

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

A MCKINLEY MYSTERY

*Shopping
is Murder*



CAROLYN ARNOLD



Excerpt from *Shopping is Murder* (Book 6 in the McKinley Mystery series)

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CHAPTER 1

SHOPPING 'TIL IT HURTS

SARA LOVED THE HOLIDAYS, but she was one “Silent Night” away from running out of the mall in search of a glass of cognac. She glanced over at Sean. He was weighed down with their spoils and trailed along beside her—bags over both shoulders, boxes perched precariously under his arms.

The odd capture of his facial expression, including the pressed-on smile, made it clear that he was beyond ready to call it a day. He was pushing through for her. Maybe it wouldn't have been such a bad idea to forego the deals of Black Friday. After all, it's not like money was a concern.

Sean had tried to reason with her about the crowds, but she refused to listen. He even suggested hiring someone to take care of the shopping. She hadn't considered his suggestion, opting for the personal touch of buying the gifts for family and friends themselves.

“That's not something you delegate.” The statement was meant in sincerity—at the time. Now she was asking herself what she'd been thinking, and it was obvious she hadn't been.

“Just one more stop, darling,” she said to reassure him the retail torture was almost over.

“Isn't that what you said a few ago now?”

“I know, darling, but it's important to me.” She led him into a lingerie shop.

“And to think, I was going to say one more store, I might kill myself.” He smiled at her as she dropped the packages

she carried and reached for a silk number on a storefront display rack.

Sara let the strap of the negligee slip from her fingers. "You would think, of all places, you'd be happy in here."

"That's why I said *I was going to say*." He came up close behind her, his warm breath cascading across her neck. "Why are we doing all of this today anyway? We've been at it for hours already."

"I just want to get everything in one swoop."

"Everything?"

She nodded.

"Christmas gifts for your family, our friends at PD, Jimmy, Adam. You plan on buying for everyone today?" He adjusted the bags he held.

"Don't forget the new friends we met in Europe."

"Ah, yes, how could I forget Leo and Valerie?"

"And Pierre." She offered a smile.

"Of course."

Leo and Valerie ran a bed and breakfast in France called *La Villa Château*. They'd met them on a day trip into the countryside when they'd happened into the quaint B&B.

Pierre was the couple's quirky friend who had shown up years ago and never left. They had ended up hiring him and never looked back. He was an excellent chef and had proven to be a tremendous asset to their marketing campaign.

Pierre had given Sara recipes and pointers to take back home with her. She had tried a couple, but they never turned out the way they had when she worked by Pierre's side. She wondered if Sean would dare gift her cooking lessons—she'd never seemed to arrange for any herself.

She smiled over at him.

"What?"

"It's just that you're being so good about all of this."

He blinked and turned his head to the right, his jaw angled slightly upward. He was trying to hide his guilt, but she could see through it. "Yes, I know you've been whining."

“Me? Whining? No—”

Horrific screams reached into the store, drowning out the holiday merriment spreading over the speakers.

Sara raced out of the store, knowing from her days as a cop they could only mean one thing—someone was dead.

CHAPTER 2

CROWDED

SEAN FOLLOWED SARA IN THE direction of the shrill cries. She had left all her bags behind, and he had done the same, letting them fall to the floor of the lingerie store before scampering to catch up.

The second floor of the mall was crowded with shoppers—people of all sizes, ages, and genders—but instead of making a beeline for the next store, they had all come to a standstill alongside the railing.

A middle-aged woman turned around, covering her mouth. Her eyes were watery, but her pallor threatened more than distress. She was going to be sick.

Sean brushed a few people aside to make room for her to pass through. She gave him a silent thank you, reflected in her irises. There was desperation to her aura. She didn't have any time to spend on pleasantries.

Sean watched after her for a second, and in that amount of time the small opening in the crowd had been swallowed whole. There had to be at least ten to fifteen people between him and the railing.

He already had a good idea as to what happened. He surveyed the crowd and located Sara. She was worming her way through the mass of people toward the banister. It was as if she were being pulled by a force greater than herself. She expertly maneuvered, side-stepping left or right as need be. He hurried to make his way to her, but there was no getting through—elbows halted his attempts to make

headway.

SARA'S HEART HAMMERED IN HER CHEST. She knew what she would face once she reached the railing, but something from within propelled her forward with a burst of desperation. There was no logical explanation for it, but sometimes reasoning was easy to discredit. This was one of those times.

She saw her opening ahead. Only two men and one woman stood in her way. The one man towered over her, easily more than six and a half feet tall. His girth was further extended by the large bags he held in his hands. The second man was smaller by comparison, but still more expansive than her petite frame. He wore a wool overcoat and had a small bag in one hand.

The woman was bathed in perfume, the musky overture strong and overbearing.

Sara stifled a cough. "Excuse me."

The woman, a brunette, shot her a glare and nudged her shoulder farther to the left, right into Sara's path.

"Excuse me," Sara repeated.

No reaction.

Sara put a hand on the woman's shoulder. The brunette turned, ready to punch her, but Sara had anticipated the reaction and caught the woman's flying fist with her hand.

"Albany PD." It was a stretch of the truth, but not an outright lie—more of an implication.

"You're a police officer?" The woman's eyes darted up and down Sara's wardrobe.

It made Sara self-conscious of her Jimmy Choo's and Louis Vuitton handbag—an odd reaction as these items should never conjure that level of scrutiny.

Sara shrugged with open hands. "I don't have any packages, do I?"

The brunette ran a hand down Sara's purse, letting her fingers linger on the leather longer than Sara would have

liked, but whatever worked.

The crowd was getting thicker by the moment. Security was slow to respond and those who had had been ineffectual against the mass of people.

“Nice handbag for a cop,” the woman said.

“Yes, yes, it is. Please, I need to get by you.”

The woman leveled eyes with her momentarily before stepping to the side.

The two men had squeezed shoulder to shoulder, having been bucked by the crowd during Sara’s interaction with the woman. She placed a hand on each of them. Both moved over when they saw her.

“Thank you.”

“Don’t mention it,” the large guy said.

The smaller man didn’t say anything, but Sara felt him leering at her.

She reached the railing and looked down. Just as she had expected, someone had fallen to their death. A man’s body lay twisted at the bottom of the escalator, his bags and items strewn across the floor. The angle of his head confirmed the fall had rendered a fatal blow.

What she hadn’t expected was to see her childhood friend Nicole Hill below, struggling with mall security and screaming, “That’s my husband.”

CHAPTER 3

LIFE'S DETOUR

SARA HAD FOUGHT TO REACH the railing and, now that she had, she was ready to reverse course. She had to get down to Nicole.

A man's hand laid flat on her shoulder and she gasped. The contact pulled her from her thoughts. When she turned, she came face to face with Sean.

"Are you okay, darling?" he asked.

She took a deep breath, prepared to say yes, but instead she shook her head. Tears beaded in the corners of her eyes and her mouth became dry. She swallowed roughly.

"I know his wife." She managed to get the few words out but giving birth to them confirmed the tragedy that had come to a childhood friend. Even though years and life decisions had separated them, Sara still felt a connection to Nicole. She dared to meet Sean's eyes. "I have to go..." She communicated the rest through rushed finger gestures.

He took her hand and led her through the crowd. It was starting to thin out a bit, but outcries from various people still cut through the air. For the most part, though, the cacophony vibrated with the collective buzz of "I can't believe what happened."

Police had arrived and, along with mall security, they steered anyone in the area down a back hallway toward some offices.

They would be cordoning off the area and would need to preserve potential witnesses and suspects. Until the man's

death could be confirmed suicide or accidental, it would be treated as a homicide, with the utmost care and due diligence.

She took the steps toward the escalator to go down but was stopped by Officer Salone. “Sean and Sara?” Concern swept over his face. “Were you here when it happened?” He pointed toward the main level.

Sean wrapped his arm around Sara’s waist and she was thankful for his touch—and his strength. At that moment, her legs may have given out beneath her if not for his hold on her. She angled her head, trying to see through the thinning crowd. Beyond a man, who was being guided by a police officer, she could see through to the mezzanine. She saw Nicole.

Shopping bags were still flung over her shoulder, but she was sobbing. Two officers, Barrett and Cornell, consoled her.

Sara remembered their names, but it was more than her pristine memory. She would carry her brothers and sisters in blue with her always. They were woven into the fiber of her being.

“Sara?”

The strain in Sean’s voice when he called her name told her that he had tried to get her attention a few times already without luck.

“Yes, sorry.” She tore her eyes from Nicole.

Salone pointed a pencil toward her friend. “Sean was just telling me that you know her.”

“I do.” She took a few steps, but Sean grounded her.

“Sweetheart, you know the drill.”

She spun to face him, her defiance melting away when she saw concern lacing his features. She did know “the drill” all too well. In fact, she’d still be executing that drill if it hadn’t been for fate stepping into their lives and paving a path of gold.

“Fine, but after we give our statement, I’m talking to

Nicole. She needs me right now.”

Sean pulled her head to his chest, brushed back her hair, and kissed her forehead. “I wouldn’t expect anything less.”

CHAPTER 4

TOM SELLECK'S DOUBLE

SEAN WISHED HE COULD STRIP away the pain in Sara's eyes. Despite having never heard of Nicole before today, it was apparent that she had, at one time, held a special spot in his wife's heart. He ensured that Salone had secured their packages from the lingerie store before he and Sara followed after everyone else.

If only they had stayed in Europe a while longer. It would have saved Sara from facing this tragedy. The thought passed through his mind and, just as quickly, he passed judgment and chastisement. Naivety wasn't a better alternative. Only if this man's death had been prevented would things be better off.

Officer Ramsey stood outside the door to an office space. "Sean? I thought you guys would pay someone to shop for you."

"Not now, Barry." Sean's words were polite yet firm. He tightened his hold on Sara, but affectionately—she felt fragile beneath his touch as if a crumbling pie crust held together by sugar and love.

Barry's eyes drifted to Sara, but he didn't say anything to her.

Sean's protective arm around her must have safeguarded her from his bombardment. He guided her into the room. At least thirty to fifty people were already there. Different scents fought for dominance—sweat, tobacco, the hint of alcohol, colognes, and perfumes. Combined, they created

the perfect elixir for a migraine.

Many were talking among themselves, some were crying, while others appeared in a state of shock that rendered them mute. One man was huddled in a far corner, rubbing at his face, exposing dark body ink on his wrist.

Officers Carr and Foster were making the rounds, collecting statements and personal information in case anyone needed to be contacted for further questioning.

Sean flagged Foster down, and the officer came over. Foster was string-bean thin by any determination. His lanky torso combined with his dangling arms and scrawny legs resembled the roots of a Banyan tree.

“Hey, Sean. Sara.”

Sara attempted a smile that saw the corners of her mouth lifting slightly. “Scott.”

Scott Foster dragged his focus from Sara to Sean. Despite appearances, this officer was always on top of his game. He knew that something was wrong. “I can take your statement now if you’d like.”

“Scott, anything we can do to speed the process along. Sara knows the victim’s wife.”

Full revelation dawned on Foster’s face. “Oh. Sorry to hear that, Sara.”

“It’s not your fault. I just need to see her, and help if I can.”

Sean wished she hadn’t let that last part slip, although he supposed it was in her nature. Maybe he was being paranoid. To help didn’t necessarily imply investigating. Still, he wondered about her intentions.

Their adventures abroad had been satisfying and non-eventful—at least when it came to dead bodies and murders to solve. Now they were home, he wondered if they’d pick up right where they left off, cracking cases as some sort of pseudo-private investigator team.

Foster hooked a thumb in a pants pocket, holding his pen perched between his index and middle finger like one would

a cigarette. He let his eyes go over the two of them. "You're not thinking of getting involved with this investigation are you?"

Foster was too smart for his own good.

"Of course not. She just wants to be there for a friend."

"I see."

"Come on, Scott, don't sound so unconvinced. We just got back from holidays, do you really think we want to get caught up in a case?"

Sean followed Foster's gaze to Sara. The flecks of green and gold in her large brown eyes were electric. Sean saw the answer there and hoped that Foster didn't possess the ability to read Sara as well as he did.

Sean's heart sank. Getting involved, in the strictest terms, was Sara's intention. Maybe between now and the time they met with the widow, he'd be able to talk her out of it and convince her of the folly of getting involved.

Foster took a deep intake of breath and let it out. "All right, I'll take your word for it."

"Good. Now can we get on?"

Foster scanned the room, tapped the point of his pen against his notepad, leaving a trail of blue dots. "Just quick, did you see the victim go over the railing?"

"No."

"Where were you at the time?"

"I'd guess in the lingerie store."

"You'd guess?"

"That's where we were when the screams started."

Foster jotted something down. "Did you see the victim at all today? Before..." Foster rolled his hand to fill in the remainder of the implication.

"No."

"Sara?"

She shook her head.

Sean hated to see her locked up inside with emotions. He knew it wasn't the sight of a dead body that had upset

her—their previous line of work demanded the ability to assimilate such scenes—it was her connection to the victim's widow.

“Is that all you need?” Sean asked.

Foster nodded and flipped over the page in his notepad.

A louder voice cut through the clamor of the crowd. “I heard him say, ‘if we shop much longer, I’ll jump.’ I guess he just followed through. Lord knows, I know what it’s like to be dragged all over the place.” It was a man who wore glasses that appeared to be dating back to the style of the 80s, their round lenses filling the area from his brow to his cheekbones. But it wasn’t his eyewear that had Sean’s attention, it was his full mustache. It made Sean think of the television show *Magnum, P.I.* and its lead Tom Selleck.

Magnum glared at the woman at his side as he spoke. Sean guessed she was his wife. She laced her arms in response to her husband and turned away, jaw locked tight.

Officer Carr must have been writing down every word as his pen flicked rapidly across the pad he held.

Sara rubbed the back of Sean’s hand to get his attention and he realized that Foster had moved on. He and Sara were free to go.

“Let’s go find your friend.”

“Wait a minute,” a female voice called out behind them.

The overbearing smell of perfume, strong enough to knock down a horse, slammed his sinuses. He turned to face a brunette who was retracting her arm from Sara’s shoulder.

“You’re not a cop are you?”

The woman’s accusation sat out there for a few seconds.

Sara hitched a shoulder and turned to Sean. “Come on, darling, let’s get out of here.” She pulled on his hand and led him out of the room.

The brunette followed but was stopped by Barry Ramsey at the door. She still needed to give her statement.

Sara had taken off, and Sean recognized it was more than a driving need to comfort a friend. Her stride was riddled

with determination for another reason. He had to get the situation under control before it spiraled further out of his grasp. Just because they had decided to take on cases didn't mean they needed to get involved with this one.

He pulled back on her softly, slowing her pace.

She did eventually stop. "What is it, Sean?"

"I'd like to talk to you for a moment."

Very rarely did he encounter impatience from her, but this was one of those scarce occasions.

"I know you want to see your friend, but I want to be clear on something before we see her."

"You don't want to get involved in helping her do you?"

He held up a hand, its purpose to console while he delivered the news. "I don't think we should."

Her arms crossed, transporting him back to the unhappy couple from the room. He didn't like the drawn comparison.

"Sean, I don't know what's going to happen. I just know Nicole needs me now. Maybe it sounds silly. We haven't been in touch in, in over a decade, but we used to be really close. Can you understand that?"

The doe-like look to her eyes, the appeal in every softened feature of her face, had his defensive wall crumbling down. He conceded with a nod. "I understand."

"Thank you." She went to take a step.

He held her in place.

She stopped, her eyes going to his hands on her arms.

"That woman thought you were a cop. Any idea why?" he asked.

Her eyes averted from his for a few seconds. "I might have given her that impression. What? I needed to get to the railing and she wasn't going to budge."

"Darling, you do realize that it's a federal offense to impersonate an officer of the law."

Sara leaned in close and kissed his cheek, then his lips. She pulled back, but when she spoke her warm breath blanketed his chin. "I trust my indiscretion is safe with you. After all,

you wouldn't want me to go away to prison, would you?"

He caressed her face. "And miss your kisses? Not a chance."

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