

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

A MCKINLEY MYSTERY

*Christmas
is Murder*



CAROLYN ARNOLD



Excerpt from *Christmas is Murder* (Book 7 in the McKinley Mystery series)

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CHAPTER 1

“WINTER WONDERLAND”

THE SNOW WAS COMING DOWN as if it were a Hollywood movie set. The flakes were large and falling steady, casting enchantment over the ever-forming winter wonderland. It was the perfect day to pick a tree, and Sara was thankful for her father's recent purchase of a pickup. She and Sean never would have strapped a tree to their Mercedes.

Her parents themselves came part-and-parcel in exchange for the use of their truck, which for Sara only made things more ideal. After all, the holidays were about family, and Sara wouldn't have it any other way.

Her thoughts briefly traced to Beth, her birth mother's sister. She would have loved to have her come along, but she was having a hard time adjusting to a new medicine her doctors had started her on. Although, they figured she'd be good enough to take part in the festivities by the time Christmas arrived. It was a compromise Sara was willing to make. It was better to have her for the actual celebration than for the preparation.

“Darling, this one is perfect.” Sara rushed over to the evergreen, dragging Sean along with her. She let go of his hand and caressed its foliage with her mitts.

He leaned down and rubbed his nose against hers. “I agree.”

“Oh, Sean.” She pulled back, a full-fledged smile on her face. “I can already see it in front of the main window.”

“The window?”

“Where else would it go?”

“I was thinking next to the fireplace.”

She visualized the setting. Stockings hanging from the mantle, with a red carpet, for the season, was spread in front of the gas fireplace and presents overflowing beneath the tree. She had to concede to his idea. “Yes. It would look good there.”

“You doubted me.”

“No, I...” She giggled. “Never.”

“Uh-huh.”

“Sara? Sean?” Her mother, Jeannie, came over to them, grinning. “We found ours, and I see you’ve chosen yours too.”

“Yeah, isn’t it wonderful?” Sara gestured to the tree and realized how fortunate she was. She was truly blessed in every possible manner. She had the man she loved, the house of her dreams, more money than she could ever spend, and adoptive parents who loved her as their own blood—and she loved them right back.

“We better get heading out, sweetheart. Your father has his poker night.”

Sean glanced at his watch. He must have noticed the inquiry in Sara’s eyes. “It’s six.”

“Oh, the time has gotten away from us.” Sara put her arm around her mother’s, leaving Sean to follow them.

A female voice called out from a short distance away. “Jeannie, is that you?”

“Margaret? How nice to see you again.” Her mother left her side and embraced the older woman coming toward them.

Margaret pulled back and looked at Sara and Sean. “And this must be—”

“It is. Sara, this is your neighbor.” Her mother tapped the back of Margaret’s hand. “I’m sorry, dear, I forgot your last name.”

“Margaret Wilson but Maggie will do just fine.” She

extended her gloved hand toward Sara.

Sara shook her hand.

Sean followed suit as he carried out a more formal introduction. "Sean McKinley and this is my wife, Sara."

Maggie batted her hand in the air. "Oh, yes, dear heavens, I know the both of you."

Sara's memory was flawless, and she could swear she had never seen the woman before. But she was brought up better than to embarrass anyone, let alone someone older than her, so perhaps it was best to go along as though she knew this Margaret woman.

Maggie smiled pleasantly at Sara, then let it linger a moment longer for Sean. "You may have misunderstood. We've never met."

Sara glanced at her mother for an explanation.

"Sweetheart, we met Maggie when you were in Europe."

"Europe is such a beautiful place. Everyone should go at least once." Maggie's blue eyes sparkled.

Sara and Sean had spent a few months in Europe, visiting many of the popular landmarks. They even wandered off the beaten path, as it were, and ventured into territory that didn't lure tourists with commercialism. It was on these adventures that they met some terrific people.

While they were away, her parents had stayed at Sara and Sean's house for a few nights, when their friend Jimmy couldn't. Between the three of them, their estate was left in good hands. Yet another aspect to be grateful for.

"I apologize that we haven't been over to meet you," Sara offered.

"Nonsense. I know you two have been busy. Living in a whirlwind, I'm sure. In the papers, on TV—going to Europe." Maggie threw in a wink with her last words.

An older man trudged through the snow. His winter boots were lined with fur that spilled over the tops, and he wore leather mitts and a lumberman's hat with ear flaps. "Where did you get off to, woman?" He seemed to realize

he'd interrupted a conversation and hung back a few feet. "My apologies. Jeannie, nice to see you again." His gaze passed from Sara's mother to Sara, and then to Sean.

Her mother gave Sara a motherly look that silently disciplined her for not knowing her neighbors. Sara supposed things had changed quite a bit since her mother was young. As much as she considered herself and Sean to be outgoing, they had the constraints of time and a busy life—Mrs. Wilson had been spot on with her observation. Things had been a whirlwind. Sara hadn't even returned to a semblance of the life she'd had before marrying Sean. She had scribbled in a journal in Europe and had added to the word count in a novel she was determined to finish, but she hadn't kept up with checking the obituaries—a hobby that Sean teased her for, saying it was morbid.

"I'm Sean, and this is Sara." Sean shook hands with the elderly man and gestured toward Sara.

She followed her husband's lead. "It's nice to finally meet you. Which house is it that you live in?"

"Number seventeen twenty-five."

"Ah, the red brick colonial."

"Impressive memory on your girl here, Jeannie." Maggie nudged her mother's elbow.

"She always did have that."

"Why don't we all go back to the house for a hot chocolate?" Sara figured she could make up for lost time.

"We could, but I don't think I have any," Maggie said.

"No, Mrs. Wilson, I meant for you and your lovely husband—sorry, what was your name, sir?"

"Sir? She has a memory and is the most polite person I've ever met." He bobbed his head toward her mother. "That confirms a terrific upbringing."

Was this older man hitting on her mother? Where was her dad anyway? He had been in such a hurry to leave.

The man smiled at Sara. "My name is Elbert."

"Well, Elbert, Sean and I would be honored if you and

your lovely wife came back to our house for hot chocolate.”

“I don’t know, dear. As nice as that sounds, it’s best we stay in after a certain hour.” Maggie rubbed her husband’s arm.

He pulled it out of her reach. “She thinks I’m old, you know that?” He shook his head. “I’m still a young man, at least I feel like one.” He wrapped his arms around his wife.

“Elbert, please, not in front of—”

“Jeannie, we have to leave.” Sara’s dad came to the clearing and his face was panicked. One thing he detested was tardiness.

“We’re coming.”

“I’ve already paid—for both trees. Sean, help me load this one up, would you? I had an employee take ours to the truck,” he explained.

“Of course.” Sean smiled at Sara before working with her dad to hoist the tree off the ground.

“We better get going too.” Maggie smiled pleasantly. “We probably should have just hired someone to take care of all this.”

Elbert batted the air. “Nonsense. When we were young, we took care of it ourselves.”

“Yeah, in the old days, dear. Before the decorating shops opened up to cater to the rich. Speaking of, I’m surprised to see you two here.”

Sara had heard rumors about these types of shops, but before this year their existence mattered little to her. Decorating was done as a family. On top of that, the financial portfolio never used to justify paying someone else to handle the matter.

“It’s really a family holiday isn’t it, Margaret?” Sara’s mother smiled.

“Please, just call me Maggie. Margaret sounds so proper.” She gave Sara’s mother another squeeze. “Please visit sometime. You have our number?”

“I do.”

The older couple walked away, leaving Sara to face her mother.

“You really should get to know your neighbors, sweetheart. You never know when it might come in handy.”

CHAPTER 2

“MARSHMALLOW WORLD”

FLAMES WERE DANCING IN THE fireplace, adding warmth to the room. The Rat Pack was crooning over the speaker system, and the snow was coming down harder than before, transforming Albany into a picturesque landscape. Maybe she should experience guilt for having everything so perfect, but at this moment, Sara simply appreciated every nuance.

Her parents had pulled their truck into the garage to protect their tree and had taken up the offer of hot chocolate she'd extended to them and the Wilsons. Her dad had to be convinced to forego his poker night but, surprisingly, he did it with little protest. It was probably because he'd rather not show than be late.

She and her mom were snuggled on the sofa in front of the bay window while Sean and her dad struggled to get their tree upright and in place. Sara held back her amusement—for a small evergreen it came with big issues.

“Voila!” Her dad stood back, his arms flailed out, admiring his hard work.

Her mother put her hand on Sara's forearm. “You have your tree.”

“I do.” Those two words managed to form aloud, but her emotions were tapping at the back of her jaw. For a relatively simple thing, it warmed her soul more than the hot beverage. This would be her first time celebrating Christmas with Sean.

She got off the sofa and sauntered over to him. She

slipped her arms around her husband and kissed his lips, passionately, but briefly.

“I think she likes it, dear.”

She heard her dad talking to her mom and pulled back, smiling. She palmed her cheeks. “It’s beautiful.”

“We better get going. I think it’s time these two go to bed.”

“Dad!”

Sean was smirking like he was fond of her father’s idea and ready to act on the parental advice. She, on the other hand, was mortified.

“Come on, Leon. You’re embarrassing the child.” Sara’s mom leaned in and kissed her cheek.

“Thank you.” Sara snickered now and hugged her dad. “Take care of each other. Drive safe in this weather.”

“We will.”

Sara watched from the front window as they left. The snow had eased up somewhat, but the flakes were large. She blew them a kiss as they pulled out of the drive. It was a tradition, something her family had always done when another member was leaving.

“So, darling, would you like to get started on the tree or take up on your father’s advice? Myself, personally...” Sean came behind her, nuzzled into her neck, and nibbled on an earlobe.

She wrapped her arm back and over his head, before turning to face him. “Are you sure you want to hear my answer?”

“Must you always start off playing hard to get?”

“Not always.” She leaned forward to kiss him but stopped when sirens rocked the house. Any flashing lights that would have accompanied them were diluted due to the snow and the distance of their house from the road.

Sara put her hand on Sean’s chest and he drew back.

He looked out the window. “Fire trucks. It’s probably nothing, Sara.”

There was that feeling whelming up within her gut. Something terrible had happened. Was it her parents?

“Please, darling.” She grabbed her mobile phone off the coffee table and dialed her mother’s cell. “Pick up. Pick up.”

Sean was watching her with wide eyes. She wasn’t sure if he suspected something was terribly wrong too, or if it was her adrenaline getting him going.

Three rings. No answer.

She felt the blood drain from her face. Her legs buckled beneath her.

“Sara.” Sean rushed the few feet to her and helped her right her balance. “What is it?”

Four rings.

“Something awful has hap—”

Voice mail.

“Mom, as soon as you get this message, call me.”

“Sweetheart?” Sean put his hands on her arms as she lowered the phone.

The sirens had stopped. They hadn’t gone that far down the street.

“We have to—” She took his hand and led him to the door. “Mom didn’t answer her cell. You know how I get feelings sometimes?” Her eyes pleaded with him. “I have one now. Those fire trucks were for someone we know.”

“You’re thinking your parents were in an accident?”

“I don’t know, Sean, but I need to find out.” She pulled her coat from the hook and slipped into her boots. Sean dashed into the garage after her.

She inhaled the air. “I smell fire.”

“Me too.”

They ran out of the bay and stopped, standing there for several seconds, as if frozen to their driveway, noses to the wind, snowflakes melting on their skin.

“The Wilsons,” she said.

They rounded the bend and had a relative line of sight to their neighbor’s property. Only partially obscured by bare

tree branches, it was easy to discern the swirling of colored lights.

She trudged through the snow, ignoring Sean's pleas behind her. The sky was full of billowing gray smoke and it propelled her all the more. She reached the Wilsons' drive, nearly spilling onto it from her forward momentum.

A couple firemen were spraying through the main window. The rumble of the fire engine and the water pump added to the nightmarish scene.

"Sara." Sean became motionless, and speechless when his eyes fell on what was before them.

"The Wilsons?" She took one step, but Sean held her arm.

"You can't go in there, darling." The desperation in his eyes said it all—it wasn't safe or practical.

"Excuse me. We're going to have to ask you to leave." A uniformed man approached them. The label on his hat read *Chief*.

"Are they okay? Was anybody hurt?"

A voice came over his radio and indicated the blaze was coming under control.

The chief nodded to Sara and gestured for them to move back.

For some reason, even though he answered in the affirmative, with a nod, she sensed it had more to do with directing them to the side than denoting good news.

"Who are you two?"

"I'm—" Her voice was shaky and Sean took over.

"We're the McKinleys, from next door. Sean and Sara."

"What caused the fire?" Sara asked.

"This time of year we get a lot of calls." He gestured to the Christmas lights that dangled from the Wilsons' eaves like eerie shadows, carrying haunting memories of happier times.

"The Wilsons, are they—"

Plumes of smoke exited the front window. The firemen kept spraying.

The chief's crease lines took on sharp edges. His mouth fell into a straight line. "I'm sorry to say this, but they didn't make it."

"Oh, darling." Sara turned toward Sean and he held her tight.

"What happened?" Sean asked.

"They were both found in the living room. They were rushed away immediately, but the call came en route to the hospital. For what it matters, I don't think they suffered. I think they were asleep on the couch when the fire started and died from smoke inhalation."

Even though her back was to the man, Sara sensed his heart was broken over the situation. She imagined his gaze on her.

"Well, you don't need all the details." His gravelly voice confirmed her suspicion.

"I assume there will be an investigation into the cause of the fire," Sean said.

Sara straightened and turned to face the chief, her shoulder remained tucked under Sean's armpit, their torsos as close as possible with their bulky winter coats.

"It's standard protocol."

"Did they have any family? People—"

"Mrs. McKinley, arrangements for the notification is being made as we speak."

"We just met them this afternoon." The statement fell as a guilty confession, remorse over not knowing them underscored every word.

"They have a daughter who lives in town."

"Please, what is her name?"

"I'm sorry, but I can't tell you that."

Sean tightened his hold on Sara. "We understand, Chief—I'm sorry, what is your name?"

"Harold Fox."

"*We got it,*" a voice called over the radio.

The men, who were spraying the front, turned the water

off and lowered the hose. The smell of fire clung to the air. The snowfall that had earlier cast a magical spell had taken on the weight of loss and sadness.

CHAPTER 3

“BLUE CHRISTMAS”

“I CAN’T BELIEVE THEY’RE GONE.” Sara was on the couch beneath a blanket.

“I know how you feel, darling.” He watched her as she took a sip of her cognac. There was nothing one could do to ease the pain that came with loss—the only remedy was time.

“We never even got a chance to know them. We should meet our other neighbors, Sean.”

He nodded. There was nothing to say to that. Now wasn’t the time. He was happy to see that she remained sitting and didn’t get up to act on it.

His eyes traced to their tree. To think, only hours ago, the room was filled with laughter. Everything was going right in the world. He was even enjoying the snow, which typically held more appeal for Sara than him.

Sara’s cell vibrated across the table and she answered.

He could tell it was Jeannie from this side of the conversation. She and Leon had made it home fine. He picked up on the excited pitch of Jeannie’s voice over the line. She must have been telling Sara about how they got their tree all set up.

The curve of Sara’s lips fell, a somber expression washed down her face. Listening to her share the news about the Wilsons drilled an ache into his heart. Sara had taught him that everyone was connected, and, whether people wished to believe that or not, it was the truth.

She hung up and faced him. "I just wish there was more we could do."

"There's no way the fire chief is going to hand over their daughter's name."

"I know how to get that, Sean, but it will require a bit of waiting."

He recalled the habit of Sara's that he found particularly strange, but it made her unique and it did, at times, serve a purpose. If it hadn't been for this pastime of hers, he might not have heard about Mr. Quinn in time to pay his respects at the funeral. That man was responsible for all the good that had come into his life—and, by extension, Sara's. "Their obituaries?"

She nodded. "I just wish I knew what caused the fire, you know what I mean?"

"Your detective nature at it again?"

"I guess so. It's probably just because I don't want to accept how they were here one minute and gone the next."

"Darling, you and I should know, more than most, that's how life works—for better or worse."

"Yes." She peered into his eyes.

If he had superhuman capabilities to shelter her from all the injustices of the world, he would. Sadly, that was something even all his riches couldn't buy.

"Chief Fox said that he'd update us on their findings. It's nice that he's doing that." Sean recalled the man's hesitancy in making that agreement, but he had complied, stating that it wouldn't be until the next of kin was notified. "I believe he'll follow through. He seems like a good man."

"I agree. Do you think it was an accident, Sean?"

He swept her hair back. "Always the detective, aren't you?"

"I can't help it."

"In this case, I think we need to accept that a terrible accident occurred."

"I think you're right. I mean who would want to kill those two? They were sweethearts, at least I got that feeling."

“So did I.”

Sara rose from under the blanket and flicked off the fireplace. “It’s time to follow my father’s advice from earlier in the evening.”

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