



## MURDER AT EAGLE SUMMIT

By Virginia Smith

### Chapter 1

“Have you ever seen an uglier dress in your life?”

Liz Carmichael pitched her voice to be heard over the windshield wipers and the thunder of rain battering against the roof of the car. Rainfall this heavy was unusual in December, but nothing about this warm Kentucky winter could be called usual. She lifted her head from the passenger headrest and cracked one tired lid to see her friend’s reaction to her comment.

Jazzy clutched the wheel with both hands, her gaze fixed on the wet road through the windshield. Lightning flashed across the coal-black sky above them, illuminating her dainty profile in an eerie white glow.

“It was pretty awful,” she agreed without looking toward Liz.

From the backseat came Caitlin’s weary voice. “But the bride was beautiful.”

“What bride?” Liz snorted. “If there was a girl somewhere inside all those ruffles, I couldn’t see her.”

“Oh, there was a bride, all right. I have her check to prove it.” The corner of Jazzy’s mouth twisted. “And a stiff neck, too.”

“Yeah, and my lips are numb.” Caitlin, the flutist in their classical ensemble, sounded tired too. “I think that’s the longest we’ve ever played at a wedding reception. We earned our money tonight, that’s for sure.”

Liz rubbed a thumb across the calluses on her fingertips, which were sore from playing her cello for two hours straight. “I just hope the check doesn’t bounce.”

Caitlin poked her shoulder from behind while Jazzy said, “Don’t be such a sourpuss. Of course the check won’t bounce.”

The car slowed as they approached the entrance to Liz's apartment complex.

"Well, you never know. Remember the time—"

"What's going on over there?" Jazzy cut her off with a finger stabbing at the windshield.

Liz looked where she indicated. Flashing blue and white lights from a pair--no, three police cars sliced through the dark haze of the downpour.

"They look like they're in front of your building, Liz."

Liz leaned forward to peer through the torrent of rain as Jazzy guided the car through the parking lot. As they drew near, a person in a dark rain poncho exited her building and slogged through the water pooling on the sidewalk. The figure slid inside one of the police cars. Uh, oh. What if something had happened to one of her neighbors?

What she noticed next made her stomach twist. A light shone in the second floor window on left side of the building.

Her window.

She had turned off the lights before she left. She always did.

"I think..." Her voice came out choked. She swallowed and tried again. "I think they're in my apartment."

Caitlin's gasp was almost drowned out by the rumble of thunder outside.

Jazzy pulled the car to a stop behind the third police cruiser and cut the engine. The sound of rain hammering against the roof grew louder in the silence. Dread gathered in Liz's core. Had her place been broken into? Had she been robbed?

Shuffling sounds from the backseat made Liz look around. Caitlin had pulled her hood up over her head and was tying it in place beneath her chin.

Liz cleared her throat. "You don't have to get out in this weather. You'll get soaked."

Jazzy slipped her car keys into the pocket of her raincoat before turning a disbelieving stare in her direction. "Are you crazy? We're your friends. We're coming with you."

A flash of relief loosened her tense shoulders, but only for a second. She fumbled with the door handle. Forget the umbrella. She needed to get in there and see what was going on in her apartment. She braced herself, pushed open the car door, and exited the vehicle at a run. Dimly aware that Jazzy and Caitlin followed, she splashed across the sidewalk and into the breezeway of her building. Water plastered her bangs to her forehead and dripped into her eyes.

Blinking furiously to clear them, she ascended the six stairs in two leaps. Her friends right behind her, she skidded to a halt in front of her door.

It stood open.

Just inside the doorway, two raincoated police officers, one male, one female, blocked her way. Both wore thick rain ponchos and hats covered in plastic.

Someone rushed up beside her, and Liz felt her arm caught in a tight grip.

“Oh, Liz, I’m so sorry.” Her neighbor, Mrs. Evans, peered up at her from beneath a creased brow. “You’ve been burgled.”

*No. Not again.* “I have?”

Mrs. Evans nodded. “They left your door open, and I peeked in. When I saw the mess, I knew something was wrong so I called the police.” Her clutch eased and she patted Liz’s arm. “You’re not nearly as messy as all that.”

*All what?*

“You’re Elizabeth Carmichael?” The female officer’s badge read R. Lawrence. She and the man stood shoulder-to-shoulder so Liz couldn’t see past them.

Almost fearfully, she nodded.

“I’m afraid someone made quite a mess of your apartment.”

“What...” Liz cleared her throat. “What did they take?”

The other officer, T. Franklin, lifted a shoulder. “You’re going to have to tell us.” He stepped aside and gestured for Liz to enter.

She took a step forward and stopped. A shudder ran down her spine. The sight that greeted her was hauntingly familiar.

The couch cushions had been pulled off and tossed aside. Books lay strewn over the floor in front of the empty bookcase. Sheet music littered the floor.

“Oh, no,” said Caitlin behind her.

“Not again.” Jazzy’s whisper echoed her thoughts.

Liz’s hand rose involuntarily to her throat. Once before she’d been the victim of a break-in when she and her friends were hired to play at an out of town wedding. Only then she’d been present when the intruder arrived.

But that was four months ago. That man was in prison for murder.

“As far as we can see,” Officer Franklin said, “your television and stereo are here, and your computer is in the other room. We need you to walk through and without touching anything, tell us if you see what’s missing.”

“The bedroom looks worse.” Liz winced at Officer Lawrence’s sympathetic warning.

While Jazzy, Caitlin and Mrs. Evans waited by the door, Liz stepped slowly across the living room. Hands clasped to keep from picking anything up, she did a mental inventory. CDs and DVDs were scattered around the floor. Were any missing? Impossible to tell. Sheet music... well, she wouldn’t know until she went through it, but she couldn’t imagine anyone would want her cello music. Her DVD player had been pushed cock-eyed, but it was still there. Still showed the correct time, even.

Bracing herself, she headed for the bedroom. The officers followed. Bile churned in her stomach when she saw the mess the intruder had left. Dresser drawers upended all over the floor. The mattress shoved off the box springs. The contents of her jewelry box scattered across the top of the dresser.

Her computer desk drawers had been dumped and her personal papers strewn everywhere. Bank statements, receipts, letters, all littered the room. Hard to tell if any were missing. She’d have to alert the bank and her credit card companies, just in case they’d taken something, or made note of her account numbers. But the computer was still there.

“Do you have any firearms that may be missing, Miss Carmichael?”

Liz whirled toward Officer Franklin. “No. Nothing like that.”

“How about the jewelry?” asked Officer Lawrence. “Is it all there?”

Liz’s fingers hovered over the brooch on her blouse as she inspected the tangle of necklaces, earrings and bracelets. She didn’t wear much jewelry, and didn’t own any expensive pieces. The only jewelry she had that was worth more than a few dollars was her grandmother’s brooch, and its value was mostly sentimental.

“I don’t understand.” She looked at the officers. “There doesn’t seem to be anything missing.”

“Well, count yourself lucky.” Officer Franklin’s smile flashed on and off again. He turned on his heel and headed back toward the living room.

Looking at the disaster all around her, Liz didn’t feel very lucky.

Officer Lawrence offered a smile more genuine. "It might have been kids looking for cash. We'll dust for prints and see if we can find anything. In the meantime, if you discover anything missing, you be sure to let us know, okay?"

Throat tight, Liz nodded. She followed the woman back into the living room, where her friends rushed forward to enfold her in a group hug.

"You don't have to stay here," Caitlin whispered. "You can come home with me tonight."

Jazzy's head nodded against hers. "Tomorrow we'll come back and help you clean up. And we'll get new locks for your door and windows."

Liz returned the pressure of their embrace. She had never been more grateful for her friends.

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From his vantage point on the other side of the parking lot, Jason slumped low behind the steering wheel and watched the shadowy figures moving back and forth through the window. Dark sheets of rain shrouded his car and protected him from the cops' sight.

He fingered his cell phone. Duke wasn't gonna like this. But putting off the call only postponed the inevitable. He dialed the number.

The call was answered on the second ring. "You get it?"

"It wasn't there."

The sound of soft swearing greeted his news.

"You're sure you aren't mistaken."

Jason's teeth snapped together at the implication that he couldn't handle a simple job. When he could reply in an even tone, he said, "I'm sure. I know everything that girl has in her apartment. It ain't there."

The silence on the line went on longer than Jason's patience. "You want me to nab her?"

"No."

The answer was quick, too quick. Was Duke thinking about taking him off the job? Jason couldn't afford that. His take on this job was gonna pay off some pressing gambling debts.

"It won't be like before." He gulped, remembering Duke's blistering tirade when he'd roughed up an old guy last week. Duke had been furious with Jason, but who knew the guy

would come home early and catch him? At least he got the goods, and was well away before the cops arrived. “Let me talk to her nice-like. I’ll bump into her in a restaurant or something, pour on the charm. I’ll get it out of her.”

“I don’t want to risk you being seen. Again.” The last word dripped derision. “Besides, I don’t think that will be necessary. Our friend says he can get Miss Carmichael out here, and he’s confident she’ll bring it with her.”

“But that’ll take months.” Jason did whine then. He needed money now. “I’m sure I can—”

“Don’t do another thing. You just get yourself on a plane.”

“The job’s still mine, though, right? You ain’t gonna take me off of it after I put in so much time?”

The low chuckle could have been derisive, or it could have been meant to comfort him. Jason gnawed his lower lip. He didn’t want to tick the guy off.

“Don’t worry, my friend. I’ve got several little tasks lined up to keep you busy until Miss Carmichael gets here. Just come on home.”

The line went quiet.

Jason straightened in the seat and reached for the ignition. As he turned the key to start the rental car’s engine, a shadow walked across the apartment window. Too unclear to identify, but it could have been her. He shifted into drive, and when the car started to roll forward, he touched a finger to his forehead in a farewell gesture.

“I’ll be seeing you, girlie.”

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