

A sample of
EXERCISE IS MURDER
by Carolyn Arnold

Exercise is Murder

INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLING AUTHOR

*Carolyn
Arnold*

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Exercise
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Chapter 1

NO PAIN, NO GAIN

Sweat was beading on Sara's forehead, and her biceps were burning, but she dared not stop. "Three more. You're doing great." Mirela Craciun was a petite woman but housed the spirit of a fierce fitness ninja. She made the perfect trainer for Sara. She stood watchful as Sara carried on her reps and monitored her breathing. "Remember, exhale on the arm curl, inhale on release."

Mirela came to the house to train Sara every Monday, Wednesday, and Friday. Alisha Daneluzzi from Mirela's company, Elite Personal Training, trained her husband Sean on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays. Sara had no idea why she'd chosen Mondays, of all days, but was behind her and Sean's decision to take a firm stand for their health. They had been finding it more difficult to set aside time for exercise, but that's what happened when you were good at what you did. Their private investigation firm, Pay It Forward Investigations, was bringing in clients faster than they could service them. It was either carve out some time for themselves or forego their health and trim figures. And that would have been devastating for both of them. Sean loved putting on a tux, and Sara loved slipping into a slinky cocktail dress as the occasion called for. If only having the hourglass figure wasn't so much work. Her forearms were burning, but she pushed through and performed the last curl.

Mirela smiled after Sara finished her last rep. "You did fantastic today. Go ahead and sit on the bench, cross one leg

over the other, and push down softly on the knee.”

Sara happily got into the position. Stretching marked the end of the torture session.

Mirela ran her through a few more stretches—ones for her arms, chest, shoulders, and back. When Sara finished, she smiled at Mirela and thanked her for the workout.

“My pleasure. See you on Wednesday.” Mirela grabbed her huge purse from the corner of the room and saw herself out.

“And you know where to find me,” Sara mumbled in the empty gym.

Sara dabbed her forehead with a towel and smiled to herself. As much as her body complained during a workout, it always felt good when it was over—and not just because it was over. Her muscles had this gentle purr to them that made her feel alive.

She hit the sauna, grateful for this luxury in her own home. She felt thankful for all she had in her life—Sean to start, but also the money that afforded them the finer things in life. Their financial position hadn’t always been that way. Heck, not even close. She and Sean used to work in Homicide for the Albany Police Department, and they’d still be there if Sean hadn’t done one kind deed for an elderly man who saw fit to reward him. Little had Sean known, but the man was a multibillionaire who owned numerous corporations. Pretty much overnight, she and Sean had more money than they could have ever imagined or be able to spend.

There were times that concept was still a hard one for Sara to comprehend, which might sound strange to some people, but having a sudden windfall of money was an adjustment. Likely easier than losing it, but it was still an adjustment. The one thing they learned early on, though, was money was a means, a vehicle they could use to do whatever they wanted. It turned out, badge or no badge, that solving murder was in their blood—and for whatever reason, it seemed like dead

bodies fell around them.

Death investigations were not just the primary focus of their firm—it was the sole one. The saying “use what God gave you” applied to their gift of solving murders the police couldn’t or had ruled manner of death otherwise. It just so happened there were a lot of people out there who didn’t want to accept their loved one just collapsed or succumbed to natural causes or an accident. Some even disputed suicide. Part of it was motivated by no one wanting to let go and the haunting question death often brought with it: “Why did this have to happen?” But she and Sean knew how to see through the evidence and determine where there was a hope for closure and when it was time for people to work on accepting and moving on.

Sara went about her morning routine, including a long, hot steaming shower and eating an apple and drinking a protein shake for breakfast. She emerged from the house at ten in the morning, coffee thermos in hand. Armed with a robust brew, she was ready to hit this day running.

She got into her Mercedes E 300 sedan that they’d picked up recently for her. Sharing one car between them sometimes made for an inconvenience. After all, with their new workout routine, it would mean neither of them would hit the office until about ten thirty every day, and that wouldn’t get the work done. Sara found it ironic that while they could play away their days, they often put in far more hours now than they had with the Albany PD.

The traffic was light, and she got to the firm by ten twenty, record time. She entered, and Helen greeted her with a smile. They’d met Helen Warner when their paths crossed four Christmases ago. She was a single mother to a beautiful and bright eight-year-old girl named Mia.

“Good morning,” Sara said.

“Good—” The phone rang. Helen rolled her eyes playfully and answered.

Every time Sara overheard Helen say, “Good day, Pay It Forward Investigations,” she took such much pride in it. This company was something that she and Sean had built with some of the closest people in their lives. It felt fantastic. And while they kept their team small, they were a mighty bunch.

In addition to Helen, there were only two others—Jimmy Voigt, their former sergeant who’d left his post about four years ago, and Adam Laverty, a tech genius they’d found at Universal Acquisitions Corporation, one of the companies they’d inherited. Adam was stationed there, headquartered in New York City, most of the time but would work with them as needed and drive in when necessary.

She found Sean in his office, and he looked up at her and whistled. “Oooh la la.”

She giggled but posed in the doorway, one arm stretched above her head, torso slightly turned with one leg bent. She’d put thought into her outfit; she always did. Today she’d chosen a slim-fitting pink skirt and cream blouse purposely to show off her figure. She also wore two-inch pink stilettos. In her opinion, every outfit begged for a pair—well, most. They didn’t pair well with yoga pants.

“Exercise looks good on you, Mrs. McKinley.” Sean got up and closed the distance between them. He slipped an arm around her waist. “You’re so beautiful.” He tapped a kiss on her lips, and she savored it.

“Thank you,” she said modestly. “Though I swear Mirela’s trying to kill me.”

“But it feels good, doesn’t it?” Sean pressed his forehead to hers.

“You know it.” She smiled at her husband, thanking the heavens to have been so blessed with him in her life. He was the most loyal and sincere man she knew besides her adoptive father. And to think she and Sean had been brought together by murder.

Chapter 2

ACCELERATING THE HEART RATE

Sean let go of his wife and returned to his desk. He'd been going through some case applications. It was part of their business model—the client filled out a form providing as much information as possible on the death and the status of the investigation from a law enforcement standpoint. Being former detectives the last thing he and Sara wanted to do was interfere with open cases, though they had made exceptions to that rule. But the saying about “too many cooks in the kitchen” also applied when it came to investigations.

Sara came over to his desk and gestured to the pile of paperwork in front of him. “Reviewing applications?”

“Monday-morning business, darling.”

Sara sat in a chair across from him. “What’s the latest on the Devin case?”

Max Devin was a seventy-eight-year-old man who had been found dead in his home by his caregiver. The daughter suspected the caregiver had overdosed her father on his prescription oxycodone. Some cases progressed slower than others, and Devin’s was one of those.

Sean sat back and clasped his hands. “Jimmy’s paying a visit to Needham to see if he can find out anything useful there.”

Sara’s lips twitched like she wanted to smile but wouldn’t let herself, and Sean knew precisely why. Albert Needham, a local medical examiner, was much better company for the dead than the living.

“Poor Jimmy,” she said.

“Yeah, Needham’s not his favorite person.”

“I hate to say it, but is the man anyone’s? And I mean we get along with mostly everyone.”

“Don’t pull me into this,” he teased.

“Well, if you like him, you go pay him a visit in Jimmy’s place,” she challenged.

“Why rob Jimmy of the pleasure?”

Both of them laughed.

Sean glanced at the clock and noted the time was ten thirty. “Knowing Jimmy, he’ll wait until close to noon. He usually arms himself with Needham’s favorite sandwich as bribery.”

“They do say a way to a man’s heart is through his stomach.” Sara took a long draw on her coffee.

“Good thing that’s not true for me.” He winked. Sara wasn’t exactly a gourmet in the kitchen, and her cooking skills—or lack thereof—certainly had no bearing on why he’d fallen in love with her.

Sara narrowed her eyes. “Very funny.” She swayed her crossed leg and took another drink of her coffee.

He pointed at her cup. “How many is that?”

“What?” She held the cup to her left cheek and batted her eyes at him. “Are you the keeper of coffee now?”

He liked to give her a hard time about how much coffee she drank. If she could take it intravenously, she would, whereas he liked just one, first thing in the morning. From there, he’d move on to orange juice and water, but to each his own. He never wanted to change Sara, but it didn’t stop him from bugging her periodically. Call that a perk of marriage.

A brief interlude of silence fell between them, and Sean’s gaze went to the pile of applications on his desk. “Here, look at these ones.” He extended an inch-high stack toward her, which she took from him and got up.

“Now I remember why I have my workout sessions on Monday mornings.”

“It only delays the inevitable.”

“Grr,” she griped. “While I’m working on these, what are you going to be doing?”

“Daydreaming about my beautiful wife.”

“Ha, very funny, Sean.”

He patted the pile of applications still on his desk. “I’ve got plenty to keep me busy.”

“Good.” She smirked at him and sashayed out of the room in the direction of her own office. Though it was more like *glided* out, and he admired how she moved so gracefully.

“Now for a *cold* shower,” he said in his best imitation of Daniel Craig’s Alex West from *Lara Craft: Tomb Raider*.

He picked up the application he had been looking at before Sara had arrived.

Death, death, and more death.

For seeing so much of it, he should probably be calloused by now, but he figured if that hadn’t happened yet, it never would. While death affected him to an extent, he didn’t let himself get sucked in emotionally. He’d seen the harvest of that too many times on the force. Good officers falling apart, seeking comfort in food and drink, and letting their health and relationships slide. That’s the last thing he wanted for Sara or himself. It really was a miracle that for the front-row seat they repeatedly had to Death, they never saw the dead when they closed their eyes at night.

Chapter 3

PUTTING IN THE TIME

Sara stretched out in a sofa chair she kept in the corner of her office. That's where she liked to review applications and dog-ear the ones she thought were good cases to take on. There was a knack to identifying the investigations that had hope. Sean was more objective, strictly guided from a logical standpoint, whereas she tended to sometimes let her emotions guide her. It was probably their different approaches that struck such a great balance. He grounded her, and she gave him wings.

Her eyes were starting to blur, so she set down the application she just finished reviewing and pinched the bridge of her nose. Paperwork had always been her least favorite thing to do on the force, too. She'd rather be out in the field, following leads, catching killers. She was wired for action, not paper-pushing. And while they had Helen screen applications before they saw them, it would be nice to have someone who would whittle them down to the point that they'd just be told what cases to work. But that was wishful thinking, that she and Sean would ever release the reins that far. It would be too reminiscent of being back on the force.

The phone buzzed on her desk, and the tone let Sara know it was Helen calling from the front desk. Sara got up and hit the speaker button. "Yes?"

"There's someone here to see you. She says her name is Mirela Craciun."

Sara could hear someone talking to Helen in the

background.

“She says she’s your trainer, owns Elite Personal Training Studios,” Helen added.

“Yes. I know Mirela. I’ll be right there.” Sara was about to hang up when Helen spoke again.

“It might be better if I send her back.” Helen was talking quietly, and Sara got the sense something was wrong.

“Sure.”

Helen hung up, and Sara went to her office door to watch for Mirela. When she saw her approaching, Mirela wasn’t the same woman who had left her house that morning. The usually self-assured woman appeared to be trembling, and her shoulders sagged.

“Come in. Sit wherever you’d like.” Sara’s impulse had been to ask Mirela if she was all right, but the answer to that was obvious.

Mirela dropped onto a couch that Sara had in her office. “I’m sorry to bother you like this.”

“No bother.” Sara closed the door and sat beside Mirela. Only one thing would bring Mirela to her door: death. Sara put a reassuring hand on Mirela’s forearm. “Who was it?”

Mirela worried her lip, her eyes wet and glazed over. “One of my clients.”

“What happened to her?”

Tears fell down Mirela’s cheeks, and Sara got up and grabbed a tissue box from her desk. “Here you go.”

Mirela took a tissue, dabbed her eyes, and dried her cheeks. “Thank you.”

“It’s okay. Talk to me.” Most people had a hard time talking about death, and pretty much everyone would prefer to live in a world of make-believe where it didn’t exist.

Mirela lifted her head, tilted out her chin, and sniffled. “She’s dead.” She tossed out the two words like stones into water—and they sank. “She died a couple of weeks ago while

she was on a run through Corning City Preserve.”

Sara was familiar with the trails that ran through the preserve and along the Hudson River. Some areas were quite isolated, and her mind started churning out worst-case scenarios. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

“*Two weeks ago*,” Mirela stressed, “and I had no idea until now.” She paused and pressed a tissue to her nose. “She’d canceled a few of her sessions, so I wasn’t expecting her until this morning.”

Sara glanced at the clock and saw that it was now close to one. *Where had the morning gone?* “And you didn’t hear from her, so you called?” Sara asked, applying gentle pressure.

“Yeah, and some guy answered. Said he was Levi Bradley. You know, the baseball player?”

Sara had no idea. Neither Sean nor she followed sports. They didn’t have the time even if they’d wanted to. “I don’t, but why was he answering her phone?”

“He is—*was*—Katie’s boyfriend.”

“I assume Katie was your client?”

“Oh, yeah, Katie Carpenter. Guess I hadn’t said her name. Levi said the police are saying it was an accident.”

Accident was a trigger word for Sara. “Can you tell me any more?”

“Apparently, she fell from a path that runs along the top of a hill, tumbled down, and wound up facedown in the Hudson River. I don’t think she fell. I think someone pushed her.”

Chills went down Sara’s arms, but she could hear Sean’s voice directing her to logic. “It’s never easy to accept the death of someone we care about.”

“Sara, I am being very serious with you right now. Someone killed Katie, and I need you to find out who.”

Sara’s gaze went to the stack of applications already in the queue, then back to Mirela’s pleading eyes. “I’ll see what we can do, but I’ll need more details.”

Chapter 4

WORKING OUT THE KINKS

Sean was seeing some light. The stack of applications he'd reviewed was larger than the ones he had yet to do. He got up and lifted his arms high above his head, twisted at the hips, stretched his neck side to side. His eyes caught the clock on the wall. His first thought went to Jimmy, who was probably armed with a Swiss-and-alfalfa-on-rye sandwich and headed in to see Needham right at this moment. His second thought went to grabbing something to eat himself, but he'd ask Sara to join him.

He went down the hall and noticed her door was shut, but he could see through its window that Sara was sitting on the couch with Mirela. Sara was holding a box of tissues, and her body was leaning toward Mirela. Something was wrong.

He knocked, and Sara looked up and came to the door.

"Is everything all right?" he asked.

"Not by a long shot." Sara looked over her shoulder to Mirela and nudged the door shut a bit with her foot, blocking him out. "Mirela, would it be all right if Sean joined us?"

"Yes, of course."

Sara stepped out of his way and widened her door. "She needs our help," she whispered to him as he entered.

Sara closed the door behind him and resumed her spot on the couch next to Mirela. Sean took the chair in the corner, moving the pile of applications that were there to the floor. He greeted the trainer, and she reciprocated. He noted her puffy eyes and the used tissue in her hand. He'd guess someone had

died.

Sara was the first to speak and filled him in. “Mirela was just telling me about a client of hers, Katie Carpenter, who died a couple of weeks ago.”

“Oh, she didn’t die, Sara. I told you I think someone murdered her.” Mirela was quick to jump in with her correction.

Think someone murdered her.

Sean settled deeper into his chair. Just because someone thought something didn’t make it fact. His logic-based mind would need a lot more before he’d be swayed into believing there was something that Sara and he could do to help. He clasped his hands on his lap. “What happened?”

Sara locked eyes with him and answered for Mirela. “Katie was found in the Hudson River.”

Mirela took over. “The police have ruled it an accident, saying that she fell from a trail that runs through the Corning City Preserve, but it was no accident. I feel it in my bones,” Mirela pleaded. “Katie ran along that trail every day, probably for about eight months. Maybe more.”

Add *feel it* to the determining factors in this case. Sean cleared his throat, and both women looked at him.

“Whereabouts along the path?” Sean asked, trying to play along and, at the same time, seeking a good image of the terrain in his mind. He’d run some of those trails himself in the past.

“I don’t know exactly, but from what I understand, it was isolated and ran along the hill that overlooked the river.”

Mirela’s description could fit a few areas in the preserve. He also remembered sections that ran tight to the edge of the hill and how the Hudson was eroding the hillside. Though if the path had given out and taken Katie Carpenter along with it, that’s what Mirela would have told them. Still, Sean would ask. “Is the trail itself intact?”

“As far as I know.”

Sean glanced at Sara. Her heart was large, and he loved that about her, but sometimes death didn't give closure to the ones left behind. He liked Mirela and respected her, but if he and Sara were going to take this any further, he needed to know more. “When did police rule her death an accident?”

Mirela sniffled. “Levi said on Saturday.”

“Just two days ago?”

“Yeah.”

Sean studied her. This didn't feel right. Case closed in less than two weeks. The police must have had solid evidence to indicate it was an accident.

“You know what? I'm getting the feeling I probably shouldn't have come. I'm sor—” Mirela moved to get up, and Sara put a hand out to stay her.

“We're glad you came to us,” Sara said, shooting a warning glare at Sean. “We'd love to help you in whatever way we can.”

“But?” Mirela served back.

Sean's gaze went to the applications he'd moved to the floor; he thought of the ones back in his office. Their plates were more than full, but when he caught his wife's pleading eyes, he lost his resolve to fight—against his better judgment, it turned out. “We'll do what we can, Mirela. We'll ask around.”

Mirela's face lit up. “I don't expect you to do it for nothing. I'd be happy to cover any fees associated with the investigation.”

Sean felt like he was sliding down a steep hill with no traction. He hadn't exactly said they'd investigate; he said they'd do what they could. But with the hopeful spark in Mirela's eyes and the subtle smile of approval on his wife's lips, he wasn't prepared to disappoint either one of them. “That would be appreciated. Thank you,” he said, getting up.

Mirela shook his hand, then Sara's, and left.

Sara wrapped her arms around his neck. “I've married the best man on the planet.”

“I’m going to remind you of that as often as possible.” He kissed her, then put his arms on her hips and pushed her out from him, his gaze going to the stack of applications. “What are we going to do about them?”

“They’ll be right there waiting for us when we finish up the case we’ve just taken on.”

“I should have known you’d say something like that. One stop first. We can’t be effective on an empty stomach.” He held his arm out for her to slip hers through.

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