



One for the Murphys

By Lynda Mullaly Hunt

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From the author of the *New York Times* bestselling novel *Fish in a Tree*!

Carley uses humor and street smarts to keep her emotional walls high and thick. But the day she becomes a foster child, and moves in with the Murphys, she's blindsided. This loving, bustling family shows Carley the stable family life she never thought existed, and she feels like an alien in their cookie-cutter-perfect household. Despite her resistance, the Murphys eventually show her what it feels like to belong--until her mother wants her back and Carley has to decide where and how to live. She's not really a Murphy, but the gifts they've given her have opened up a new future.

"Hunt's writing is fearless and *One For The Murphys* is a story that is at once compassionate, thought-provoking and beautifully told. From the first page, I was drawn into Carley's story. She is a character not to be missed or forgotten."

—Jacqueline Woodson, National Book Award-winning author of *Brown Girl Dreaming*

Winner of the Tassy Walden Award for New Voice in Children's Literature

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Editorial Review

Review

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* "By the end of this poignant debut, readers will be applauding Carley's strength." —*Kirkus Reviews*, starred review

"Readers will be cheering her on." —*Booklist*

"This is a beautiful book, filled with hope. You'll cry and laugh along with Carley as she learns to lower her defenses enough to love--and, more surprisingly, be loved. It's a story you'll long remember." —Patricia Reilly Giff, Newbery Honor-winning author of *Pictures of Hollis Woods* and *Lily's Crossing*

"Undeniably affecting. Hunt's writing is strong and her characters well-developed and believable." —*Publishers Weekly*

"*One for the Murphys* is a riveting story..." —*Examiner.com*

"This novel speaks to the universal experience of growing up but will especially resonate with readers who have questioned the hands they have been dealt and wonder how to move forward nonetheless." —*The Horn Book*

"An astonishing debut! Lynda Mullaly Hunt's direct style of writing has readers rooting for Carley Connors and all of the Murphys from start to satisfying finish." —Leslie Connor, ALA Schneider Family Award-winning author of *Waiting for Normal* and *Crunch*

"An incredibly touching novel." —*TheStorySiren.com*

"Absolutely astonishing." —*Bookalicious.org*

About the Author

Lynda Mullaly Hunt (www.lyndamullalyhunt.com) has received many honors for her debut novel, *One for the Murphys*, which is on over twenty state award lists, including Bank Street's 2013 Best Books of the Year. Her follow up novel, *Fish in a Tree*, is a *New York Times* bestseller and ALA Notable Children's Book. She's a former teacher, and holds writers retreats for the Society of Children's Book Writers and Illustrators. She lives in Connecticut with her husband, two children, impetuous beagle, and beagle-loathing cat.

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One

FOR THE

Murphys

My mother had a
different way of doing things.

Officially, this is my fourth day in captivity. I have started keeping tally on the back of that dumb hero sign. One good thing, though. Mrs. Murphy has cleared some time to take me clothes shopping. In an actual store.

This is a far cry from my mother and I making late-night visits to Salvation Army drop boxes to “shop.” I remember how she’d hand me a flashlight, hoist me into the bins, and then make requests for sizes and specific colors like I was sitting in there with a doting saleslady and a catalog.

It was cool, though, how we’d go to McDonald’s afterward and my mother would hold up her ice cream as if to toast me. “Carley, what would I do without you?” she’d ask.

Back when I was little, I used to wonder why there weren’t lines of people at those bins. I figured my mother must be the most clever mother anywhere.

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One

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CHAPTER 1

Lucky Girl

Sitting in the back of the social worker's car, I try to remember how my mother has always said to never show your fear. She'd be disappointed to see me now. Shaking. Just going without a fight.

The social worker, Mrs. MacAvoy, pulls out of the hospital parking lot while I play with the electric-lock button on her car door. *Lock. Unlock. Lock. Unlock.* She glares at me in the mirror and says, "Please... stop that. The door needs to stay locked."

I love it when people use the word *please* but they sound like they want to remove your face. I stop. But I'm not doing it to bug her like she thinks. It's just that I can't keep still. And it beats jumping out of a moving car.

My fingers play with my hospital bracelet. I stare at my name. Carley Connors. Thirteen letters. How unlucky can one person be?

I think about my mother. Still there, lying in her hospital bed like an eggplant. I wonder if she's conscious yet. I wonder why no one will tell me what's happening with her. And I wonder why I can't seem to ask anymore.

Gazing out the window, I count the trees. Connecticut is covered with them, but in March the branches are still bare. Like long, gray fingers waving us along as we speed by.

"We're almost there," Mrs. MacAvoy says, taking a corner faster than I think any social worker is supposed to.

I think back to sitting in that hospital bed, bunching the blankets up in my fists, asking her if they were going to send me to an orphanage. "We don't call them orphanages anymore," she'd said, shaking her head and laughing. Like *that* was the point?

Now I'm trapped in her car going to a place she's chosen. After what my stepfather has done, I'm terrified thinking about what kind of foster house I may land in. The things that could happen to me.

I think of the Little Mermaid mural near the nurse's station. How the tooth fairy gave me that CD when I was seven, and my mother let me get up to listen when I found it under my pillow at midnight. We danced around the kitchen together. She sang "Kiss the Girl" as she chased me to get a kiss. I never once ran away for real.

“You know,” Mrs. MacAvoy says, pulling me back to reality. “You’re very lucky, Carley.”

“You’re kidding me, right?”

Her mouth bunches up. “Well.” She sounds like a ticking bomb. “It’s a nice home. A good placement. You *are* lucky.”

“Guess I should buy a lottery ticket then.”

“Someday, Carley, you’re going to have to realize that being angry at the whole world only hurts you.”

I wonder if that isn’t the point.

We drive up to a house the color of dirt. Tall, thin trees surround it, like guards on watch. There is a “66” on the mailbox. A palindrome.

Mrs. MacAvoy opens the car door for me. “This is a very nice family, *Carley*.” She puts emphasis on my name as if to give me a warning. “And this is the first time they’ve taken a foster child...”

I know this is her way of telling me to be a “good girl.” The walk up the driveway feels like wading through glue. I’ve read books and seen movies. I know what foster parents are like. They smoke cigars and feed you saltines for breakfast.

One, two, three... seven, eight, nine. Standing on the porch, I count the leaves on the plastic wreath that hangs on the door. The bright redness of the flowers reminds me of the swirling lights of the ambulance. I have a vague memory of my mother screaming for me and my own voice trying to yell for her. And the taste of blood; I remember that.

I remember the blinding pain surging through my body and then feeling nothing at all. Wondering if a person like me would go to heaven.

I jump when the door swings open, and a woman smiles. She is the kind of person you’d never look at twice. Her hair is shoulder length, straight, and different shades of brown. Her blue V-neck sweater matches her eyes, and she wears a silver leaf necklace and plaid pants. I mean, *plaid* pants?

She holds out her hand. “Hello, Carley. How nice to meet you. I’m Julie Murphy.”

I can’t reach back. Even the name feels fake. Too perky. I wonder why she’s happy to meet me. I wonder how much she knows. And I hope that I do not like her.

Then this whole thing gets even worse.

Mrs. Murphy steps to the side. Behind her stand three boys. The smallest one runs over, stretching his hands up toward his mother, and she swoops him up.

I can’t stay here. I’m probably here to be a live-in babysitter or a modern-day Cinderella.

The oldest boy looks at me like he wants to wrap me in a carpet and leave me on the curb.

I haven’t cried since my mother told me she was going to marry Dennis. That was 384 days ago, but I want to cry now.

His mother tips her head to the side and holds my gaze until I just can't look anymore. I hear her voice. Soft. "Why don't you come in, Carley?"

CHAPTER 2

The First Step

While Mrs. MacAvoy blathers on, Mrs. Murphy focuses on the bruises on my arms; her look of pity crawls inside of me. Clasping my hands behind my back, I try to hide my arms so she can't see.

The middle boy starts pulling Matchbox cars from his pants pockets and holds them against his chest. He's the dirtiest but seems the most serious, even with a head full of red curls.

The one in her arms is about four, I guess. He wears a plastic fireman's hat, little fire hydrant boxers, and bright yellow rain boots. A great blackmail picture when the kid's about sixteen.

"This is Daniel," she says, pointing to the tallest one. "And my redhead car guy is Adam, and my littlest guy is Michael Eric. Say hi, guys!"

I look at this family. A family I don't know. That I am supposed to stay with. I try to swallow my panic.

The whole place smells like dryer sheets. Reminds me of Lucky's Laundromat back in Vegas, but it isn't nearly as bright. The fireplace spans an entire wall in the step-down family room; the mantel is covered with St. Patrick's Day decorations.

Mrs. MacAvoy leaves, saying, "Good luck." I wonder which one of us she's talking to.

When Mrs. Murphy closes the door behind her, she turns to me.

"Let's get you settled in," she says. The idea of me settling in here is about as likely as an apple tree sprouting in my ear.

She picks up the backpack that Family Services gave me, which has a stuffed giraffe, a toothbrush, and a pair of bright yellow fairy pajamas that remind me that there are worse things than death. The stuffed giraffe is good, though. Anyone who has had her whole life shredded in one night should have a stuffed giraffe.

Mrs. Murphy takes me up the staircase. There are thirteen steps to the top, the tenth one being a squeaker. Soon we stand in a bedroom decorated in the theme of fire trucks. On the wall over the bed, there's a red wooden sign that reads BE SOMEONE'S HERO in white letters, and I consider the cruel irony of sleeping under this phrase.

"Sorry about the room. I know it isn't well suited to a girl your age. I moved Michael Eric in with Adam so you'd have some privacy. You know, I assumed you'd be a boy." She looks at me over her shoulder and seems a little embarrassed. "I mean, I was surprised to hear that you were a girl."

"Yeah, me too."

Straightening the corner of the bed, she laughs. "What a clip."

I wonder what that means. I like it.

"I was thinking. If you want to call me Julie instead of Mrs. Murphy, that would be fine. Not so formal."

“Okay,” I say, thinking that I don’t want to call her Julie like we’re friends. I don’t want to call her anything. She seems okay, but I don’t want someone else’s family.

“I’m going to get Michael Eric and Adam cleaned up and start dinner. Mrs. MacAvoy said you’d been asking for books at the hospital, so I put a bunch you may like on the top shelf there.” She nods toward a bookcase.

I turn to look at them. Best thing so far.

“We’re having lasagna for dinner. I hope that’s okay.”

“Stouffer’s or store brand?”

“Uh, no. I mean neither. I made it a couple of weeks ago and stuck it in the basement freezer.” She seems embarrassed. “So I guess you could say it’s frozen, then?”

She made it herself? Seriously?

Mrs. Murphy turns to go, closing the door behind her.

“Hey!”

“Yeah?” she answers, stepping back in.

“Do you have a husband?” I ask, staring at her wedding band and thinking of my stepfather, Dennis.

“Yes, I do.” She sounds all singsongy. “My husband, Jack, is working at the firehouse today, but he’ll be home tomorrow morning. He knows you’re here.”

I am afraid again. “Okay. Thanks.”

She leaves, and soon I hear splashing from the bathroom and it sounds like there are ten boys in the tub instead of two. I stand at the door and want to go in but don’t. I see the Murphys’ bedroom door is open, so I go in there instead.

The bed is high off the ground and has a woven canopy over it. There are pictures all over the room on tables and shelves. There’s a man in a Navy uniform. There’s also a wedding picture, and I see that the groom is the same as the Navy guy. I wish my mother had been married to my father.

The bathroom door opens behind me, and I feel like I’ve been caught doing something wrong. I jump back into the tub, and the Navy man picture smashes on the floor. I blurt out, “Sorry.”

“Carley. Never mind that. I’ll clean it later. But be careful. Don’t cut yourself.”

I stare at her. When will she get mad?

“There’s a little step stool in here,” she says. “Why don’t you come sit and join us?”

What sounds like a plastic cup falls on the floor in the bathroom followed by a loud little-boy laugh. She pokes her head in. “Michael Eric. Leave the water in the tub, honey.”

Honey.

She turns toward me, waiting for an answer. I can see she becomes impatient as her gaze jumps between me and the bathroom.

“Sorry,” I say. I wonder if my mother is awake yet.

She seems to force a smile. “The picture is no big deal. Jack hates it anyway.”

My mouth dries up. I know I am not apologizing for the picture. I am sorry for being there in the first place.

Mrs. Murphy lets me skip dinner. Says it’s only for the first night. I hear a happy family downstairs, talking and laughing, and I am relieved that I am not with them.

In the dark bedroom that is not my own, I count the wheels on the trucks over and over. I count the little firemen running around to help people. I stare at the hero sign and count the curves and lines of the letters. I wonder if, in my whole life, I could ever be someone’s hero.

I think I hear my mother calling my name in the night, and I pull the covers up under my chin. I remind myself how she told me to never cry. How she and her friends would laugh at me when I did. How my mother would tell me that crying was for suckers, and that you can’t be a sucker in Vegas.

I know that wherever my mother is, she has to be thinking about me, and I know I will go to her if she needs me, no matter what the state says. I hope that if I’m patient, I will have a mother of my own again.

CHAPTER 3

Orange You Glad You’re Here?

At night, the house is quiet. Too quiet for sleeping.

The digital clock reads 2:34 a.m.; I like the consecutive numbers. I watch and wait for 2:35 because two plus three will be five. At 2:36, two times three will be six.

The number six makes me remember my mother’s favorite vase. How I filled it with six big, clear marbles with deep blue swirls inside, even when she told me not to. How my elbow sent it to the carpeted floor, and how when we cleaned it up, there were six pieces. We glued the vase back together, but it was misshapen and couldn’t hold water anymore.

I’m afraid that’s the way my mother and I will be now. I’m afraid that no matter how many times I apologize for messing things up with her new husband, Dennis, we will remain misshapen and unable to hold water.

I so wish I’d been able to see her before leaving the hospital. I think back to my last night there—just twenty-four hours ago. About how I tried to sneak out of my room and find my mother in intensive care. How I kept thinking that if I was any daughter at all, I’d be able to find her.

When the nurse caught me, I blurted out to her how sorry I was for making Dennis mad. Like by telling her, my mother would know too.

The nurse walked me back to my room and told me to get some sleep. I don’t know why, when things are horrible, people always tell you to get some sleep. I bet it’s because if you’re asleep, they know you’ll leave them alone.

When she turned to leave, I remember thinking that I was afraid to be alone.

The nurse turned out the lights before she left. And I was in the dark.

Just like I am now.

The next morning, I sip orange juice. Good, ordinary, boring orange juice with no added kiwi or pomegranate.

Mrs. Murphy went out last night to get it for me after I told her I only liked it plain. I think it's freakish that she got it just because I'd asked for it. Whenever I'd asked my mother for orange juice, she'd ask me if I were a Rockefeller. For years I'd thought that a Rockefeller was a person who really loves oranges.

The back door slams and there's instant screaming and crying; now this place finally feels a little like home.

Michael Eric comes in with his hand tucked into his armpit. His mother drops to the floor like someone has kicked her behind the knees, but she lands gently, holding out her arms, and he melts into them. He tells how Adam smashed his hand. She takes his hand and kisses it. "My poor ole boy," she whispers. "Does that feel better?"

His crying stops.

She wipes his tears away and he spins and runs back outside. Then Mrs. Murphy goes to the door and calls Adam.

Again she kneels and asks him if he hit his little brother. At first he denies it. Then she poses a simple question. "Are you telling me the truth?"

She's got to be kidding. If there's half a brain in his head, he'll stick to the story.

He pauses and says, "I whaled him, Mommy, but he deserved it."

I think that it's funny to have "whaled him" and "Mommy" in the same sentence, and I decide that I like Adam.

She tilts her head. "What have we said about this?"

"I'm supposed to protect him 'cause he's my brother."

"That's right. Brothers stick together, right? Family looks out for family."

I stand in a place with no space.

My stomach has such a longing in it that I want to throw up. The tone, the look on her face and the look on his, a gentle brush of his hair. A kiss on top of the head. I struggle to decipher a foreign language. She's looking at him like she's seeing the best thing ever. Even though he's done something wrong.

I no longer have the stomach for this juice that she bought for me. I go to the sink and pour it out. I don't belong here. I begin to think that a foster mother who smokes cigars and makes me sleep in the basement would be a relief.

CHAPTER 4

Are You There, God? It's Me, Carley

When Mrs. Murphy comes back into the kitchen, she looks nervous as she studies me. She seems to think about things a lot before she speaks, which makes me wonder what she doesn't say.

"So," Mrs. Murphy begins, in her perky voice. "Do you know what you'd like to do today?"

I shrug. What's with her? She makes it sound like I'm on a vacation.

"Would it be okay if I go shoot baskets?"

"You play basketball?" Perky Murphy asks.

"Yeah, I was on the team back home." I remember how my mother would come to the games and yell for me. How she'd tell the refs to go back to reffing blind man's basketball when they made a call against me. How I thought it was funny, but the other mothers used to tell her that it was inappropriate, which only made her louder.

"Well, you and Daniel should get along really well."

"Great," I say, thinking that I'll be back with my mother before that could even happen.

"You can borrow my coat," she says. "It's cold."

I can't because she suggested it.

She glances at me and then glances again. "You may borrow that, if you'd rather," she says, motioning toward a gray hoodie. I put it on.

Outside, I find a basketball right away. It's green with shamrocks. Can't *anything* just be the way I expect around here?

It's cold outside. Not like Vegas. I can see my breath, and it reminds me of the smoke in the casinos when my mother would leave me in the lobby to wait for her. She'd do a few of the slot machines just inside the door where she could see me waiting on the bench. How she'd do a thumbs-up when she won, or yell "Send me luck!" when she didn't.

Standing there in the cold, in front of the house that's the color of dirt, I decide to ask God a question.

I close my eyes and turn the ball in my hands. I say in a whisper, "Okay. If I make this basket, then my mother still loves me."

Bending my knees, I shoot, watching the ball spin in the air. It gets wedged between the board and the back of the hoop. I know that means something, but I don't know what.

"Wicked good one," says a voice behind me. At first, I think it's God. Like he has time to talk to me.

I turn around.

It's Daniel. "You going to get it down now?" he asks.

"What do you mean? I did the work of getting it up there; *you* get it down."

I hear a car. Daniel waves to a guy pulling into the driveway in a pickup. It must be Mr. Murphy.

Stellar. Just *stellar*.

The door of the truck squeaks when he opens it. He slams the door, messes Daniel's hair, looks up at the ball, and says, "Good shot."

"It was *her*," Daniel says, pointing.

Mr. Murphy comes toward me, faster than I would like. He holds out his hand. "Nice to meet you, Carley," he says, but his face says that I'm here to infect his family with malaria. He makes me want to run.

Mrs. Murphy comes out through the garage. Mr. Murphy kisses her on the cheek and whispers something. She smiles at him. Then he grabs a small duffel bag from his truck and heads inside.

"Mom," Daniel says, pointing. "Look what she did."

Mrs. Murphy's smile falls away, and now she's rattled. I hear worry in her voice. "So get it down, Daniel. Problem solving, right?"

Clearly, he wanted a little of my blood instead of a suggestion to do it himself. I hardly know Daniel, but I hate him anyway. I have this feeling, though, that if I don't lay off the prince, Mrs. MacAvoy will be back for me.

CHAPTER 5

I Should Have Licked the Anthill

I came up to the fireman room after Daniel complained that I'm wearing his sweatshirt. I hate having to wear his clothes, but I'm glad the sleeves cover my bruises. No more pity face from his mother.

I sit on the floor, holding the giraffe that came in my Family Services backpack, rubbing my finger back and forth along its soft brown mane.

Michael Eric walks in.

"Don't you knock first?" I ask.

"But this is *my* room," he says.

Oh yeah.

He marches over and sits down. "Whatcha doin'?"

"Just thinking."

"Why would you be doing just that?"

I almost laugh at how little he knows of the world. "Sometimes you can't help but think, even if you don't want to."

"Like when you pee in your pants?"

I laugh now. Maybe he knows more than I thought. "Yeah. Kind of like that. Not so messy, though."

He giggles this laugh that comes right from his belly. If a sound could dance, this is what it would be like. He reaches for the giraffe, and I let him take it. He holds it against the side of his face. “Who is this?” he asks.

“Just a stuffed giraffe.”

“Well, what’s his *name*?”

“He doesn’t have a name,” I say.

He looks at the giraffe like he doesn’t recognize it anymore. Then he hugs it to his stomach. “Mr. Longneck.”

“Mr. Longneck, huh?”

“Yeah, ’cause he’s got a long neck.” He holds it in front of my face. “See?”

“Funny. I hadn’t noticed that.”

“Silly Carley. Of *course* a giraffe has a long neck. That’s what makes him a giraffe!”

Funny how something can be defined by the one thing that makes it different from everything else. Like “the foster kid.”

I turn to him and act confused. “I thought a giraffe had a trunk.”

“No,” he says like he feels sorry for me. He leans over and whispers in my ear. “That’s an elephant.”

“Oh. Well, thanks for setting me straight.”

He sits up. “That’s okay. I don’t mind.”

I have to smile. I like Michael Eric, too. How can he and Adam possibly be related to Daniel?

“Can I keep Mr. Longneck?” he asks me.

I’m surprised. I mean, I know I should give it to him because he’s a little kid and everything, but besides the clothes I’m wearing and my high tops, Mr. Longneck is pretty much all I have in the whole world right now. “Sorry, bud. I don’t think so.”

He shrugs. “Oh,” he says. Then his eyebrows jump. “Can you play with me?”

I feel like I should, but I really just want to sit. “Can we another time maybe?”

He stands and then bends over so his face is upside down. “We’ll play on Friday. Oh, and Mommy wants you to come down for lunch now.”

I’d rather lick an anthill than eat lunch, but I nod, and he is out as fast as he was in.

Perky Murphy stands near the sink making sandwiches. She turns to me. “Chicken, ham, or tuna?”

“I can make it myself.”

“Don’t be silly.” She smiles. “Let me make it for you.”

I don't *want* her to make it for me.

"So, which one do you think?" she asks.

"I really don't mind making it myself." I don't want her to wait on me. It feels wrong.

"I really don't mind, Carley. I mean, c'mon, it's only a sandwich. Chicken, ham, or tuna?" Her eyes widen.

I am dying to say roast beef.

"Perhaps you'd prefer something from the cabinet? There are some microwavable meals in there."

I almost feel sorry for her. She's so pathetic. Like the world would come apart if everyone doesn't get a perfect little lunch. I think of how watching my mother talk to her would be like watching a kitten play with a ball of yarn.

But the feeling in my gut whispers that maybe I'm a little mad about all the gallons of chicken noodle soup I've eaten right out of the can. Still though, this Perky Murphy is as fragile as they come.

She wouldn't last a second in my world.

I open the cabinet looking for a can of chicken noodle soup, so that I can feel like I'm in my own place. The first thing I notice are the Oreos. My mother's favorite.

I almost burst out laughing, though, when I see how everything is arranged by size with the labels facing forward. I mumble to myself, "And on the third day, God created the seas and the mountains and this freakish cabinet in Connecticut."

Yet looking at it, something creeps across my scalp. So while Mrs. Murphy is distracted by Michael Eric stuffing his entire sandwich in his mouth at once, I mess everything up, turning the cans around and upside down. The earth should fall off its axis when she opens this.

I sit down, holding a can of soup, trying to decide if I should eat it cold or not. Daniel shows up; he and his mom discuss what he should eat. Like the leaders of two nations have come together to work out something actually important. These people are too much.

Users Review

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