

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

A MCKINLEY MYSTERY

*Vacation
is Murder*



CAROLYN ARNOLD



Excerpt from *Vacation is Murder* (Book 2 in the McKinley Mystery series)

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CHAPTER 1

DYING FOR MURDER

HERE SEAN WAS IN PARADISE and yet he was dying for murder. Lying on his side watching his bride of a few weeks, he thought back to the events of the last month. Life had been a true whirlwind. First, coming into a fortune large enough to carry generations. Second, finally being able to have the woman he had loved for two years. He was lucky that she loved him as much he did her.

Their wedding was an intimate gathering of close friends and family—the family being Sara’s adoptive parents, since neither Sean nor Sara had siblings, and Sean’s parents were both gone.

While he was surprised she hadn’t wanted the big event, complete with caterers, a slew of bridesmaids, and the rest of the “fun” that went along with it, he was pleased. She’d wanted to solidify their relationship too, so, he had promised her a large party when they got back from their honeymoon.

Sean adjusted his pillow, plumping it up a bit more to support his neck, smiling as Sara’s chest rose and fell, carrying the soft purrs of a snore.

Beyond her, a gentle breeze played with the curtain and revealed the Caribbean Sea. The sun was already up and made the water sparkle as diamonds. On the horizon, the cerulean blue of the sky and water merged as if stroked with the brush of a master painter who could rival Claude Monet.

She shifted to her side, facing away from Sean, a moan

escaping her throat.

Her sleepy response to a new day caused him to smile again. It was starting to feel like this would be his permanent expression.

One thing he had always known about Sara but that became amplified since they'd gotten married—she didn't do mornings very well. She preferred to laze around, sleepy-eyed and cradling a mug of coffee—which she refilled periodically—for a good hour before she'd shed the shell and admit to being up.

This was where they differed. Sean typically loved waking early and getting a jump on the day, although, things might change a bit in that regard now. He was retired at the age of thirty-three and had no place he needed to be, nothing he needed to do.

He pressed tightly against Sara's back and put his arm around her, sweeping back the cascade of dark hair, baring her neck, and pressing his lips to her warm flesh.

"Morn—" A yawn, that seemed to stem up from the tips of her toes, shuddered through her entire body.

She angled her head back, kissed him, and then nuzzled into her pillow. "What a beautiful view."

"It is." While she had referred to the view outside, a different one had his attention.

She rolled over to face him and smiling, she took in his features and brushed a strand of hair from his forehead. Her eyes settled on his.

If he had to die, he would want this woman by his side. So many nights had been spent dreaming of the time they'd be together—and he wasn't the kind to resign to such whimsical fairytales. Before he met Sara, he would have been content to live out his days as a single man. She was what people termed a game changer.

He squeezed her tighter and took her mouth, his hand caressing her shoulder, running down the length of her torso. She curved into him, melding her body into his.

HE DIDN'T WANT TO LET her out of his arms—not yet—even though her caffeine craving would have her bounding from bed any minute. While he may have been growing tired of soaking up the sun every day, he would never tire of this—of embracing her, inhaling her smell, caressing her. Loving her was timeless, and part of the reason he was on earth. He knew he sounded like the romantics he had always mocked.

“There’s one problem with this resort, Sean.” Sara slipped out of his arms and out of bed, pulling the sheet with her and wrapping it around her trim, naked frame.

Always so modest. Always a lady.

Her dark cherry lips pouted. “No coffee in the room.”

“Let me fix that for you.” He sat up and reached for the phone to call the front desk.

She bounded over, snatched the receiver from him and replaced it on the cradle. She dropped on the edge of the bed, dangling her legs and swaying them like a child. “Just because we can get whatever we want, doesn’t mean we should.”

“I love you.”

“I love you too.” She patted his leg and got back up. “Come on, let’s go down for coffee.”

He smiled at her enthusiasm and her attempt at appearing awake, but she was still fawn-eyed and likely dough-headed.

“What do you say we do something today?” he asked. While he was eager to spend the day with her, Sean was tiring of doing the same thing every day—bobbing in the resort pool, sipping on cocktails, soaking up the sun, and getting involved with poolside games such as volleyball. Neither of them relished playing any of the drinking games.

“Do something?” Her eyes widened, the largest he had seen in days.

“Yeah, we could rent a boat, go deep-sea fishing.”

“Oh, Sean, I don’t—”

He laughed. He couldn’t picture Sara baiting a line and being in the salty brine air with stinky dead fish at her feet.

She grinned. "You really see that happening?"

"We could go see the ruins. I've heard great things."

"Or swim with the dolphins."

"We could also check into going to Xcaret. It seems to be a huge attraction here."

"Sounds good, but let's plan for either that or the ruins tomorrow. Do you think we could swim with the dolphins today?"

He went to her side, tucked a strand of hair behind her ear, and kissed her temple. "My dear, anything is possible."

CHAPTER 2

THE SPENCERS

THEY WENT DOWN A SIDE hallway to the sight-seeing travel desk. A woman sat behind a counter that was littered with brochures. She was in the midst of helping another gentleman arrange a day trip and didn't make eye contact with Sean.

"You look into the dolphins, and I'll get a coffee." Sara went to leave, but Sean pulled their clasped hands to his chest, positioning them over his heart.

"We stay together. I'm not letting you out of my sight."

"Oh, Sean."

"You don't realize how beautiful you are, do you. Any number of men could whisk you away when I'm not looking."

"They could try."

He smiled at her. Old Man Quinn surely went to heaven. He had left Sean so much more than money—he'd left him with the ability to have the life he had envisioned.

Sara's large sunglasses were perched on top of her head, nestled in a bed of brown curls. She wore a white dress that was strapped at the nape of her neck. Her shoulders were bare and the front resembled the shape of a bikini top, but its length flowed out from beneath her bodice and draped to the floor. Navy blue bangles adorned her wrists and diamonds accented her earlobes. The bangles tied her outfit into Sean's—he wore white shorts with a navy blue striped collared t-shirt.

The man talking to the Mexican woman asked if they

took Visa, and she responded by pulling out the appropriate paperwork. She explained to him, as she took all of his information, that the transaction would be processed at the front desk. She told him to stay seated and that she'd be right back.

Sean pulled Sara tighter to his side and sweat dripped down his back. With the open nature of the resort, the morning heat already kissed the air and the salty trace carried on the breeze induced a type of high.

"We could come back, Sean. Maybe we're not meant to go anywhere today." She swung their arms and he steadied the motion.

As much as he loved to watch her in a bikini, toying in the surf, or lounging by the pool, he wasn't sure he could handle another day of such monotony. He needed to *do* something, and her suggestion of swimming with the dolphins fit that bill.

She smiled up at him. "Ah, never mind. You're attached to the idea."

"You know me too well."

"I always have, hon, but now I don't have to hold back."

The Mexican woman had excused herself to run the man's credit card. After several minutes, Sean was starting to wonder if this was a sign that they should hang around the resort again today.

"We should have asked the Spencers to come with us," Sara said.

"It's probably too late at this point."

As if they sensed her speaking of them, the couple came out of the resort's restaurant, heading in their direction. They both smiled, but Catherine waved and hugged Sara.

"Good to see you guys," she said as if they hadn't seen each other in days.

Catherine tapped a quick kiss to each of Sara's cheeks and then proceeded with hugging and kissing Sean. She smelled of floral perfume and coconut oil. Her bleached-

blond hair was styled just above her shoulders, with long bangs framing her face.

The couple, in their mid-fifties, had both mentioned they'd fallen in love quickly and didn't have to search long for the right one. They were here celebrating their thirtieth wedding anniversary.

Although neither Sara nor Sean had gotten much of their background out of them, they did know the couple owned a business back home in Maine and, based on Catherine's diamonds, weren't hurting financially.

While Catherine seemed eager to discuss her husband's success, Earl preferred to change the subject whenever it came up.

The cop inside Sean found that interesting. Assuming Earl had worked to build his company from the ground up, why not bask in that accomplishment? But Sean knew from his life journey that some people didn't know how to celebrate successes, only mull over failures.

Catherine went back to Sara and held her hand. "What are you two up to today?" Catherine traced a finger around one of her hoop earrings.

"First, let me tell you, I love your outfit." Sara gestured to Catherine's fuchsia-colored bikini wrap dress.

Catherine beamed. "Thank you. How sweet. You look stunning, as always."

A few awkward seconds had passed before Sara picked up on answering Catherine's previous question. She glanced at Sean. "He's taking me to swim with the dolphins."

"Hope that's nothing like swimming with the sharks." Earl chortled. His gray hair, mussed as always had strands going this way and that. His thick mustache and bushy eyebrows were both in need of a good trim. While his wife took care with her appearance, he was dressed down, wearing a white t-shirt and pair of red swim trunks in place of shorts.

"Oh, Earl." Catherine batted a hand toward her husband. "He thinks he's funny. Dolphins. That sounds like fun."

"Would you like to come with us?" Sara extended the invitation.

"We were going to hang out by the pool," Earl said.

"Oh, let's go with them, dear. We've been by that pool every day since we got here. We haven't even ventured out to see any of the ruins."

"There are more than one?" Sara's eyes widened.

Sean watched for the Mexican lady to return. Thankfully, she was on her way now.

"Yes, there are a couple, and from what I understand, several options. I looked into them quickly yesterday, but this stick-in-the-mud said he paid for the resort, why dole out more cash?"

"You make me sound like a penny-pincher, Cathy."

"Aren't you?" She smiled pleasantly at her husband, but the tension sparking between them was hard to miss.

Sean put his arm around Sara. They would never become the Spencers.

"Señor," the Mexican travel woman called Sean over.

Sean addressed Sara. "Ah, darling." He shuffled the few feet to the desk, keeping his hold tight on Sara so she had to move with him.

"So, what do you say?" she asked the Spencers over her shoulder. "Dolphins or the pool?"

"Oh, Earl." Catherine laced her arm through Earl's.

"All right, we can do the dolphins today, but I don't want to go see any ruins. I heard it's a two-hour drive out there. There's a lot of heat and a lot of walking."

"My husband's so fragile." She patted his arm and he scowled at her verbal stab.

Sara grinned. "Sean and I are doing that tomorrow, aren't we, darling?"

"Of course we can."

The woman glanced at Sara and Sean. "Actually, Señor, if you want to see the ruins, you must reserve for Thursday. The bus is already full for tomorrow." Every word she spoke

came out kissed by her Spanish accent.

Sara nodded her head rapidly. "Let's do it, Sean."

He leaned in and whispered into her ear. "It's not the appropriate place or time for *that*, but we could skip the dolphins."

"Sean."

"The shuttle to take you to the boat for the dolphins arrives in twenty minutes. Do you want to make a reservation for today?"

"Yes," Sara answered.

The woman looked at Sean and he nodded in agreement, handing her his credit card. "Run through four tickets for the dolphins and two for the ruins," he said.

"Sean, that's not necessary." Catherine placed a hand on his shoulder.

"Maybe your husband can treat us to a nice dinner when we get back. One outside the resort."

Her face lit into a huge smile. It had her cheeks balled and her eyes glistening with life. "Agreed."

"One moment, por favor." She took Sean's credit card and went off to charge it.

The one thing he noticed with Mexicans was they knew how to take life one thing at a time. They were hard workers, and when they started a task they stuck with it until completion. But what she likely considered a hurried pace to the front counter, back in America would have been a slow saunter.

People passed by while they waited. Sara was an abundance of light. It thrilled Sean that he could make her happy. Catherine didn't stop smiling, but Earl appeared to be uncomfortable. He kept shifting his stance and averted his eyes whenever Sean glanced over.

A woman in a yellow sundress, paired with a large-brimmed white sunhat approached. A gust of wind rushed through, blowing her hat off.

It fell at Earl's feet and they both bent over to pick it up,

knocking heads.

“Oh, my apologies,” she said. Her one hand rubbed her forehead while she reached out for the hat with the other one.

“No prob—”

His words stopped when he straightened out and leveled eyes with her. They retained eye contact for a few seconds until Catherine tugged on her husband’s arm.

Earl let go of the hat. “Here you go.”

“Thank you.” She never returned it to her head but kept it in front of her as she excused herself.

The Mexican woman came back with Sean’s receipt and dug out four tickets from her desk drawer. She handed those to him, along with the two passes he purchased for the Chichén Itzá ruins.

“You may want a one-piece suit.” The travel woman pointed her finger, going up and down Sara. “Sometimes bikinis fall off with the dolphins.”

Earl *tsked*. “They are little perverts.”

Sara turned to Catherine. “All right, I’m going to get a change of clothes.”

“Sounds like a good idea.”

Sara pulled on Sean’s hand. “Darling, please get me a coffee. I’ll make sure you have everything you need too.” Her brows sagged and she pouted.

“Of course.” He smiled.

Her hand filtered from his, then both women hurried toward the elevators, leaving him with Earl. The man may have a business, but he wasn’t a communicator by any means. He only spoke when necessary, and when spoken to, but he was pleasant enough.

“You didn’t have to buy our tickets.” Earl gestured to the travel desk.

“You’re taking us for a nice dinner remember?”

“It might have been cheaper for the tickets.”

Before Sean came into money, he had always spent it

thoughtfully—at least for the most part. He valued return on investment, whether that be intrinsic or entertainment. Some friends termed Sean a spend-thrift, but they hadn't met Earl Spencer.

Squealing brakes echoed through the lobby from the front turnaround. The shuttle was here.

"I better go get that coffee." Sean glanced at the elevator, and as if on cue, it chimed and the doors opened. Both women came out together.

Sara had changed into a pair of black capris and a teal tank shirt. She carried a loaded beach bag over her shoulder and Sean took it from her.

"Thank you, hon."

He lifted it up and down. "What have you got in here?"

"Everything we'll need." Her eyes settled on his hands.

"And my guess, a little more," he said.

"Where's my coffee?"

"Sorry, darling, but we'll have to get something once we're there. The shuttle's already here."

Sara took a deep breath, her gaze carrying a subtle glare. "I hope you're right."

"Oh, come on, darling," he kissed her forehead, "you'll live."

"But you might not." Sara laughed.

"See how cute they are together, Earl. Were we ever like that?"

When Earl didn't answer his wife, Sara did it for him. "Probably cuter."

Catherine smiled. "How sweet."

Sara tugged on Sean's arm. "We better get moving. Oh, I'm so excited. Swimming with the dolphins."

SHE WATCHED THEM WALK OFF with another couple. That had been close. Earl's wife had been right there. She had to be a little more careful about how she handled things. Her heart was getting in the way of her mind.

It thumped in her chest, pounding against her rib cage as if longing for freedom.

She kept glancing over at them until they boarded a shuttle, and then she hurried to the travel desk.

“Excuse me.”

The Mexican woman looked up, the reflection in her eyes telling her she was an intrusion.

She pointed to the shuttle. “Where are they going?”

“Who?”

“Them?” She jabbed her finger. She wished she knew Spanish because at least it would gain her some favor with the Mexicans. They tended to see through her and not give her a second thought.

“The couples,” she said, hoping it would jar a response from the woman.

“To swim with dolphins.”

“I will take one ticket.”

“Many packages available. Do you also want to snorkel? Do you want to add on manatees? Or to swim with seals?”

She took in a deep breath and exhaled slowly. “Just the dolphins.”

“Credit card or cash?”

“How much?”

The woman provided the total and she handed over her credit card. It should have an open balance sufficient to cover the transaction. She had booked the trip on it, but prior to that, it had been at a zero balance. She quickly went over purchases in her mind and realized that everything else she had bought she had paid for in cash.

“One moment.” The woman took her card and went over to the front desk.

Where was she going? Why did everyone move so slowly here?

The shuttle looked like it was getting ready to leave.

Come on. Come on.

The woman came back, extending the plastic. “Declined.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. Try it again.”

“I try three times. Declined.”

She took the card and rummaged through her purse. She had enough cash, but what happened to the available credit on the card? She prayed it didn't mean what she thought it might.

She counted out the bills and handed them to the Mexican woman, who shuffled through each of them, slowly enough that she could have been memorizing serial numbers.

“You do take American currency?”

“Yes.” The woman's eyes never left the cash.

“Please. Hur—”

She glanced over when she heard the *psff* of air. The shuttle doors closed and it was on the move.

“How am I supposed to—”

“Taxi.” The woman handed her a ticket. “It's just a short ride to the boat that will take you to the dolphins.”

She couldn't get out of this country fast enough.

CHAPTER 3

STORMY WATERS

THE DOLPHINS WERE ON ISLA Mujeres and required a twenty-five-minute boat ride through the Caribbean Sea. The boat was a three-decker, including the lower level where passengers entered.

Coming through the doorway, the hull of the ship carried the distinct smell of pastries and coffee. Sara's eyes fired to life. "Thank the heavens."

"Let me get it for you," Sean said.

Catherine waved for Sara's attention. "We'll get a place for us to sit together."

"Okay, sounds good."

Sean poured Sara's cup and got one for himself. She picked up an apple danish and put it on a napkin.

"Carbs for breakfast?" he asked.

"Sean, this is vacation. Calories don't count, and besides, carbs are a popular breakfast form."

"It won't hold you over."

He held back his true feelings. Just the glint in her eyes told him not to press her about food or drink choices—especially before her first cup of coffee.

"I'm sure there's more food where we're going, and right now, I'm more interested in coffee." She bounced on her feet. "Oh, I'm so excited. We're doing something today."

Sean snickered.

"Are you laughing at me, or with me? Be honest. I know you're excited to be getting off the resort too."

"God, yeah."

“Sean.”

“What?”

“Well, that was a little quick.”

He gently guided her over by her elbow and let another couple cram in to get their morning delights. “You know exactly how I feel.” He matched eyes with her.

She smiled and nodded. “I do. Bored. Now, please don’t take it personally, darling.”

“Never.”

“No, really. It’s just we’re used to always being on the go and never slowing down. We’re going on our third week of doing nothing.”

“I know exactly how you feel. I’m dying for some action and adventure. Maybe even a crime to solve.” He rubbed his hands together.

“You’re on vacation in Cancun and dreaming of your old day job? You’ve got to be the first.”

“Can you honestly say you don’t miss it, even a little bit?”

“I miss the purpose and direction.” Sara tore a small corner off the danish and popped it into her mouth.

He wiped away a crumb at the corner of her bottom lip. “I miss bringing closure to families and stopping killers. I’m starting to look at everyone as a suspect.”

She slanted her head to the side. “And what’s the crime?”

“Well, for most of the guys, it’s staring at you.”

“Oh. Punishable by death.”

“It should be.”

She smirked and took a sip of her coffee.

“We should get upstairs with the Spencers. After all, we did invite them along, and it would be rude to hide out somewhere making love.” He put his hands on her hips and pulled her toward him.

She put her cup and pastry on a free corner of the table and draped her arms around his neck. Her fingers caressed his nape and she kissed his lips.

It had him wishing they were back at the resort.

THE SPENCERS WERE AT A table near an open window. Catherine gestured toward two empty chairs—one beside her, the other by her husband. “We left the ones against the glass for you.”

Sara glanced at Sean, and he picked up on her silent communication. She didn’t want to part from his side, but she smiled at Catherine and took the seat beside her.

A few minutes passed before the roar of the engines started and the boat was in motion. The farther out they went, the choppiest the waves became, rocking the boat, kicking up water and foam through the window.

Sean got up to close it.

“Leave it. It’s okay.” Sara was laughing. She licked her lips. “That is so salty.”

“Then, you asked for it.” Sean sat back down.

For being such a lady, he loved Sara’s playful nature. Life was an adventure to her. For him, before he came into money, he tackled life as a list of to-dos that needed crossing off.

Sara giggled every time the boat cut a wave, sending seawater cascading inside. For him, with each heave, he willed his focus on something else. His stomach churned and he was thankful he didn’t have breakfast in there.

“Tell us about your company, Earl.” Sean figured it was a good time to broach the subject, and it would get his mind off the drastic ups and downs.

He swiped at the air. “Nah, I don’t want to bore you with the details.”

“It wouldn’t.”

Earl looked out the window, his aversion to making eye contact ever apparent.

“Let’s talk about the dolphins, darling. Earl came on holidays to get away from work.” Sara didn’t seem to miss Earl’s body language.

Sean wished she hadn’t shot down his efforts to get some personal information from Earl.

Sara’s attention went back out the window. “It’s so beautiful.”

The women started a conversation, but Sean wasn't really listening. He was still curious why Earl went quiet every time business came up.

"The girl's right. This is vacation," Earl added, seconds after he could have let the topic go.

"I was just trying to make conversation."

"Let's talk about you and your new bride then. How did you meet?"

"You know how it is. You find the right one and the rest is history." He paused, studying Earl's eyes. He wasn't going to get caught up in the details and let Earl's attempt at diverting the discussion work. He referred back to Earl's business. "Of course, I didn't mean to pry."

"It's starting to seem like you do."

"Nonsense. I just have a curious mind."

Earl pressed his lips together before turning away and getting up. "Anyone else here interested in a drink? My treat."

"A drink? Earl, it's only eight o'clock in the morning," Catherine chirped in.

"I am fully aware of that, but we are on vacation, are we not?" He hit both hands to his chest and opened his arms wide. "What do you say?"

Sean glanced over at Sara, who shook her head.

"We'll pass, at this time," Sean answered for the both of them.

Catherine gestured toward her husband, then to his chair. "Why don't you sit down? There is plenty of day for drinking."

He ignored the offer and took off in the direction of the bar.

"I apologize for him. He doesn't realize how he comes across sometimes. He's not really a boozier."

"No judgment here at all. Right, Sean?" Sara touched her shoe against his.

"None."

“You two are the sweetest people I’ve met in a long time,” Catherine said.

“Thank you.”

While Sara was being kind, he couldn’t help but think why the topic of business had Earl needing a drink..

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