

CAROL SMITH

FRIENDS FOR LIFE



A novel

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CAROL SMITH




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For my parents
Winifred Emily Mapleston
and
Cecil Daniel Smith

Prologue

Death came stealthily on a tranquil summer's afternoon with a step so light and a smile so familiar she failed to recognize the danger even when she saw it face-to-face. She was making peach jam in the low, cool kitchen, with the door open to allow the breeze to circulate and the radio murmuring fifties dance music from the center of the scrubbed pine table. Soft music, sweet and evocative, to which she tapped along with her bare foot, all the time stirring the thickening syrup with a wooden spoon, in tune with the hot, still afternoon and the heavy aroma from the huge black cauldron on the stove.

"Hi, sweetie!" she called when she heard the first soft footfall. "Back so soon? How was the game? Aren't you sweltering? Shall I open you a beer?"

Then: "Oh, it's you. I thought it was your dad. If you want to make yourself useful, start topping and tailing those beans. And fetch me a soda from the cooler, will you, hon?"

She smiled contentedly and went on stirring. Life in this lazy backwater was not so bad after all, not at moments of pure pleasure such as this. Quality food, fresh air, the basic comforts of home and family she had once so much despised. All she could ever want, in fact, contained between these

four stone walls amid scenery so dramatic it could knock the breath right out of you.

The brick found its mark with a force that did just that, and as she staggered and reached for the rail of the stove, she gazed up through a bewildering haze of streaming blood and watched it fall again. Watched in disbelief as it swung toward her, wrapped innocuously, she now saw, in one of her own expensive stockings, culled in stealth from her drawer.

She lay on the cool stone floor and gazed up at the stove, at the black iron cauldron, so heavy she could scarcely lift it, bubbling above her head. When she saw it topple toward her she knew she was going to die, but by then it was too late.

Part One

Prologue

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Part One

Chapter One

Mornings like this, thought Beth, made living in Central London totally justifiable. Church bells ringing from across the road, the pervasive aroma of spring lamb spiked with rosemary wafting from the Aga stove, the kitchen door propped open on this fine May morning to let in the scent of honeysuckle and the occasional buzz of a lazy bee. She spread tiny new potatoes in a single layer across a cast-iron pan and deftly drizzled them with olive oil. From here you could scarcely hear the dull thunder of traffic and if you looked out of the window, as she did now on her way to the stove, all you could see through a trellis of green willow was the sloping lawn, a white wicket gate, and the curve of gravel which fronted the church. Just like living in a cathedral close, she was fond of saying, and had had her good friend Richard Brooke immortalize the view in one of his stylish watercolors, now hanging on the paneled wall in the hall. Visitors to the house never failed to comment on it.

"Surely that can't be an original," they would say, peering at the minute signature. But it was and Beth was proud of it, proud too of the gamble she had taken all those years ago when Richard was still a starving student and she had risked a month's rent money in

order to help him out of a jam by backing her conviction that he had real talent, talent that would last. Creative people, she was fond of saying, should back each other, and what was the point of money if you couldn't use it to help a friend? Beth thought for a moment of her own circumstances and how Pop had come up trumps just when she had needed it most. What goes around comes around. Certainly she could not have been more right about Richard, and she hadn't heard many complaints from Pop either in these last few hectic years.

She opened the fridge and poured herself a glass of chilled Chardonnay. There were moments when life seemed pretty near perfect, and this was one of them.

"Mum," said Imogen from the sofa, sprawled like a young gazelle in a welter of Sunday papers, "it says here Dad may be coming home."

She looked up through the straggly fringe that badly needed trimming and pointed to a paragraph in the *Mail on Sunday*. At twelve, Imogen was growing fast and was already almost as tall as her mother (though Beth had never been so slender), with long, coltish legs. Beth wiped her hands on her bleached cotton apron and crossed the room to take a look at the paper. After three years of being a smash hit, it seemed the American musical *Autumn Crocus* was transferring to London in the autumn with its distinguished choreographer/director, Gus Hardy, and full Broadway cast.

"Brilliant!" said Imogen, cheeks flushed, dark eyes alight with happiness. "Will he come and live here? There's tons of room. Shall I call him now and ask him?"

She was on her feet and heading toward the phone before her mother could stop her.

"Hang on a sec! Leave it for a while," Beth said, rolling the tiny potatoes expertly around in the oil and dusting them with pepper and fresh coriander. "We'll talk about it later. You never know with Dad, he may well have made other arrangements. After all, there's the whole company to think of and it isn't as if it's just for a week or two. Besides," she added as an afterthought, "it's early in the morning in New York, and you know your dad. He won't thank you if you wake him this early, not after one of his legendary Saturday nights."

She topped up her glass and sliced zucchini briskly into a colander. Beth ran a catering business and had three weddings and a charity ball to cook for. Life was complicated enough as it was without Gus Hardy reappearing on the scene.

"Just what I need," she said to Jane later, spread out on the sofa in a postprandial slump after Imogen had disappeared on her rollerblades to join up with friends down the road. "They say it never rains but it pours. Oliver gets back from Johannesburg on Thursday, and now this, the return of the prodigal for God knows how long."

Jane laughed. As Beth's best friend, she was used to her hectic personal life.

"You can cope, you've done it before. Besides, you thrive on friction. And it won't do Oliver any harm either to have a bit of competition." She disapproved of Oliver. Most of Beth's friends did.

"Yes, but what am I going to do if Imogen insists on having him stay here? You know what she's like once she sets her heart on something. And the truth is, we do have the space."

"I wouldn't worry. Gus will have his own ideas, and can you really see him wanting to play Happy Families again? But it will be nice for Imogen to be able to see a bit more of him. Kids need their dads. And it ought to give you a bit more breathing space, too."

"For Oliver?"

"For you. There's more to life than wasting it all on a selfish man."

Beth laughed. She had heard this tune many times before but, as she never stopped reminding her, Jane had Alastair, as well as a demanding career.

"Well, we'll see. Now I suppose I'd better do those damned dishes. I've got a dinner for twelve tomorrow night and the smoked salmon mousse still to prepare."

When the pain came, it caught Beth unawares, as she was lifting a heavy tray of delicate chou pastry cases from the oven. She gasped and managed to set them down without dropping them all over the floor. She clasped her stomach and cold sweat broke out on her forehead. Damn it to hell! Why did it always happen on occasions like

this, when she was already up to her ears with no time even to sit down? Deirdre, chopping parsley, looked up and frowned.

"You really ought to see someone about that. Doesn't do to ignore health warnings, and how would the rest of us cope if you were really ill?"

Selfish cow, there she went again. Dear though she was, Deirdre could be a right pain. But after seven years of her relentless pessimism, Beth was well used to it and even found herself missing it on the rare occasions Deirdre wasn't around. She was like some sort of wretched albatross, hung around Beth's neck to ensure she didn't have too good a time. Beth stood upright and smiled bravely.

"Don't worry, probably just wind."

"Sounds like your innards to me. You most likely need a hysterectomy." Deirdre, with her four raucous children and scream-makingly monotonous existence, could always be counted on to put in a hefty boot.

"Thanks a bunch," Beth shot back. "I'm not that old!"

"Look what happened to my sister," said Deirdre dourly, shuffling the neatly chopped parsley into a tidy pile and reaching for another bunch.

"With respect, your sister was at least ten years older than me, and there's a history of it in your family. I'm not about to pop off yet."

Beth was already feeling better. It was nothing more than her ovaries giving her an early warning. Her period must be due around now. It was all totally unfair; when God created woman he might have given her a more effective reproductive system. She poured a glass of mineral water and downed two aspirin. No need to worry, she was ridiculously healthy and always had been. Luckily Imogen seemed to have inherited her genes, too. She was not going to let an old misery-guts like Deirdre scare her.

She slammed another tray of pastry cases into the Aga and forgot all about it.

Beth was right about Gus. He called later in the week and confirmed that the newspaper report was true. Things were going so well he was taking a gamble and putting in a subsidiary cast for the show while he brought the original stars to London.

"Jesus, but I hope it works. Marla's already having the vapors because she hates to travel, and Vic's agent's been on the blower, muttering about a revised contract and the extra emotional strain of having to modify his accent for British audiences."

He sounded buoyant and breathless with excitement. Gus was nearly always on a high. That was one of the attractive things about him. Some people found it exhausting but Beth had always been invigorated by his energy. Just talking to him made her feel better; she hung up the phone in a happier mood. A little of Gus went a very long way but having him around recharged her batteries like nothing else could. And he wasn't planning to invade her privacy, she had been almost sure of that. Although they remained good friends all these years after the divorce, they had always respected each other's space. Gus had arranged to move back into his own house in Islington because, fortuitously, his tenant had an operatic tour of Australia planned for the same time as his visit.

It would be great for Imogen, who idolized her father. One of Beth's main areas of guilt, in fact, was the absence of Gus from her daughter's young life. She needed her talented, exuberant dad with whom she always had so much fun. Gus had his faults but he was an excellent father. In a fair world he would have had loads of children. But they had both made new lives for themselves and were happy. Moreover, they shared Imogen, a spirited and delightful child who seemed to have suffered little harm from the early separation. Still, a son would have been nice for Gus; a son he could take sailing and tutor in the rudiments of football and cricket—or, more likely, the way things had turned out, baseball.

Oliver edged the dark blue Mercedes into a space outside the white wicket gate and Beth, still damp from the bath, stood at the upstairs window and watched him. Some girlish instinct, a relict perhaps of her Nottinghamshire past, still gave her a thrill when in the presence of serious money. Although her socialist principles would have made her hotly deny it to most of her acquaintances, sneakily, deep down inside, she had to admit she found style and class a definite turn-on. She watched now as Oliver slid from the driver's seat, glanced each way to check that his beloved car was suitably parked, then ran a manicured hand over his immaculate hair. That was an-

other thing about Oliver. No matter what he might be doing, he was always well turned out, with never a hair out of place or a torn cuticle, or even a razor cut on his stern, handsome face. Beth watched him reach into the back for the arrangement of pewter roses that had become a tradition between them. He locked the car, and only then did he look up, directly at where she was standing. Beth backed away guiltily behind the gauzy curtain, still embarrassed, after all these months, to be caught peeping.

She wrapped the apple-green silk kimono more tightly around her generous figure—there was not a lot of point in getting dressed—ran a brush through her short, curly hair, and raced down the wooden staircase to fling open the door and hurl herself into his arms. This was always the best part, the coming together again after yet another of their frequent separations. She laid her head against his lavender shirt front and breathed in the exotic mix of Trumpers lime aftershave and expensive starched cotton. Oliver brushed the hair back from her forehead as he kicked the door shut with one foot and tossed the roses onto the shabby sofa. He planted a kiss on her nose then another, more seriously, on her unpainted mouth. His eyes roved around the room.

“Imogen?”

“Alice’s. For the night.”

She snuggled her head into his neck and let him guide her to the sofa to scrunch down next to the roses.

Two years ago, when Beth first set eyes on Oliver, it was love at first sight—or at least lust, which was usually the case and more or less the same thing with Beth. She was forever making fresh resolutions to put her head before her heart and try to assess a man’s character, solid worth, and kindness to defenseless beings before noticing the slant of his cheekbones or the neatness of his bum, but all to no avail. She was not at all sure how she managed to achieve it, she who had never been as slim as she would have liked and was far from happy with her nose, but Beth had managed from a very early age to surround herself with very handsome men. Gus Hardy was one of the most beautiful beings in God’s creation, very nearly the whole world was agreed upon that, but Oliver Nugent, with his stronger jaw and slightly satanic good looks, ran him a pretty close second.