

**A sample of  
SKIING IS MURDER  
by Carolyn Arnold**

A MCKINLEY MYSTERY

*Skiing  
is Murder*



CAROLYN ARNOLD



Excerpt from *Skiing is Murder* (Book 10 in the McKinley Mystery series)  
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## CHAPTER 1

### IT'S ALL DOWNHILL FROM HERE

THE SNOW-COVERED MOUNTAINSIDE was glistening in the setting sun outside the window. It was so peaceful that it was hard to believe that a violent storm had passed through three days before and dumped five feet of snow. Luckily for Sean and Sara, all the runs had opened back up today.

They had gotten to Vail the previous evening. It was Monday now, and they were inside the chalet settled onto a couch and warming up next to the fireplace. Sara had her legs curled up beneath her, and Sean had his extended and crossed at the ankles.

He was sitting there thinking about how lovely the day had been. No murder. No mention of murder. Just him and Sara relaxing. Although they had retired their Albany detective badges when he'd inherited billions from Old Man Quinn, an elderly business tycoon, homicides were never far away. One murder after another kept dropping into their laps, starting on their honeymoon. They hadn't been looking for cases to solve, but after a year of it happening, they'd decided to make it official: they'd become licensed PIs and opened a firm.

Pay it Forward PI Firm was opened about eight months earlier, and despite some zany cases they'd taken on so far, neither Sean nor Sara regretted the choice to become investigators. But sometimes they needed a little break from things. That was what had brought them to Vail, Colorado. Sean had sold Sara on the trip by saying it could be a pre-

anniversary celebration—not to detract from the real date, which would mark two years of marriage the next month.

“You know that wasn’t fair, right?” Sara lifted her glass of spiked hot chocolate and took a sip.

“Yes it was.”

“It was not.” She had a hardened look to her features, a concentration that usually showed when they were close to solving a murder. She flung her legs out from under her and angled her body to toward him. “You can’t say ‘race ya’ while you’re already taking off down the hill.” Her words were full of heat, but her eyes were full of mischief.

“For the record, I never said ‘race ya.’”

“Ah, Sean.” She turned to face the fire and sat back, her eyes drifting to the flames dancing on the hearth.

“What I said was, and I quote, ‘Whoever gets to the bottom last buys the drinks.’”

She leveled him with a glare, but the seriousness dissipated partway through the attempt. She was playing him, and her jig was up.

“I think I’ll take a cognac after dinner tonight,” he said. They were still a couple hours from that.

“Oh, what a lovely idea.” She lowered her mug to a side table, and it wasn’t long before a waitress came along and took it away. Sara declined the offer of a refill.

They had a full day of skiing, but Sean would be more than ready to hit the slopes again tomorrow morning. He appreciated the hum that was now vibrating through his muscles from the exercise. It invigorated him and even made sitting more enjoyable than it would have been if he’d done nothing physical during the day. He sank back against the sofa, letting his head rest on the cushion. He was so comfort—

“He’s dead. I can’t believe it, but he’s—”

“It must have been an accident.”

*A nightmare? It has to be...*

He must have dozed off. But sadly, when he lifted his

head, he knew what he had heard was real. A group of five people had shuffled into the chalet, loaded down with ski equipment—three women and two men—and it was two of the women who had spoken.

“They say they found his body up on an advanced run,” one of the men pitched in.

“I think I heard someone say it was Adrian Blackwell,” the second man said.

“Adrian? He’s an Olympic medalist.” This from the third woman.

Sean’s gaze went from one person to the next as the discussion volleyed among them. He tried to stay calm. Just because someone was found dead in the area didn’t mean that he and Sara needed to get involved.

He reached for Sara’s hand, but he couldn’t find it. He pulled his gaze from the group to look at her. But she wasn’t sitting there anymore. She was making her way over to the group.

*No, no, no!* He had to stop her before she reached them. They were supposed to be on vacation, not getting involved with any investigations. If a body had been found, let the local authorities handle it.

He shot to his feet and bolted after her. He caught Sara’s arm on a backswing and then moved down to clasp her hand. “Sara.”

She looked from his eyes to his hand. “Did you just hear what they said?”

*I wish I hadn’t.*

He nodded. “But this has nothing to do with us.” He scanned her face. “We’re here to relax.”

She smiled ever so slightly, the corners of her mouth barely curving. “I’m just curious.” She cupped his cheek, the caress loving, soothing. Pacifying. And then she was off.

He was left standing there in the sea of people that had since gathered around the group spreading the latest gossip, and Sean felt his relaxing vacation slipping away.

## CHAPTER 2

### HARMLESS CURIOSITY?

SHE SAW THE LOOK IN Sean's eyes, the one that pleaded for her to leave the matter of the dead man alone. But she wasn't getting involved with the investigation; she was simply curious as to what had happened. From the sound of it, the deceased was Adrian Blackwell. He'd won two Olympic gold medals in skiing—one in 2010 and another in 2014. Adrian's death would warrant a full-blown police investigation, even if it appeared that an accident had killed him.

She always tuned in to watch both the winter and summer Olympics. There was something about the world coming together, united in the name of athletics. Political agendas seemed to fade. Nations became equals. Maybe that was why she always felt despondent when it came time for the closing ceremony. Maybe she was the only one who viewed the Games this way, but if she were looking at the world through rose-colored glasses, she'd keep them.

The friends were huddled together in a corner of the lobby, now surrounded by strangers hoping to get in on the news. After all, the average person rarely came across a death, let alone a potential murder, and the word *dead* seemed to spark attention and curiosity from most people.

Sara glanced over her shoulder at Sean. He followed her now, but it saddened her to see his solemn face. She stopped in her tracks and turned to face him.

"Do you want me to leave this alone?" she asked.

“You know I do.”

Normally she would do anything he asked of her, but there was a burning curiosity within her that just needed to know what had happened. At this point, she had no inclination to get involved with the investigation.

She placed a hand on Sean’s forearm, and he responded by tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.

“I just want to know what happened. That’s all.” She hated that there was a part of her—even if it was very minute—that doubted her resolve to leave it at *that’s all*. Based on the tilt of Sean’s head, he was questioning her intentions, as well.

“Are you sure? Because there’s something in your eyes that tells me otherwise.”

She was torn between getting more information and walking away. But Sean was the most important person in her life, and his happiness was her happiness. “We’re here on vacation, Sean, and I know you’ve been looking forward to this trip since you first brought it up six weeks ago.”

“I know you, Sara. I know us. For some reason, death is all around us.”

“It’s a good thing it’s only *around* us,” Sara said with a small chuckle.

He consented with a smile. “True enough. It could be worse.”

She nodded. “If I promise just to find out what happened and leave it alone, can I talk to them?”

A few seconds of silence followed. She sensed he was almost offended—or ashamed—that she was looking to him for permission.

“I can’t stop you, but please, let’s stick to our plan of a relaxing vacation,” he beseeched.

“You got it.” She slipped her hand into his, and the two of them joined the growing cluster of people.

As they approached, a blonde of about twenty-five was talking animatedly about where Adrian was found. She was

one of the women from the original group. Her statement seemed to be in response to something a brunette in her late thirties had said as the latter bobbed her head.

The blonde caught Sara's eye. A man had an arm around her waist. His hair was blond like the girl's, but spiky. His bangs stood up as though he had done a face-plant in the snow, and his flushed cheeks supported that theory. "He probably OD'd," he said.

"Why would you go there?" The blonde turned to him. "He was a respected athlete."

"There's a lot of pressure on athletes." He added a shoulder shrug. "Maybe it got to be too much for him."

"I overheard the police say that it looks like an accident." This came from a young redhead. She wore her hair in two braids, and freckles dusted the bridge of her nose.

"Not buying it." A second man, a brunette who was also with the original group, adjusted his skis and poles under his arms.

"What do you mean you're not buying it?" The blonde leaned forward to look directly at him. "If that's what the police are—"

"The police aren't always right." The words came from Sara's lips without a thought, strictly on impulse. She cringed and didn't want to look at Sean. She could only imagine the scowl on his face.

## CHAPTER 3

### IN THE HOT SEAT

“HEY, DO I KNOW YOU?” The brown-haired man pointed a finger at Sara, then moved it toward Sean. “Wait a minute—” he snapped his fingers “—you’re that couple. I saw you on TV.”

Sara sensed the eyes of the thirtysomething brunette on her and met her blank gaze. Before looking away, Sara noticed the snowflake-shaped diamond earrings the woman wore. Stunning.

“They *are* the McKinleys!” The man was now adamant.

Sean tugged gently on Sara’s hand, hard enough to make her take notice. But it was too late to retreat now. They’d been recognized and at least this young man knew they solved murders. It was surreal, as she often failed to appreciate that she and Sean were sort of celebrities. To her, she was just Sara McKinley, another human being on the planet. But ever since they had inherited billions, life had forever changed. They had loved each other before the money came into play but given the fact that they were partners, they didn’t allow themselves to get romantically involved. But the windfall had allowed them to retire their police badges and get married. All these aspects seemed to fascinate people. Their continuing to solve murders when they didn’t need to also may have led to them being interviewed on several major television networks.

When things slowed down, which wasn’t often, Sara could appreciate how fast their lives had changed and how

easily they now attracted suspicious deaths, ones the police had typically washed their hands of or closed without exhausting all the evidence. The police had limitations and budgets. She and Sean had inexhaustible resources.

“The McKinleys?” Face-plant’s brow tightened out of obvious confusion. At least there were a few people who didn’t know who they were.

“You are, aren’t you?” The thirtysomething woman stepped toward Sara with an extended hand, her eyes now full of recognition. “What an honor to meet you.” She shook Sara’s hand, then took Sean’s, which she took longer to release.

Sean was smiling, and it took Sara nudging his elbow with hers to fade his expression. She knew he wasn’t attracted to the woman, that he was just amused by her excitement over meeting them. He probably felt the way Sara did: they put pants on one leg at a time like everybody else.

The brunette woman addressed the small crowd. “These people solve murders.” She turned back to face Sean and Sara. “Are you here to find out what happened to Adrian Blackwell?”

Sara passed a sideways glance to Sean. There was a grimace on his face now.

“We’re actually here on vacation,” Sara said with a pleasant smile. It was funny how easily a person could get categorized. Solve a few murders and that’s all you did.

“But there’s a death. I don’t think he killed himself. And an accident? I’m not sure I buy it,” the blond girl said.

Sara was about to respond when three police officers entered the lobby.

“This is a police matter,” one of them said while pulling up on the waist of his pants. He must have overheard the woman, although given her volume, it wouldn’t have been hard.

He wasn’t in uniform, and Sara guessed he was a detective. He was a rail of a man, reedy enough to topple over with a

strong breeze. His hair was thinning and what he did have left was bright red, bordering on orange.

Sara was familiar with his type. Based on the energy exuding from him and his peacocked stance, he wore the badge as a bragging right and wasted no opportunity to point out the power that came along with it. And it wasn't just in the way he had hoisted up his pants, or even the way he stood there now with both hands braced on his hips. It was in the way his eyes scanned the room. Those beady marbles of his took everything and everyone in, assessing, analyzing. While a good cop did need to be aware of his surroundings, this guy was making a show of it, displaying his position of authority.

"We're going to need to speak with everyone, so we'd appreciate it if you'd keep the chatting among yourselves to a minimum." The detective looked over his shoulder and motioned for the uniformed officers to spread out across the room.

It didn't seem like two officers and one detective were sufficient to question everyone in the room. There were easily fifty people. It could take awhile.

The first officer to pass them glanced at Sara as he walked toward the group of friends. He had dark hair, a solid build, an angular jaw line, and a protruding brow bone. The embroidered name on his uniform announced him as Muller.

The second officer, Dodd, also had brown hair, but he had an exaggerated swagger that made Sara think of dueling cowboys from old westerns. His thumbs were latched onto a couple of belt loops, his shoulders were pulled back, and it seemed like his hips swung his legs. Dodd smiled at Sara but quickly averted his gaze and went to question another cluster of people.

Sean tugged on Sara's arm again and leaned in to whisper in her ear. "I knew we should have just left."

"This will be over soon, darling. We don't know anything. You know how all this works."

The detective positioned himself directly in front of her and Sean, legs braced, shoulder-width apart. "I'll be questioning you guys," he said. "I'm Detective Callahan." He flipped open a top-spiraled notepad with his right hand and clicked a pen in his left. "Names?"

"Sean and Sara McKinley. We're former detectives with the Albany PD," Sean said.

Sara noticed how Sean dropped *homicide* from their former job titles.

Callahan let out a whistle. "The Empire State. You're a long way from home."

"We're here for a quiet vacation."

"And how's that going for you?"

"Fine up until now. If you would excuse us—" Sean wrapped an arm around Sara's waist and guided her to move with him—"my wife and I will be on our—"

"You and your wife will be staying right there." Callahan tipped one end of the pen toward them. "I have some questions I need answered."

## CHAPTER 4

### THE INSIDE SCOOP

“WE UNDERSTAND THAT YOU ARE just doing your job, Detective, but we don’t know anything other than what we’ve just overheard,” Sean reasoned.

Sara glanced at Sean. If he was trying to get out of answering questions, he wasn’t going about it the right way. Now the detective would want to know what they’d heard, see how it lined up with what the police already knew, and on it would go.

“Detective Callahan,” Sara began, certain to keep her tone sweet, “my husband and I only know that a man’s body was found.”

“So you s’pect me to believe that you don’t know whose body?”

“We might have heard it was Adrian Blackwell,” she admitted.

Callahan squinted. “*Might have or did?*”

“We heard who it was,” Sean confessed. “Beyond that, we were enjoying a drink in front of the fireplace.” Sean bobbed his head in the direction of the hearth. The flames continued to dance, unaffected by the transpiring events.

“And who did you hear this from?” Callahan hoisted the pad up his chest, so far it was essentially tucked under his chin. It was almost as if he had bad eyesight but refused to wear eyeglasses. His pen was poised and ready to write.

“We overheard it from that group over there.” Sean pointed discreetly in the direction of the five friends, who

were having a lively conversation with Officer Muller.

Callahan scribbled something on his notepad, then looked back up at Sean and Sara. "All right. Before we get into the hearsay, when did you two arrive at the resort?"

"We got in last night," Sean stated.

"Did you ever meet Adrian Blackwell?"

"So that *is* the victim?" Sara jumped right on the detective's slip, which essentially confirmed the ID of the deceased.

"This is an open investigation," he replied, clinching the deceased's identity. To say what he had said was a common diversion tactic.

"Please, Detective Callahan, as my husband told you, we used to work with the Albany PD, in homicide to be precise."

"Homicide, you say? Well, that hasn't been verified."

Sean took a deep breath as Sara let a subtle smile dust her lips.

"Very wise. You don't have confirmation," she said. "But I assure you, we are telling the truth. And you just confirmed that Adrian Blackwell was the person you found dead."

Callahan smacked his lips and glanced briefly around the room. Meeting her gaze again, he nodded. "Yes, it was Blackwell."

"Was he murdered?" The question left her lips without a filter.

"It's too early to say."

Sara nodded.

Callahan transferred his pen to his right hand along with the pad, his arms now lowered. "I probably shouldn't be saying any more than this, but you two have trustworthy faces. And yes, I know I just said that your story about being cops wasn't verified. It was a spiel. You get that, right? We say 'em all the time as cops."

He was looking to establish common ground, and even though Sara wasn't in full agreement with what he had said, she nodded. Sean did, too.

"His body was found in a thicket of trees along one of the

runs," Callahan continued. "Now, that hill is for advanced skiers and not for the faint of heart."

"Adrian was a skiing champion," Sara countered.

"Yes, ma'am, and a two-time Olympic gold medalist at that."

*Ma'am?* She hated being addressed that way. It made her feel older than her thirty-four years.

"We overheard that you might be thinking it was an accident," Sean interjected.

"It's possible. Like I said, it's way too early to tell. The resort staff thought he'd checked out days ago. Last Thursday."

*Thought?*

Sara's ears perked up. "Did *he* check out? I mean, someone else didn't do it for him?"

"Well, you know how it's done these days. Most times you don't even need to speak to a person. You just leave your keys in the room and the charges go to your credit card automatically. Blackwell was booked to stay through this coming Friday, but the front desk received a call canceling the rest of the week."

"From Adrian Blackwell?" Sara was confident the detective was holding back. She'd noticed that he left out the time of the phone call. Sean nudged his boot against hers.

"We need to verify who called down, see if the front desk has a recording of it, but I'm not holding my breath." Callahan went quiet for a moment, indicating there was more he wasn't saying or at liberty to share. "Adrian was known to be rather impulsive in his personal life."

Sara didn't miss the leap in topic from the mention of a recording to the likelihood of a shortened stay. She knew he didn't think Adrian was the one to make the call, which meant Adrian's time of death must have been before the call, a fact it seemed Callahan was guarding, at least for now.

"What do you mean he was impulsive?" Sara asked,

sticking to more neutral ground.

“He was disciplined with his sport. Obviously. Look at his successes. But he was divorced by the age of twenty-two. I get that if something doesn’t work out, it doesn’t work out, but he moves on in relationships like there’s no shortage of women.” Callahan paused and bobbed his head side to side. “But I guess for a guy like Blackwell, there probably wasn’t.”

“Are you referring to what the tabloids say about Adrian or have you verified this information already?” Sean asked the question, but it made Sara realize that since they’d exchanged their badges for PI licenses, both the deceased and the suspects were often referred to by first names as opposed to surnames.

“Yeah. Well, that and what some other officers are saying.”

There was a brief lull in the conversation, and Sara could have let the interaction die there if she could just turn off the investigator that lived inside her. “So Adrian was supposed to check out this coming Friday but checked out this past Thursday?” If it weren’t for his dead body and the question of who made the call to shorten his stay, she’d wonder if it was simply a booking error.

“You got it.”

Sara decided to be a little more direct. “Only he didn’t check himself out. Someone did it for him.”

Callahan remained quiet.

“He was found on the hill, and I assume he was dressed for skiing?” Sara pressed, hoping to pry loose what Callahan was holding back.

“All of his personal belongings were cleared from his room.” Callahan glanced away and was rocking on his heels.

“Hmm.” Sara received another nudge from Sean’s boot. She glanced at him and he bugged his eyes at her, begging her to leave it alone. But she couldn’t. “You—the police—are leaning toward this being an accident? Who found him?” Killers often reported the discovery of their victims.

Callahan waved his hand in dismissal. “They’ve already been cleared.”

“Whatever you tell us stays between us,” Sara prompted, hoping to get more out of the detective.

Callahan’s gaze came back to her. “I’ve said too much already. I just hope you two are who you say you are.” He hesitated, seeming to deliberate whether to tell them anymore than he already had. “Adrian’s time of death was two in the morning Thursday.”

“He didn’t check out of his room that early, did he?”

Callahan pressed his lips together. “Nope. Late afternoon.”

Sara faced Sean, and he shook his head. He was right, of course. This matter should be left to the police, but there was a part of her that couldn’t look the other way. There were too many unanswered questions, foremost of which was who checked Adrian out—both from the resort and from this world.

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