

The Witness at the Wedding

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Extract

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Chapter One

'Oh, I didn't tell you there's a history of murder in my fiancée's family, did I?'

The speaker was Stephen, Carole Seddon's son, and as soon as he'd said the words, she wished he hadn't. Everything had been going well up until that point. Carole was entertaining Stephen and Gaby on her own ground, over lunch in the Crown and Anchor pub in Fethering, and discussion of the wedding arrangements had been harmonious, even at times exciting.

But Gaby hadn't liked the mention of murder. The bubbliness of her personality had been instantly punctured, and she looked pained as she turned to her fiancé and said, 'You're exaggerating. I don't think local gossip qualifies as a "history of murder".'

To give him his due, he did back off very quickly, aware that he had crossed a threshold into forbidden territory. Carole was again surprised by her son's sensitivity. In Gaby's company Stephen displayed sides of his personality whose existence his mother had never suspected . . . or, Carole thought ruefully, had never taken the trouble to explore. She still didn't

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ever feel quite at ease with her son, still a little guilty for her lack of instinctive maternal feelings, for her part in the break-up of the marriage to his father David.

And as she looked across at him, she was again struck by how like Stephen was to a distorted image from her own mirror. He had the same earnest and potentially cold pale blue eyes, which peered through similar rimless glasses. Though not yet as uniformly grey as her own, his hair had a patina of silver over it. His relationship with Gaby had considerably lightened his personality, but there had always been hanging about Stephen an aura of the middle-aged. Though only in his early thirties, he looked older.

'More drinks,' Carole announced, mainly to break the mood. Stephen demurred; he was driving and he'd had the half of bitter he'd rationed himself. This proper caution only served to reinforce his middle-aged image. But Gaby said she'd join Carole in another glass of Chilean Chardonnay.

The moment she moved to the bar, Carole was aware of the two heads in the alcove behind her drawing closer, of the whispered remonstrance from Gaby to Stephen. She must have been berating him further for mentioning the subject of murder. Carole felt intrigued, but knew that this was not the moment to probe further. An opportunity might arise to find out more, or it might not. Carole wouldn't be that bothered either way. With Gaby Martin about to become a fixture in her life, there would be plenty of time to find out about her family background.

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She ordered two glasses of wine from Ted Crisp, the Crown and Anchor's landlord, scruffy of beard and matted of hair. He was an ex-stand-up comedian and – perhaps more unlikely – one of Carole's very few ex-lovers. The mutual consent by which the relationship had ended seemed now to have developed into a mutual agreement that no mention should ever be made of the incident by either of its participants.

'Nice day, isn't it?' Carole observed.

Ted did not take issue with this uncontroversial assertion. 'Yes, really get the smell of the sea with the windows open.'

'Have you still never been on the beach, Ted?'

He shook his shaggy head in mock-fear. 'Ooh, no. Not my element, the sea. I'm a city bloke, really.'

'Yes, but you have been living on the South Coast for some years now and the beach is less than a hundred yards away.'

'No, not for me. I find it easier to pretend the sea's not there.' He leant forward conspiratorially over the bar. 'That way I'm not at risk from mermaids.'

'What?'

'They're well known for luring men to their deaths.'

'I thought those were sirens.'

'Mermaids do it too. I should know. Had a girlfriend who was a mermaid once. Beautiful. Her vital statistics were thirty-eight – twenty-four – and a large cod.'

Carole winced. 'What a loss you were to the stand-up circuit, Ted.'

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He chuckled, then nodded across to the well-rounded, bubble-haired figure leaning in towards Stephen. 'That's the famous fiancée, is it?' He had not been behind the bar when they arrived, so no introductions had been made.

Carole confirmed that it was indeed the famous fiancée.

'Looks as if she's a good thing for Stephen,' Ted observed.

'How do you mean?'

'I've seen you having lunch in here with him a few times over the years. Conversation seems to be flowing a bit more freely with the fiancée around.'

Carole neither confirmed nor denied this, but she knew it was true. The days when Stephen had come down to Fethering and picked up his mother from her house, High Tor, for dutiful lunches had never been particularly relaxing for either of them. He had always taken refuge in talking about his work, which made Carole feel guilty because she had so little understanding of what he did, and could feign so little interest in it. Gaby's appearance on the scene had certainly freed up the conversational logjam. Even without the reliable stand-by of the wedding, there never seemed to be a lack of topics for discussion when Gaby was present.

Murmuring some all-purpose response to Ted Crisp, Carole crossed back to the table. The momentary dissension between the engaged couple had evidently been smoothed over, but the firmness with which Stephen embarked on a new topic of conversa-

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tion showed that Gaby's family history was not about to be probed further.

'We've absolutely decided that we're going to get married down here.'

'Down here?'

'Yes, Mother. In Fethering.'

Carole still winced inwardly at the formality of that 'Mother' - particularly as she couldn't forget that Stephen called his father 'Dad'.

'But surely Gaby's parents - I mean, it is traditional for the bride to be married where she grew up.' Carole looked at Gaby, who shrugged.

'Well, I wasn't brought up in Harlow, which is where they live now. And in fact I do have a West Sussex connection.'

'Oh?'

'My mother went to school in Worthing. I wasn't born down here, but I think she'd only just moved out of the area. I don't know. Mum's always a bit vague about that period of her life.'

'Fine. So it'll be Worthing rather than Harlow.' Carole hoped the relief didn't show in her voice. Her middle-class sensibilities would have been troubled by the idea of her son being married in Essex. Hard to disguise that kind of thing. People viewing the wedding photographs would be bound to ask where the event had happened. And, of course, it'd be on the marriage certificate for perpetuity. The genteel folk of West Sussex did not hold the county of Essex in the highest esteem.

'Yes! Besides . . .' Gaby paused, as though uncertain

whether she should proceed with the sentence. She made up her mind and went on, 'The fact is, Carole, that my parents aren't really . . . Well, it's going to be easier all round if Stephen and I make most of the arrangements.'

Carole didn't say anything, but her disquiet communicated itself, so Gaby hastened to correct any false impression. 'It's not that they aren't happy about Stephen and me getting married. They're absolutely delighted. It's just . . . well, the fact is that my mother is a terrible worrier. Organizing a wedding would be like a nightmare for her. She's just not good at that stuff. The only way she's going to enjoy the event is if she has nothing at all to do with the arrangements.'

Carole took a rather dim view of this. She hadn't got a daughter, so the situation would never arise for her, but she liked to think that in the same circumstances she would have done her duty. She might not enjoy organizing a wedding, but she knew it was part of the complex package of agreements every parent of a daughter signed up to. Still, maybe those rules didn't apply to people who lived in Essex. She tried to keep the disapproval out of her face, but clearly failed.

'I know you think that's wrong, Carole, but believe me, if my mother was in charge, a) the wedding wouldn't be at all well organized, and b) being responsible for it would probably give her a nervous breakdown.'

'Well, you know best. That sounds fine.' But Carole wasn't convinced it was fine. Also the mention of a 'nervous breakdown' raised the disturbing possibility

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of instability in the family of her future daughter-in-law. Carole Seddon was very old-fashioned about the concept of mental illness. She liked to think that she kept her emotions so firmly under control that she herself was in no danger of such a lapse, and tended to be judgemental towards those who did succumb. A psychologist might have reckoned that this attitude reflected her fear of losing control of her own mind, but then Carole Seddon was not a psychologist - nor indeed had she ever consulted one.

'There's also the matter of money,' said Stephen. 'Gaby's mum and dad would do anything for her, but the fact is that they haven't really got a bean . . .'

'Afraid not,' his fiancée concurred. 'They've only got Dad's pension.'

' . . . whereas we're fortunate enough to be quite well-heeled at the moment. So it was always going to be us who were going to pay for everything.'

Carole thought of her handsome civil service pension and her carefully squirrelled savings. 'I'd be very happy to help out if—'

'Not necessary, Mother. Honestly. We don't have a problem with it. A lot of our contemporaries pay for their own weddings. It's different if you marry straight out of university, when you have no money at all . . .'

'Not to mention a huge student loan these days,' Gaby added.

'Right. In those circumstances you expect the parents to stump up, but Gaby and I are . . . well, both healthily established in our careers, so it makes sense for us to foot the bills.'

'Yes, I'm sure that's fine,' said Carole, again with more conviction than she felt.

'And,' her son continued, 'on the "he who pays the piper" principle, that will also mean we can conduct the wedding in exactly the way we think fit.'

He pronounced this with an almost wolfish satisfaction, which again set alarm bells ringing for Carole. Surely they weren't going to go for some 'alternative' style of wedding? Not exchanges of vows they had written specially for the occasion, or readings from *The Road Less Travelled* or *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*, or crowning each other with garlands of wild flowers? None of that sounded terribly likely from the Stephen she knew, but Carole was coming to realize increasingly how little of her son she did know.

'And what,' she asked tentatively, 'do you "think fit"?''

'Oh, nothing outrageous,' he replied, to her considerable relief. 'Traditional, white church job, that's what we're after.' Seeing his fiancée's wry grimace, he went on. 'No, Gaby, if we're going to do it, we'll do it properly. A big number. Invite everyone we know.'

The girl looked almost pleadingly at Carole. 'A large part of me would just like to dash off to a registry office and get the deed done on the quiet.'

'No way. It's not as if we're ashamed of each other.'

'Of course not.'

'Then let's let everyone know about it. I think the most important bit of the wedding service is that "before this congregation" bit - though no doubt

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they've screwed that up too in the Modern English version of the service.'

Carole wasn't enough of an expert on the liturgy to pass comment. Gaby still looked dubious. Though she worked in the flamboyant world of a theatrical agency, there was a reclusive quality about the girl, an unwillingness to be put into any kind of limelight. And that tendency seemed to strengthen as the reality of the wedding approached. She jutted out her lower lip. 'I don't know. I think the playwright Ian Hay probably got it right when he described marriage as "a ghastly public confession of a strictly private intention".'

Stephen chuckled. 'It'll be all right, love. I want to show you off. I want everyone to know that I'm marrying the most wonderful woman in the world.'

Carole lowered her eyes in embarrassment. This seemed a rather effusive statement from a member of the Seddon family. The thought seemed to cause further disquiet to Gaby too.

But it enabled Stephen to move on to what was clearly another bone of contention for the engaged couple. 'Which is why, Gaby, I think we really have got to put the announcement in the paper.'

'I honestly don't think that's necessary, Steve.' Carole had never heard her son called 'Steve' by anyone but Gaby; even his school friends had stuck to the rather sedate 'Stephen'.

'We've told all our friends,' Gaby went on. 'Everyone who needs to know already knows.'

'But somehow the engagement doesn't really seem

proper unless there's been an announcement in *The Times* and the *Telegraph*.'

Carole sympathized completely with her son's response. There was a right way of doing these things. 'I agree. Really, Gaby, you'll be amazed by the reaction you get to an official engagement announcement. People you knew as a child, school friends, people you've completely forgotten about - they'll all write and congratulate you.'

Gaby grimaced without enthusiasm. 'I'm not sure that I want that. People coming out of the wood-work . . .' The idea troubled her for a moment, then she moved on in a lighter vein. 'Anyway, from what friends of mine have told me, newspaper announcements also mean your parents get inundated with flyers from wedding caterers, wedding video companies, wedding insurance brokers . . . I can do without all that.'

'I still think we should do it,' said Stephen, with a dogged truculence that Carole remembered well from his childhood.

'All right, we'll talk about it again. Not now.'

Gaby spoke with a surprising firmness, which had the instant effect of making Stephen change the subject.

'Incidentally, Mother, have you talked to Dad?'

After another little internal wince, Carole replied, 'Well, I spoke to him soon after you announced your engagement.'

'But not since then?'

'No.'

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'You said you were going to.'

The reproach in Stephen's voice put Carole instantly on the defensive. 'Yes, but I didn't say when.'

'No, but you must.'

'I will.'

'It's very important that you and Dad are relaxed with each other at the wedding.'

'I can assure you,' said Carole with some asperity, 'that your father and I will be as relaxed as it is possible for us to be. But neither of us is about to pretend that the divorce didn't happen.'

'I wasn't suggesting that. I was just thinking, the more contact you've had before the event, the easier it will be for you.'

'That, Stephen, is a matter of opinion.'

'But you will try.'

'Of course I'll try.' Carole was surprised at how close she had been to putting a 'bloody' in her reply.

'I spoke to him a couple of days ago, and said that you'd be ringing him soon.'

'And I'm sure I will. But I'll do it without prompting from you, Stephen.'

'OK, fine.'

The spectre of David loomed closer in Carole's consciousness, and it was a troubling presence. There was a lot about the whole wedding business that troubled her. Not that her son was marrying Gaby Martin – that seemed a piece of unqualified good news – but the attendant details that this basic fact gave rise to. A reconciliation – at whatever level – with David was the most worrying of these. And now it had been

joined by the fact that the wedding was to take place on Carole's home patch. She knew she should be pleased and flattered by the news, but all it had done was to raise her anxiety. In spite of her mental strictures about Gaby's mother's response to the idea of organizing a wedding, Carole didn't want to find herself forced into too much responsibility for the event.

As these two worries jostled for prominence, a third, which had been lurking in Carole's unconscious, rose to join them – the prospect of meeting Gaby's parents. Carole had the social skills of any middle-aged woman who'd been brought up in the right middle-class way, so she was not going to disgrace herself, but the mere thought of the encounter disturbed her. It was fear of the unknown. These two people were about to become inextricably involved with her, and that knowledge brought to Carole Seddon the familiar terror of losing control of her carefully circumscribed existence. In her Fethering retirement she had simplified everything – she had her comfortable Home Office pension, High Tor all paid for, her Labrador Gulliver to prevent her from looking like a lonely single woman. She resented anything that threatened to recomplicate her life.

As if reading her thoughts, Gaby said, 'And we really must fix a date for you to meet up with my mum and dad.'

'Yes,' Carole agreed, envying the ease of that 'mum'. Without total honesty, she went on, 'I'm really looking forward to that.'

'I'll ring them this evening and try to sort some-

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thing out. Are weekends best for you, or would a weekday be as good?"

'It doesn't make a lot of difference,' replied Carole, suddenly overwhelmed by the bleakness of her social calendar.

'I'll get back to you when I've talked to them.'

'Fine.' Everything seemed to be 'fine' that lunch-time, Carole thought wryly. At least, everyone kept saying everything was fine.

'We're going to have to move soon,' Stephen announced, looking at his watch. 'Want to look at some churches.'

'I thought you'd decided that you were going to get married in Fethering.'

'Near Fethering. If there's a prettier church in one of the other local villages, then we'll go for that. Since Gaby isn't a resident . . .'

'And since neither of us has a shred of religion,' his fiancée contributed, anticipating his thought.

' . . . we may as well make our choice on purely aesthetic grounds.'

Gaby's face took on an expression of mock-guilt. 'And the only person who'll be offended by that will be my grandmother. Still carrying a very large candle for the Catholic Church, I'm afraid, *Grand'mère*. Still, she lives in France, and I think she'll be too frail to make it to the wedding – so, as Steve says, we'll just go for the prettiest church we can find.'

'Yes, well, fine.' Though Carole had no more religious feeling than they did, she had found her son's words a little offensive. Without buying into the belief

side of the church, she felt there were still certain social niceties that should be respected.

She reached for her handbag. 'I'll settle up.'

'I'll get it, Mother'

'No, my treat. My patch. My idea to meet here.'

'I won't hear of it.'

And he wouldn't. Before Carole had time for further remonstrance, Stephen was up at the bar, wallet at the ready.

Gaby eased her body against the hard back of the settle in their alcove, wincing as she did so.

'You all right?'

'Getting a bit of pain from my back.'

'Have you had it looked at?'

'No, I'm sure it'll sort itself out. Just tension.'

'Worried about the huge step you're taking in getting married?'

It was an atypically direct question for Carole, but Gaby just laughed it off. 'No, a client at work's giving us a hard time. Actor who's just hit the big time - or may have hit the big time. He keeps talking about moving on to another agency, and my boss is on my case all the time, trying to make sure I don't allow that to happen.' She grinned weakly. 'Usual stuff.'

Carole wasn't entirely convinced by the answer. She thought her own diagnosis might be nearer the truth. Suddenly she noticed how pale and stressed Gaby looked, how different from the vivacious young woman she had first met only a few months previously at the Hopwicke Country House Hotel. Though her body retained its plumpness, Gaby's face

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seemed to have thinned. There were deep hollows under her eyes and the tight blonde curls had lost their lustre.

'How long has the back been bad?'

Gaby shrugged, a movement which again caused her to wince. 'Few weeks.'

'Doesn't Stephen think you should see someone?'

'I haven't told him it's hurting. I have to be strong for him.'

Carole hardly had time to register the strangeness of this remark before Gaby, almost childlike in her pleading dependency, asked, 'Why? You don't know a good back person, do you? Because we are going to be down here for a few days.'

'Well . . .' Carole Seddon couldn't quite keep the scepticism out of her tone as she replied, 'I know someone who does some *healing*.'