

Death in the Ozarks: A Sally Witherspoon Mystery by Erik S. Meyers / Excerpt

Chapter One

Sally Witherspoon dropped onto the sofa in her office with a sigh, the cracked brown leather groaning as she settled herself, and ran her hand through her graying chestnut ponytail. What a night. The fights in the bar on Saturday nights were getting worse. Sally loved her bar, Sally's Smasher, and her adopted town of Berry Springs, but the violence was getting to her. She had come to live in the small town fifteen years ago.

An old college friend, Bill Arnold, was from there, and he had always urged her to come for a visit. With a population of two thousand, one hotel, two bars, two diners, and a few arts-and-crafts shops, it was very different from her high-powered life in finance in Atlanta, but now it was definitely home.

A home that didn't include her husband, mind you. They had divorced soon after the trip to Berry Springs. Putting her life's savings into buying an old run-down bakery—with a lot of financial help from Bill—and turning it into Sally's Smasher had been quite a gamble, but life here was different.

The thought of living in the beautiful Ozark mountains in Arkansas and still sitting in an office like back in Georgia hadn't been an option for her, and the bar seemed like the perfect alternative. Running it meant she had more time to explore and hike the local area. Yes, the nights were long, but the town had come to love Sally and her biker bar, and she'd made many friends.

With only two bartenders, Jay and Magda, to help, it took a lot to run the place. Most Saturday shifts were hard slogs, but that night had been an especially long evening, as she had to deal with three bar fights, each uglier than the last. First, her business partner, Bill Arnold, had gotten into a heated argument with his biker club, The Mountaineers, over who would get to ride Bill's vintage Vincent Rapide next. As it was

on display at the bar in a large metal cage, it was often a topic of contention. Bill was always worried it would be stolen, it was worth a lot, or worse, one of his buddies would ruin the perfectly restored and polished leather seat and shining metal.

Then Bethany Wells, the school assistant, had accidentally stumbled into Mayor Jennifer Milkowski on her way to the bathroom. Bethany did love her wine, and there had been a bit of a misunderstanding. Bethany got easily annoyed when she had had too much to drink. Jennifer was not the easiest to get along with, for sure, but she was always watching her image, and being involved in a bar fight would certainly not fit her mayoral brand, and she quickly defused the situation.

The third fight almost resulted in Sally calling the police. Her friend Jeff Bartholomew, a teacher at Clinton High School, was sitting with their local Catholic priest, Father O'Malley, and had become pissed off by the bikers yelling at each other next to their table. Jeff stood up, his fists at the ready. One of The Mountaineers lobbed him in the jaw, and Jeff swung in return. Jeff had had too many beers to be in top form, and his swing missed. As he swiveled around, he fell hard, knocking over a table full of glasses and falling on a metal chair in the process, which his broad six-foot-two frame bent out of shape. If it weren't for Bill stepping in and throwing Jeff out of the bar at that moment, Sally's Smasher would have been truly and royally, well, smashed up.

Unfortunately, this was not something completely unusual; the rough-and-ready people living in the remote town rising to conflict more than she'd seen in the city, but the fights that night had been more violent than normal. They'd completely torn up one corner of the place. Her insurance would pay for now, she hoped. She didn't really have the funds to fix it up herself.

But reviewing the events of the evening wasn't going to change matters, nor was it helping Sally relax. She pushed herself up from the couch to finish cleaning up and readying the place for the next night. She'd sent Jay and Magda home at half past

twelve, not needing their help in finishing off the last of the jobs. Plus, she didn't want to overwork them. If they quit, she would be up the proverbial creek without a paddle.

Sally went over to her desk to tally up the night's receipts, making a note of the amount of cash in the drawer and putting all of it in the safe. While the overall accounting at the bar wasn't as perfect as she wanted it to be—far too much red ink for her finance background's liking—she always made sure the cash drawer was perfect.

She then headed back out into the bar to put the glasses away she had washed before closing for the night. Pushing all the tables and chairs back in their proper places, Sally made one final sweep of the bar before checking all the windows and doors. Casting her eyes over the decorations around the bar always made her smile. The deer antlers above the door came from one of her hunting trips. Bill's vintage bike was a real pull. And the red wooden paneling had been specially made by the local lumberyard. She was so proud of what she had accomplished, though it wouldn't have happened without Bill's help, and his money.

As she did every night, she went to each window from left to right, making sure the catches were secure. Then she locked the front door. Back in her office, she grabbed her backpack and shut off the lights. Just before leaving through the back door, she set the alarm. The reassuring red light always calmed her nerves. After four break-ins in one month the previous year, she finally broke down and bought an alarm, a huge expense, but so far, worth it.

In the parking lot, she headed to her car, looking forward to falling into bed. She threw her red backpack in the back of her old blue Datsun and started the engine.

Damn, I forgot to put out the trash.

She turned off the car and reluctantly headed back across the parking lot. Looking up, she frowned. Bill's fiery-red Harley-Davidson motorcycle was still parked in the back of

the building near the trash bins. Bill didn't have a car, so he couldn't have taken that. And she had definitely checked everywhere inside to make sure no one was passed out in one of the bathroom stalls. Maybe someone had given him a lift home.

Bill was her business partner, but he acted like a very loyal customer most nights, drinking up the Murphy's stout imported from Ireland for him. She walked over to the motorcycle and was surprised to find the engine warm to the touch. That's strange, she thought. She glanced around the parking lot and the woods behind for Bill. Though, why would he be waiting outside?

At that point, she was too tired to think about the motorcycle any further. Bill was a big boy, and he'd make his own way home, and she went to get the trash bags. She stomped back inside. Annoyed with herself, she had to switch the alarm off. She'd left the damn things by the door but must have walked straight by them. There were three huge bags, so she would have to make two trips. To make it easier for herself, she moved the bags outside before locking up and turning on the alarm again.

She then grabbed two of the bags and lugged them across the lot. Why hadn't she put the trash bins closer to the door? This was one of her many to-dos that never reached the top of the priority list. She should get Jay to do it for her next week.

At the dumpster, she opened the lid and threw the bags in without looking, brushing her jeans against some grease on the side. Jeans were pretty much her go-to outfits, or sweatpants at home. Everything else was a waste of money, as it got dirty so easily at the bar. And she didn't do much beyond hiking, working, sleeping, and eating.

She went back and grabbed the third bag from the door, and returned to the dumpster. Her long night would finally be over. As she opened the lid again, she realized the bags she had just thrown in were too close to the top. The dumpster had been emptied the day before, so what was under the bags? If someone else was dumping their rubbish in her bin, she'd be having words.

Sally fumbled in her pocket for her cell, switched on the flashlight, and peered inside. Waving the flashlight, the light landed on something that was definitely not trash. She brought her hands to her mouth, dropping the trash bag, and screamed.

Staring back at her were the gray, unseeing eyes of Bill Arnold.