

ALSO BY CAROLYN ARNOLD

Detective Madison Knight

<i>Ties That Bind</i>	<i>Power Struggle</i>
<i>Justified</i>	<i>Shades of Justic</i>
<i>Sacrifice</i>	<i>What We Bury</i>
<i>Found Innocent</i>	<i>Girl on the Run</i>
<i>Just Cause</i>	<i>Her Dark Grave</i>
<i>Deadly Impulse</i>	<i>Musrder at the lake</i>
<i>In the Line of Duty</i>	<i>Life Sentence</i>

Brandon Fisher FBI

<i>Eleven</i>	<i>Remnants</i>
<i>Silent Graves</i>	<i>On the Count of Three</i>
<i>The Defenseless</i>	<i>Past Deeds</i>
<i>Blue Baby</i>	<i>One More Kill</i>
<i>Violated</i>	

Detective Amanda Steele

<i>The Little Grave</i>	<i>Last Seen Alive</i>
<i>Stolen Daughters</i>	<i>Her Final Breath</i>
<i>The Silent Witness</i>	<i>Taken Girls</i>
<i>Black Orchid Girls</i>	<i>Her Last Words</i>
<i>Her Frozen Cry</i>	

Sara and Sean Cozy Mystery

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

Matthew Connor Adventure

<i>City of Gold</i>	<i>The Legend of Gasparilla and His</i>
<i>The Secret of the Lost Pharaoh</i>	<i>Treasure</i>

Standalone

Assassination of a Dignitary
Midlife Psychic

WEDDING BELLS BREW MURDER

A SARA AND SEAN COZY MYSTERY

CAROLYN ARNOLD

HIBBERT & STILES
PUBLISHING INC.

Published by Hibbert & Stiles Publishing Inc. 2023

hspubinc.com

Copyright © Carolyn Arnold, 2023

Carolyn Arnold has asserted her right to be identified
as the author of this work.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in any retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior written permission of the publishers.

Paperback ISBN: 978-1-989706-92-3

eBook ISBN: 978-1-989706-91-6

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places and events other than those clearly in the public domain, are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or locales is entirely coincidental.

**WEDDING
BELLS BREW
MURDER**

Chapter One

Sara Cain must have been crazy to set her wedding date only six months out—even when money was no object. It was hard to believe the big day was only one sleep away. Though time did fly. Even more so since Sean McKinley inherited a vast fortune and proposed to her. From there, it was all a blur. They'd quit their jobs as homicide detectives with the Albany Police Department and spent the time since traveling the world. It had turned out Sean's benefactor, Old Man Quinn, was a wealthy businessman with thirty-three companies around the globe—of which they'd visited only a handful so far.

They had returned from Spain a week ago to ensure all the wedding preparations were on schedule. Between a professional wedding planner and good friends who lived in the area, all was covered. Tomorrow was on track to be a perfect day. Fingers crossed it stayed that way.

Ever since Sean's windfall had hit the news, he and Sara had gained notoriety in the press. Reporters from all over the country clamored for an exclusive. Mere acquaintances came forward and claimed close friendships. Sara found adjusting to the limelight difficult, although traveling had sheltered them from some of the impact. But now that protective bubble was gone. They were back on their home turf. More specifically, her hometown.

Cotton Spring Falls, fifteen minutes outside of Albany, New York, came with a modest population of about sixteen thousand. Tonight, Sara and Sean were seated with their wedding party—short their master of ceremonies, who needed to bow out for a professional obligation—in a private room near the back of the most popular mom-and-pop restaurant in town. They'd rented the establishment for the night to ensure their privacy. A small price to pay.

In attendance on Sean's side were his aunt Gwen Dixon, his long-time best friend, Conrad Cooley, and Jimmy Voigt. He was her and Sean's former sergeant and was standing up as Sean's best man. Jimmy had been a mentor to Sean and a bit of a father figure. Sean had lost his biological father at seventeen to a heart attack—sudden, unexpected, and devastating.

Sara had her two closest friends, Valerie Morgan and Bobbi Rowe—both dubbed maids of honor, as choosing between them would have been impossible. Both were single and self-proclaimed to be happy that way, but the thriving businesses they each owned in Cotton Spring Falls kept them busy. Sara's parents, Jeannie and Leon Cain, were also there. They'd adopted Sara as a baby, but they might as well be her flesh and blood. She didn't remember her biological father, who had died before she could form memories, and her mother had run off prior to that. Private investigators had never discovered her whereabouts. It wasn't even certain if she was still alive.

"To Sara and Sean." Jeannie lifted her champagne glass in a toast, and everyone joined in.

"Thank you, Mom." Sara would squeeze her hand, but she was a few chairs down, seated next to Leon at the end of the table.

Servers set out the main course—meals that had been preselected before today by each person present. The food wasn't

regular fare offered by the establishment, which traditionally served pub food.

Their dishes set in front of them were salmon with a creamy dill sauce served with grilled asparagus and risotto; beef tenderloin, roasted baby carrots, and braised potatoes; and the vegetarian option for Valerie, which was butternut squash ravioli made with a cauliflower pasta garnished with crisp strips of basil that had been sauteed in butter and oil.

Sara lifted her fork to dig into her beef and saw Sean watching her. They took each other's hand.

"I love you, Sara Cain." Sean leaned toward her, cupping her cheek in his hand and giving her a kiss on the mouth.

"Ooooh... Speech!" Conrad clinked the handle of his fork against his glass.

Valerie and Bobbi were quick to raise their glasses in support.

Sara smiled at Sean, knowing he didn't love being in the spotlight.

"I'd rather save it for my vows tomorrow," Sean said.

"Aw, that's too adorable," Bobbi cooed. As much as she claimed to love being single, Sara wouldn't be surprised if she was the first of her two best friends to tie the knot.

"At least kiss again," Conrad dared.

"Not a problem there." Sean set the cloth napkin that he'd had on his lap on the table and stood. He held out a hand, and she put hers in his.

They "performed" to hoots and hollers from Conrad and laughter from everyone else. Sean gave Sara a kiss that made her head spin.

Prior to meeting Sean, she was fine being single and lived a complete and full life. But from the moment they made eye contact, something shifted. There was this instant, inexplicable connection to him, as if she'd always known him. At the time, romantic notions had to be set aside, though. They were

partners on the job, and mixing business with pleasure could mean the difference between life and death. *Thank Old Man Quinn for everything!*

She ate while watching those she loved and feeling so incredibly blessed. She'd marry the man of her dreams tomorrow and not look back.

The plates were cleared, and dessert would come out in a few minutes.

Sara excused herself and headed to the restroom. She passed the kitchen doors on the way, but she stopped at the sound of a raised voice coming from inside.

It belonged to Darlene Day, the woman who had created their masterpiece of a wedding cake. "Leave me alone! I have told you it's not happening."

Darlene's venomous words had Sara blushing. Though it wasn't like she'd intentionally eavesdropped. It had been unavoidable. There was no verbal response, but shoes tapped against the floor. One set of footsteps was coming toward Sara. She hustled to move.

"Sara?"

She froze, put on a smile, and turned to face Darlene. She was wearing a frilly white apron tied around her ample waist. Her cheeks were a bright red, and strands of gray hair poked out from a loose bun and stood out from the sides of her head.

"Hello." Sara wanted to ask if everything was all right, but it was truly none of her business. And if she did inquire about Darlene's well-being, she'd give herself away.

"You must be getting excited," Darlene said. "How was everyone's meal?" She seemed genuinely interested, even though the concoctions were not her creations. Confections were Darlene's specialty and what made Locally Baked *the* bakery in Cotton Spring Falls and nearby townships. She was here tonight to provide a sampling of the wedding cake on offering for tomorrow.

“Absolutely lovely. And you have no idea how excited. But if you’ll excuse me...” She smiled and ducked into the restroom and leaned against the wall. She was feeling like a snoop, but it wasn’t like she’d intentionally heard what she had. And, besides, she had no context to know what to make of the words.

Sara took care of her business and returned to her guests.

Darlene entered the room with a tray of cake squares and doled them out. “To give you all a taste of the wedding cake being served tomorrow.”

Once she got around to her, Sara thanked Darlene for all her hard work and asked after her eighteen-year-old niece, Trinity. Sara hadn’t yet met her, having only heard about her from her mother and things Darlene shared. Trinity had lost her parents in a car accident not long after Sara had moved to Albany, and Darlene was raising her. Earlier in the week, Darlene had spoken proudly of her and said she might be here tonight to help her.

“Trin will be there tomorrow, but you know what girls her age are like. She ran off with her boyfriend.”

“Tell her that we missed her.”

“Will do.” Darlene excused herself and left the room.

After espressos and special coffees, Sara, Sean, and their closest filtered out of the restaurant into the cool March air. Her parents and Sean’s aunt were the first people to take off, leaving six loitering in the lot—Sara, Sean, Valerie, Bobbi, Conrad, and Jimmy.

“One minute before we leave,” Sean said to Conrad and Jimmy—the three planning an overnight stay at Sean’s house. She and Sean hadn’t let go of their individual homes yet, but after tonight, they’d be calling Sean’s house home—at least until they decided to go house shopping. Travel and wedding plans had taken priority in the last several months.

“You got it.” Jimmy smiled at Sara and ambled toward his car with Conrad at his heels.

Valerie and Bobbi picked up on Sean's enclosed request to be left alone with his future bride. "We'll be in the car," Valerie said.

Sara nodded, and once everyone walked away, Sean put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him. "I'm going to miss you tonight."

"Me too."

They had agreed, based on custom, to stay apart for the night. It would be tough, as they'd adapted to sharing a bed.

"Just one night," Sean said. "Otherwise, I intend to fall asleep with you every night and wake up with you every morning."

"Not sure that's entirely realistic, but we can give it a go." She winked at him, and he smiled.

Before he left, he kissed her tenderly one last time. She was smiling, her soul lit on fire, happier than she'd ever been in her life, but there was also this knot in her gut. Wedding day jitters setting in or something else? She couldn't quite place her finger on what was causing the discomfort, but it probably wasn't anything important. All she needed was a good night's sleep. Tomorrow she'd become Mrs. Cain-McKinley. How she loved the sound of that.

Chapter Two

The wedding was being held in Cotton Spring Falls Dutch Community Center—a heritage it came by because Dutch traders founded the town. It was a rather large venue with rooms to facilitate the ceremony, dining, and reception. There were also two fully functioning kitchens, meeting rooms, and spaces designated to accommodate bride and groom.

Since neither she nor her family, nor Sean, were associated with any organized religion, this location seemed an answer to their needs.

Sara was in the bridal suite with her maids of honor and her mother.

“There.” Bobbi stepped back, having just finished adjusting the tiara holding Sara’s veil. “You’re as beautiful as ever.”

“Thank you.” Sara’s gaze flitted past her friend to the standing mirror. Her breath caught at her own reflection. The dress had a heart bodice and followed the curves of her petite frame. She was wearing her mother’s pearl necklace, the something borrowed. For something new, pearl teardrop earrings, and for a splash of blue, a tiny dolphin charm on an ankle bracelet.

Sara’s mother came up behind her, setting her hands on her shoulders. Sara looked at her mother’s face in the mirror.

“Bobbi is right, sweetheart. You are beautiful, but I am so proud of you.” Jeannie’s voice fractured as she spoke the words, and tears pooled in her eyes.

Sara turned, careful of the train on the dress, and faced her mother.

She was clutching a tissue in her hand, and her chin quivered slightly. “I wish you all the happiness that your father and I have.” Her mother reached out for Sara’s cheek but stopped short of contact. “Don’t want to mess up your makeup.”

“Then please stop making me want to cry.” Sara felt the hot tears building, but blinked them back and fanned a hand in front of her face. “No, no, no.”

Valerie laughed. “You’ll be crying before this is all over. We are talking about *you* here.”

The fact the groom had been completely off-limits just six months ago didn’t help with the enormity of the day. How could she speak her vows, while peering into Sean’s eyes, and *not* cry given how far they’d come? “Well, if I’m going to cry, I’d rather it be later.” An image flashed in her mind of standing at the podium, holding hands with Sean, and the officiant saying, “Repeat after me.” *Gulp...* She could always take the coward’s way out and avoid eye contact with Sean altogether.

“Here’s a little help to push you past the wedding jitters.” Bobbi had four flutes of champagne and gave the first glass to Sara.

The wedding was to start in seven minutes. “Do we have time?”

“You’re the bride. You set the schedule. To Sara and Sean.” Bobbi raised her glass and made the toast, and the rest of them echoed her sentiment.

The champagne was cold and sharp. A wake-up call.

I am getting married!

Her single life was soon to be over. She'd hold Sean's heart in her hands. What if she ever failed him?

"Oh my..." Sara set the glass down on a nearby table and put a hand over her heart.

"Sweetie?" Her mother rushed over to her. "Are you all right?"

Huge question. Tough to answer. Not that she had any doubt she loved Sean, and commitment didn't scare her at all. Their romance was of the once-in-a-lifetime variety.

"Sara," her mother prompted.

"I will be." She considered gulping back the champagne when a knock on the door stopped her.

"I'll get it." Bobbi hurried over, opened the door a crack, and stuck her head out. "Yes?"

The visitor didn't speak, but the door was pushed open, and Darlene Day stumbled inside. She beelined to Sara, a wild look in her eyes.

"Darlene? What is it?" Sara's sixth sense shot the hairs up on the back of her neck. What would have her baker in her bridal suite minutes before the wedding?

Darlene's eyelids were fluttering, and she was panting.

"Ah, Sara..." Bobbi's face was pale as she pointed at Darlene. "She's... ah... She has a..." She covered her mouth and turned away.

Sara tensed and spotted what Bobbi had been trying to tell her.

Darlene had a knife plunged into her back.

"I'm calling nine-one-one." Her mother rummaged in her purse and pulled out her phone.

"We're getting you help. Just hang in there." Sara was calm, despite every nerve ending in her body screaming someone tried to kill Darlene. The knife didn't get in her back by

accident. She couldn't have done it herself. It was Sara's former career as a homicide detective helping her to process all this in a rational manner. She leaned into the flush of adrenaline. She motioned for Valerie to help her guide Darlene to the couch. They perched her on the edge of the cushion. "Who did this to you, Darlene? Do you know?" Sara asked.

Tears were falling down Darlene's cheeks, and she opened her mouth and closed it, gasping like a fish out of water.

"It's okay. Just stay with us. That's the important part." Sara fended off the rush of anger that danced through her veins. Darlene was sixty-something years old. What could she have done to attract a murderer? *And today... Why today?* The thought was minuscule, the guilt immense that it had even come to mind.

"I..." Darlene's voice was weak, and Sara assured her again.

"Help is coming."

"... need someone here right away," her mother was saying into her phone.

Bobbi and Valerie were huddled together in a corner of the room, staring wide-eyed.

"Save your energy, Darlene." Sara pinched her eyes shut for a moment, wishing to heal the poor woman and set back the clock.

"I... I..."

It wasn't long before sirens were approaching the community building.

Sara looked at the clock. She was due to walk down the aisle in five minutes. Her heart sank as her wedding slipped away.

"Someone needs to tell them downstairs that..." Sara swallowed roughly. "The wedding needs to be postponed."

Valerie sniffled and nodded. "I'll take care of it."

“Thank you.”

Valerie left, and the door shutting behind her seemed to add an exclamation point to Sara’s reality. Her marriage was on hold.

Darlene tapped the back of Sara’s hand. “I... Icing.” Her eyes rolled back just before her head fell forward.

Darlene Day was dead.

Chapter Three

This couldn't be happening... could *not* have *happened*. It was like a horrid nightmare, except there would be no waking up from this one. What was with people around her being murdered? In the days before her engagement to Sean, it had been a neighbor around the corner from Sara's house. She'd been the one to discover him dead inside his entryway. She'd also taken in his beagle, Magnum, who she and Sean adopted. While they traveled, he'd stayed with Sara's parents, who were very much at risk of getting their own fur baby now that they'd fallen in love with having one around. All these thoughts were ricocheting inside her head, disrupting her peace of mind. Surely, Darlene's murder was coincidental and not a sign that Sara attracted death or was some sort of Pandora's Box.

A knock on the door had her jumping.

"Sara?" It was Sean, and she started toward the door.

Her mother tugged on her arm. "He can't see you in your dress. It's bad luck."

"Too late to prevent that." Sara glanced over her shoulder at Darlene's slumped form.

"Sara?" Sean repeated.

"Sean, just give me a minute." She looked anxiously around the room. Should she change or just answer as she was?

“Please, darling, just open the door,” Sean pleaded.

Her chest tightened. She was being foolish. The whole “groom seeing a bride in her dress” thing was nothing but foolish superstition. “I’m coming.” She swept past her mother and shrugged out of the way as she tried to stop her again.

Sara opened the door and froze. Sean was quite the sight in his tuxedo. So very handsome, and he was all hers.

His mouth gaped open as he danced his gaze over her dress, her neckline, her lips, and her tiara. He met her eyes. “Sara, you are... breathtaking.”

Her cheeks heated, but now wasn’t the time to get swept away by his charm. “You shouldn’t be seeing me right now, but there’s been a murder.”

“A murder?” His confused expression looked like a scowl. “Valerie said there was an *incident*.”

At that point, Valerie came up behind him, slightly winded. She stopped short, her gaze going from Sara to Sean, back to Sara. The unspoken caution was an easy—and predictable—one to pick up. She was giving Sara grief about showing herself to Sean.

“Everyone’s been notified there will be a delay,” Valerie said. “Conrad and Jimmy are making sure no one goes anywhere.”

Sara nodded, realizing her friend might not even understand the full import of that. Someone in this building was most likely a murderer. She made eye contact with Sean. “You need to make sure of that.” She didn’t need to say any more. Two years of working as partners in Homicide had made them good at reading each other’s minds.

“I will.” And he was off.

As she watched him walk away, the rest of Valerie’s words sank in. Sara took a deep breath, hating to acknowledge reality. There would be more than a *delay* to the wedding; it would

be postponed. The community hall was now a crime scene. Speaking of, so was the bridal suite. “You and Bobbi need to leave this room now. So do I. Paramedics will look at her and confirm death. But there’s going to be crime scene investigators, detectives, a medical examiner...”

“Sweetheart, you can’t seriously be considering remaining in your wedding gown,” her mother said, her voice tender and concerned.

Sara considered, and it wouldn’t be ideal, so she’d make a change of wardrobe. “I’ll change, if one of you can help me out of this.” She could barely bring herself to say the words, and her chin quivered as she did. All the hard work to make this the perfect day—for what? It was a selfish pity party, really, as a woman had lost her life. Besides, how could she get married on the flip side of a murder? It wasn’t like she could ignore Darlene’s body and carry on like everything was peachy. Was all this a bad omen? Was the universe trying to tell her not to marry Sean? She trembled at the thought.

“I’ll help,” her mother said, as Bobbi brushed past them into the hall with Valerie.

Sara stepped back and closed the door. Walking across the room, she carefully removed her tiara and veil and gave a wide berth to the couch and Darlene’s body. She laid it across the back of a chair near the closet and opened its doors. Inside were the Chanel dress pants and blouse she had worn to the center, but her gaze danced over to the other outfit. To think, just moments ago, she had assumed her next change of clothes would be into the sequined pantsuit she’d be leaving in. Ironically, the sentiment about assumptions seemed apt right now. Along the lines of making plans and God laughing. Well, she wasn’t, and neither was anyone else.

“I’m sorry this happened to you,” her mother said, staying near the door.

Sara slowly turned, sorrow filling her soul with disappointment, but on any scale, Darlene was the one they needed to feel for. And what would become of her niece, Trinity, with Darlene dead? Sara shook her head. "It's unfortunately where we are. We need to find out who did this to her."

"Sara, by that you mean the local police? Not you, right? You're retired, off the force. You don't need to find anyone."

Did her mother not understand the way she was wired at all? She had an inborn need to get answers, obtain closure, and find justice. "She was murdered at my wedding."

"Yes," her mother dragged out and closed the distance. She put a hand on Sara's shoulder. "And the police will investigate. We all need to clear out and let them do their work."

"Mom, no one can go anywhere. This center is now a crime scene." Sara turned and pointed behind her to indicate the buttons on the dress that trailed up her spine.

Her mother started undoing them. "It doesn't mean you have to investigate."

"How well did you know Darlene?" Sara asked, disregarding her mother's words.

"Enough to know Darlene didn't deserve this. I can't imagine who would have done this to her." Jeannie's voice was even, almost catatonic. She was clearly operating in a state of denial. The shock of the death hadn't fully hit her yet.

"We'll find out."

Jeannie said nothing, but Sara sensed her annoyed energy. She finished with the buttons and touched Sara's shoulder, prompting her to turn around. "*We?* This is a matter for the police—not you and Sean."

Sara was saved from defending her decision again by another knock on the door.

"Paramedics," a man called out.

"One minute." Sara fanned her hands for her mother to hurry. Gown overhead and off, she stepped into her pants and

buttoned up her blouse. “Come in.” She wiped down the front of herself, straightening the material.

Two medics entered. The older one frowned at the sight of Darlene on the couch.

“Ms. Day, and she’s...?” He looked at Sara.

“She passed shortly after we called for you,” Sara said.

The younger one checked for a pulse, shook his head, and the older man double-checked.

“She *is* dead,” he said.

Sara crossed her arms, biting back a sharp remark. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to discern between alive and dead. “Did you know her?”

“Yes, she made the cake for my wedding,” the older medic said, his eyes dipping down. “That was years ago now, but her bakery is the go-to in Cotton Spring Falls.”

“Hands down,” Jeannie said proudly as she finished hanging the wedding dress on its hangers and tucking it into the closet. “We haven’t met before, but I’m Jeannie Cain, Sara’s mother. Ah, that’s Sara.”

“Otis Whitaker,” the older man said. “This is Brice Franklin.”

The younger medic dipped his head, blushed, for reasons Sara didn’t understand. “You’ll need to call in the police, ma’am.”

Sara stiffened. “We will. Thanks.”

The two medics turned to leave, but Otis stopped to say, “Sorry about your wedding.”

“Thanks.” The condolence had reality sinking in deeper. The day she’d been anticipating and planning for six months was ruined. Sara snatched her purse from where it had been on a table and pulled out her phone.

“I’m glad you’re seeing reason and leaving this to the police,” her mother said.

“I never said anything about leaving it entirely with them.”

“Sara Melody Cain.”

“Mom, there’s no way I’m not going to help out.”

“And what makes you think the police will be interested in your help?”

Ryan Doyle, a detective with the Cotton Spring Falls PD, came to mind. She'd had him around her pinkie finger since elementary school. She'd invited him to the wedding, but he'd declined. It might have to do with feelings he had for her, which she never reciprocated. She wasn't taking the moral high ground taking advantage of him, but it was a means to an end. He'd likely let her and Sean be involved in the investigation. “Oh, I'm sure they'll be open to the idea.” *Ryan anyway...*

“What do you think Sean will say about this?” Her mother stepped into the hall with Sara.

She closed the door of the suite. “I'm sure he'll agree with me.”

“Then you're both crazy, Sara.”

“Mom, someone in this building killed Darlene. At our wedding. It doesn't get much more personal for us.” It grated on her to think that someone she and Sean had invited was a killer. That burden settled on her shoulders and the back of her neck as she listened to Ryan's line ring.

You have reached the end of the sample. For purchase options, visit:

CarolynArnold.net/Wedding-Bells-Brew-Murder