ForeWord Reviews
Clarion Review

GENERAL

Unexpected Life
Paula Evans Archer
CreateSpace
978-1-4196-8418-0
Four Stars (out of Five)

Pack up the sunscreen and a copy of Unexpected Life, the first book in a trilogy by Paula Evans Archer. This novel of middle-age single parenting, teenage children, and a life-changing beach vacation is a delightful summer read.

The story opens as a French-Canadian family settles into their rented beachside cottage. Jacques, a tall, lean surgeon and single father; his sullen twenty-one-year-old son Rene; daughter Sophie, on the cusp of womanhood; and Sophie's best friend Lorraine begin a final family vacation before the kids fly the nest. French idioms and phrases dot their dialogue, adding exotic flavor. When an American family moves into the rental cabin next door, the trip takes a decided turn toward the romantic and conflict heats up. Jacques is intrigued by Laura, a writer and single mom of teenaged Max and twenty-year-old daughter Audrey, and chaperone to Max's girlfriend Natalie. Jacques begins to realize how much he's missed a female companion in the fourteen years since his wife abandoned them.

Although the author includes too much minutiae ("The evening had turned out to be delightful—dry and warm—even though the day had been cloudy, grey, rainy, cold, clammy and gloomy."), many of these details provide layers in an otherwise simple tale of families on the brink of metamorphosis. A moment of humiliation is strengthened by description: "The next few seconds seemed like an eternity of silence. It was excruciating! Jacques looked pitiful standing there, hanging his head, feeling naked and ashamed, with his hands in his wet pockets and his foot nervously forming a mound of sand."

Moments of introspection add depth and dimension to the characters and foreshadow the direction relationships will take. One such interlude compares streaks of rain to life's scars:

He watched as most of the drops fell from the sky and stayed, as if glued to the glass, retaining their shape for a very long time. Others seemed destined to drip down the glass quite randomly…coalescing together into a uniquely shaped drop until it became heavy enough to scratch its own significant path down the glass…Jacques was suddenly struck by the similarity

between the paths of those rogue rain drops and the scars that major events scratched on the invisible surface of the human heart during one's life.

The ensemble cast of young, single, near-adult children sizzles with energy, sexual tension, and passion. The summer blazes with romance. Yet the slow and steady attraction that sparks between Jacques and Laura adds balance and a sense of mature love that transforms this from a summer fling to, perhaps, the real thing.

This charming story, with its unique and vibrant characters, melds families and crosses language barriers. A thorough edit, elimination of frivolous wordage, and heavy weeding of unnecessary details will transform this novel into a perfect beach accessory for romance readers.

Dawn Goldsmith