

EXCERPT

“That fish still has its head,” Mac said as if Murphy, on whose plate the whole fish rested, was unable to see that it indeed still had its head—as well as its tail and everything else.

Murphy nodded his head. “Yes, it does, Mac.” He then proceeded to remove the skin to get to the meat.

Trying to suppress the shudder working its way up his spine, Mac picked up his own plate. “David, trade places with me.”

At the opposite head of the table, David stopped with his fork, which was filled with barbecued beef brisket, almost to his mouth. “Huh?”

With his plate and beer mug in hand, Mac was already at David’s elbow and looked like he was going to shove him out of his seat.

Storm, who was lying next to David’s chair, jumped to her feet and scurried around to the other side to peer with wide eyes up at the intruder.

In the living room area, Gnarly raised his head from where he was curled up in the love seat and narrowed his eyes at the sight of a plate of food on the move. He wondered

whether capturing the plate would be worth the energy of getting up, extracting himself from the comfortable seat, and running across the room to tackle Mac. Deciding it wouldn't be, the German shepherd returned to his nap.

"Dad can't eat anything that's looking at him," Jessica said.

"But he's not looking at you," Dallas said to Mac from her seat next to David. "He's looking at Murphy." She jerked her thumb toward where he was sitting on the other side of the table.

"He's dead," Murphy said. "He's not looking at anyone."

Mac wasn't going to argue about it. "Move," he said to David, who, with a heavy sigh, picked up his plate and beer mug and moved to the other end of the table.

After Mac had sat down, Storm looked up at him and then at the other end of the table. Once she saw that David had settled, she trotted around the table to lie down next to his new seat, where she remained quietly for the rest of the meal.

"You're lucky he's not making you throw that fish down the garbage disposal and grind it up so that he won't have to think about it looking at him," Archie said to Murphy.

Swallowing his first bite of the fish, Murphy shook his head in Mac's direction. "No way. If he tries to take this fish off of me, he's going to have a fight on his hands." He turned to Dallas. "This has to be the best redfish I've ever eaten. I don't suppose you'd give me your recipe?"

"It's a secret family recipe on my momma's side," she said. "But since we're almost family, I'll think about it."

Jessica cringed. If Dallas became family, she could use that as leverage to learn about Murphy's true profession.

Murphy and Jessica had been together for less than a year, but he already knew what she meant when she narrowed her eyes and glanced in Dallas's direction. It was time to move

onto a safer topic of discussion.

“Archie told me that you two are working on a book together,” Murphy said to Dallas.

“My mother’s publisher has already made an offer,” Dallas said. “I’ve finished writing it. Now Archie is doing the hard stuff that I hate.”

“The editing,” Archie said.

“Which frees me up to move on to my next project,” Dallas said.

“You’re already working on another case?” Murphy asked. “We’d love to hear about it.”

“It’s a cold case that’s gotten hot again,” Dallas said. “Maybe you heard about it on the news. It’s the Pine Bridge massacre.”

Mac’s fork tumbled out of his hand and hit his plate with a clatter.

The sudden noise caused Storm to scurry under David’s chair.

Thinking that the clatter meant food in the offing, Spencer leaped down off of the chair she had sneaked up onto and raced over to Murphy’s chair.

Jessica sat up straight in her seat. The blood seemed to drain from her face.

Murphy draped his arm across her shoulders. “Are you okay, buttercup? You’re as white as a sheet. What’s wrong?”

Composing himself, Mac wiped his mouth with his napkin and then cleaned up a spot of barbecue sauce that had splashed onto the tablecloth.

“Was it something I said?” Dallas asked. “Of course, if something wrong can be said, you can guarantee I’ll be the one to say it.”

“Obviously, this has something to do with the massacre fifteen years ago at the Pine Bridge Winery,” David said.

“I’ve heard about the case, but I don’t know the specifics,” Murphy said.

Mac took a long drink from his water glass. They waited in silence for him to set the glass back down. After Jessica nodded her head to assure him that she was okay, he said, “The Pine Bridge Winery is owned and operated by my family.”

Archie spoke first. “Mac, you never—”

“That’s why the Spencer Inn carries all of its wines,” Mac said.

“I’ve only just started my research,” Dallas said. “I would have thought that if the Riva family was in any way connected to the Spencers, it would have come out.”

“The only connection between the Rivas and the Spencers is me,” Mac said. “You’re forgetting that I was adopted by the Faradays when I was born. My adoptive father came from a big Irish family. My mother came from a huge Italian family—the Rivas.”

“Dad had an interesting upbringing,” Jessica said.

“I had—have—a great family,” Mac said. “I have a lot of uncles and aunts and cousins. On my mother’s side of the family, someone somewhere owned a winery back in Italy before immigrating to the States. So it was only natural that my uncle Salvatore eventually bought the land along the Shenandoah Mountains in Pine Bridge, Virginia, to start his own winery back in the 1970s. I didn’t really visit the winery except to go to weddings and the annual family reunions.”

“It has a lake and a pavilion,” Jessica said.

“It’s supposed to be lovely,” Dallas said. “Huge gazebo and gardens. Very popular for weddings and parties, and there’s a spectacular bed-and-breakfast that used to be a big old pre-Civil War mansion.”

“Like I said,” Mac continued, “I only went there a couple

A FINE YEAR FOR MURDER - EXCERPT

of times a year for family gatherings. The place is ninety minutes from where I lived. Salvatore has two sons around my age who are in the family business. Both of them have daughters Jessica's age."

"A few years older than I am," Jessica said.

"One summer," Mac said, "my cousins invited Jessica to spend a week with their daughters during summer break. There were tons of things for her to do there, so we let her go. She had loads of fun, so she went the next year too. It became a regular thing, her going for a week or two in the middle of July...until the massacre."

Clutching Jessica's hand, Murphy whispered, "You were there." Her fingers were trembling.

Mac broke the silence that had fallen over the table. "I drove Jessica down on a Friday and turned around and drove right back home. Sunday morning, she called me to tell me that a family had been murdered across the creek during the night. She sounded terrified." He shook his head. "She was only ten years old. I broke every speed limit getting down to Pine Bridge to pick her up and bring her back home. We never went back—not even for weddings or reunions."

"I knew one of the victims," Jessica said in a soft whisper.

Sitting up straight, Dallas turned her full attention to her. "You did?"

"Ava Browning," Jessica said in a quiet voice. "She was beaten and stabbed to death."

"Her body was found in the creek," Dallas said. "Her grandmother and father were murdered too. Ava's brother found them on Sunday morning, when he came home from a night out with his girlfriend."

"Did—"

"I didn't see anything," Jessica said, cutting Murphy off. "It was just that that was the first time in my life that someone I knew had been murdered. She was only a couple of miles

away—across the footbridge and through the woods. Scared me to death just thinking about it.” She folded her arms across her chest. “All I wanted was to go home and have Dad hold me and tell me that everything was going to be all right.”

“That’s completely understandable,” David said.

“Did the police question you?” Dallas asked.

“Yes, but what could I have possibly known?” Jessica said. “I was with Bridget and Simone, my cousins. We were having a sleepover out in the RV—roasting s’mores and pigging out on pizza. We were up all night watching the *Scream* and *I Know What You Did Last Summer* movies series. We didn’t see or hear anything. We didn’t know about the murders until Gary, the winery’s foreman, drove over to the main house to tell Simone’s dad, and he came running out to the RV to check on us. That was when I called Dad to tell him to come get me.”

“And the murders happened Saturday night?” Murphy asked. “Do they have any suspects?”

“Curt Browning, who was eighteen years old at the time, was always a person of interest,” Dallas said. “He’d been in and out of trouble since his childhood—but he’d never done anything violent. Stealing and vandalism. His father, James Browning, did maintenance work for the Riva family.”

“Did Curt Browning have an alibi for the time of the murders?” Murphy asked. “What motive would he or anyone have had?”

“Robbery certainly wasn’t the motive,” Dallas said. “James Browning was too poor to pay attention. They really didn’t have much in the way of property. James’s momma had emphysema, and they had no insurance. The year before, Ava had had a baby, and the medical bills had exhausted every penny.”

“A baby?” Archie said. “How old was she?”

“Sixteen,” Jessica said.

“She was when she had the baby,” Dallas said, “who was

A FINE YEAR FOR MURDER - EXCERPT

immediately put up for adoption. Ava never identified the father.”

“Bridget and Simone had gone to school with Ava Browning, and they were friends, since she lived right across the creek from them,” Mac said. “When Ava got pregnant, she dropped out of school, and Bridget’s and Simone’s parents forbade them to be friends with her. They were afraid she would be a bad influence on them.”

Dallas was nodding her head. “It is a fact that if you lie down with dogs, you’ll get up with fleas.”

“Tell them about the murders, Dallas,” David said.

“The murders were brutal,” Dallas said. “Curt Browning got home shortly after eight o’clock in the mornin’ and walked in to find both his grandmother and his father beaten to death. Blood all over the place.”

“What about James’s wife?” Murphy asked. “Ava’s mother.”

“Ava’s mother wasn’t in the picture,” Dallas said with a shake of her head. “Accordin’ to my information, she was looser than ashes in the wind and had taken off with a truck driver when Ava was little more ’an a toddler.”

“Are you sure about the time the bodies were discovered?” Mac asked.

“I’ve got copies of the police reports,” Dallas said. “The next-door neighbor was sittin’ in his car waitin’ for his wife to come out so that they could go to church when he saw Curt drive up and go inside. He’s absolutely positive about the time because they were late for church, and he was keeping an eye on the clock. Seconds later, Curt came runnin’ out of the house screamin’ for them to call the police. The woman next door called the police at seven minutes after eight, while Curt and the neighbor went lookin’ for Ava, who was not in the house. They found the window to her bedroom open and the screen kicked out. They think she escaped through the window while her father and grandmother were bein’ murdered.

LAUREN CARR

Police arrived at eight eighteen. Ava's body was found in the creek almost an hour later, at nine twelve."

"Excuse me." Jessica got up from the table.

Murphy watched her make her way outside onto the back deck and step down to the boat dock. Worried, he tossed his napkin onto the table, grabbed her jacket from the coatrack, and followed her with Spencer hot on his heels.

Down at the end of the table, Mac Faraday was watching his daughter with his eyes narrowed into blue slits. One of his hands was balled up into a fist, and he was rubbing it.

A thick blanket of silence dropped over the dinner party.



Staring out across the dark, still lake, Jessica was so lost in her thoughts that she felt as if her feet had left the plank flooring of the deck. When Murphy draped her jacket across her shoulders, her shriek echoed across the water.

"It's only me." Murphy clasped her shoulders.

Relieved, she turned around and buried her face in his warm chest. He could feel her heart pounding. Wrapping his arms around her and squeezing her tight, he asked, "Are you okay?"

She sucked in a deep, shuddering breath. "No."