

**A sample of**  
**VALENTINE'S DAY IS MURDER**  
**by Carolyn Arnold**

A MCKINLEY MYSTERY  
*Valentine's Day  
is Murder*



CAROLYN ARNOLD



Excerpt from *Valentine's Day is Murder* (Book 8 in the McKinley Mystery series)

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## CHAPTER 1

### UNDER THE JAMAICAN MOONLIGHT

FOR A MAN WHO HAD given up on love, dining under the Ocho Rios' moon reaffirmed that all things are possible. Jimmy Voigt sat across from Meredith, a woman who, just a couple months back, had been a stranger. She carried the black evening dress she wore elegantly, its straps loose and dangling over her shoulders. In the candlelight and a beautiful setting such as this, it was hard to resist her. A portion of him didn't even want to try.

"Thank you for taking me with you, Jimmy." She smiled at him, wistfully, as she lifted her wine glass for a toast. "To us."

His lips twitched, but he wasn't sure if the full expression showed—he was terrified of falling in love. He went through with the expected response, though. He *clinked* his glass to hers and watched as softness blanketed her features.

It was the perfect end to a perfect day.

They were both up with the sun and had met by the pool. They had spent the early morning strolling along the shore. With toes in the sand, they had shared whispered jokes and silly stories while the sea air cleared out any stench of the city and melted away stress. Tropical breezes also carried wafts of plant life and flowers.

"The Dunns River Falls was quite the experience."

"You're telling me." He left out the fact that his knees had barked most of the way up. He found himself caring what she thought about him, which was a first since Clara.

While he had tried to put Clara from his mind, his ex-wife had a way of entering his thoughts at random intervals and at the most inappropriate times. He had loved her with his soul, but that hadn't been enough. Maybe it was why he held back now. He feared that if loving someone with his entire being hadn't been enough before, why would it be now? Yet, he had to shake the self-flagellation.

"The best part, though, I must say, was snorkeling. The colors of those fish. Absolutely stunning." Meredith took a sip of her wine.

Jimmy's eyes fell to her slim fingers. When they held hands, they intertwined perfectly with his.

He needed to put the past behind him and leave it there. Sara had told him to open his heart, but he was starting to think it was secured behind reinforced steel doors. Still, he appreciated how far he had come—and not simply in actual mileage, but also in the emotional distance he had traveled to ask Meredith to accompany him to Jamaica. Really, though, what fun was an island without a companion? Still, he wasn't going to rush things and had ensured they had separate rooms.

Taking a long draw on his wine, he appreciated its flavor. He pursed his lips.

"You look mighty deep in thought." Meredith laughed.

"Truth be told, I was." If he allowed his mind to swallow him whole, it would. Enough of the scrutiny and inward reflection. He was determined to enjoy this moment in time—another wise piece of advice from Sara.

He reached across the table for Meredith's hand. As hers molded to his, he had to admit that he felt better than he had in a long time. On some level, he felt more complete. If he had listened to his initial excuses, he wouldn't be here with her. It was with that thought he realized she no longer wore the ring. He pinched his fingers around where it used to be.

She withdrew her hand and placed it on her lap. "You just noticed? I haven't worn it since just before Christmas, but

it was time for me to move on. I have a feeling it is for you too.”

Meredith's husband had cheated on her after twenty years of marriage. She couldn't forgive him. It was an offense Jimmy wasn't sure he could have pardoned either.

Again, the internal talk would have him believe his situation hadn't been the same. That somehow he'd suffered less the way his marriage had ended. All Clara wanted was more of him, yet it was a sacrifice he wasn't able to make. He had continued to put the job first, and in the end, that's all he had. Still, it had resulted in the same outcome as it had for Meredith—two hearts that had once been bound were ripped apart.

“I know you're probably right.” Jimmy tried to smile. He hoped at least a glimmer of it came through. “I've been happy here with you. It's been nice having a friend.” He knew it came out all wrong by the way her face fell and her eyes pinched.

“Yes, it is.” She cleared her throat as she took the napkin from her lap and put it on the table. “If you'll excuse me for a moment.”

As she walked away, he felt like a schmuck, with a capital *S*. Why couldn't he just put his reservations aside? What did he have to lose? His pride? He was certain his heart hung back, despite periodic suspicions to the contrary. All he had to do was breathe in, and breathe out.

His hand went to his neck and he stretched it side to side. It was then he felt a pinch and everything went black.

## CHAPTER 2

### TIME FLIES

SEAN SIPPED HIS ORANGE JUICE as he peered out a window that overlooked the backyard. The morning was overcast and would be downright gloomy if it wasn't for the white blanket of snow clinging to the bushes and the trees. He had an odd realization—how depressing it would be if the snow were black, red, pink, or, essentially, any other color.

He was in the sitting room, with the dark wood trim and piano, both of which Sara had fallen in love with at first sight. She was holed up in her office, a room of the house she had claimed for her writing. He was glad to see that she was back to her craft and taking it more seriously than ever.

This left him with one concern. Valentine's Day. It was a few days away and he wanted to make it memorable for Sara. But it was tough to devise a plan that would surprise the imagination of a novelist. He had given her jewels and a top-of-the-line desktop computer with a large monitor for Christmas.

And if the pressure of a memorable Valentine's Day wasn't enough, the end of this month marked one year since the day he'd proposed—and Sara's birthday. Tagged onto that, the start of March was their wedding anniversary. Time had flown.

The last two months had been particularly busy as they set out organizing their private investigator firm. Obtaining their PI licenses had proven easy, given the advantage of their past experience. They renewed their licenses and

registered a couple semi-automatic handguns. They were ready to go. The only things left were deciding on a name and setting up shop.

Sara came into the room. "Good morning, darling."

"How's the book coming along?"

"Oh, it comes." She went over to him and kissed his forehead, but he tugged her down into his lap, swept his fingers through her hair, and took her mouth.

She put her hand on his chest and pulled back. "Someone's in a great mood this morning."

"You have no idea. I was just thinking about how far we've come and how fast time goes."

Sara let out a puff of breath. "I agree. Can you believe it's almost been a year since we got married? It's unbelievable to me."

"It feels longer?"

She batted his chest and angled her head. "You want me to feed your ego? It's been the best twelve months of my life, Sean."

She pressed her lips to his, and he didn't want the display of affection to end, but the shrill ring of the phone on the side table was enough to disrupt them.

"Let Helen get the phone. Now, where were—" He put his hand to the nape of her neck and drew her to him.

"Sara? Oh, I'm terribly sorry." Helen, their housekeeper, stood in the doorway, her hand beneath her chin, and her eyes screwed up toward the ceiling. Her face was flushed when she looked back at them. "It's for you, Sara."

"Thank you." She reached for the handset while remaining on Sean's lap. "Hello, this is Sara McKinley."

Sean played with her hair, twirling the long chestnut strands around his fingers.

"What do you mean gone?" Her eyes cut to him before she got up, paced a few steps, and stopped. "You have no idea where he is?"

Sean sat straighter and aligned eye contact with her.

“He just disappeared at dinner? And you haven’t seen him since? We’ll be there as fast as we can. Stay put, all right? Everything will be fine.” Sara lowered the receiver to its cradle. She appeared peaked.

Sean took her hand. “What is it?”

“Jimmy. He’s missing.”

“Missing?”

“Yes. Meredith said she’d excused herself to go to the washroom and when she came back, he was gone. They hadn’t even finished their meal.”

“He never came back to the resort?”

Sara shook her head. “What could have happened to him, Sean? I can’t see him leaving her there. Did someone take Jimmy?”

“I don’t know, darling, but we’re going to find out and get him back.”

## CHAPTER 3

### SWEET LANDING

THE HEAT CLUNG TO SARA, making her skin clammy and her breath hitch, as she stepped off the plane.

The pilot, co-pilot, and stewardess were waiting at the base of the stairs. The two men stood straight, with their hands clasped behind their backs. Bethany held hers in front.

Sara smiled at Bethany. There was something familiar about her, but Sara couldn't decide whether she had run into her in the past, or whether the girl just had one of those faces.

"I hope that you found the flight enjoyable," Samuel Reynolds, the pilot, said.

Sean nodded. "If only this trip was for pleasure."

The pilot's eyes held a silent inquiry, but he didn't need to know everything. In fact, they hadn't disclosed their reason for the last-minute getaway, thinking this was a case of the fewer who knew, the better. The flight crew probably assumed it was to celebrate Valentine's Day.

Sara wished it had been a spur-of-the-moment fancy to fly to the island. She slipped her hand into Sean's, and they headed toward the front of the airport with Anthony in tow, carrying their luggage.

When they reached the parking lot, Sean extended an envelope to the co-pilot. "This is for you."

Anthony opened it and fanned the bills. "Sir?"

"You can thank me later. For now, I just want you to enjoy yourself. Book yourself a nice room somewhere, sip piña

coladas, and swim in the sea. Can you handle that?"

"Hmm. Yes, uh-huh."

Sara smiled at the man. While she and Sean hadn't gotten to know their flight crew that well, people worked harder when they felt appreciated.

"Tell Samuel and Bethany that there is a packet for each of them on the glass table."

"Yes, wow, thank—I don't know what to say."

Sean put his hand on Anthony's shoulder. "There's nothing you have to say. Simply have fun. We'll contact you as soon as we're ready to go. You have my number?"

Anthony nodded.

"All right. Welcome to Jamaica." Sean smiled at him and squeezed Sara's hand, but his face fell serious when his back was to his crew member. "Let's just hope the Jamaican adage—no problem—applies to Jimmy's situation."

"Darling, I hope you're right."

"I know. I don't even want to think about anything happening to Jimmy."

THEY HAD TWO OPTIONS FOR travel from the airport to the resort—cram into a bus or rent a driver and a vehicle. The later was a wise choice, although, the ride was bumpy. The sedan needed new shocks and every time the driver touched the brakes, the car pulsated. The sensation would have suited twirling hubcaps quite well.

The trip from the airport to their resort in Ocho Rios was an hour's drive and it took them through the countryside. The landscape was flat with a lot of palm trees and various other plants with wide leaves shadowing the edges of the road. They passed a few resorts, but Sara couldn't imagine staying in any of them when being next to the water was an option.

"Here we are, *sa*." The driver came to a stop in front of the resort and got out. He opened Sara's door, and then went to the trunk for their bags.

Sean tipped the man and he left, a plume of smoke kicking out exhaust in his wake.

The breeze carried the scent of the sea, the salty brine casting a sort of spell over Sara as she breathed in heavily. It was the same for her no matter where they visited. Each locale had a unique smell—even in the tropics, one island differed from another.

Inside the resort, a wall was open and the view of the beach stretched out before them. The aquamarine blue contrasting with the white sands was postcard worthy—if only a photograph could truly capture the beauty of witnessing such scenery firsthand.

Her white dress rippled in the air currents, the fabric teasing her skin as it brushed against her and then swelled, providing temporary relief from the heat.

“Welcome to Ocho Rios.” The female behind the front desk greeted them with a wide grin, showcasing teeth. Her skin, the color of the night, was beautiful.

“Thank you.” Sara smiled at her and glanced at Sean. He seemed about as caught up in the magic of the place as she. His facial features were soft and his eyes electric.

“We have a reservation under McKinley. Sean and Sara,” he said.

“Ah, yes. We were expecting you about now.”

“Please, this way.” A man in his early twenties came up behind them.

Sara hadn't even noticed him until he spoke.

“I will take your bags to your room.” He took the luggage from Sean, but his eyes never left Sara.

Under his intense stare, Sara felt her cheeks burn. She reached for Sean's hand, knowing that island men loved foreign women.

“He will show you to the room,” the woman at the counter prompted the bellhop to move along.

He stopped in front of Sara. “I am Benjamin. That's a Bible name. Pleased to meet you.” He put the luggage down

and extended his hand.

She shook it and found it interesting that he mentioned the Bible. “Sara and this is my husband, Sean.”

Sean had his arm wrapped around her waist and pulled her in toward him.

“All the beautiful ones are married.” The glint in Benjamin’s eyes could have sparked a fire. “This way.”

“Actually, we need to get somewhere.” Sean gave him the name of the resort where Meredith was staying. They had tried to get reservations at the same place, but there were no vacancies.

The smile on Benjamin’s face fell as he looked at the woman behind the counter.

“You need to go there?” she asked.

“Yes, we need to visit a friend.”

“Oh.” The toothy grin showcased again. “Benjamin will take your bags to your room and I will get you a ride.”

“Thank you.”

“No problem.”

## CHAPTER 4

### PINEAPPLES & ALIBIS

JIMMY HAD DONE ALL RIGHT for himself in choosing this resort. It wasn't quite as luxurious as Sean and Sara's had appeared to be, but it was beautiful nonetheless. Sean didn't think it possible to be unhappy in Jamaica—at least as a tourist.

From the little he had already seen, Jamaicans were a hardworking bunch, and to the islanders, even the average-income earner in the United States was wealthy by comparison. Not wanting to flaunt their affluence, they had packed comfortable clothes, but not their high-ticket wardrobe items.

He only wished they were here for leisure and not for the purpose of finding their friend.

The thought that Jimmy had up and left Meredith was not a possibility based on the man's character. He was simply incapable of such an insensitive act. No, if he had disappeared, it wasn't by choice. That left the question that begged for an answer. Who would want to harm Jimmy, and, by extension, who in Jamaica? He and Sara had talked about it on the flight over, but until they got him back safely, Sean was certain he would be their ongoing topic of conversation.

Sara held his hand as they headed inside the resort. "I can hardly believe why we're here. It feels like a nightmare I want to wake up from."

"I know exactly what you mean. We'll start with Meredith,

get some more information out of her, and go from there.”

“We have to get him back, Sean.”

“We will.” He felt the tightness in his jaw. There was no other option. He couldn’t imagine a time when Jimmy was no longer around.

“THERE WAS NO ANSWER IN her room. She may be out by the pool.” The front desk clerk lowered the phone’s receiver and gestured toward a wall of windows that faced a pool, and, beyond that, the sea.

“Thank you,” Sean said.

“No worries.” The clerk smiled and flipped some papers over that she had been working on when they had approached her to call up to Meredith’s room.

Tourists, clad in bathing suits in a spectrum of colors, dotted both the poolside and the beach. It had Sara wishing all she and Sean had to do was enjoy the scenery.

The sun was beating down, the warmth all-encompassing, but thankfully, the humidity wasn’t extreme. Sara still wished to slip out of her dress to reveal the bikini she wore underneath. The thought of the rays kissing her skin was almost too much to dismiss from her mind.

She scanned the horde of vacationers and spotted Meredith lying out on a lounge chair. She sat up as if she sensed Sara watching.

“There she is, Sean.” Sara nudged her head toward Meredith.

“She doesn’t look too upset, does she?”

Sara put a hand on Sean’s shoulder. “We’re not going to assume she’s behind this.”

He stayed put. “She’s not behind this and yet she’s new to his life and he’s never gone missing before.”

“We promised each other on the flight that we would give her the benefit of the doubt unless something came up to convince us of her involvement.”

“I’m starting to rethink that decision.”

"If Jimmy trusted her—"

"Yes, then we should too."

"That's right." Sara pressed her lips, hoping she conveyed more conviction than she felt at times—this being one of those times.

"Sean and Sara." Meredith leaned in to kiss Sara's cheek. She smelled of coconut lotion and sand. Her flesh was warm to the touch. "I'm so happy to see you two. How was your flight?"

"It was good. This is a beautiful resort." The words came out and Sara sensed Sean's impatience with the small talk, but if Meredith was innocent, then it would calm her nerves.

Meredith wrapped a cover-up around herself and tied the fabric belt before sticking her hands in the pockets. "We can talk over here." She led them to a patio table with an umbrella. It was prime real estate, but the majority were interested in sunbathing, not seeking shelter.

A server in a black-and-white uniform came to them once they were seated. "Can I get you anything?"

"I'd love water," Sara said.

"Water?" A smile lifted his mouth. "No piña colada or mojito? Come on, miss, you are in Jamaica." His country's flavor kissed his accent.

It was hard to resist the temptation to have a drink, but they had to keep their heads about them if they would find Jimmy. "Water will be just fine. Sean?"

"I'll have the same."

"All right, but you will regret it." The server slid his glance to Meredith. "And you?"

Meredith looked at Sean and Sara. "I hope you won't think less of me."

"Nonsense," Sara said.

"In that case, I'll have a piña colada."

"I will be right back with your drinks."

With the server gone, Meredith leaned on the table and let out a jagged sigh. "It's been so hard, sitting around,

waiting, wondering what happened to him. My mind keeps coming up with worst-case scenarios. I hate it.”

Sara reached for Meredith’s hand and caressed the back of it. “Unfortunately, it’s a natural reaction, given the circumstances.”

“You know, I just thought that I may have found love, that I could trust someone again.”

“I can assure you that Jimmy didn’t abandon you of his own free will.”

“So, you do believe someone took him?”

“We have no doubt of that,” Sean said.

“Who would want to do something like that? And why here? Why now?”

Sara’s mind ruminated on what Meredith had just said. Every one of her questions were good—ones she and Sean had as well—and they required answers. Her cop instincts made her realize that if Meredith was behind Jimmy’s disappearance somehow, the timing and location would have been ideal. Meredith would be an unlikely suspect, and acting far away from home would make her appear innocent. Or was it that simple? Did she call them to give that impression, to mislead them?

“We will find out.” The words sliced from Sara’s throat.

“Tell us more about last night. Was anyone watching you two?” Sean asked.

The waiter returned with their drinks. He pointed to Meredith’s and spoke to Sara. “See how good it looks.”

Sara didn’t need to look at it—the heavenly scent of pineapple and rum had her salivating enough. “I’m fine. Thank you.”

“As you wish. No problem, beautiful lady.” He left them, saluting to Sara as he withdrew.

Meredith plucked the wedge of pineapple from her glass as if she were going to eat it, but dropped it into her drink instead. “The day had been wonderful, full of adventure. To end it by dining at that fine restaurant, I was on a high. I

might have said too much about letting go of the past and opening up to the future. I think I scared him off.”

“Like we said, there’s no way he’d leave you,” Sean added.

Meredith nodded at Sean. “I want to believe it here,” she tapped her heart and then her head, “but here I wonder.”

“You’ve been hurt before.” Sara made the observation. There was no question enclosed. Meredith’s history was etched into her eyes.

“I have.” She took a sip of her drink.

Sara reached for her water, envious of Meredith’s beverage, but there would be plenty of time for that once they got Jimmy back safely.

“Would your ex know about Jimmy?” Sean leaned forward and rolled up his three-quarter-length sleeves.

“You mean would he come after Jimmy? I highly doubt it. He never fought for me before.”

Sara knew where Sean was going with this. Things were different now. Jimmy had them, and they had money. “Have you heard anything? Received a ransom call?”

“No. I would feel better if I had.”

“You would feel better?”

“At least I’d know he was okay, that there was a possibility of his return. Right now, it’s hard to believe—” Meredith’s chin quivered and tears beaded in her eyes.

Sara placed a hand on her forearm. “We will get him back. That’s what we do.”

“I know. Thank heavens. I just hope that this has nothing to do with me.”

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