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Sara and Sean Cozy Mystery

<i>Bowled Over Americano</i>	<i>Wedding Bells Brew Murder</i>
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Standalone

Assassination of a Dignitary
Midlife Psychic

BOWLED OVER AMERICANO

A SARA AND SEAN COZY MYSTERY

CAROLYN ARNOLD

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**BOWLED OVER
AMERICANO**

To George, my partner in solving crime

Chapter 1

Books don't write themselves.” Sara Cain just wanted to finish writing one novel. High hopes and all that. It certainly had her muttering under her breath like a madwoman. She hadn't realized when she'd chosen the working title of *Dead in the Water* how painfully accurate it would be. She'd been working on the book for two-plus years. It wasn't all a loss, at least. The book's setting, the victim, and the murder method were working. The motive was tripping her up. What had sounded good in her head fell flat on the page, and she had no idea how to fix it. She also had no clue how to lead her sleuths to the killer. All because she decided to jump in without plotting in advance. Big mistake. Though writing by the seat of her pants—organically, *panster* style—came with its fun moments. Until she hit a wall called writer's block. And it was real, all right.

She swore the blasted cursor mocked her with every blink, as if hammering in the fact that zero words were hitting the page. Well, she'd show it! She closed the lid on her laptop.

Time for a break!

Sara put on her running shoes and stepped onto her front porch, drawing in a deep breath of the summer night air. Even with a touch of humidity, the temperature was perfect. She locked the door and headed out.

Nothing worked like a walk to clear the mind. Fingers crossed...

If her mother knew, she would try to talk Sara out of going because it was six thirty at night—sun still up or not—and there were safer neighborhoods in Albany. Even better, her mother would have preferred Sara stay in Cotton Spring Falls, about fourteen minutes from the city, and made the daily commute. “It’s safer here,” her mother would argue. But when Sara signed on with the Albany Police Department, she’d wanted a fresh start, and that meant a new place to rent.

Not like her mother had to worry anyway. Sara had some martial arts classes under her belt, and what she hadn’t picked up there, she learned on the job as a detective in Homicide.

Sara set off down a side street, enjoying a rather quiet Wednesday evening. The only sounds were birdsong and crickets getting an early start. It was the perfect night to drink wine and watch the sunset, ideally with that special someone.

She pushed her work partner, Sean McKinley, from her mind. He was five foot ten—three inches taller than her—with brown eyes that always regarded her with affection. And he had this ability to read her mind. But by far the most dangerous things about him were his smile and his charisma. The latter he wielded like a superpower that came naturally and required the slightest effort. He dated a harem and never got serious about any one of them, but she didn’t think of him as a player. She preferred to believe he was, like her, trying to find *the one*. Until that person came along, they had their friendship and solving murders to keep them company.

The sidewalk was mostly barren except for a young boy of about twelve pedaling his bike straight toward her at a fast clip. She got out of the way just in time.

“Sorry,” he called out over a shoulder.

Sara smiled. Thoughts of her book had been scared out of her.

A man reversing his car out of his driveway waved at her. She waved back. It was a sad stereotype that people in cities weren't friendly; she always found a smile in the crowd. Her mother would tell her it had to do with the fact that she still had her youth and beauty. Sara hated to believe the world was that vain, but her youth was slipping away. She didn't really want to think about her birthday next Wednesday. *Yikes. The big three-three.*

Maybe she could outrun aging, right along with her manuscript. She picked up her pace until she felt a soft burn in her calf muscles. She wasn't inclined toward jogging or running, but she relished a cardio high.

She entered a nearby park, planning to stick to the paved path that cut through it. She passed a man and woman with two children. The girl was on a swing while the boy played in the sandbox. Their guardians paid them little attention. Both had their heads bent forward, their faces toward their phones.

It was sad how obsessed people were with their phones while their lives in the flesh-and-blood world passed them by. The seconds continued to pass, the minutes, the hours, the days... the years. Life was over in a blur. Possibly one reason people sought the distraction that electronics provided.

But Sara couldn't escape the reality of death—not when it was her day job. She also had what most would consider a morbid pastime. She loved reading obituaries and sinking into the lives of strangers. Reading about their accomplishments inspired her.

Sean would tease her about seeking more of the macabre after work hours. He didn't understand her desire to write a murder mystery either, but that shouldn't be any of his concern. She viewed it as her outlet to escape. After all, the world she created and wielded at will constantly evolved at her fingertips.

The mystery of death may fascinate her, but so what? It might have to do with never knowing her birth parents. Her father, who had been raising her alone, died in a car accident when she was just a baby, and her mother's only contribution had been birthing Sara. Sara found this out at age thirteen, after her adoptive parents, Jeannie and Leon Cain, traced her heritage. Her mother's name was Monica Wilcox, but otherwise she remained a mystery.

These thoughts were bouncing around in her head when a beagle came out of nowhere and ran into her leg.

"Hey there, little fella."

The tricolor hound wasn't a stranger to her. She'd seen him before, even knew where he lived. She looked around. There was no sign of his owner, a miserable coot who was always scowling. The dog may have decided to go off leash to do some mind clearing of his own.

"We better get you back—" She bent over to grab the dog's collar, but he darted away and ran across the lawn toward the baseball diamond. She'd call out his name if she knew it.

"Come here, boy. Here." She clapped the front of her thighs.

The dog paid her no attention, bounding across the freshly mowed grass.

She looked down at her new running shoes—a brilliant white she'd prefer to keep. The dog really wasn't her responsibility, but outside of the park, city streets and the vehicles that came with them posed a danger. She'd never forgive herself if he got injured.

She whistled for him, but his tail pointed in the air as he put his nose to the ground.

"Here goes..." She traipsed toward the dog. Stopped walking. He had lifted his head and stood there watching her.

"Oh no. Don't you dare run."

Of course, that was exactly what he did—barreling toward her, then juking out of reach at the last second. This was a game to him. She became a tangle of arms and legs, trying to corral a twenty-pound beagle. She could use some help. A quick glance at the playground confirmed the man, woman, and children stood watching her escapade. Not that any of them made a move to assist.

The boy cried out, “Doggy!” followed by an outburst of giggles.

For the cuteness of the beagle, or in response to her antics?

Not that it mattered now; she was committed to catching the dog. A few more bumbled attempts at reaching for its collar before victory. She looked at the family again, as if expecting applause, but they were gone.

No good deed...

“All right, little guy...” He had a name tag on his collar, which she flipped over in her hand. “Magnum.” *Hub*. “Nice name. How about we take you home?”

The dog made no argument, but it wouldn’t be much fun walking hunched over for half a block. She reached the path and noticed her shoes. Not a brilliant white anymore, but grass-stained like an abstract painter had gone wild with green paint. Her stomach sank. She liked her things nice and neat, organized, presentable. She’d have to put in some elbow grease scrubbing them, but hopefully with a pinch of luck...

She carried on, walking down the street, curious if any onlookers had surfaced from their devices long enough to pay her any heed and find humor in her situation.

“Almost there.” The redbrick home was a few houses down. She climbed onto the front porch. “We did it, Magnum.” She reached the door, prepared to knock, but it was cracked open. Guess the mystery of how the beagle had gotten loose was solved. “Hello?” she called out. “I have your dog, Magnum.”

She listened. Nothing.

Instinct told her to stay put. But what if the dog's owner needed medical attention?

"Albany Police, I'm coming in." She wasn't there in an official capacity, but if the man was conscious, her presence shouldn't frighten him.

Sara let go of Magnum's collar and pushed the door with her elbow—a habit formed on the job to preserve evidence at a crime scene. But surely, that wouldn't be an issue here. Blame the job for her cynicism and seeing murder everywhere she went.

"Hello?" she repeated.

As she opened the door farther, silence and the faint hint of a woman's floral perfume greeted her. It became clear why her shouts were not getting a response.

Magnum's owner lay on the entry floor. Dead. A large bloody gash on his head. Sara looked around, seeing nothing that could have caused the injury. This wasn't an accident.

She looked at Magnum, now sitting next to his master. "Well, you certainly got my mind off my book."

And right onto murder...

Chapter 2

You didn't touch anything, I hope." Detective Davenport was one of the most incompetent and irritating officers on the force. He looked at Sara as if she were a first-day rookie and not a third-year detective.

She'd found a leash for Magnum, and they were on the front porch with Detective No-Good. Neighbors had spilled from their houses, finding the unfolding scene at 816 Cedarwood to be exciting enough to pull them from whatever they might have been watching on TV. After all, they had a real-life crime drama going on right on their street to entertain them. "Are you going to have uniforms cordon off the area?"

His eyes narrowed. "Don't tell me how to do my job, Cain."

Guess he doesn't like to be patronized either! "Would never dream of it."

Davenport bellowed over his shoulder to the closest uniformed officer and requested he usher people back inside their homes. To Sara, he said, "Just answer my question, Cain. Did you touch anything?"

He hadn't asked before; he'd made a statement, but she'd let that slide. "Of course I didn't."

Davenport perched his elbow on his substantial belly and scribbled in a notepad.

He's probably doodling...

"Why are you here this evening?"

"We've been through this." Magnum winced at her side as if he too were tiring of Davenport's attitude.

"Yadda. Yadda. So this guy"—he pointed at the dog—"led you here?"

"I wouldn't put it like that." She took a deep breath, thankful she had a lot of patience to pull from, but Davenport threatened her reserves. If he didn't get on with the investigation, the victim's friends and family could never hope for justice.

"And how do you know Cliff Cunningham?"

"I don't."

"Yet here you are at his house." He gestured toward the structure with the tip of his pen.

"I've seen him around. That's how I knew where Magnum lived. When I brought him here, that's when I found Cunningham." She prattled off the entire story again without an ounce of energy, exasperated. "Listen, are you going to go inside, look around, or do you plan to interrogate me all night?" The sun was low in the sky, and she'd guess the time was after eight.

"I have seen the vic, and I will— Hey, you're doing it again," Davenport huffed.

She wasn't intentionally telling him how to do his job; it just kept spilling out. But given how fast he "closed" his cases, he'd benefit from a refresher course on murder investigation. "How did Cunningham die?"

"He was murdered."

"That would be the *manner* of death."

He grimaced.

"I asked *how*."

"Someone hit him hard on the old..." He tapped his head. "And how the heck should I know how? If you're talking all technical and stuff, that's what Needham is for."

Albert Needham was the chief medical examiner in the area. Sara gave the detective a few seconds to cool off before she went on. "I am curious if you've figured out what caused the man's injuries yet." There was nothing near the body, but it wasn't like she'd had a chance to look around. Upon discovering Cunningham, she'd backed out of the house, taking the dog with her—preservation of the crime scene of utmost importance.

"Don't know yet."

Then again, how could he when he'd spent the last hour and a half talking with her? Sara pressed her lips. Her mother had taught her if she had nothing nice to say, then keep quiet.

Davenport flipped his notepad closed and jacked a thumb toward the road. "You can go. I'll call if I need anything more from you."

With pleasure... She tried to give Davenport the dog leash, but he held up both his hands and stepped back.

"I don't want him."

"He comes with the crime scene."

"Nope. You found him. He's your responsibility."

"What am I supposed to do with a dog?"

"Do I look like I care? Take him to the kennel or the pound." He walked past her toward the house.

Kennels would be closed. Taking him to a pound would likely seal his fate. She was still devastated that Daisy, her beagle as a teen, had been sent to *the farm*. "You can't be serious." She followed Davenport.

He stopped inside the door, turned around. "Can I help you?"

"Ah, yeah, you can. Who is Cunningham's next of kin?" They might be Magnum's only hope.

"He's got a sister, but we haven't been able to reach her yet."

“Reach her,” she urged. “I’m sure she’ll want the dog, but I’ll take him home *for now*.”

“Whatever floats your boat, darlin’.”

Hmph. This man was infuriating and would test even Job’s patience.

“Now, if you would... Scoot.” He raised his brows and made a sweeping motion with his hands.

She backed onto the porch and looked down at the beagle. “Guess it’s you and me, Magnum.”

As she walked the two blocks to her house, the sun continued to sink to the horizon. Not that she lived in fear, but she had to admit, having Magnum at her side bolstered her courage. A dog of her own might be a good idea. But that wasn’t really feasible. She worked all hours, leaving little time and energy to care for one.

She unlocked her front door, cursing herself. She’d been so caught up dealing with Davenport, she hadn’t even thought about Magnum’s needs. She really didn’t want to face Davenport again. A quick check on her phone confirmed the time was nearing eight thirty. Pet stores would be open, but Magnum would need his regular food, as a substitution could make him ill. A change to a dog’s diet needed to be introduced over time.

“Just for you,” she said to Magnum as she texted Davenport.

Need to know brand of Magnum’s food. Even better, bring his bag over. Leave on my front porch.

There. She wouldn’t even need to see the man.

She unleashed Magnum, who was already wildly sniffing the air. “Go. Explore.”

He did just that. His nose dove to the baseboards, inhaling every millimeter. The people who had rented the house before her had owned three cats. Was the animals’ hair and dander still caked in the cracks? Whatever it was, with a powerful sniffer like that, it amazed her he could turn the receptors off to sleep.

She slipped out of her shoes and inspected the damage. There were some areas of the canvas that remained white.

She did a quick Google search on her phone, and it told her to mix vinegar with warm water. That was easy enough, but she imagined scrubbing the shoes would require some patience, something she was running low on after being with Davenport. Was he even doing his job over there? Or was he simply going through the motions and running with the quickest, most obvious evidence and pigeonholing someone to fit his frame?

But whatever his actions were, or lack thereof, shouldn't be her concern. The key words being *shouldn't be*.

A distraction might be a good thing.

In the kitchen, she mixed up the concoction of one-third vinegar with two-thirds warm water and got to work. Magnum passed through, giving the area a thorough inspection. She filled a bowl with cool water for him, which he gratefully lapped up before carrying on with his exploration.

It took some time and was more difficult than the article let on, but her shoes were once again a brilliant white, though wet. She set them over a floor vent, figuring she'd let the fan from the central air conditioning take care of drying them.

Magnum returned from his travels, sniffed the shoes, and looked up at her.

"Cover every square inch there, Magnum?" She smiled as she got on her haunches and petted his head, letting her fingers go down the extension of his big floppy ears. *Soft as velvet*.

As she stood, the setting sun had mostly disappeared behind buildings, but a sliver came through the window and hit her in the eye. It gave her an idea of how to cap off this horrible day.

She poured herself a glass of wine and topped up Magnum's water, then slipped onto the small back deck with the dog and their refreshments.

The glowing orange orb was low, but it ignited the sky. Magnificent.

The beagle stepped down into the small yard to investigate. She got in one sip of wine when her phone pinged with a message.

Do you think I'm your errand boy?

She considered pitching her phone, but it hadn't wronged her. Another ping.

Having a uniformed officer bring the food. You're welcome.

There's a saying that's very popular on ball caps and T-shirts: "Wine for the things you can't control."
She'd drink to that. Bottoms up.

Chapter 3

Sara beat the alarm, thanks to Magnum. For one, he was a bed hog. She had tried to scooch him over several times in the night—without success. She could have closed her bedroom door and sealed him out, but she didn't have the heart. The beagle had jumped up onto her comforter and stayed there the entire night. Currently, he had his back against her side, tugging down on the bedding. She understood how mummies might feel—if they were alive at the time of being wrapped.

Two, he snored like a jackhammer. It was impressive, curious, and disturbing that so much noise could come from something so small.

“Let's go.” She nudged her elbow against Magnum, and he rolled to his feet quickly, as if she'd startled him. Then he stared at her as if she were an evil person for waking him up. “Hey, I don't like mornings either.”

She let him out back, took care of her business, and got a pot of coffee started. The clock on the machine told her it was 6:03 AM. Surely no one got up this early by choice. She'd sleep until noon if her schedule allowed the indulgence. Her mornings usually had her bolting from bed less than forty minutes before her shift, which started at eight, downing some coffee, taking a quick shower, and running out the door.

She yawned, lonely for her pillow—the right amount of plush and firm. The same for her mattress. Her bedding was soft and smelled faintly of lavender and honey. An oasis and a haven for her weary bones. But both would have to wait until tonight.

The bag of dog food on the counter caught her eye. She'd poured some kibble out for Magnum before bed, but he hadn't shown any interest. She'd try again, and hopefully her canine friend had an appetite this morning.

Friend. She liked that. And speaking of her friend, he was howling at the back door.

She let him in, and he sauntered in like he owned the place. He came over to the food bowl and flopped down. He looked up at her, his eyebrows and the top of his head wrinkled. *Hound eyes.* But more than that, she'd say Magnum grieved his master and friend, Cliff Cunningham.

"I know, boy. Tough times for you right now. I'll help you through it as best I can." She heard her promise and retreated for a hot second. Why was she saying such a crazy thing? She was talking like she planned to keep the dog. Cunningham's sister would be claiming him soon enough. Speaking of... Why hadn't she yet?

No new text messages on her phone. No missed calls either. Did Detective Davenport even bother notifying the next of kin? One would hope he wasn't so negligent in his duties that he hadn't.

She called his cell phone and landed in voicemail. "It's Sara. Call me, please." She figured a brief message would work best. It was no secret the detective didn't have a long attention span.

Magnum remained laid out on the vinyl floor—legs all stretched out with his head lowered between his two front ones. She wished she could mend his broken heart, but only time could do that.

She petted him and wriggled her fingers in the sweet spot just behind his near-black ears. He seemed to approve as he shut his eyes. She ran a fingertip down his light-tan muzzle to his dark-chocolate nose.

“Hang in there, boy.”

She straightened to full height, grabbed herself a coffee, and took it to the living room. She dropped onto the couch, put her feet up on the coffee table, and grabbed her laptop from the cushion beside her and brought up the latest obituaries from the area.

It was far too early for there to be one for Cunningham, but sadly, people dropped off every day. Not to be blasé, but it was a fact.

Today, there were five, including Marjorie Coffey, a retired schoolteacher who left behind a husband, five children, and ten grandchildren. Seventy-six when she passed “peacefully in her sleep” with her family by her side.

That was the way to go.

Then, Perry Andrews, fifty-five, “sudden.”

Heart attack, accident...?

When the cause of death wasn't stated, Sara speculated, her imagination spinning out of control. It might be another reason she enjoyed reading the brief memoirs; they helped her flex her creative muscles.

Next, Douglas Quinn.

The name sounded familiar, but why? Her memory was usually spot-on, but this morning it failed her. She might just need more coffee. She swallowed a few mouthfuls of the brew.

No grand epiphanies.

She read the piece on Quinn, plucking out the highlights.

Quinn was eighty-three when “he died peacefully at home.” No mention of leaving behind a wife, children, grandchildren, or extended family.

How terribly sad to live that long without family around. It sounded so lonely.

The obit encapsulated Quinn as a businessman with a big heart who firmly believed in the Golden Rule.

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

Her days in Sunday school came rushing back. Her parents wanted her to be educated in matters of the Bible and religion, but they never forced a belief system on her.

Quinn's obituary gave evidence of professional detachment. *A businessman...* An interesting descriptor for a man of his age. Had he built up a corporate empire to be his legacy? But with no family left behind, who stood to inherit and benefit from his life's hard work?

Probably the same person who submitted the obit. Likely someone who had worked for Quinn, who he had taken in and viewed as a surrogate family member. His funeral was scheduled for this coming Saturday at three in the afternoon.

She heard clicks coming toward her on the wood floor. Magnum.

"Hey, boy." She closed the lid on her laptop and set it on the side table.

The beagle sat at her feet and looked up at her, showing off his exceptionally applied kohl eyeliner. She patted the cushion next to her. Magnum hopped up, but instead of curling into a ball, he laid his tan head on her lap. She swept her hand down his back. His hair was black on top and dripped down to beige, then white for his legs and belly. Brown spots dotted his legs as freckles. His tail, black except the tip that looked like someone had dipped it into a can of white paint.

He was so soft and warm. She burrowed her fingers into the folds at the base of his neck, rolling over a small ridge of hair that didn't lie straight and ran the length of his underside. It was like the dog had been stitched together right up the middle.

Sara could sit there forever petting the little guy. But she had to stop herself, pull back from that ledge. She was getting attached, and she couldn't afford to. One, she had a job to get to, and two, Magnum's "aunt" would surely want to claim him.

Sara called Detective Davenport again. Hopefully, he'd answer this time.

"What do you want, Cain?"

Wow. She took a few seconds to calm her temper. Lashing out at Davenport wouldn't get her anywhere. "Did you contact the victim's sister?" She intentionally didn't say *Cunningham* in case Magnum picked up on his dead master's surname and it caused him to grieve further.

"Wasn't my first shift last night."

"Great. When is she coming to get the dog?" Again, she went the no-name route. Let the poor fella rest. She nestled her fingers further into Magnum's fur.

"She's not."

"She's—" She snapped her mouth shut. "What do you mean she's not?"

"Think that should be pretty straightforward."

"Well, what am I supposed to do with—"

"I gave you two options last night."

Sara tightened her grip on the phone, imagining for a second her hands were around Detective Davenport's neck. "Big help."

"That's me. Ciao." And with that, he was gone.

She held her phone tightly and tapped it against the arm of the couch. What was she supposed to do now? She couldn't take Magnum to work. Her sergeant, Jimmy Voigt, was understanding, but bringing a dog to the police station might be pushing things.

Two teenagers—Rhett and Annie—lived next door, and they were out of school for summer break. One of them might watch the dog. But did she really know them well enough to

ask such a favor? Her relationship with any of her neighbors typically only went as far as the occasional wave and hello. Why should they want to help her out? And could she even trust them?

Facing Jimmy might be the safest bet for Magnum.

“Guess you’re coming to work with me, fella.”

He licked her hand as if he understood exactly what she’d said.

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