



A Taste of Murder

By Virginia Smith

Excerpt courtesy of www.virginiasmith.org

CHAPTER ONE

"What in the world have you gotten us into, Jasmine Delaney?"

Jazzy bit back a groan as she stared into the wide-eyed face of her friend. Liz clutched her cello case to her chest. A girl around ten years old—one of the horde that filled the hotel lobby—brushed past her in hot pursuit of a giggling friend.

Shaking her head, Jazzy followed the girls' progress as they threaded through the line of hotel guests waiting to check in. A room-service waiter with a tray of covered dishes balanced over his head barely avoided disaster when they dashed by him. They narrowly missed a repairman before disappearing behind the elevators.

With an apologetic grimace, Jazzy faced her friend. "When the bride gave me the reservation number she did mention that I was getting one of the few remaining rooms." A shriek of high-pitched laughter from a group of girls seated on nearby sofas pierced the din. Jazzy winced. "I assumed the rooms were taken by people attending the Bar-B-Q Festival. I had no idea there would be so many children."

"Smile!" The third member of their trio pointed a digital camera in their faces for the fifth time in as many minutes. A confirmed scrapbooker, Caitlin was forever snapping pictures of their part-time ensemble during rehearsals and performances. It drove Jazzy crazy.

Nevertheless, she put her head close to Liz's and pasted on a cheesy grin. The urge to hold bunny fingers above her grouchy friend's head was strong, but she resisted.

Caitlin lowered the camera, frowning. "Darn. I think the batteries just died."

"Here, let me." Jazzy whipped out her cell phone, pointed and caught a shot of Caitlin scowling at her camera.

Liz glared as another group of giggling girls brushed by them a little too close. "What's with all these kids?"

The line moved forward. A tall woman pushed by Jazzy and marched to the front of the line. Jazzy exchanged a glance with Caitlin, who shrugged and bent to drag her gigantic duffel bag into place behind her.

Straightening, Caitlin gestured with her flute case to a point behind Jazzy's head. "That's why. Look what's going on in this hotel tomorrow."

Jazzy turned her head in the direction Caitlin indicated. A poster on a marquee near the edge of the reception desk detailed Waynesboro Barbecue Festival Events. She scanned the entries until she spotted the one to which Caitlin referred. A baby pageant would be held in the International Ballroom tomorrow morning, followed by the Toddler Pageant, the Youth Pageant, the Little Princess Pageant and the Miss Bar-B-Q Teen Pageant. The biggest event, the crowning of Miss Bar-B-Q Festival, would be held at eight-thirty tomorrow night.

Jazzy groaned out loud this time. They'd reserved a room smack-dab in the middle of beauty pageant central.

Liz clutched the cello case tighter. "Do you suppose we could find another hotel?" Strands of her dark hair took on a life of their own as she whipped her head to watch a harried mother herd a brood of towheaded children toward the lobby restaurant.

Jazzy wished they could. So far the Executive Inn wasn't living up to its name. She'd expected something far newer, but judging by the worn carpet and slightly shabby state of the wingback chairs grouped to form conversation nooks throughout the lobby, this hotel had been around for a while. She examined the gleaming glass front doors with a critical eye. At least they looked clean.

"I doubt it. The bride made this reservation months ago. Waynesboro isn't a very big town to begin with, and the festival seems to have commandeered every available room." Jazzy looked at her watch. "Besides, we don't have time. We've got to be at the church for the rehearsal in ninety minutes."

"Oh, c'mon." Caitlin punched Liz on the arm, grinning. "Don't be a Scrooge. You like kids, don't you?"

"Singly," Liz replied instantly. "And preferably sleeping."

As another loud burst of laughter rose from the girls on the sofa, Jazzy had to agree. Raised as an only child, she'd never been comfortable with large groups of kids. Except, of

course, when she was playing in the school orchestra or the junior symphony. But then everybody was governed by the rules of the music—every note, every beat carefully orchestrated by the conductor.

"I told you on the phone we needed a room on the second floor in this wing." The voice cut through the general din of the lobby. "I ain't gonna have my daughter traipsing from the backside of the hotel in her fancy clothes tomorrow afternoon."

The broad-shouldered woman who had barged past them stood before the high counter, her anger evident in her white-fingered grip on the straps of a blue canvas handbag. A girl around ten or eleven years old stood quietly beside her, head bowed. Jazzy caught a quick glimpse of a blush-stained cheek before the girl sidled away from the woman, stopping nearby but facing in the opposite direction as though trying to disassociate herself from the argument that was beginning to attract attention. Jazzy exchanged a glance with Liz, eyebrows arched.

The desk clerk, a young man with an imperturbable expression, issued a response in a low voice, which Jazzy couldn't distinguish.

"I don't care if you're full. Move somebody. I made these reservations eight months ago, and I told you on the phone where I wanted our room."

The young man mumbled something else without looking up as he tapped on a keyboard. Apparently his words served only to enrage the woman.

"I don't know who I talked to, but that shouldn't make no never-mind. Don't you have a place in that computer to record customer requests?" She pounded a finger on the top of the monitor in front of the clerk.

Another guest walked away from the opposite end of the counter, and the teenage girl seated behind an identical monitor caught Jazzy's eye. "I can help whoever's next."

Her rolling suitcase in one hand and her violin case in the other, Jazzy stepped up to the counter. Liz and Caitlin followed behind her.

"I have a reservation," she said. "The name's Jasmine Delaney."

The girl's fingers flew across the keyboard, her eyes fixed on the screen in front of her. "For an economy double?"

"That's right. But if you have a rollaway, there will be three of us in the room."

The other desk clerk got out of his chair to swipe a key card through the encoder that rested on the counter between the two monitors. Jazzy saw him exchange a quick eye-roll with the girl checking her in.

The girl awarded him a sympathetic grimace before returning her attention to Jazzy. "Sorry, but they're all gone. Will two double beds be okay?"

Jazzy glanced at her friends. She supposed she could double up with one of them. The three had played together for over a year, but this was their first overnight gig. It might be a test of their friendship.

"Sure, that'll be fine."

"Names of the other two guests?"

"Liz Carmichael and Caitlin Saylor."

The girl's nimble fingers recorded their names into the computer, then without looking up she said, "The room's been paid for, but I need to see an ID."

As Jazzy dug her wallet out of her purse, the angry guest at the other end of the counter walked past, her embarrassed daughter in tow. The girl shuffled behind with her head bowed, limp brown hair falling forward to hide her features. Judging from the satisfied expression on the woman's broad face, she'd gotten her way with the room.

"Do you want three keys?"

Jazzy glanced at Liz.

"Definitely."

The desk clerk rolled her chair sideways toward the key encoder. She punched some buttons, paused with a glance toward the young man, punched some more then swiped three cards.

Room keys in hand, Jazzy and her friends gathered their various bags and instrument cases and headed toward the elevator. On the fourth floor they followed the hallway around an open-air atrium. From there Jazzy could see the extent of the lobby. The place might be old, but the owners had done a good job with the decor. A trio of gigantic Florida palms towered from a huge planter in the center, standing guard over the entrance to the restaurant. In the other corner a neon sign announced the location of the Time Out Lounge, and in front of that a series of cubicles contained the hotel's business center.

"Look at that." Caitlin dipped her head toward one of the front cubicles. "There's a radio station right here in the lobby."

Jazzy read a sign above an empty desk loaded with all kinds of fancy equipment. "WKBR Country Radio." Her lips twisted. "I'll bet they never heard of Haydn."

Liz laughed as they rounded a corner. "Don't be such a music snob, Jazzy."

They wound away from the atrium, turned at another corridor and walked down the long hallway. Theirs was the second room from the end. Jazzy dropped her suitcase as she pulled a key card out of its paper sleeve.

"I hope these walls are soundproof." Liz leveled a glare at the closed door next to theirs. "With my luck we'll have a ton of those pint-sized beauty pageant contestants right next door.

"It'll be okay," Caitlin said. "It's only for a couple of nights." She shifted her glance to Jazzy. "How did you find out about this wedding gig, anyway? And how come they had to bring us all the way from Lexington? Couldn't they get a local ensemble to play?"

Jazzy shook her head as she swiped the card through the reader on the door. "I guess the Bar-B-Q Festival takes priority with the local groups. The bride's brother read about our ensemble on my ShoutLife profile. He sent a note asking if we'd be willing to make the drive down to Waynesboro. I figured since they're willing to pay us and cover our hotel bill, it would be worth the trip."

The light on the door turned green, and Jazzy pushed down on the handle. She didn't see any need to mention the fact that Derrick Rogers's profile picture on the online community Shout-Life identified him as a drop-dead gorgeous guy just about her age. And proclaimed that he was a Christian. The combination had been too good to pass up.

"I can't imagine why someone would plan a wedding on a weekend when their town is going to be overflowing with out-of-town barbecue lovers." Liz's lips pursed. "That's poor planning, if you ask me."

"Oh, come on, Liz." Caitlin pushed past Jazzy into the room. "Quit acting like you're going to a funeral. We're gonna have fun. I Googled this festival thing and read up on it. It's a big deal, with a bunch of different contests for barbeque and burgoo. All kinds of people come to it, and the barbeque teams cook for days in advance. Apparently the food is awesome." She inhaled deeply. "Wow, I can already smell the barbeque sauce."

Liz wrinkled her nose as she, too, pushed into the room. "What is burgoo?"

Jazzy grinned at her. "Your Oregon roots are showing. Every good Kentuckian knows what burgoo is."

"It's sort of a stew," Caitlin explained. "It's made with several different kinds of meat and vegetables and spices. People in Kentucky, especially in mountains and small towns like Waynesboro, are as proud of their secret burgoo recipes as Texans are of their chili recipes."

"I like chili." Liz tossed her suitcase on a bed. "What kind of meat's in it?"

Jazzy followed them inside past the closed bathroom door. "Well, here's what an old guy from eastern Kentucky told me when I asked that question." She affected a hillbilly drawl. "Hit's

got whatever road kill we pick up 'at day. Coon. Squirrel. Possum burgoo makes good eatin', long as it ain't bin layin' there more'n a day or two."

Liz's mouth twisted. "That is disgusting."

Jazzy laughed and bumped Liz with her violin case. "I'm kidding, girl. Don't be so gullible. It's made from lamb, chicken, and pork."

Liz could be a bit on the sour side, but she was an excellent cellist, and a good friend. Jazzy swiveled to survey the room. Decent-sized, with two double beds, an armoire with a television set and a writing desk near the window. She lifted the floral bedspread and inspected the sheets. They smelled a little stale, but looked clean.

Caitlin was watching with an amused expression. "Well, Miss Clean Freak?"

"Acceptable," she said as she dropped her violin case onto the mattress. Liz had claimed the other bed, which was okay with her. She liked being nearest the bathroom.

"Not bad." Liz opened a drawer in the nightstand and peered inside. "The Gideons have been here."

Caitlin collapsed onto the bed. She looked up at Jazzy. "Are there enough towels? I wouldn't mind grabbing a shower before the rehearsal."

"I'll check."

Jazzy hefted her suitcase up on the mattress beside her violin and turned toward the bathroom.

"And see if there are three soaps," Liz added. "No offense, girls, but I want my own."

Jazzy opened the bathroom door and stepped inside. Caitlin was right about the smell of barbeque sauce. It was even stronger in here. Odd. Maybe the bathroom was vented to draw air from outside, where the contestants would be cooking their festival entries.

The room was small, with a bathtub instead of a shower stall, and a thick white curtain pulled closed. The white fixtures sparkled, thank goodness. She counted four towels and four washcloths, but only one small cake of soap. There might be another in the bathtub soap dish, though.

She grasped the top of the shower curtain and jerked it open. Rings slid across the rod with a metallic scrape.

The strong odor of barbeque sauce slapped her in the face. At the same time, her heart skidded to a stop. Blood drained from her face, leaving her cheeks clammy.

Now would be a good time to scream. One gathered in her diaphragm, but her throat seemed frozen. Instead of a scream, she barely managed to produce a whimper.

A man lay in the bathtub. Fully clothed. Mouth open. Eyes fixed on the ceiling. Tongue hanging grotesquely out.

Dead.

Her stomach lurched as she scanned the sticky red stuff covering his body. Blood?

She placed a hand over her mouth and swallowed back a sudden surge of acid.

Not blood. Barbeque sauce. The man's body was covered in barbeque sauce.

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