



Scent of Murder

by Virginia Smith

Chapter 1

The rising sun glimmered in the eastern sky as Chase Hollister followed a well-defined trail that skirted the edge of Brown County State Park. He maintained a brisk pace, though low branches from the dense trees made running impossible. Night clung to the forest around him with stubborn determination, even as tendrils of sunlight threatened its tenacious hold. Chase welcomed the shadowy darkness. It suited his mood.

A lingering chill penetrated his T-shirt and sent a shiver rippling through his body. Nights in early May here in Indiana were still pretty cold. He should have grabbed a lightweight jacket on his way out of the house.

Scratch that. He should have kept to the open road for his morning run, where the heat of exertion would have kept him warm. What possessed him to come to the park before dawn—again?

Chase climbed over a dead tree limb lying across the path. No matter how determined he was not to haunt this place, he kept returning.

Not as often as before. A year ago, right after the tragedy—his mind skipped across the details, best not go there—he'd wandered these trails almost daily. His parents assumed he'd found some sort of comfort in surrounding himself with nature. Maybe they thought he was praying. And Chase had done some praying, if his repeated questions of *Why, Lord? Why didn't I see it? How could I miss it?* counted as prayers. But no answers had been forthcoming, and the questions still tortured Chase, almost a year later.

And he still wandered the park trails every few weeks. How sad was that?

The shadows lost their tenuous grip on the wooded area around him, and Chase could now make out a few more details. A movement up ahead turned out to be a deer. He caught sight of a patch of white fur as it scurried off and disappeared into the forest, no doubt startled to see anyone out at this early hour. Something rustled the thick green leaves in the tree overhead. The residents of

the park were waking.

He heard the stream before he saw it, smelled the fresh, rich scent of mud from the shore. The trail turned sharply and ran alongside the wide stream for fifty yards or so, to the place where the path ended at the road. Chase tensed when he glimpsed a dark structure, the covered bridge that stood sentinel over the north entrance to the park. And beneath it...

He set his teeth together. The place that drew him here. That haunted him.

How many times had he told himself he would not come back here, that he needed to put the past behind him and move on? And yet, here he was.

His step slowed as he neared the trail's end. The stream splashed along beside him, the sound an almost joyful counterpoint to his dire thoughts. *I was too focused on myself, on my stupid infatuation with Leslie. If I'd paid more attention to my friend, surely I would have known. I could have helped him.*

His throat tightened like a clenched fist, a familiar feeling lately. *I'm so sorry, Kevin.*

The sun had not yet risen above the trees to his left, so the wide, muddy area beneath the bridge was still in shadows. Try though he might, Chase couldn't stop himself from staring at the place where the nightmare had begun.

His footsteps faltered. The shore wasn't empty. Something was there, something big. Black. It was...

Chase's mouth went dry. A car. The front tires rested in the water, the rear end angled upward on the steep bank.

He broke into a run. One corner of his mind noted the angle of the tire tracks in the soft soil as he splashed into the stream. The car had been driven, or maybe pushed, off the two-lane road a few feet before entering the covered bridge. Icy water wet Chase's sweatpants up to the knees. He barely noticed. His fingers grasped the door handle and jerked. Locked. He shielded his eyes and peered through the window.

Acid surged into Chase's throat. He jerked away, stomach roiling. No doubt at all what had killed the person inside. Dark stains covered the man's clothing and the car's interior. An ugly wound gaped in his throat.

Just like Kevin.

Chase stumbled to the shore and fell to his knees. Mud seeped through his pants, but he didn't move.

Lord, no—it can't happen again.



"I'm really sorry, Caitlin. I just can't take the time off work right now."

Sincerity filled the voice on the phone, but Caitlin Saylor couldn't quite bring herself to accept Jazzy's apology. They'd planned this trip for two months, and Caitlin had been looking forward to the five-day vacation with her musical-trio friends more than she cared to admit. But both Liz and Jazzy had cancelled last week.

Correction. Not cancelled. They'd abandoned her. That's what it felt like.

Stop it. They can't help it if they don't have enough vacation time.

Of course, the reason Liz and Jazzy had used up all their vacation time was the root of Caitlin's hurt feelings. Over the past couple of years they had played their classical music at dozens of weddings. Now the trio was breaking up because Jazzy and Liz were both getting married themselves, and moving away. And Caitlin wasn't.

Abandoned, in more ways than one.

She switched the cordless phone to her left hand, leaving her right free to rinse her coffee mug and set it in the top rack of the dishwasher. "You *are* still planning to take off Friday afternoon and get up there in time for the rehearsal, aren't you? We have a commitment to the bride. I can't play an entire wedding and a reception as a flute solo."

"You know we wouldn't duck out on our last performance. Liz and I are both leaving work at noon. We'll meet you in Indiana at three. That'll give us plenty of time to get to the rehearsal by four."

They're not leaving much room for error. What if they have car trouble or something? Caitlin was glad her friend couldn't see her scowl. She didn't want to be accused of acting childish—even though she was.

"The Internet says there are hundreds of craft shops and art galleries in that little town. You've got two and a half days to search out the best shopping spots," Jazzy went on. "We'll have Friday night after the rehearsal, and most of the day Saturday, since the wedding isn't until evening. So, take a notepad and make a list, okay? And if you find something really good, buy it for me as a wedding present."

Caitlin picked up the dishrag and gave the counter a final, savage swipe. That was *exactly* what she wanted to do for the next few days—shop alone. *Not!*

But she told Jazzy, "I will." Did her voice sound as forlorn as she felt?

"Listen, are you sure you want to go up there by yourself? Why don't you call the hotel and tell them we've been delayed and we'll be checking in two days later?"

She glanced across the dinette area, at the luggage sitting next to the front door of her apartment. Sassy, her Lhasa Apso, kept running over to sniff it.

"I'm sure." She forced a confidence she didn't feel into her tone.

"Well, make sure your cell phone is fully charged. Do you have mace in your purse?"

Caitlin paused. "Why would I need mace?"

"What if you have a flat tire and you're stranded on the side of the road when some sicko stops? You need protection."

"You are such an alarmist, Jazzy. No, I don't have mace, but I do have my trusty pocket knife."

"Like that little Girl Scout toy could stop anybody."

Caitlin heaved an exaggerated sigh. "I won't need to stop anyone. My tires are fine. But if anything does happen, I'm perfectly capable of changing a tire. Don't worry about me. I can take care of myself."

"If you say so." Jazzy sounded hesitant. "Call me when you get there, and let me know how the hotel room is. You've got Lysol, right?"

That drew a grudging laugh out of Caitlin. Compulsively clean Jazzy never went anywhere without a plentiful supply of antibacterial cleaning products. "I'll call you. Good-bye, Jazzy."

Caitlin replaced the phone in its cradle on the kitchen wall. Melancholy feelings returned as she glanced around the too-clean kitchen. She'd spent so much time cleaning lately, she could be accused of having germaphobic tendencies herself. But what else did she have to fill her evenings?

Sassy charged into the room and hopped on her hind legs, yapping. *At least someone still wants to spend time with me.* Caitlin scooped Sassy into her arms and buried her face in the dog's neck. If a few tears fell into the fuzzy fur, well, it wasn't the first time.

She carried Sassy into the living room, where her suitcase, flute, and music portfolio stood ready to be loaded into the car. Maybe she ought to do as Jazzy suggested. If she postponed until Friday, she could make the trip with her friends.

But she'd been looking forward to this minivacation for months. Her schedule was clear. She'd told all her students there would be no lessons for the remainder of the week. The deposit had

been paid for Sassy to spend five days at Raintree Pet Resort. True, they'd probably let her cancel the first couple of days if she decided to stay home.

But why should she? So she could sit around and feel sorry for herself? She clenched her teeth. *Stop it, Caitlin!* Her friends' upcoming weddings were ruining her mood lately. Not that she wasn't thrilled for Jazzy and Liz, but *both* of them planning weddings at the same time? That's all they talked about anymore. If she waited to drive up with them, no doubt the entire three-hour trip to Indiana would be full of wedding talk and plans for happy homemaking. They seemed to forget that while they were busy planning for their new lives, she was being left out in the cold.

Or maybe they just don't care.

Caitlin thrust the thought away. Of course her friends cared about her. She was just feeling sorry for herself. After all, it hadn't been so long since she was the only one of the three who even had a steady boyfriend. Oh, how the tables could turn in the span of a single year. Now Jazzy and Liz were both getting married, and she was facing life as an old maid.

The familiar ache in her chest turned to anger and threatened to send more tears into her eyes. If Glenn were here right now she'd...she'd...she'd kick him in the shin, that's what she'd do. Serve him right, after leading her on for three years and then dumping her for someone else. *I wasted the best years of my life.* The thought only made her angrier. He'd reduced her to thinking in clichés!

Sassy wriggled around in her arms to lick her face. The attempt to calm her brought a smile to Caitlin's lips.

"I've got to get on with life," she told the dog. "I'm driving up to Nashville, Indiana, by myself, and I'm going to make myself have a good time. It'll be like a retreat. I'll take my bible and spend some serious time in prayer. That'll give me a new perspective for sure."

She gave Sassy a final snuggle, then set her on the floor. Standing around here was getting her nowhere. Time to get a move on. In more ways than one.

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