

A sample of
COFFEE IS MURDER
by Carolyn Arnold

A MCKINLEY MYSTERY

*Coffee
is Murder*



CAROLYN ARNOLD



Excerpt from *Coffee is Murder* (Book 9 in the McKinley Mystery series)
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CHAPTER 1

A MOMENT OF APPRECIATION

FOR SARA, COFFEE WAS ONE of life's greatest—and simplest—pleasures. Every time she took a draw of freshly brewed java, her eyelids automatically lowered in appreciation of the robust flavor. Somehow, when drinking it, life seemed less complicated, or maybe it was just how it coated the palate and calmed her nerves despite what some scientific studies might say.

She was in her home office, seated behind her desk, staring at the blinking cursor on her monitor, but it wasn't because she had writer's block. Her wrists needed a break. Better yet, she needed to indulge in this cup.

Leaning back in her chair, she swiveled from side to side and closed her eyes, savoring the aroma of the dark beans. While they were ground at the time she pressed the button, the only way to get it any fresher was picking the beans off the plants in Brazil. With their money, she supposed it was an option.

She let herself get caught up with the thought. It might not be a bad idea. As her daydreaming grew in scale, she laughed. She wasn't going to board a plane to South America for a cup of coffee, even though it might be the best she'd ever had. She wasn't that obsessed—was she?

Sean knocked, but entered without awaiting a reply. He held on to a glass of orange juice and she admired his self-restraint. For some reason, his body required only one coffee a day when he first woke up. Otherwise, he moved on

to juice or water.

If Sean had his way, Sara would drink only one, but coffee was a habit she wasn't willing to break. Maybe she was an addict, although, that word carried such a negative connotation. She wasn't an alcoholic simply because she enjoyed an evening beverage, so her coffee indulgence shouldn't be considered an addiction. Even her thoughts betrayed her. *Indulgence*.

"Good morning, darling." Sean kissed her forehead and then her lips. "I hope I'm not interrupting." He glanced at the screen. "I guess I'm not."

She smirked at him, realizing only a chapter number was showing. "I'm just taking a small break. I can't always be typing, you know. I'm not a machine."

"The way you've been holed up in here lately, I'm starting to wonder."

She pouted. "Are you feeling lonely?"

"A little bit like a writer's widower actually."

"Well, let me make it up to you." She stood, cupped his face with her hands, and kissed his mouth.

When they parted, any pleasure she derived from the coffee had diluted. It was replaced by the need to hold her husband.

"Hmm. Not bad," he said.

"Excuse me?"

"You have coffee breath. I have orange juice breath. Still, the kiss, not bad."

She narrowed her eyes and was about to say something when the phone on her desk rang.

Sean answered. "Hello...yes, Helen...all right, make the appointment for two hours from now."

As she listened to her husband speak, she had a good idea what this was about. There was a job.

CHAPTER 2

THE ORGANIZATION

SEAN AND SARA HAD THEIR private investigator licenses and had decided to open a firm. They didn't want to work from home, even though it was quite likely there would be some crossover. The building was more or less a meeting place for clients. While she, Sean, Jimmy, and Adam had offices there, they would only go in when there was a case.

Jimmy had a barebones office, designed to his liking, which afforded him a wooden desk, a desktop computer, two vertical filing cabinets, and a colored print on the wall. The latter was non-negotiable. Just because the man had simpler taste didn't mean the place couldn't be classy.

Contrasting to Jimmy's office, Adam's space had state-of-the-art everything. Adam, who they had brought on board from their New York company, Universal Acquisitions, spent most of his time in the Big Apple. They had given him a promotion and he was in charge of Internet security—a task he was more than qualified for. He was a genius, another reason they needed him on their team. When required, he came out to Albany.

Sara and Sean shared a sizable office with two work stations, each with a desktop computer.

The front reception desk was where Helen spent Mondays through Fridays, from ten until three. She had a young daughter, Mia, who, at only six years old, had fought cancer and won. The limited hours allowed Helen time to pick Mia up from kindergarten and get over to the McKinleys' to

tidy their house and prepare dinner. As things grew with the agency, Sara wouldn't be surprised if Helen requested to work there full-time. And the search for a maid would be on once again.

At the agency, Helen's responsibilities included answering the phones, filtering through case applications, paperwork, and bookkeeping. If Helen was calling now—and Sean had agreed to a meeting in a couple hours—Helen had deemed a case a priority.

There were two criteria they provided her to determine urgency. One, the police had closed their investigation, yet circumstances surrounding the death were suspicious. And two, the applicant needed to note three charities to receive a portion of the business's earnings. If people couldn't bring themselves to list three notable causes, then why should they invest their time to help them?

Sean hung up. "We might have our first official case."

"I gathered that."

"I'd say your gift of intuition was remarkable, but in this situation—"

"Yes, it was rather easy. So, what is it?"

"In brief, a woman lost her mother two weeks ago. The police fail to acknowledge foul play because no one stood out as wanting to hurt the woman."

"So no autopsy?"

"Not on the city's dime anyway. The daughter paid for one, but nothing was found."

"Why does she believe her mother was murdered?"

"Because she was complaining of dizziness and nausea the week before her death. It was thought she had the flu."

"I hate to say it, Sean, but the flu can kill people."

"It can, but the flu doesn't typically cause stomach or intestinal problems in adults."

"Really? I thought that vomiting was one of the main symptoms."

"I guess it's not. The daughter is a nurse and says she

knows this.”

“Then why not take her mother to a doctor to get whatever she had diagnosed?”

“She was going to, but her mother died before the appointment.”

CHAPTER 3

LIVING THE DREAM

THEIR FIRM WAS LOCATED ON Broadway, which was part of the downtown historic district. It was just a small postage-stamp-sized property nestled between the Broadway Plaza and another building. Despite the fact that they could have afforded a larger space—the entire block if they were so inclined—the size of their building was more than sufficient.

Sara found the curb appeal to be quaint and cozy, almost the feel of an old book store. The architecture was unique, with arched window frames and a decorative cap at the top of the structure that complimented the style of the façade. They used the main level and basement for their offices. In total, the building was four stories tall. The layout was suited to leasing out the other levels, as there was a separate entrance around back. They preferred to work with one or more non-profit organizations just starting out. They would offer the space at an affordable monthly amount.

It wasn't as if she and Sean needed the money, but their accountant had insisted that the business carry its own weight. They had chosen not to draw a salary, but the cost of labor and materials needed to be billed out, just as any private investigator agency. Where their financial management clashed was that after expenses were covered, the remainder was divvied up to the charities specified on their customer's application. While the client wrote one check, their accountant ensured that the amounts were distributed accordingly.

The doorbell chimed when they entered.

The front entrance was a wall of windows with green trim, and the lettering on them announced their hours along with their phone number. The firm's name was still being decided, and Sara was ashamed by her lack of creativity when it came to picking one. She had a feeling they'd end up settling on something basic and relatively generic like McKinley Private Investigators. Right now it read *Private Investigators*.

Helen was on the phone, but acknowledged them with a bob of her head. "Yes, I can send you an application. Complete that and send it back to us, and I assure you it will receive top priority when it comes in. How would you like to receive the application? Email, fax, mail, or you can pick one up in person....sure, I will send it shortly."

Sara smiled at Sean. All of this felt right. Just like slipping into an old pair of favorite jeans or spending a Sunday morning lounging around in pajamas. Opening this firm was the right decision. They had a talent for solving murders. Why waste that skill when so many needed closure and justice for a loved one?

"You can just attach it and reply to the email I send you or deliver it in person, whatever you wish. All right, yes...okay..." As Helen carried on the conversation with the caller, Sara analyzed the space.

The interior designers had certainly accomplished the task assigned them. Sara was adamant that the agency not resemble the PI offices on TV or in the movies, which were all dark, drab, and depressing. And, as if the dark colors weren't enough, they were finished off with bulky pieces of furniture and cluttered desks.

Here, it was the stark opposite. Bright lighting bathed the space, and it was furnished with sleek lines of white and chrome. The walls were neutral with dabs of color coming from accent pieces and framed, abstract paintings with large swaths of reds, blues, and yellows. This theme

followed through the space on both levels.

Behind reception a feature wall was turquoise, a color known for its soothing and calm energy. People who came here had gone through a lot and it would be comforting to them.

“Sounds good, Ms. Carter, I will watch for it. Thank you...Good day.” Helen returned the receiver and crossed her eyes. “It’s been a busy morning.”

Sara drew her gaze from their framed licenses, which stood out against the blue-green wall. “I’m not sure if that’s a good thing or not.” Her response was spoken without thought, but one of the factors that had initially held them back from opening a business was the potential workload. It didn’t seem to matter if they were officially in business or not, murder tended to find them. It was best to keep busy in life anyway, especially when one was given a gift. She noticed both Sean and Helen were watching her. “Although, the more cases we have applications for, the more will be approved, and the more charities will benefit.”

“I think it’s beautiful what you’re doing with the profits.”

“It’s just the right thing to do.”

“Still, it’s nice.”

Sean put his hand on Sara’s lower back. “When will our client be in?”

“You said two hours, Mr. McKinley, and that’s exactly when I booked her for. You still have an hour to review the file.” She handed Sean a manila folder. “This is her application. It also contains my notes, of course.”

When Helen deemed a case worthy of their attention, she’d conduct preliminary work which included pulling financial information on the applicant, the deceased’s past as well as their obituary, and the official ruling on cause of death.

“Thank you, Helen. You’re doing a great job,” Sara said.

“Thank you.” Helen’s cheeks blushed.

Sara recognized her reaction for what it was. Helen

was industrious and thorough, but had a hard time taking compliments. Work was something Helen just did without contestation or the need for praise. She was the type that made things appear easy to everyone else. It was a quality often taken advantage of in the professional arena. Here, she would never have that problem.

CHAPTER 4

BLOND AND DETERMINED

SEAN AND SARA TOOK THE file to the meeting room, which had a glass table and seating for six. The space had more sleek lines and chrome. A large screen was on one wall—the modern-day solution to a marker board. Adam’s enthusiasm about the technology of the interactive whiteboard was contagious and had Sean parting with the money.

Every time Sean entered the room, though, he was glad that he had made the investment. Adam’s praise was well-deserving. The board served a decorative purpose and was practical. Unlike the traditional predecessor, with this electronic one, it was possible to save any notes or doodles as images and PDFs.

Sean handed Sara the file. She was a faster reader, so, once she finished reading a sheet, she would pass it on to him and keep going. They still had more to read when two shadows graced the doorway.

It was Helen and a pretty blonde, who, Sean assumed, must be their prospective client, Sophie Hogan. He had read enough of the preliminary. Between the application and what Helen had told him, he was aware Sophie worked as a nurse in a retirement home. It was her mother, Beverly Sparks, who’d passed away. She was sixty-nine at the time of her death.

“Sean, Sara, this is Sophie Hogan.” Helen conducted the formal introductions as she guided the woman farther into the room.

“Hello. Nice to meet you both. Thank you for agreeing to take my case.” Sophie shook Sean’s hand.

He didn’t have the heart to correct her assumption. This meeting was a preliminary interview. She had made it past Helen, and now he and Sara had to decide if they’d accept the case, or if there even was one to take on.

Sophie clasped Sara’s hand in greeting now. “You are beautiful.”

“Thank you. So are you.”

Sean never tired of people saying that to his wife. She was attractive both inside and outside and had a quality that drew people. Jealousy periodically slipped in when it involved men, but he was working to root out the undesirable quality.

Sophie’s head dipped and she pulled out a chair, but hesitated. “I guess I shouldn’t assume. Is it all right if I sit here?”

“Of course.” Sara spoke gently and Sean admired, again, his wife’s ability to put people at ease.

Sophie was positioned across from them so it worked out ideally. Eye contact and being able to read a person’s body language was a big factor in conversation. Often, more was said through energy and movement than was communicated through words.

“I’m going to excuse myself, if that will be all.” Helen waved a hand, pointing toward the door.

“That will be. Thank you, Helen,” Sean said.

She closed the door behind her, and Sean settled his gaze on Sophie. She was thirty-two, according to the file, but she could have passed for mid-twenties. Her eyes were hazel and her hair was bottle-blond with dark lowlights. She wore it down at the back with the sides pulled up and clipped into a barrette. As a generalization, women freed their face of wandering strands when they were focused. And, despite her timorous mannerisms, Sean saw a person who was likely confident in her own right. He figured that consulting with private investigators ventured outside of

most people's comfort zones.

The business had opened its doors a month ago and had come together rather quickly—money equaled power, and, when the contractors found out it was multi-billionaire Sean McKinley requesting their services, they were more than efficient. A job that might have stretched out for months if they were working for someone else was condensed to the timespan of thirty days.

Three months ago, they had bought the property. Two months ago, they had hired the contractor. And one month ago, they had officially opened the doors. With the applications coming in from the moment they'd purchased the property, they were ready to start as soon as they found a case that matched their criteria.

"Would you like a cup of coffee or a glass of water?" Sara asked her.

Sophie shook her head. "Your assistant did ask me, but I'm good. I'm off coffee right now."

"All right, well, we've read a good portion of your file and application, but it's much better to hear things straight from the person. First of all, you have our sympathies for your loss," Sean said.

Sophie's lips quivered and she nodded.

"You don't believe it was related to her age."

She slid her bottom lip through her teeth. "Not at all. My mother was in good physical shape. She might not have been very active, but she was sixty-nine. Still, considering her age and all she had gone through in life, she had many more years left." Her voice fractured on the last sentence.

"You're saying that she was murdered?" Sara's tone was soft.

"That's exactly what I'm saying."

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