

# **The Dangerous Edge of Things**

**By Tina Whittle**

## **Chapter One**

Don't look left, I reminded myself. Look left and you throw up again. So I made myself look right, where I stared at an azalea bush until it blurred into a pink and green blob. Luckily for me, the police officer returned at that moment with a cardboard cup of water. I accepted it with shaking hands as he appraised me.

"Are you sure you're okay?"

I faked a smile. "Still shook up, but okay."

His nametag read Norris, and he was dark and squat and as official as a fire hydrant. He'd discovered me retching behind my brother's new forsythia and bustled off to fetch some water. Then he'd offered to track down some breath mints. I'd declined. What I wanted was a cigarette, and I wanted it fiercely.

It was the only thing I could think of that might get the dead girl out of my head.

I remembered strange details, like the rhinestone barrette just above her left ear, a

clean metallic gleam in the dark clotted mass of her hair. A silver cuff bracelet encircling a slender white wrist. And the smell when I'd opened the car door—copper sour and stale, like the bottom of a meat drawer, with a tang of something dank and sewer-ish at the edges.

I took a sip of water and willed my hands steady. And I didn't look left, where the body still slumped over the steering wheel of the white Lexus, which was still parked across the street at the curb. Up and down the cul-de-sac, Atlanta police officers clustered with EMTs from both Grady and Crawford Long. I was a part of this scene too, secluded in the back of a patrol car, protected by a ring of yellow tape and nice Officer Norris, who was just beginning to get down to business.

He took out a pen and a small notebook. "It says here your name is . . . Tai?"

I knew what he was thinking. Curly caramel blond hair, hazel eyes, pale freckled skin. Not a drop of Asian blood.

"It's a nickname. My real name is Teresa Ann Randolph. I can show you my driver's license if you want."

He wanted. I could tell he was getting suspicious, his tight appraisal cataloging my frowzy hair and unmade face, my tee-shirt and thrift store jeans. I didn't belong in this neighborhood of ivy-laced cottages and tidy window boxes, and he knew it.

"My Aunt Dotty started calling me Tai when I was a baby," I said, digging in my tote bag for my wallet. "She said it meant 'little drop of heaven,' which is totally made up, of course, but—"

"This is your brother's place, correct?" He consulted his notes. "Eric Randolph?"

"That's him."

"Do you live here too?"

I started to explain that I'd only been in Atlanta for a week, that I'd just moved up from Savannah, that I used to have a part-time job leading ghost tours, so I usually didn't get freaked out around dead people, or cops, except that the dead people in Savannah were crumbly and six feet under, and the cops were all related to me, but I liked Atlanta cops, so far anyway.

Luckily, I caught all that before it escaped my mouth. "I'm staying here until I find an apartment."

I handed over my license. Norris scrutinized it and handed it back. "Where's your brother?"

"He left this morning for a cruise to the Bahamas."

He narrowed his eyes and underlined the word "Bahamas." Twice. I scrambled to explain.

"It's for work, some pop therapy seminar-at-sea thing. Like Dr. Phil, only on a boat. I took him to the airport this morning for his flight to Miami."

"Was he behaving out of the ordinary?"

"You mean homicidal?"

The response came out peevish, not what I'd intended. Officer Norris kept his pen poised while I scraped wax off the cup with my fingernail. Why had I decided that this was the week to quit smoking?

"What I mean is, he seemed perfectly normal. A little tense, maybe, but nothing

that would have anything to do with something like . . . that."

I gestured toward the Lexus. Eric's Virginia Highland cul-de-sac was usually quiet, the only noise the distant murmur of North Highland traffic. It was a place of Arts and Crafts bungalows and kitschy specialty shops, a place where you strolled to the corner café for a petite serving of organic peach gelato. Not the kind of place where you stumbled into corpses on the curb.

"So your brother was tense?" Norris said.

Oh great, I thought. Now I'd done it.

"Not tense like guilty," I corrected, "tense from worrying about passports and stuff. A perfectly innocent tense."

This was not the whole truth, but I didn't feel like explaining the rest, the part where we'd argued, the part where he'd told me to grow up and I'd told him to shove it. The part that would make any cop's nose twitch with interest. I knew it wasn't relevant and would only distract the police from what they *should* be doing, namely, finding out why there was a corpse across the street.

"You picked him up here, at the house?"

"No, at work, some place by Perimeter Mall. He's a PhD, you know, an industrial psychologist."

I had no idea why I added that last part. Perhaps I was trying to make Eric seem stable and ethical, not the kind of man who'd murder some woman and then flee the country. Officer Norris didn't seem concerned about his character, however. He remained focused on the timeline.

"So you picked him up at work, dropped him off at the airport, and came back here?"

"No, not immediately anyway. I went to the shop first."

"What shop?"

I hesitated. It was looking like I didn't have a non-suspicious answer in me.

"Dexter's Guns and More," I finally said. "Up in Kennesaw. I'm the new owner."

Norris' eyes dipped to my chest, to the tee-shirt with Dexter's logo and the slogan "From My Cold Dead Hands" on it. I'd found a bag of them in my uncle's desk and pulled one on while I cleaned the storeroom, so not only was it politically incorrect, it was filthy with dust and cobwebs.

"Look, I know it sounds bad, me with a gun shop just forty-five minutes away and a murdered person on the curb, but it's entirely innocent."

I held up my cell phone and showed him a photo from that morning. There I was, standing in front of a display case chock full of dangerous things, a Confederate flag hanging brazenly behind me.

"Interesting," Norris said. His ebony features betrayed no emotion.

I tried again. The next shot didn't have any rebel paraphernalia in it, just the prominently displayed city ordinance requiring all Kennesaw citizens to own a gun. And me, beaming brightly. But it *did* have the time and date, proving that I was telling the truth about my whereabouts.

"Uncle Dexter left the place to me in his will. Well, he left it to my mother actually—she's his sister—but she's been dead for over a year now—my dad and Aunt

Dotty too, a long time ago—and we were next in line, me *and* Eric, but Eric will have nothing to do with it, loathes the whole concept, so technically—"

"Can anyone verify your story?"

I took a deep breath. "Sorry. I run on when I'm nervous. My friend Rico was there, I'll give you his number."

Norris wrote down the information, which I knew was going to piss Rico off royally. Rico didn't like being asked to go on the record for anything; he never had, not even in high school. But he'd forgive me, just like I'd forgive him for not returning my four messages and three texts.

Norris turned the page. "Tell me how you found the body."

"I left the shop a little after four, got here sometime around five-thirty. I noticed the car right off, but I didn't think much of it, not until I went to the mailbox. That's when I saw the woman slumped over the steering wheel. So I went over and knocked on the window, and when she didn't look up, I opened the door. And that's when I saw the blood."

A camera flash popped as the crime scene photographer circled the car, stepping on the neighbor's pansies. Another cop placed squarish yellow markers on the concrete. Someone's radio squawked, staccato and abrupt.

Behind Norris, I saw two new arrivals duck under the tape, one male, one female. The woman was average height and athletic, with the kind of bleached straw hair and nut brown skin that come from too many hours in the sun. The man was only a little taller, with deep-cocoa skin and hair clipped close to his head. Both wore the same thing—

charcoal pants and jackets, gold shields clipped at the belt.

APD detectives. They knew better than to step on the pansies.

"And you have no idea who she is?" Norris said.

"No. Do you?"

He seemed surprised at the question. "Would I be asking you if I did?"

"Of course you would, you're a cop. You ask all kinds of questions you already know the answer to."

I said it with a smile, and he smiled too, just a little, which was a relief. Not as big a relief as a Winston Light, mind you, but something.

Just then, I noticed a dark gray sedan pull up close to the crime scene tape. A sandy-haired business type pushed himself out — a stocky guy, with broad shoulders and a purposeful stride. One of the uniforms shook hands with him and pointed him toward the detectives.

Not a cop, I decided. Probably a GBI agent, maybe even a Fed. Which could only mean one thing—this dead girl I didn't know was somebody important.

The patrol officer led the detectives and the sandy-haired man under the yellow tape to the crime scene itself. The sandy-haired man peered inside, then shook his head. The female detective held up a plastic bag with something small and white inside. I squinted to get a look. And then, as if on cue, all three turned and looked at me. With interest.

Not a good thing.

My belly sloshed. And then the two detectives headed toward my patrol car,

leaving the sandy-haired man at the crime scene to do things I didn't want to think about. I peeked at my cell phone. Nothing from Eric, nothing from Rico, nothing from anyone at all. Abandoned.

And then they were upon me.

"Ms. Randolph?" The male partner leaned down and extended his hand. His grip was dry and warm, but his eyes were skewers. "I'm Detective Ryan. This is my partner, Detective Vance."

The woman unfastened her gaze from the dead girl's car and swiveled her head my way. She reminded me of a hawk, right down to her small hook of a nose and round unblinking eyes. I fought the urge to get still and small.

Ryan smiled. "Is it all right if we talk inside?"

The way he phrased it wasn't a question.

My mind raced. I watched *CSI*, I knew what it meant to let a cop in your house with their little vials and black lights and rubber gloves. Should I demand a search warrant? Tell them to wait until I heard from Eric? Call a lawyer?

I thought all of these things, but what I said was, "Sure. Okay."