

DEATH FOR SALE

A SALLY WITHERSPOON MYSTERY

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Chapter One

Holiday smells wafted through the hall. Sally leaned back against the wall and closed her eyes. She loved the cheerful aromas of cinnamon, cranberries, roasted turkey, and so much more. Thanksgiving had been one of her favorite holidays ever since she was a child.

Her nostalgia brought a twinge of sadness. She would be 60 next year, and her parents were aging.

But enough of that, she told herself, there was a job to do.

Opening her eyes, she took in a roomful of smiling faces. Around 250 people from across the county had come to the annual Thanksgiving Day dinner in the expansive ballroom at the Grand Hotel in Berry Springs, the center of life in the area.

The entire hall was decked out in Thanksgiving swag. Cornucopia baskets sat on each table, their contents overflowing with the abundance of the harvest. Each chair had a covering of soft, dark green fabric. Crystal wine and water glasses, as well as real silver flatware, added to the luxury of it all.

The manager of the hotel, Rose Cohen, had an eagle eye for detail, and every event there had people gushing afterwards for days. Since this was the highlight of the year in Berry Springs, even more so than Christmas or New Year, she had really gone all out, as always.

Rose flitted about doing last-minute checks of each table. Sally also noticed her quietly reprimanding some of her staff. This was evident as the two waiters she talked to had anguished looks of fight or flight on their faces.

With the guests, though, she was sugar and spice. Rose knew pretty much

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everyone in town, and they knew her. She had been a fixture at the Grand Hotel for over 50 years, starting as a chambermaid at 16 and working her way up to general manager. Many people came to Berry Springs and never left, like Sally.

At that, Sally smiled. She really did love living in the small town.

Pushing that thought aside, Sally checked her phone for the time. The festivities were about to begin.

Annette, her part-time bartender and bar helper, was there along with Magda, her full-time staff member, to help make sure thirsts were quenched and no one had to wait too long for a drink. As every year, she had also hired a few temp bartenders to deal with the vast number of people present.

The overstuffed buffet had been provided by the lovely Joanna, who owned The Nutmeg Café on Oak Street, not far from the town square. Joanna usually offered café food, but for this, she had gone all out with a magnificent Thanksgiving feast. From roast turkey to stuffing, mashed potatoes, cranberry sauce, pumpkin pie, and much much more, Sally knew no one would go hungry. It was Thanksgiving after all.

Sally always wondered why Joanna catered for the event, rather than the hotel kitchen staff. Well, actually, she did know. Joanna's food was so much better. Mind you, the hotel restaurant wasn't that bad, but it was basic fare like steak and potatoes or flounder filet, far from the fancy concoctions Joanna came up with. Her café cuisine was a delicious and unique fusion of so many food origins.

Looking around, this was one of those special moments Sally knew she had made the right choice those many years ago to leave Atlanta and move to Berry Springs, tucked in the Arkansas Ozarks.

Life had been fairly quiet, well up until the past year or so. She couldn't believe how much had happened in such a short time.

Just over a year ago, her best friend and business partner, Bill Arnold, had been killed and left in the dumpster behind her bar. Other deaths followed, and Sally helped the police get to the bottom of it, though she almost got herself killed in the process.

This was the second Thanksgiving without Bill, and it still hurt.

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Then, about six months ago, she had booked a luxury paddleboat river cruise down the Mississippi to get away. Sally laughed to herself. Yeah, she really got away. Partway into the cruise, one of the passengers died mysteriously at dinner. Other deaths followed, and the rest of the passengers and crew got away within an inch of their lives.

Death seemed to follow Sally around, which wasn't very healthy, she considered.

Someone tapped her on her shoulder, stirring her out of her reverie.

"Sally, are you with us? You seem lost in thought," Magda said.

Sally smiled. "No, I'm fine. Just reminiscing."

"Enough of that, we have work to do," Magda retorted playfully.

They hugged.

A tap on the microphone got everyone's attention. Sally did a scan of the bar they had set up in the corner. Once the mayor's (hopefully) short speech was done, the bar and buffet would be officially open. Sally, Annette, and Magda would serve people at the bar, while the temporary bartending staff would take drink orders at the tables.

This was the new mayor's first Thanksgiving.

The long-time former mayor, Jennifer Milkowski, had resigned at the beginning of the year, a few months after Bill was killed and left town. Her long-time partner, Margaret Jackson, was implicated in the deaths, and was now awaiting trial in Little Rock. The legal process was slow, and Sally wished it would speed up so Berry Springs could try to put those events behind it.

Sam Pulasky, the former chief of police, had been elected mayor earlier in the year. He had run on a safety platform, and Sally was sure that was why so many people voted for him. Sally had worked with him and his team to track down Bill's killer, and many people saw Pulasky as the town's savior.

"Dear Berry Springs residents, dear county guests, dear friends, I'd like to welcome you all to the Berry Springs' Annual Thanksgiving Extravaganza," Mayor Pulasky began.

"This is a special occasion for us all to come together and remember what we are thankful for. It's also a time for everyone to see old friends, meet

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new people, and enjoy a wonderful time together. I am ever thankful for your votes to elect me as mayor. I will do my best to do you proud and make Berry Springs a safe, healthy environment again for everyone,” the mayor continued.

Sally gagged. He was laying it on a bit thick.

“Thank you to Joanna from The Nutmeg Café and Sally Witherspoon from Sally’s Smasher for the food and drink. And a huge thanks to Rose Cohen and her team for this beautiful setting! I know we will all enjoy the evening. So, without further ado, I declare the feast open. Enjoy!”

Mayor Pulasky stepped down from the podium and went over to sit at the head table with the town dignitaries, as it were. Sally saw Detective John Finnegan and his underling Sergeant Mark Soder together with the new chief of police, Tim Sanford. Chief Sanford was the son of her retired neighbor, Robert Sanford, who had passed away earlier in the year. He was sitting next to his gorgeous husband, Andy. Sally always had a warm spot for the chief’s father, particularly for how he embraced Andy as his son-in-law. She knew Robert would be so proud of his son, and it was sad that he had passed away only a few months before Tim had been appointed chief.

She wondered what Detective Finnegan thought of his new boss. Though she had to admit to herself that while Finnegan had a hard crust, deep down he had a soft soul. Well, that’s what she told herself at any rate.

Finnegan and Pulasky weren’t married, but Sally did wonder where Mark Soder’s wife, Candy, was. Maybe she was sick. Sally would have to try to get a chance to ask Mark later.

“Hi, Sally, I’ll have a cold beer,” a voice said.

Sally looked over. It was Randall Wentworth, the main lawyer in town. “Hi Randall, so nice to see you here.”

Randall smiled. “Yes, I always try to get here and show my face. I think people expect it,” he offered.

“I bet,” Sally replied, hoping she didn’t sound too sarcastic.

She glanced over at Detective Finnegan, who had also just appeared at the bar. The look on his face told her he thought the same of Randall Wentworth. He moved a few steps away from the lawyer to order a drink from Magda.

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He nodded at Sally as he did.

She handed Randall his beer and moved on to the next customer, Jeff Bartholomew, a high school teacher and the basketball coach at Clinton High School.

Jeff had been charged as an accessory in Bill's death, but as he had been acting under duress, he got off with a six-month suspended sentence. This was probably more due to the fact that he was a beloved teacher in the county than anything else. His popularity with students and parents alike had also saved his job at the school.

Magda, her bartender, was particularly pleased. They had dated a while back and gotten back together.

"Jeff, why don't you let Magda help you?" Sally offered.

"Oh, I see her all the time, Sally."

"I guess," Sally said, chuckling. "What will you have?"

"The same as Randall, a nice cold beer."

Sally handed him his beer and went on serving other people.

After only about 20 minutes, they had somehow managed to get through the first round. The extra bartending staff was a godsend. There was no other way they would have been able to handle the extensive crowd on their own.

"Time for some photos for our social media presence," Magda said, moving through the room snapping away, as if she were an influencer in New York.

Sally never got the pull of social media, but Magda was a whiz at it. She always told Sally it kept up the buzz about Sally's Smasher bar, as if there was buzz. Though Sally had heard a few comments from out-of-town visitors who had been intrigued by the name of the bar and their posts on social media. This had prompted them to try to expand their social media activity. Sally's Smasher bar was a bit out of town, but Sally still had quite a good business going with the locals. The out-of-towners added a nice twist to the mix.

Magda came back, tapping away.

"Thanks so much, Magda. I couldn't do that social media stuff," Sally said.

Magda laughed, "OK, Grandma."

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That got a giggle out of Sally as well.

With everyone seated and eating, a hush had filled the room as people dove in.

Sally took a moment to sit on one of the stools behind the bar and rest her feet. The night had just begun.