



# Murder by Mushroom

By Virginia Smith

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## CHAPTER ONE

While the congregation of Heritage Community Church prayed, Jackie Hoffner fidgeted in her pew. Her backside had gone numb from a full torturous hour of sitting on the unyielding wooden surface.

For cryin' out loud, wrap up the prayer so we can get to the food!

She cracked open an eye and peeked toward the podium. From her seat near the center of the small sanctuary, she saw Pastor Earl Palmer standing with his eyes closed, his big black Bible clasped in his hands and his face alight with passion for the holy conversation in which he was engaged. As far as Jackie could tell, Pastor Palmer showed no sign of getting close to Amen, but instead seemed intent on reviewing in prayer every one of the finer points of his sermon. As if the Lord hadn't just heard it along with the rest of the congregation.

As on any potluck Sunday, the small sanctuary of the Kentucky church was practically full. Jackie doubted if anyone paid attention to the pastor's prayer. All around the sanctuary people shuffled in their pews, reaching for their purses or replacing their hymnals in anticipation of the moment of dismissal. Directly behind her, Justin Hart's stomach growled and his wife, Nancy, giggled. Jackie balled her hand and pushed a fist into her own stomach, which seemed determined to shout out an answering rumble.

And no wonder. The tangy odor of barbecued baked beans wafted from the fellowship hall where Lizzie Wallace had plugged in a Crock-Pot before the service. A variety of other smells had tantalized or tortured Jackie's nose through the service, as well. One row up, Mrs. Watkins sat with a casserole dish on the pew beside her, the telling odor of asparagus seeping

from beneath the foil cover. Next to Jackie, Sarabeth Engelmann had set down a plate of foul-smelling deviled eggs that actually started to smell pretty good as Pastor Palmer's sermon lengthened and Jackie's stomach grew emptier.

With smug pride, Jackie thought of her own casserole on the floor of her car, wrapped in a thick layer of towels to keep the heat in. She had reason to feel good about it: at last month's potluck, Beverly Sanders had remarked, "At least we'll never lack potato chips as long as Jackie keeps coming to church."

Jackie's cheeks went hot at the memory of her snide tone and down-the-nose glance. Beverly, who was pushing fifty, presided over the monthly church-wide potluck like a queen. She assumed that a single female twenty-five years her junior couldn't produce an edible potluck offering. Well, Jackie had proved her wrong today.

*Enough already! Say Amen!*

A breath later, as though he heard Jackie's impatient thought, Pastor Palmer intoned, "Amen." The congregation's fiddling increased, as did the noise of bulletins shuffling and hymnals dropping with loud thuds into wooden slots. The jingle of Jackie's car keys added to the clamor as she fished them out of her purse.

At the front of the sanctuary, the pastor wasn't ready to let them go yet. "I have a couple of prayer requests for this week. Please continue to remember Mrs. Sawyer as she recovers from hip surgery. And this is our week to hold Bible study at the jail, so pray for that, too." His head turned in a sweeping motion as he scanned the congregation. "Are there any other announcements before we close?"

Lois Thatcher spoke up from halfway back on the left side of the sanctuary. "I need some men to carry tables out to the yard."

He nodded. "Okay, anyone who can help Lois, please go with her. Anything else?"

No one spoke. Pastor Palmer smiled and held his right hand high, palm toward the congregation. Jackie uncrossed her legs in preparation for her dash to the car the moment he pronounced the benediction.

As did everyone else. The instant the last word left the pastor's lips, the noise level rose considerably. Adults shouted orders here and there, and children called to one another in high-pitched voices as Jackie darted into the aisle and toward the exit. Pastor Palmer didn't even try to make it to the back of the sanctuary. No one would have shaken his hand anyway. They were too busy rushing to grab their covered dishes and get out to the yard.

Outside in her gray Toyota, Jackie uncovered her casserole dish and left a pile of towels in the passenger seat. She inhaled deeply of the spicy tomato sauce. Why had Beverly's comment bothered her so much? Maybe because it sounded like a stinging remark Aunt Betty had made several years ago, after tasting Jackie's first attempt at chili: "You'd better hope your looks help you snag a man, honey. Your cooking sure won't."

Well, she might not have a man yet, but she intended to prove today she could at least manage a decent casserole. Trying to keep the smirk off her face, she marched across the grass to where Beverly stood beside the buffet table. As Jackie approached, the woman's plucked eyebrows arched.

"Why, Jackie Hoffner, I thought you couldn't cook." Her voice dripped Southern charm, reminiscent of Scarlett O'Hara. Jackie suspected the inflection was fake, since the local accent around this part of central Kentucky sounded more hillbilly twang than Southern-belle drawl.

"I never said I couldn't cook. I just don't do it often." Jackie kept the sweetness in her smile as she placed her casserole dish on the table in front of Beverly. She removed the glass lid with a flourish.

Beverly's cherry-red lips formed an O. "Why, it looks simply divine! Is that cheese on top?"

Jackie inclined her head. "Mozzarella. It's spiral pasta in homemade tomato sauce with beef, peppers and mushrooms."

"Homemade? I declare, Jackie, you are the surprise of the day. You will share the recipe, won't you? It's not a family secret?"

Jackie didn't feel compelled to admit she'd Googled the recipe. Prior to yesterday, the only spaghetti sauce she had ever cooked—a total of twice in her life—had come from a jar. With a smile she promised to write down her special recipe and turned away so Beverly could continue organizing the food on the buffet table. She indulged in a moment of self-satisfied smirking. She'd sure shown Beverly Sanders who could cook. From now on, someone else could bring potato chips.

The sun shone brightly in a clear blue sky. The weather had cooperated so they could hold their potluck outside for the first time since Jackie started attending the church. The white-plank building, erected back in the early 1900s, lay snug between the gentle swell of rolling hills on the outskirts of Versailles. Early-summer weeds poked through a meager layer of gravel in the parking lot that fronted the building, but the flat yard on the side boasted a thick lawn of true Kentucky bluegrass. Today the smell of freshly mowed grass almost overpowered the odor of the

food. Across the lawn, filmy plastic tablecloths on the tables from the fellowship hall flapped in the slight June breeze, held down with rocks on the corners. HCC's five teenagers were busy unfolding metal chairs and setting them in place. Beneath the tables, the Dorsey twins energetically covered their Sunday clothes with grass stains.

The buffet table filled quickly. A smaller drink table held an assortment of two-liter bottles and plastic pitchers of sweet tea and lemonade. Jackie stepped out of the way as women bustled around her, rearranging the food at Beverly's direction so the salads, meats and casseroles were at one end and the desserts at the other. Several of the men had already staked their claims on seats, while a rapidly growing crowd lingered near the far end of the food table, ready to form a line.

Finally, Beverly clapped her hands for attention. "I think everything's about ready, y'all. Pastor Palmer, you want to ask a blessing?"

Jackie groaned. *Don't get him started on another prayer. We'll never get to eat!*

Pastor Palmer nodded, and a hush fell over the crowd as everyone bowed their heads. "Father, we thank You for the beautiful sunshine today. Thank You also for the freedom of gathering in fellowship with one another, when so many of our brothers and sisters in the world don't have that privilege. Bless the food we are about to eat, and all those who prepared it. In Jesus' Name, Amen."

At the last word, the feasting on the lawn of Heritage Community Church began.

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Margaret Palmer speared a twisty pasta and a mushroom on a plastic fork. She stole a glance at her husband, whose single-minded attack on his plate of fried chicken, potato salad and green beans had her thinking she should feed him better at home. Of course, as pastor he felt he had a responsibility to taste and exclaim over every dish, but he actually went back for seconds on potato salad. She made a mental note to find out what spices Esther used, then directed her attention across the table when Alice Farmer's endless string of complaints turned to the UPS driver.

"Rude, that's what he was." The elderly lady gave a vicious nod that shook her tightly curled gray hair. "He wouldn't even help me with a few boxes. I told him I couldn't lift them. He left me standing on the porch without even a by-your-leave. And me a widow with a weak heart."

The creases around Alice's mouth deepened as her face settled into its habitual scowl.

Seated beside Alice, Jackie Hoffner stiffened and drew an outraged breath. "You mean he just dropped the boxes off on your porch and wouldn't bring them in for you?"

"Of course not," Alice snapped. "He was delivering a book I ordered off the television. I'm perfectly capable of carrying a book. The boxes are up in my attic, and he refused to go up there and get them down for me."

Margaret saw Earl hide a grin behind a chicken leg.

"But Mrs. Farmer," Jackie said, "UPS probably doesn't allow their drivers to go into people's houses. Maybe he was just following his company's rules."

Alice's lips pursed as her chin shot upward. "Then whoever told him that ought to be ashamed of himself. It's scandalous, I tell you. The Good Book says people should take care of widows, but do they? Of course not. This generation hasn't been taught proper respect. They don't respect their elders or widows or anyone else."

Margaret tried not to laugh at the expression on Jackie's face. The girl looked especially nice today in white slacks and a loose pink blouse that suited her creamy complexion and emphasized her slender figure. What a shame there were no single young men her age in the church. Maybe... No. Margaret mentally shook herself. Earl often accused her of obsessively trying to change the marital status of every single person over the age of twenty.

With a practiced gesture, Jackie tucked a lock of curly dark hair behind her ear and leaned back in her chair, her high forehead wrinkling as she searched for an appropriate defense for the UPS man. She was an earnest young woman who tended to consider a differing opinion from her own as a personal challenge. She'd started coming to the church six months ago, shortly after Earl replaced the previous pastor of HCC. Margaret often wondered how long she would be satisfied with the rather traditional small church when the area boasted plenty of bigger, more contemporary congregations with far more single men to choose from.

However, Jackie seemed perfectly happy at HCC. Odd that an attractive young woman would prefer the company of older people to those her own age. But look where she'd chosen to sit today-with a boring middle-aged couple and a complaining old woman.

Alice Farmer's eyes focused on something over Margaret's shoulder, and her scowl deepened. "No respect for the Bible, either, or the Ten Commandments. It's a crime, that's what it is. A crime."

Margaret turned her head, wondering what caused such venom in the old lady's voice. Behind her, people ate and chatted amicably. Several had returned for second helpings and hovered around the food. Richard Watson stood talking to Steve Townsend, while his wife,

Laura, used a wet wipe on little Charlie Dorsey's sticky face. Kathy Dorsey had her arms around her second son, Jamie, holding him in place while she scrubbed at the spaghetti sauce on his hands. Esther Hodges stood close to Sylvia Graham, whispering rather intently in her ear.

Margaret turned back to Alice as Earl answered in his most soothing pastoral voice.

"We live in a fallen world, Mrs. Farmer, but we've been given a powerful weapon. Prayer. Our job as Christians is to pray for those who are struggling."

"Struggling is one thing." The old woman's gaze slid over to him. "Wallowing in sin is another."

Earl's eyebrows rose. "Those in sin need prayer as much as anyone. And that is every one of us. Remember, All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."

Margaret gave him a quick look. She couldn't remember easy-going Earl ever quoting Scripture to chastise someone.

Before Alice had a chance to flare at his reprimand, he pushed his plate away and stood. "I'm ready for dessert. Can I bring anything for you ladies?"

Jackie and Alice declined, but Margaret stood with him. "I want to see what choices I have."

As they walked away, Earl leaned toward her to whisper. "I don't know how Mr. Farmer died, but I'll bet he did it just to escape the complaining."

"Shh. Someone might hear you." Margaret aimed an elbow at his ribs, but he jumped away in the nick of time, grinning.

One end of the buffet table was a center of industrious activity. Several ladies busily dished leftovers into plastic containers, ready to send them home with anyone who wanted to take them. Margaret and Earl slipped into the line at the opposite end.

Dessert had always been Margaret's downfall. She loved homemade cakes and pies and had never met a cookie she could refuse. For years she fluctuated between a size fourteen and a sixteen, but lately those sixteens had felt a little snug. With a sigh, she took one of the small dessert plates and halved a slice of pecan pie. As she moved down the line, her resolve lessened and she cut a sliver of Mrs. Lewis's carrot cake and then added a moderate-sized spoonful of banana pudding. After only a second's hesitation, she picked up a chocolate-pecan cookie before scanning the tables for a seat not quite so near to Alice.

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Jackie reached for another plastic bowl and scraped the last of the banana pudding into it. Seemed like she had packaged enough leftovers to feed the whole town. A quick glance down the length of the table confirmed that all the food was either eaten or covered. She didn't look the other way, toward the far table where a cluster of young women laughed over the latest episode of some stupid reality show on television. The girls at work talked about those shows all the time, but Jackie didn't join in there, either. What was the fascination in watching a group of people turn on each other week after week, voting to get rid of one of their own? Jackie didn't have time for nonsense like that.

Of course, she could have sat with the girls and listened. Maybe even pretended to be interested...

Impatient with the thought, she brushed it away. There was work to be done. Someone had to do the clean-up duty. Might as well be her.

She snapped on the lid and set the container near the edge of the table just as Mrs. Dressler walked up, leaning heavily on her cane with her right hand, a plastic grocery sack clutched in her left.

"Is this some of that good banana pudding?" the elderly lady asked

"Yes ma'am, that's the last little bit."

"Oh, I hate to take the last."

"It's yours." Jackie picked up the bowl and held it out to her. "Enjoy!"

"Well, if you think so." Mrs. Dressler put it into the grocery sack along with at least half a dozen identical containers. "Thank you, honey."

Jackie followed Mrs. Dressler's progress down the table and hid a smile at the line of little old ladies flocking around the buffet with their sacks opened like trick-or-treaters. No HCC member past the age of seventy had to cook a meal for a full week after a church potluck.

She noted with satisfaction that none of the leftover containers of her casserole remained. Cooking would never be her claim to fame, but the sauce must not have turned out too badly.

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Not far away, another pair of eyes studied the line of elderly ladies.

Old ladies liked to talk. But someone should remind them gossip was a sin.

A deadly sin.

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