I said, and waited for the inevitable. Sure enough, sleek, dark Mrs. Bartell sniggered before she could stop herself. "My mother is delayed, which she very much regrets, and she asked me to meet you here so you could begin looking. There's so much to see in this house."

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There, I'd done my mother proud.

Mr. Bartell was about five ten, forty-fiveish, prematurely white-headed, with a tough, interesting face, and wearing a suit even I could tell was a major investment. His eyes, which I was trying hard to avoid, were the lightest brown I'd ever seen. "I'm Martin Bartell, Miss Teagarden," he said in an unaccented Voice of Command, "and this is my sister, Barbara Lampton."

"Barby," said Barbara Lampton with a girlish smile. Ms. Lampton was maybe forty, broad in the beam but camouflaging it very skillfully, and not altogether happy at being in Lawrenceton, Georgia, pop. 15,000.

I raised my eyebrows only very slightly (after all, my mother wanted to sell this house). A Barby was laughing at an Aurora? And she wasn't Mrs. Bartell, after all. But was she really his sister?

"Nice to meet you," I said neutrally. "Now, I'm not really showing you this house, I'm not a licensed realtor, but I do have the fact sheet here in case you have any questions, and I am familiar with the layout and history of the house."

So saying, I turned and led the way before Martin Bartell could ask why this was any different from showing the house.

"Barby" commented on the marble-topped table and the silk flowers, and I explained about the furniture.

To the right of the foyer, through a doorway, was a very sizable formal living room and a small formal dining room, and to the left the same space was divided into two large rooms, a "family room" and a room that could be used for just about anything. Martin Bartell examined everything very carefully and asked several questions I was quite unable to answer, and a few I was.

I was careful always to be looking down at the fact sheet when he turned to ask me something.

"You could use this back room for your gym equipment," Barby remarked.

So that was where the athletic movement and the muscles came from.

They wandered farther back and looked through the kitchen with its informal dining nook, then into the formal dining room, which lay between the kitchen and the living room.

Was his sister going to live with him? What would he do in a house this large? He would need a maid, for sure. I tried to think of whom I could call who might know of a reliable person. I tried *not* to picture myself in one of those "French maid" outfits sold in the back of those strange confession magazines. (A junior-high girl left one in the library one time.)

All the time we were walking and looking, I kept in front of him, behind him, anywhere but facing him.

Instead of taking the kitchen stairs, I maneuvered Martin Bartell and Barby back to the main staircase. I had always loved that broad staircase. I glanced at my watch. Where was Mother? The upstairs was really the climax of the house, or at least I'd always thought so, and she should be the one to show it. Mr. Bartell seemed content with me so far, but having me instead of Mother was like having hamburger when you'd been promised steak.

Though I had a very strong feeling Martin Bartell didn't think so.

This was turning out to be a complicated morning.

This man was at least fifteen years older than I, belonged to a world I hadn't the faintest inkling of, and was silently bringing to my attention the fact that for some time now I had been dating a minister who didn't believe in premarital sex.

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And before Father Aubrey Scott, I hadn't dated anyone at all for months.

Well, I couldn't keep them standing in the foyer while I reviewed my sex life (lack of). I mentally cracked a whip at my hormones and told myself I was probably imagining these waves of interest that washed over me.

"Up these stairs is one of the nicest rooms in the house," I said determinedly. "The master bedroom." I looked at Mr. Bartell's chin instead of his eyes. I started up, and they followed obligingly. He was right behind me as I mounted the stairs. I took a few deep breaths and tried to compose myself. Really, this was *too stupid*.

"There are only three bedrooms in this house," I explained, "but all of them are marvelous, really almost suites. Each has a dressing room, a walk-in closet, and a private bathroom."

"Oh, that sounds wonderful," said Barby.

Maybe they really *were* brother and sister?

"The master bedroom, which is behind these double doors at the head of the stairs, has two walk-in closets. The blue bedroom is the door on the right end of the landing, and the rose bedroom is the one on the left. The extra door to the left is to a small room the Andertons used as a homework and TV room for the children. It would be a good office, or sewing room, or . . ." I trailed off. The room was useful, okay? And it would be much more suitable for Martin Bartell's exercise equipment than a downstairs, public, room. "The extra door to the right leads to the stairs that come up from the kitchen."

All the bedroom doors were closed, which seemed a little odd.

On the other hand, the situation gave me a great dramatic moment. I turned both knobs simultaneously, swept open the

master bedroom doors, and instantly moved to one side to give Mother's clients an unobstructed view while I glanced back to get their reaction.

"Oh, my *God!*" said Barby.

It wasn't what I'd expected.

Martin Bartell looked very grim.

Slowly and reluctantly, I turned to see what they were staring at.

The woman in the middle of the huge bed was sitting propped up against the headboard, with the white silk sheets pulled up to her waist. Her bare breasts shocked the eyes first; then her face, dark and swollen. The teased and disheveled black hair had been smoothed back to some semblance of normality. Her wrists, positioned at her sides, had some leather thongs around them.

"That's Tonia Lee Greenhouse," remarked my mother from behind her clients. "Aurora, please go make sure Tonia Lee is dead."

That's my mother. Always say "please," even when you're asking someone to check the vital signs of an obvious corpse. I had touched a dead person before, but it was not an experience I wanted to repeat. However, I had taken a step forward before a strong hand closed around my wrist.

"I'll do it," Martin Bartell said unexpectedly. "I've seen dead people before. Barby, go downstairs and sit in that big front room."

Without a word, Barby did as she was told. The Voice of Command even worked on a sister. Mr. Bartell, his shoulders stiff, strode across the wide expanse of peach carpet and leaned across the huge bed to put his fingers to the neck of the very deceased Tonia Lee Greenhouse.

"As you can tell, she's definitely dead and has been for a while," Mr. Bartell said matter-of-factly enough. His nose

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wrinkled, and I knew he was getting a much stronger whiff than I of the very unpleasant smell emanating from the bed. "Are the phones hooked up?"

"I'll see," said Mother briefly. "I'll try the one downstairs." She spoke as if she'd decided that on a whim, but when I turned to look at her, her face was completely white. She turned with great dignity, and as she went down the stairs, she began to shake visibly—as though an earthquake only she could feel was rocking the staircase.

My feet had grown roots into the thick carpet. Though I wished myself somewhere else, I seemed to lack the energy to take me there.

"Who was this woman?" asked Mr. Bartell, still bending over the bed but with his hands behind him. He was scrutinizing her neck with some detachment.

"Tonia Lee Greenhouse, half of Greenhouse Realty," I said. It was a little surprising to hear my own voice. "She showed this house yesterday. She had to get the key from my mother's office, but it was back there this morning."

"That's very remarkable," Mr. Bartell said unemphatically.

And it surely was.

I stood there rooted, thinking how atypically everyone was behaving. I would have put money on Barby Lampton screaming hysterically, and she hadn't squeaked after her first exclamation. Martin Bartell hadn't gotten angry with us for showing him a house with a corpse in it. My mother hadn't ordered me to go downstairs to call the police, she'd done it herself. And instead of finding a solitary corner and brooding, I was standing stock-still watching a middle-aged businessman examine a naked corpse. I wished passionately I could cover up Tonia Lee's bosom. I stared at Tonia Lee's clothes, folded on the end of the bed. The red dress and black slip were folded so neatly, so oddly, in tiny perfect triangles. I



brooded over this for some moments. I would have sworn Tonia Lee would be a tosser rather than a folder. And any dress subjected to that treatment would be a solid mass of wrinkles when it was shaken out.

"This lady was married?"

I nodded.

"Wonder if her husband reported her missing last night?" Mr. Bartell asked, as if the answer would be interesting, no more. He straightened up and walked back over to me, his hands in his pockets as though he were passing the time until an appointment.

My brain was not moving so very quickly. I finally realized he was doing his best not to touch anything in the room.

"I'm sure we shouldn't cover her up," I said wistfully. For once, I was wishing I hadn't read so much true and fictional crime, so I wouldn't know I was not supposed to adjust the corpse.

Martin Bartell's light brown eyes looked at me very thoroughly. They had a golden touch, like a tiger's.

"Miss Teagarden."

"Mr. Bartell . . . ?"

His hand emerged from his pocket and moved up. I tensed as though I were about to be jolted by electricity. I lost the technique of staring at his chin and looked right at him. He was going to touch my cheek.

"Is the body in here?" asked Detective Lynn Liggett Smith from perhaps three feet away.

Downstairs, at least thirty minutes later, I had recovered my composure. I no longer felt as if I was in heat and would rip Martin Bartell's clothes off any minute. I no longer felt that he, out of all the people in the world, had the power to look