### A sample of FAMILY IS MURDER by Carolyn Arnold

# A MCKINLEY MYSTERY Family is Murder



CAROLYN ARNOLD



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#### THE UNEXPECTED

THE BRUNETTE CAME INTO THE coffee shop, clutching her purse to her chest and staggering along at a fast pace. She wasn't heavy-set, by any means, but her ankles seemed to have the tendency to buckle, telling Sara that, despite being in her late forties to early fifties, she didn't have much experience walking in high heels. The woman spotted them, and Sara smiled, doing her best to put the woman at ease.

She and Sean had decided upon a local Starbucks as the meeting place to conduct interviews for a live-in maid. They had been in their new house for a week and the basic upkeep took time they'd rather spend elsewhere. One example was Sara still hadn't taken cooking lessons and she knew Sean wasn't impressed by her existing culinary skills, judging by the way he'd fill his mouth and expel the sentiment, *yum*. He was trying to appease her.

"Hello? Mrs. and Mrs. McKinley?" The woman didn't seem to pass Sean a second's glance but kept her eyes glued to Sara.

"Please, Sara and Sean." She gestured toward him then turned back to the woman. "You're Angela?"

"Yes." Angela shook Sara's hand but took a seat without reaching for Sean's. As she sat, Angela ran a hand along the back of her skirt, her eyes never leaving Sara.

Sara smiled to suppress her uncomfortable feeling. "Tell us about yourself."

"Oh, yes, I'm from Maine. Augusta."

"Such a coincidence. I was born there."

Angela didn't say anything. Her eyes now drifted to Sean but flicked back to the table.

Sara glanced at Sean, back to Angela. "So, I take it you have experience with keeping a house?" She had the resume in front of her but preferred to have all the candidates say it in their own words.

"Absolutely." Angela threw in a brief smile that didn't touch her eyes. "As you can tell, I've been around a bit. This year will mark my forty-eighth birthday."

"Well, happy birthday."

Angela's eyes dropped to the table and lifted back up a few seconds later. "The last family I cleaned for was many years ago. What is it you want me to do for you?"

Sara thought back to their ad—was it not clear enough? She and Sean had gone over the details and had decided to sum up the responsibilities under the title house manager. Basically, they required someone to maintain the interior and to oversee other things that would need organizing on the property, such as pool and lawn maintenance.

"We need someone who's good at everything," Sean said. "We need a cook, a cleaner—ideally, someone who can handle all aspects of running a household."

"Yes, well, I have that. I even had a child." Angela glanced quickly at Sean.

"Very nice." Sara's tendency was to sympathize with people and relate to them, but Sean had told her that when it came to something like this, she had to distance herself. While she didn't need to think of herself as above anyone, for a healthy work environment, their employee couldn't feel they were best friends either. It could lead to problems down the road.

She looked at the resume that Angela had submitted and took an aspect from it. "It says here that you worked as a tutor for a couple years with a family in New York City."

"Yes." Angela's eyes were flitting about the Starbucks, not

resting on anyone, or anything, longer than a half a second. Her aura had escalated from uneasiness to jitteriness.

Sara glanced at Sean. She could tell by his eyes that he'd noticed the odd behavior as well. "Is today a good time?" Sara asked.

"Uh-huh." Angela ran a quaking hand down her cheek, and let her arm return to her lap. She looked Sara in the eyes. "You're so beautiful."

The entire scenario should have had Sara asking their guest to leave, but there was something about this woman, but what, exactly, Sara didn't know.

Sean went to get up, but Sara held her arm out.

Angela's eyes shot to him and then went back to Sara. "I lied."

"You—"

The woman siphoned her bottom lip through her teeth and shook her head. "I'm not who you think I am. You're here to meet someone to interview I take it. I just played along to get close to you. See, I need to talk to you."

The current swirling in the woman's eyes was electric—Sara couldn't effectively read her.

Sean put a hand on Sara's knee and she knew that he was about to step in and ask this woman, whoever she was, to leave.

"Why would you need to talk to me?" Sara asked. For some reason, this woman's energy had Sara's heart speeding up.

"Because my real name is Leslie Summers."

"I'm still not sure what—"

"I'm your mother."

#### **EMOTIONAL REVELATION**

A WAVE OF CLAMMY NAUSEA blanketed Sara and made her light-headed. Her heart raced and her tongue went thick. "You're my—"

No more words would come out and her chin quivered. Emotions threatened to break through her fortified damn.

Sean slid his chair closer to Sara and wrapped an arm around her, locking eyes with the woman. "I'm sure you can understand this is quite the shock."

Sara's hand covered her mouth, and she swiftly brushed the tip of her nose, hoping to stifle the cry that threatened to bubble out. A rogue tear fell down her cheek, and she brushed it away.

Her insides were a tangled knot. She struggled to breathe—was she breathing? She had to get herself together. She was in a public place and it felt like everyone's eyes were on her. She looked around the coffee shop, only to find the patrons self-involved and paying her no attention.

She touched Sean's hand on her shoulder. She was fine. She gazed back at the woman—her mother? Her ambivalent thoughts only heightened her trepidation. "So, you're not here for the job?"

The woman shook her head, her eyes, also full of tears, never left Sara's.

"Why wait so long? Why now?" The words rushed from her, with a life of their own. Hurt feelings mingled with ones of anger and betrayal. Did the woman only seek her out now because of the money?

Sean leaned forward, passing a glance to Sara. His mind must have been on the same line of thought. "I'm sure you can understand why we are hesitant to believe—"

The woman extended a photograph to Sean. It was of a young pregnant girl, standing in the sunlight, her hands on her stomach, smiling.

"This is you?" he asked.

She nodded. "A girlfriend of mine took it."

Sara sat there listening to Sean and Leslie converse, as merely an observer. There were so many questions she had, explanations she needed. She'd always considered herself a forgiving person, but faced with this, she found it hard to garner that level of selflessness.

"I got pregnant with Sara when I was fifteen. Getting rid of her was not my fault. My parents forced me to."

"It still doesn't explain why, after all this—"

Sara placed a hand on Sean's. She appreciated what he was trying to do, but she would handle this her own way. "I'd like a DNA test."

The request sounded callous to her ears, but why should she trust this person before her? She was essentially a stranger, claiming to be more, claiming to be family—and people would do as much for money.

"I understand. And I'm sorry if I upset you." Leslie gathered the purse on her lap, pulling it closer to her chest, hugging it as if seeking comfort from it, or, at least, distraction with it.

"It's just that we have an appointment right now," Sara offered, even though the pain in this woman's eyes deeply affected her.

"It doesn't look as if she's coming, darling," Sean said.

"Well, then." Sara hoped that Sean wouldn't mind what she was about to propose, but, regardless, it was something she needed to do. While her heart wanted to eagerly accept this woman, her mind cautioned her. She looked at Sean's watch and noticed it was almost four thirty. Their appointment with Angela Banks had been for four. Sean was right. If she was coming, she would have been there by now. "I have an idea. That is, if it's okay with you, darling." She shifted in her seat to face him.

"Anything you'd like."

Sara turned back to Leslie, looking into brown eyes that mirrored her own—gold flecks caught the light.

"How about you come around the house for dinner? Say, seven o'clock. We can talk and catch up."

"I'd love to." She smiled at them.

"All right. It's a date." Sara attempted to smile in return. She wasn't sure if it showed, but inside she was such a mixture of emotion. Her long-lost mother had essentially returned from the dead.

EVERYTHING HAD GONE WRONG, from the moment she slipped her legs out of bed and fresh dog poop squished between her toes—her lover's stupid mutt. The only thing saving its life was the fact Brent was home. It was about time to kick both of them out.

If starting out like that wasn't enough, she pushed through, only to have her nails snag her nylons, leaving her two choices—go without, or wear a pair that saw the waist mid-hip and the crotch mid-thigh. Sadly, the weather hadn't warmed enough, so she ending up waddling to the bus stop, wrongly assuming the worst was behind her.

The overcast sky opened up and dumped rain on the city in a steady downpour. No umbrella and no bus shelter. She continued on, though, with her focus on a glass of bourbon when she returned home.

Finally, her persistence paid off and she was now in front of the coffee shop. The rain had stopped and left a clean smell to the air.

She ran her hands down her trench coat and tried to talk herself into a place of peace. She had made it, and she would go through with this. And to think, it had all started with a revelation of insight some might discount as simply being in the right place at the right time. She saw it as a calling—a strike of inspiration that beckoned for seizing.

She studied her reflection in the windows of Starbucks. Her long blond hair hung as tendrils, dangling lifelessly over her shoulders. She was tucking a strand behind an ear when her attention went beyond her image.

The McKinleys were there. Her heart sped up when she noticed them sitting across from a woman of about fifty.

Heat surged through her, saturating her cheeks, and obtaining a solid breath became difficult.

Who was moving in on her—something brushed her leg. She looked down to see a dog rubbing against her, wagging its tail.

"Shoo!"

Its owner, who trailed a few feet behind, gave the leash a tug, and her a stern look.

"Control your animal," she said.

"Good day to you too, miss."

The exhale she released couldn't be described as anything less than a growl. People irritated her, and, at this moment specifically, it was the woman getting nice and cozy with the McKinleys. That woman had no idea who she was messing with.

#### HASTY PREPARATIONS

SEAN KNEW SARA'S HEART WAS jumping in before she listened to the warnings that would be going off in her head. But that was his Sara—always taking a leap before assessing the fall. He wasn't just going to stand by and watch the woman he loved get hurt, though. The chances of this being her mother, after all these years, was hard to believe. Why resurface now if it wasn't for the money? It seemed easier to accept that she was a fake, playing a role in staking a claim in their fortune.

While the DNA tests would confirm or deny whether she was, in fact, Sara's biological mother, until then how much drama would Sara live through? Whether she verbalized it or not, he could tell by the subtle twist of her lips, the way she looked on this woman, that she wanted to believe this was her real mom. There was also a mess in Sara's eyes, a swirl that, to him, spoke to guilt.

Sara hadn't stopped moving since they got back to the house. She was hurrying around tidying up and preparing the meal.

On her way by this time, he took her hand to slow her stride, and he drew her in to him. "You can relax, darling. It will all work out."

"I just want everything to be perfect." Her eyes scanned his.

"And it will be." He led her to a sofa in their sitting room. "Please, darling, sit and let's talk."

Her eyes sparked. "I know what you're going to say."

He tapped the tip of her nose. "You've always been sort of a mind reader, but—"

"You're going to tell me to keep my head about me, to not rush to accept this woman as my mother."

The way she stared into his eyes made him feel like he was the enemy. "I just don't want you to get hurt."

"And I appreciate that." Her raised shoulders relaxed slightly, and her tone softened when she continued. "I know that you had a rough life, Sean. You lost your mother when you were nine, your father when you were a young adult. But I've never known my real parents." She paused, and there was that flicker of guilt dancing across her eyes. "Jeannie and Leon are the world to me. They were there for me from the beginning and will always be Mom and Dad. But, if this woman is who she claims to be, well, this may sound silly, but I'll feel I belong in this world."

He wasn't prepared for those words and they attacked him as if a thrown fist, hitting him dead in the heart.

She put her hand on his leg. "Darling, please, know that I love you with all my heart and soul."

He nodded. No words would form.

"And that didn't come out right. I know I belong because of you, because of Jeannie and Leon, but this is my chance to know where I came from. I have never had a blood relative all my life."

The way her eyes misted as she spoke chipped away at the gnawing pain in his chest, somehow making his life experience seem less significant. Still, losing his mother had impacted him as a boy. He remembered the isolation, the separation from others his age when there were school outings. Even watching his friends unpack their boxed lunches, he knew their mothers had taken extra care. His dad had tried, bless his soul, but he was a man. He didn't put the little cards in his lunch box telling him to smile or reminding him that he was loved. While the boys who

received these would blush from embarrassment, Sean would have traded spots with them in a heartbeat.

Yes, he knew grief, he knew heartache, he knew what it was like to be left in the world without a blood relative—but the latter not fully. He had his dad until he was nineteen and, to this day, he had his uncle Ray, although he lived in North Carolina.

He wanted to warn her to guard her heart, but seeing the look in her eyes, he couldn't speak those words. "I'm happy for you."

She leaned in and kissed him, then pulled back slowly. "I love you for that."

He nodded and smiled. She had stolen his heart two years ago when he'd first met her, and with their spoken vows that bond had only solidified into concrete.

Sara tapped the couch and went to get up. "I better get that roast in the oven."

"Roast?"

One of her brows arched slightly higher than the other, a smirk on her lips. "Yes, and I am fully capable of cooking it, you know."

He raised his hands in surrender. "Hey, I never said that you weren't."

"Uh-huh." She laughed as she pranced back to the kitchen.

Sean stayed on the couch, his heart wanting to accept Leslie, but his mind warring against the request. He would try to open up, for Sara's sake, but there was a little voice inside his head that cautioned him to stay vigilant.

#### COGNAC AND CATCHING UP

"Your house is beautiful." Leslie smiled as she took in the room, her eyes going from the dark wood trim to the piano. "Do you play?"

Sara nodded. "But it's been a long time. I won't do that to your ears."

"Nonsense. Please. I would be honored."

They were in the sitting room that had sold Sara on the house. Of course, there were many things that she loved, from the kitchen to the large master suite, but somehow this intimate room made her feel at home.

She glanced at Sean, their earlier conversation coming to mind. She hoped that he took her words at the value at which she'd delivered them. She wanted to accept Leslie as her biological mother because she longed to know another person who shared her bloodline. Yet there was an intricate part of her that contrasted the ache of yearning—a warning signal that made her want to take notice. But the woman she had wondered about her entire life was sitting in front of her—wasn't she? How could she dismiss this easily as fiction? She owed herself the opportunity to open up to what her life now afforded her. And, ironically, the woman had saved her the trouble. After Easter dinner and her conversation with Sean, she'd known she needed to find out about her birth mother. She needed to do so for many reasons, but the main one was to heal a patch on her heart.

Sara reached for her glass of cognac from a side table,

studying Leslie as she did so. She had long dark hair like Sara and brown eyes with teasing flecks of green and gold that sparkled when the light hit just right. Her stature was taller than Sara's, but she was thin and knew how to dress. After dinner, though, she had requested tea, proclaiming her dislike for the taste of coffee, saying that she had given it up years ago, which, of course, Sara couldn't fathom.

"How long are you in town?" Sean asked.

Sara glanced over at him as she tucked her legs beneath her. The amber alcohol was beginning to work.

"Well, there is no rush for me to get back for a while. I took a sabbatical."

Sara straightened. Another similarity perhaps? While many professions took them, Sara had a feeling. Was it possible while she had fought for justice with a badge, her mother did so from behind a desk? "Are you a judge or a lawyer?"

"Doctor."

"Oh "

Leslie smiled. "I take it you never expected that one."

"Not really." Sara offered a brief smile. The thoughts parading in her mind gave off constant natter. Here was the woman who gave her life and Sara knew nothing about her. The dinner had been filled with awkward moments of silence, cautious glances, and the resultant polite smiles.

"Dinner was delicious by the way. Thank you."

"You're welcome, but you don't have to lie to me." Sara's serious delivery had Leslie's eyes darkening, but the corners pinched in response to Sara's smile.

"Ah." Leslie waved with her hand.

"It was good, darling." Sean took Sara's hand and kissed the back of it.

"See, now flattery will get *you* anywhere." She smiled at him and kept the expression as she looked back to Leslie. The meal had been a bust, the beef, dry and overcooked. The mashed potatoes were lumpy and the broccoli a soggy

mess—the latter might as well have been a watery soup with floating green bits. She would definitely be looking into culinary classes once the reception party was behind them.

Leslie crossed her legs and set her glass down. "You have both been very kind. Thank you for accepting me into your home."

"Yes, well, we're not going to leave Sara's mother standing on the porch," Sean said.

Sara squeezed his hand. "I was actually thinking that..." Sara's words trailed off, the urge to say *Mom* stumbled her from the beginning. Was she accepting this too fast? Her mind and heart were saying two different things. And to call this woman her mother, wasn't that a betrayal of the one who raised her and had been there her entire life?

Both Sean and Leslie were looking at her and she realized she had gone quiet for a length of time.

"Sorry, there is a lot on my mind right now."

"Dear, I can only imagine," Leslie said.

"What was it that brought you by Starbucks today?" Sean asked Leslie.

Sara's eyes shot to him, but he kept his focus on Leslie.

"Well, the honest answer?"

"That's always refreshing." Sean put on a placating smile. Leslie's eyes went between them. "I've been watching you two for a while now. It's why I took leave from my practice."

"So you saw us on TV?" Sean slid Sara a sideways glance.

The implication in his question bristled her insides.

"Yes, I did, and I knew right away."

"You knew what?"

"Please, Sean." Sara put her hand on his forearm.

"No, Sara, dear, it's fine. He's looking out for your best interests. After all, you run into all sorts of money and then *bam*, your long lost mother, who I'm sure you thought was dead, shows up in your life. Yes, it all sounds mighty convoluted, even to my ears. I will tell you everything you

want to know. I want to get to know my daughter."

Sara tamped down the emotion that whelmed up inside her. "How did you know to find us at Starbucks?"

"Well, you've been there for the last few days. From the looks of it, interviewing people. When you were sitting there with time in between, well, I thought this was my opportunity."

"So you thought a coffee shop was the opportune time to re-enter your daughter's life?" Sean held up his hand to Sara, communicating, further than his tone, that his intention wasn't to insult Leslie.

Leslie siphoned her bottom lip through her teeth. "I'm not sure any time would be ideal." She paused, a faraway look glazing her eyes. "And, when I sat down with you, when you mistook me for your late appointment, well, I took advantage of it."

Sara got up and walked across the room to Leslie. She stood and the two women hugged.

"Thank you for your courage," Sara said.

"I've waited too long to take this step." Leslie released Sara, letting her arms fall back to her sides. "But I was afraid of how you would react. You've been so good about it."

As she spoke, Sara studied her eyes and the reflection in them made her stomach toss. Sara believed what this woman was telling her, that she was her birth mother. But why did she get sent to an adoption agency, and why wait so long to find her? They were questions that her mind required answers to, but right now, at this moment, her heart simply wanted to breathe in this sense of belonging. The blood that ran through her also ran through this woman in front of her.

"I want to ask you something," Sara began. She heard the tremble in her voice but pushed through. "Sean and I had a rushed wedding." She glanced back at him on the couch, his expression a blend of happiness and worry. "Well, we never had a reception at the time and had planned to have one

when we returned from our honeymoon. We got married just over two months ago now. March third."

"I wish I had been there. There's so much I wish I'd been around for."

Sara took Leslie's hand in hers. She noticed her fingers were long and thin, like her own. Again, the heat that told her they belonged. "There's no way you would have known."

"No, that's true."

Sara glanced back at Sean. She wasn't sure whether she should verbalize this out loud as if by doing so she was confessing to a lack in her life, when there really wasn't one. "I was going to look for you," she pressed on a small smile, "but you beat me to it." Sara looked at Sean again and didn't miss the flicker in his eyes that spoke of surprise. She continued her confession. "Now, that we're—I'm—in this position, I knew there would be nothing to stand in my way of finding you. Before, well, I didn't know how to go about it and felt ashamed considering it. My parents are wonderful people. I love them dearly."

Tears filled Leslie's eyes. "I'm so glad to hear that."

"Thank you." She scrutinized Leslie's eyes, hoping that she could extract the information she needed, not so much the apology for not being around, for placing her into the system, but at least an explanation for her absence. Leslie didn't seem inclined to offer up her past at this time. While Sara was disappointed, she also appreciated the delicate situation. The darkness that traced the color of Leslie's eyes communicated she had been through a lot of heartache. Or was it just want she wanted to see?

"We're having the party here at our house next weekend. Would you like to come?" She wanted to verbalize it more eloquently, more confidently, but fear of rejection laced through her.

"I would love nothing more."

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