

A Whitsun Wedding Murder

Chapter One

Dorset, 1950

If Thea had known she would have to help bury a body shortly before her marriage, and in the rain too, she might have stayed in Cambridge.

But here she was down at the bottom of England in the absurdly named village of Friar Wootton, shaking out her umbrella in front of the church and facing the burning question: where to sit for the funeral? She'd prefer to slip quietly into a pew at the back, a respectful newcomer to the community. But would that send a dangerous message that the vicar's fiancée could be walked over by the doyennes of the Mother's Union, Women's Institute, or whatever other committees might be drawing up battle lines against the incomer?

Tucking her wet umbrella in the corner of the vestibule, Thea pushed open the arched wooden door and stepped into the little church. Stephen stood against the rear pews, handsome in a black cassock and white surplice, with a plain black stole. Her heart hitched, reminding her why she was here in this damp, sleepy Dorset village instead of the dynamic publisher's office she had forsaken for him.

He smiled as she approached, deep blue eyes crinkling behind dark-rimmed glasses.

'Where am I supposed to sit?' she whispered.

He looked genuinely surprised. Of course a man would not have considered this dilemma. 'Anywhere. It doesn't matter.'

Thea doubted she'd get the same reaction from a parishioner if she parked herself where someone had been sitting for fifty years. She swallowed the playful retort that rose to her lips. Hardly appropriate for the occasion. Instead, she reached out and brushed his knuckles with the back of her hand.

'You'll do wonderfully,' she whispered even lower. It was Stephen's first funeral in the village community, and she knew he was nervous.

He linked his fingers in hers and gave them a quick squeeze. 'Thank you.'

Thea turned, still smiling, only to come face to face with a thin woman in a tight wool suit, half a dozen worn hymnals hooked firmly in the crook of her arm. She thrust one at Thea with a glower. Thea took it with a

murmur of thanks, the smile slipping from her face. The woman's name eluded her, though she was sure they had met before around the village. Thank goodness she could forgo small talk at a funeral.

The small church was almost full; as Thea paced down the aisle, she could almost hear the turning of heads. She kept her eyes fixed on the sanctuary framed by a simple, carved wooden rood screen. The electric lights set in the old, black iron chandeliers struggled to illuminate the nave, the stained glass windows rendered dull and lifeless by the smothering grey clouds outside. Thea spotted a space on the right, second row from the front, by a pillar. Good, she could hide. She settled into the pew and unbuttoned her mackintosh. Picking up a copy of the Book of Common Prayer from the rail before her, she flicked through its musty pages to the order of service for funerals.

The man in front turned and thrust a hand across the pew. His round, red face and bold, grey moustache, not to mention the old but perfectly tailored black overcoat, marked him out before he introduced himself.

'Sir Diggory Carter Battencourt-Smythe,' he said in a rasping whisper. 'You must be Dorothea Fraser, Stephen's gal. Sorry to meet under such circumstances. Come up to the big house soon, eh?'

Thea shook hands or, rather, allowed hers to be shaken vigorously. 'Please, call me Thea. A pleasure to meet you, Sir Diggory. Stephen has told me so much about you.'

'Mostly good, I hope.' He winked and turned back around. So, this was the lord of the manor, if one still used the term nowadays. That meant the older man in the front pew across the narrow aisle must be the widower. He sat blank-faced, running his hat brim through his fingers, eyes fixed on the plain casket resting on a wooden bier before the altar rail. A couple sat slightly apart from him. They too stared straight ahead, a handkerchief crumpled in the woman's hand. At first glance, neither seemed to resemble the widower. They looked to be slightly older than Thea – they must be the childhood friends Stephen told her about. Gracie and Ronald? Reginald? Relations of the widower's late wife. Stephen had kept vigil over the casket with them last night.

And what was the widower's name again? Jim White, no, Green. His wife's name was Monica. Thea shivered, her damp mackintosh little protection against the seeping cold of the church. Why could she remember seemingly pointless facts like the deceased's name, but not that of Stephen's friends or the disapproving woman with the hymn books whom she'd have to greet every Sunday?

The organist wound down the sonorous anthem and flowed into the introduction to 'Abide with me'. Thea glanced at the hymn board next to the pulpit for the number and thumbed hurriedly through her hymn book as

Stephen processed down the aisle behind a couple of young acolytes clearly struggling to keep their freshly scrubbed faces contorted into solemnity.

Stephen conducted the service with a balance of authority and humility, as Thea knew he would. His sermon was pitch perfect, keeping to the text of the reading, but weaving in germane remarks about the deceased, even a couple of personal stories about her kindnesses to him as a child. He'd spent most of his summers in Friar Wootton, being best friends with Sir Diggory's son, Sinclair, though his own family came from Wareham. Monica Green apparently had a heart for all. Perhaps ironic that she died of a heart attack, then.

The service ended, and the organist quietly began a piece from Bach as two men came forward to wheel the bier from the church. One was the sexton, Tom Rose. He and his wife, Phyllis, had kindly let Thea lodge with them before the wedding, since it would have been scandalous for the vicar's fiancée to stay in the vicarage.

Stephen led the procession behind the coffin, the widower and family taking their places next, followed by Sir Diggory. Thea waited a few moments, then joined the stream of people trickling out from the pews. Phyllis Rose trotted past and patted her shoulder. 'All right, dear?' Without waiting for a reply, she hurried forward to grab the arm of the woman who had sat in the front pew. 'Gracie, love, me and some of the other women'll pop ahead to the farm and set out the buffet. You take as long as you like paying your respects at the grave.'

Gracie smiled. 'That's right nice of you, Phyllis.' She glanced at her husband's back. 'Thank you so much,' she added in a posher voice.

Thea followed the burial procession out of the south door of the church along the path to where a freshly dug grave awaited. Darker clouds drifted overhead, almost skimming the top of the square Norman bell tower appended to the squat Saxon church by its long-ago conquerors. Thea hung back from the graveside under the shelter of an ancient yew tree, feeling that she was intruding on this more intimate part of the service.

The scent of damp earth wafted in the air. Tom Rose had come home last night from digging the grave, his boots caked with that very earth; Phyllis had laughingly scolded him for messing up her kitchen. And now that earth was to cover another human being until Judgement Day. She shivered for the second time. Goodness, she didn't normally have such sobering thoughts. It must be the combination of the funeral and weather.

As if on cue, fat rain drops spotted Thea's shoulders. She popped open her umbrella, leery of spoiling the fresh perm she had for the wedding. That reminded her: she needed to find a good hairdresser to set her hair before the big day. She supposed she'd have to go into Wareham for that.

Only a handful of folks remained for the interment under the grey, sodden skies, village men in their Sunday suits or with a black armband over tough country tweeds, the even fewer women simply warding off the rain under mackintoshes and headscarves. Thea need not have fretted about the suitability of her navy work suit. Gracie's husband wore a smart, black pinstripe suit and was the only one besides Thea holding an umbrella, sheltering himself and his wife, who dabbed her eyes and clung to his arm.

The widower, Jim Green, jerked his head this way and that, as if searching for someone. After a few moments, he seemed to give up and stared steadfastly down into the grave, hands clutching the hem of his jacket. Now he was standing, Thea could see that his suit strained against him. Obviously not a regular churchgoer.

A sudden cough behind her made her jump. She turned. A man stood behind the yew tree, enveloped in a large raincoat, a flat cap jammed low over his eyes, fist against his mouth and head bowed as if in prayer. Then, barely looking up, he cleared his throat, spun on his heel and left. She watched his loping gait, the coat swinging out from broad shoulders. Strange. He seemed to deliberately avoid catching anyone's eye. Was he the person Jim Green was looking for? No, she was being fanciful. Mostly likely, he was merely a visitor wandering through the churchyard, who felt obliged to stop a moment out of respect for the mourners.

An 'Amen' drew her attention back to the interment and the end of the ceremony. Stephen shook hands around the graveside. 'Anyone need a lift to the farm?' he asked. Thea strained her ears, selfishly glad when no one said yes. After courting in the privacy of Cambridge, it was hard to get used to sharing Stephen with an entire village.

She strode forward as people left, holding the umbrella high to cover Stephen's head, though it seemed rather pointless given how wet he was, brown hair plastered to his forehead and his surplice transparent in patches against his cassock.

'Allow me.' Stephen took the umbrella from her, and Thea tucked her arm in his, feeling a little thrill of possession and desire even through several layers of damp clerical clothing.

'You were perfect,' she said. 'If I'm allowed to compliment you on a funeral.'

He smiled down at her. 'Any compliments gratefully received.'

They re-entered the silent church, making for the tiny vesting room near the sanctuary. Stephen draped his stole over the back of a chair, peeled his surplice over his head, then used the edge to wipe his glasses.

‘Pass it over.’ Thea grabbed a hanger from a row of hooks and hung the surplice up to dry. Stephen reached a hand to his collar. She watched as he slipped his hands expertly down the side of the cassock, undoing the buttons without looking. Her heartbeat quickened, wishing she dared do that herself. Perhaps after they were married.

Stephen shrugged off the cassock to reveal a slightly crumpled black shirt and dog collar. He caught Thea’s gaze; his lips quirked. Embarrassed, she offered him another hanger, but he grasped her wrist and drew her towards him, gathering her up in a kiss, cassock and all.

‘The sooner you are Mrs West, the better,’ he murmured against her cheek. ‘No vicar should be this tempted.’

A knock on the door made them jump apart. Tom Rose poked his head into the room. ‘Young love,’ he grinned. ‘Vicar, all’s in order. I’m off to the wake. Sir Diggory paid for several crates of beer and I’m helping Ernie Cooper deliver them.’

Blushing, Thea straightened her jacket. Thank goodness it was Mr Rose who discovered them. She had only known him a short while, but his easy manner had made her feel welcome the moment she stepped into their home.

‘We’ll be right behind you, Tom,’ Stephen said. He turned to Thea. ‘Ready?’

Ready to be on show to the village, in everything from the way she dressed to how she drank her tea? She took a deep breath. ‘Ready.’

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed this taste of A Whitsun Wedding Murder, visit my website, www.susandcook.com for more information and to sign up for my newsletter (and a free prequel).

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