

COMPILATION

Matthew Costello

Neil Richards

# CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

Episode 25 - 27



# Contents

Cover  
Cherringham — A Cosy Crime Series  
The authors  
Main Characters  
A Cosy Crime Series Compilation  
Copyright  
Secret Santa  
Death on a Moonlit Night  
Scared to Death

# **Cherringham — A Cosy Crime Series**

“Cherringham — A Cosy Crime Series” is a series made up of self-contained stories. The series is published in English as well as in German, and is only available in e-book form.

## The authors

**Matthew Costello** (US-based) is the author of a number of successful novels, including *Vacation* (2011), *Home* (2014) and *Beneath Still Waters* (1989), which was adapted by Lionsgate as a major motion picture. He has written for The Disney Channel, BBC, SyFy and has also designed dozens of bestselling games including the critically acclaimed *The 7th Guest*, *Doom 3*, *Rage* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

**Neil Richards** has worked as a producer and writer in TV and film, creating scripts for BBC, Disney, and Channel 4, and earning numerous Bafta nominations along the way. He's also written script and story for over 20 video games including *The Da Vinci Code* and *Starship Titanic*, co-written with Douglas Adams, and consults around the world on digital storytelling.

His writing partnership with NYC-based Matt Costello goes back to the late 90's and the two have written many hours of TV together. *Cherringham* is their first crime fiction as co-writers.



## Main Characters

**Jack Brennan** is a former NYPD homicide detective who lost his wife two years ago. Being retired, all he wants is peace and quiet. Which is what he hopes to find in the quiet town of Cherringham, UK. Living on a canal boat, he enjoys his solitude. But soon enough he discovers that something is missing — the challenge of solving crimes. Surprisingly, Cherringham can help him with that.

**Sarah Edwards** is a web designer who was living in London with her husband and two kids. Three years ago, he ran off with his sexy American boss, and Sarah's world fell apart. With her children she moved back to her home town, laid-back Cherringham. But the small town atmosphere is killing her all over again — nothing ever happens. At least, that's what she thinks until Jack enters her life and changes it for good or worse ...

Matthew Costello  
Neil Richards

**CHERRINGHAM**  
**A COSY CRIME SERIES**  
**COMPILATION**



**Episode 25—27**



# »be« by BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

Digital original edition

»be« by Bastei Entertainment is an imprint of Bastei Lübbe AG

Copyright © 2016/ 2017/ 2018 by Bastei Lübbe AG, Schanzenstraße 6-20,  
51063 Cologne, Germany

Written by Matthew Costello and Neil Richards

Edited by: Eleanor Abraham

Project management: Kathrin Kummer

Cover design: Thomas Krämer based on a design by Jeannine Schmelzer

Cover illustration: © Adam Burton / Alamy Stock Photo and © Shutterstock:  
xpixel | suns07butterfly

eBook production: Jilzov [Digital Publishing](#), Düsseldorf

ISBN 978-3-7325-6308-1

[www.be-ebooks.com](http://www.be-ebooks.com)

Twitter: [@be\\_ebooks\\_com](https://twitter.com/be_ebooks_com)

[www.facebook.com/Cherringham](https://www.facebook.com/Cherringham)

Matthew Costello  
Neil Richards

# **CHERRINGHAM**

## **A COSY CRIME SERIES**



**Secret Santa**





# 1. A Perfect Night

Bill Vokes stepped onto the balcony of the village hall and looked out at the festive scene.

It had stopped snowing, and from up here the night sky looked brilliant and clear, the clouds moving on for now. All around, the rooftops sparkled white under the rising moon.

Wood smoke drifted lazily from chimney pots.

He breathed deep, a wonderful mix of scents drifting up from the High Street below: pine needles, toffee apples, cinnamon, mulled wine ...

*Hmm, was that doughnut too? Or perhaps that delicious German cake, what the devil did they call it? Ah yes, Stollen, that was it. Must remind Emily to pick one up this evening!*

His wife loved that cake almost as much as he did.

He looked down at the High Street: *good Lord, what a rare view from up here! Dammit, the parish council should open this balcony all year round. We could charge those day-trippers a fortune!*

He rested his hands on the old sandstone parapet, and looked out across the village.

The Christmas Market stretched all the way down to the Ploughman's and Cherringham Bridge Road, and he could see throngs of people lit by the warm, orange glow from the strings of lights hanging on the stalls.

Locals, tourists, visitors from other villages, children everywhere (*throwing snowballs, of course, but who cares? Let them have their fun!*). People chattering, laughing, smiling, carrying balloons, buying gifts, sipping the mulled wine, sharing bags of piping hot chestnuts.

Immediately below him he could see the shape of this year's big Christmas tree, its fairy lights still dark, the switch soon to be thrown.

To one side, the village's very own impromptu brass band was making a pretty decent attempt at *Jingle Bells*.

In front of the players, a handful of very small children danced with the total abandon of giddy kids at Christmas time.

Bill watched them, delighted. Every now and then one would lose balance and fall in the fresh snow, then — just too excited to cry — would pick themselves up for another go.

*Another perfect Cherringham Christmas!* he thought. *Does life get any better than this?*

Of course, it was no surprise to see such a magnificent crowd — there were just twenty minutes to go before the ceremonial switching on of the Cherringham Christmas lights.

And then the handing out of presents to all the children. An early treat from Santa! The main event! His very own starring role!

He couldn't quite remember how he'd first been persuaded to dress up as Santa for this Cherringham tradition. Though the size of his tummy might have had something to do with it — least that's what dear old Emily said.

But he'd never, ever once regretted it. Ten years as the Cherringham Santa, and each year more fun than the last.

"Fantastic turnout — isn't it, Bill?"

Bill turned to see Praveer Singh, Chair of the Rotary Club and dear friend, stepping out onto the balcony.

"Oh, yes. Somebody up there is looking after the weather," said Bill shaking his hand.

"That's for sure," said Praveer. "If the snow holds off for the evening, we should clear a pretty sum."

"Night like this? And for such a good cause? You'd have to be a miserable sod not to put your hand in your pocket."

"Exactly."

"Best Christmas lights in the Cotswolds, I reckon," said Bill. "Course with Todd we've got a head start — best electrician this side of Oxford!"

"Couldn't agree more," said Praveer. "Have you seen him, by the way?"

"He just popped down for one last check," said Bill. "I think he's a bit nervous about the new set-up."

Bill gestured towards the small table with a laptop and microphone.

"Aha — Cherringham goes digital, hmm?" said Praveer.

"I must admit — I rather miss the old brass lever," said Bill. "Sense of power, seeing the tree go 'up', then the lights go all the way down the High Street."

"I'm surprised you never went up with it," said Praveer. "Right old death trap that switch was."

"At least we'll still be doing the countdown — computer can't do that yet," said Bill. "Talking of which — how long have we got?"

He saw Praveer check his wrist watch.

"Half an hour, I make it. You all organised?"

"Don't you worry, old boy," said Bill. "Costume's down in the caretaker's office. Only takes me a couple of minutes to slip it on."

"Beard too?" said Praveer. "Sure you don't need a hand?"

"Got it down to a tee," said Bill. "Years of practice."

Bill saw two more figures emerge onto the balcony through the open glass doors.

"Roger! Cecil!" he said. "What a pleasure to see you both!"

*That's a damn lie*, thought Bill, without taking the welcoming smile off his face.

Roger Reed, manager of Cherringham's only bank, had treated Bill like dirt when he'd first arrived in the village all those years ago.

And Cecil Cauldwell — boss of Cauldwell's Fine Properties and a first rate snob (according to Emily) — had patronised him all the way through the purchase of his first cottage.

*But live and let live, thought Bill. After all, 'tis the season ...*

"Got your eye on the clock?" said Roger, tapping his watch. "Cutting it a bit fine, aren't you?"

"Timing's of the essence, you know, Bill," said Cecil at his side. "We've never been even a second late."

*As if I'd disappoint the village, thought Bill.* However: "You're right chaps," said Bill. "Better go and get into character, hadn't I?"

"Hmm, yes, well," said Cecil, puffing out his jowly chin even more than usual, "don't want to let the kiddies down."

With a sneaky wink to Praveer, Bill headed back through the big glass double doors into the upper room of the village hall, and made his way to the stairs.

\*

Bill peered into the mirror and carefully gummed the fluffy white beard onto his chin.

The smell of the glue always took him back to his school days in West London, that tight backstage room crammed with sixteen-year-old boys made up as unlikely Shakespearian kings and noblemen.

*Fifty years ago, he thought. Hard to believe.*

He reached down into the costume box, took out the big red hat with its white fur trim and bobble and carefully put it on over the white wig.

Then — he stepped back from the mirror and scrutinised the whole outfit.

*Not bad, he thought. Maybe a little ... saggy.*

He adjusted the stuffing under his red tunic, and tightened the belt.

"Ho, ho, ho!" he said.

*There we are! Perfect.*

He checked that the white gloves were in his trouser pockets, then glanced at his watch. Twenty to six.

*Hmm, he thought, just time for a quiet ciggie ... especially out of Emily's scolding purview.*

He reached into his jacket pocket, took out his lighter and a single cigarette from the pack. Then he stepped out of the caretaker's storeroom and headed down the hallway. He remembered from last year, the little door they used for deliveries. Fingers crossed it wouldn't be locked.

At the door, he lifted the latch and tugged hard.

*Yes!*

He pulled the creaking door open and stepped straight out onto the pavement.

Quiet here, away from the expectant hubbub.

*A nice moment.*

He was careful not to shut the door behind him.

*Don't want to get stranded out here while the show goes on!*

He popped the cigarette into his mouth, lit up and looked around. The village square was dark: all the street lights had been turned off to show off the strings of Christmas lights, looped from one side of the High Street to the other.

*Needs me to turn 'em on first though!* he thought.

The Bell Hotel was lit up of course, across the road. And some light spilled out of the Angel on this side.

*Shame I can't pop in there now for a quick pint,* he thought.

*Have to sneak down to the Ploughman's soon as I've handed out all the prezzies ...*

There were no market stalls at this end of the High Street — just parking for all the vans that belonged to the stall holders.

Standing here all alone, Bill could hardly believe the hubbub of activity just the other side of the village hall.

He took another deep drag on the cigarette, and blew the smoke up into the night air. He shivered with the cold, getting even chillier under the clear sky.

He took a moment to just gaze at the street and pavements, hard with flattened snow, the ice crystals twinkling with the light from the pub.

More snow was predicted but, so far, so good.

*Wouldn't want to be driving home on these roads tonight,* he thought.

And, as if on cue, a van crept down the High Street towards the village hall, and took the turn slowly into the square.

Bill watched as it came closer, then drew up just level with him, its engine ticking quietly.

*Must be arriving late for the festivities, whoever it was.*

*They'd better hurry ...*

The windows were all misted up, so Bill couldn't see inside the cab.

He waited for it to move on, but it didn't.

*Looking for a parking space,* thought Bill. *Some hope!*

He checked his watch.

Ten to six. Time to head back up to the balcony, make his dramatic entrance, wave to the cheering crowd, press the new button for the lights, and officially start Christmas in Cherringham.

*But still time to finish this ciggie,* he thought. *At my age — can't rush any of life's little pleasures ...*

And he took another drag and blew a perfect smoke ring into the night air.

## 2. Lighting the Tree

“How about one more mulled wine?” said Sarah, steering Jack towards the warm light of the stall.

“Sure,” said Jack, following her through the bustling crowd. “Night like this, I could do with another warm layer.”

At the stall he waited while Sarah paid for the drinks. The girl (who Jack recognised from her day job in the sandwich shop) ladled them out from a massive steaming tureen into tiny Styrofoam cups. Sarah handed him his wine.

*Funny how they always do their drinks Hobbit-sized here in England,* thought Jack.

“Cheers,” he said, carefully taking a sip of the scorching concoction.

“Cheers,” said Sarah.

“Wow, that hits the spot,” he said.

They stood for a minute at the edge of the crowd, sipping their steaming drinks and taking in the atmosphere.

Jack had been to a few of these Cherringham Christmas events over the years, and each time they seemed to get bigger, more popular. Though he recognised a lot of the faces in the crowd, there seemed to be more visitors than ever.

It all added up to a lot of fun and a great atmosphere: the busy stalls, a happy crowd jostling together in the street.

And to cap it all, two days of snow had made the whole place look like a scene from a Dickens novel.

*Long way from Bay Ridge, Brooklyn,* he thought.



"Come on, dreamer," said Sarah, seeing him take it all in. "Don't want to miss the big ceremony."

"It does look like a movie set though — doesn't it?"

"You're right," she said. "I shouldn't take it for granted."

"Lucky you — bringing up kids in a place like this."

He saw her smile and nod.

"The first year they put this on, with the stalls and everything, Chloe was seven, I think. Daniel must have been around five. He sat in the snow by the tree and absolutely refused to move until Santa turned up to hand out the presents."

"The kids here tonight?"

*Time passes*, thought Jack.

"Somewhere. Chloe's helping sell raffle tickets. And Daniel's hanging out with his pals trying to get a sneaky beer off one of the stalls, I imagine."

"Well, they might not be so interested in the 'lighting up' ceremony any more — but I sure am," said Jack.

"Me too," said Sarah, checking her watch. "And in fact — it's time we headed up to the hall."

She turned, and started to gently push her way through the crowds, and Jack followed.

\*

When they reached the village hall, a big crowd had already gathered around the Christmas tree.

Sarah recognised some of the younger village mums. It seemed like half of Cherringham Primary School was camped out, eagerly waiting for Santa to arrive. Sarah saw excited children everywhere — chattering, playing, jumping up and down, sliding on the packed snow.

And though she and Jack couldn't get any closer in the packed crowd, Sarah could easily see the balcony of the hall from where they stopped.

"This okay?"

"Fine," he said. "How long till countdown?"

"Couple of minutes," said Sarah.

She saw Jack look from the balcony, to the crowd, then back to her.

"You think so?" said Jack. "They don't look too ready up there."

Sarah looked up at the village hall — and things certainly didn't seem to be going smoothly.

Normally — right about now — the Mayor and the Chair of the local Rotary Club gave a little speech about this year's good cause, and offered a thank you to all the organisers.

Then Santa would step forward, while everyone cheered and waited for the chimes from the church to start. That would be the signal for the countdown to the lights switch being thrown and the fun to begin.

But already, it was two minutes to six and the speeches hadn't even started.

She could see her dad's friend Praveer up on the balcony in deep discussion with some of the other Rotarians. And every now and then people disappeared inside the hall only to re-emerge, animated, gesticulating.

*Something is definitely up*, she thought.

She spotted Todd Robinson, the electrician in charge of all things technical, standing to one side, arms folded, watching the chaos.

He looked ready to go. So this apparently wasn't a problem with the lights.

"Jack — I wonder what's happened," said Sarah.

"Think we're about to find out," said Jack.

Sarah saw Cecil Cauldwell step up to the microphone, tap it once, then:

"Ladies and gentlemen!" He cleared his throat, looking unusually uncomfortable. "My, er, deep apologies for the slight delay this evening. We've had a little technical hitch — which means, I'm afraid, that the handing out of

presents by Santa will no longer be taking place after the lighting ceremony.”

A groan rippled through the crowd — Sarah turned to Jack, who shrugged and shook his head.

All around him, Sarah could see disappointed parents and children, taking in this unexpected news.

“Thank you, thank you,” said Cecil loudly into the microphone, clearly trying to calm the crowd with volume. “Now, um, it’s not all bad news. I’m sure you’ll all be *very* excited to know that in a slight change to the schedule the Mayor himself will be turning on Cherringham’s amazing Christmas lights. How about that? So ladies and gentlemen, I give you the Mayor!”

No reaction from the crowd.

*Mayor versus Santa? No contest.*

“Don’t think that’s going to fly,” said Jack.

Sarah watched as the Mayor stepped up to the microphone, tapped it and coughed importantly: “Ahem! Ahem!”

“Oh, God,” said Sarah. “Anything but the Mayor — we’ll be here all night.”

“Not a fan?” said Jack, smiling.

Sarah laughed. “My dad says he should be put down.”

“Ladies and gentlemen,” the Mayor said. “It is with absolutely the most enormous pleasure, that I find myself here this evening, summoned by fate and circumstance to address you, on this very auspicious occasion for the people of Cherringham—”

Before he could go any further, the bells of St. James thankfully began to chime the hour and the crowd instantly went into the countdown.

“Ten! Nine! Eight!”

Sarah saw the Mayor try to fight the moment, raising his voice, feedback kicking in as he came too close to the microphone: “There are so many people here tonight that I would like to thank, people who have given—”

“Just wish I had my camera,” said Jack. “My daughter would love to see this.”

The crowd’s counting had now drowned out the Mayor — and Sarah could see he’d given up.

“Seven! Six! Five!”

“The joy of small towns everywhere, hmm, Jack?”

“Four! Three! Two!”

“Same the world over,” said Jack smiling. “And yet ... here it’s somehow different ...”

“One!”

And Sarah watched as up on the balcony the Mayor shrugged and nodded to Todd — who somehow hit a switch — and the Christmas tree lights lit up in a blaze of colour, tiny snow crystals in the air, on the ground, catching the coloured lights.

“Oooohhhh!” went the crowd and everybody cheered and clapped.

Then one by one, from the bottom of the High Street, Sarah saw the strings of coloured lights flash on and the whole display lit up, reindeer, candles, Christmas trees, stars, blazing into light, one after another all the way up and around the village hall and then beyond it to the top of the village.

“Quite the show! Think that’ll make up for the loss of the presents?” said Jack.

“For the moment. But then ... I think there’ll be tears and tricky questions before bedtime across the village tonight,” said Sarah. “But I’m sure the presents can be handed out next week at the Christmas concert instead. The big question is — what went wrong?”

“I think I know the answer to that,” said Jack.

“You do?”

“Someone didn’t show.”

“Well, right. Our Santa,” said Sarah, realising what the “technical hitch” really was. “But why?”

“Yep,” said Jack, “that’s the question.”

“Well I don’t think we’ll have to wait long to find the answer,” said Sarah. “Dad’s buying the drinks up at the Angel. He’s on the committee. He’ll know”

“The Angel? Nice. Well, what are we waiting for?” said Jack. “Let’s go solve the mystery.”

And, taking Sarah’s arm, he found a way through the crowd for both of them.

\*

Jack pushed open the door of the Angel and squeezed through the crowd towards the bar, Sarah right behind him.

“What are you having?” he said to Sarah, when they finally found their way through to the bar, ready to order.

“Pint of Hooky, please.”

“Good idea,” said Jack. “I’ll have a pint too I think.”

Jack put in his order, looking forward to the local ale, then turned and took in the pub.

Over in the corner he saw Sarah’s father, Michael, at the centre of a small group. And it looked like quite a heated argument was going on.

He gave a small wave to Michael, and saw him grimly nod back.

“Think we’ll hang on here,” said Jack once he’d paid for their beers. “Looks like your dad’s doing some refereeing.”

“Cheers, Jack,” said Sarah, taking a drink. “Hmm — Rotary Club bigwigs. Cherringham’s great and good.”

Jack watched as Michael disentangled himself with an uneasy smile, and came over to join them. He shook Jack’s hand and gave Sarah a hug.

“Enjoy the show?” said Michael.

“Loved the lights,” said Jack.

“But—” said Sarah.

“Where was Santa, hmm?” said Michael.

“Hard not to notice.”

“Well, it’s a good question.”

"You not going to tell us, Michael?" said Jack.

"God. Wish I could," said Michael. "Truth is — he was there one minute — and next minute — he was gone."

"Really?" said Jack. "So he *was* there tonight?"

"Absolutely. Did the rehearsal, checked all the presents, went through the tech run with Todd, the 'sparks'."

"So what happened?"

"Well, I wasn't in the hall — I was in the office sorting last-minute paperwork. But Praveer told me he popped down to put his costume on and just ... never came back."

"And they went to look for him?" said Sarah.

"Oh, yes. Sent out the search party — though, from the sound of it, it was a bit chaotic."

"And not a sign of Santa?"

"No. Not a thing. He clearly got changed into his costume — his street clothes are still hanging up, you see — and then ... disappeared."

Jack put down his pint on the bar.

*Amazing.*

This really *was* turning into a mystery.

"Wait a second. You mean — even dressed in a Santa outfit, nobody spotted him at all?"

*What a crazy thought.*

"Doesn't appear that way. Least not yet," said Michael. "That is odd — isn't it?"

Jack looked at Sarah — who looked back at him with the same concern he was suddenly feeling.

"Who actually *is* Santa?" said Jack.

Michael laughed. "You mean you don't believe in him, Jack?"

"Maybe after a couple of these," said Jack nodding to the pint of Hook Norton ale in his hand.

Michael laughed. "Bill Vokes," he said, "he's been our Santa for years. Ever meet him?"

"Don't think so. And he always turns up?"

"Oh absolutely. Never lets us down. Though — dear old Bill — he can be a little ..."

Jack watched him look around as if to make sure nobody was listening. Then he continued.

"Here's the thing," he said. "I love Bill. Great chap. Funny, life and soul, you know — and so generous. Gives hundreds each year to the charities. Always available, always offering to help. But ..."

Jack waited, glanced across to Sarah who, by now, like him knew that sometimes silence was the best way to tease people's true feelings out of them.

"Bill doesn't give a damn — what people think of him — doesn't care for convention, can be a bit of a loose cannon. Know what I mean? On golf trips, for instance, Bill's always the last to leave the bar. Other times, you look round for him — and he's just gone. Whoosh — like that! We joke about it — Bill's done one of his magic tricks again. Very funny."

"So where does he go — when he does one of his tricks?" said Sarah.

"Who knows?" said Michael. "Wandering eye, perhaps? Though by all accounts he and his lovely wife Emily are absolutely rock solid together."

"Maybe he just likes to ... be on his own?" said Jack. "Times I feel like that — one minute having lots of fun, busy bar, then next minute, realize — time to head home, hit the sack."

"Hmm, I've noticed that Jack," said Sarah, smiling at him.

"I thought I'd got away with it," said Jack, laughing.

"Could be that," said Michael. "But I'm afraid it doesn't sound like the Bill I know."

"Quite a drinker, is he?" said Jack.

"Oh, yes," said Michael. "Though not a drunk, mind. He just ... loves a drink, loves a crowd, loves having fun."



"Maybe tonight he just suddenly couldn't face being in the limelight?" said Sarah. "Change of heart."

"Possible, all possible. But I tell you what — that lot—"

And Jack saw him nod towards the group of Rotarians.

"—they're all for kicking him out. Say he's gone too far. Shamed the Rotary Club. And I must admit — whatever the reason for his going off — I'll find it hard to forgive him myself."

Jack thought about what Michael had said. The tale of the missing Santa had seemed at first like a light-hearted case of a pint too many.

But some instinct was telling him this could be something else.

Something not light-hearted at all.

*People just don't disappear.*

He looked at Sarah — and she too was pensive.

"What do you think, Sarah?" he said.

She paused before answering. "I don't really know, Jack. But something worries me."

"Me too," said Jack. Then he turned to Michael.

"Anyone still over at the village hall?" he said.

"Now? Hmm. Todd's probably still there."

"He got keys to the whole place?"

"He should have," said Michael. "Why?"

Jack drained his pint and put the glass down on the counter.

"Well, here's the thing. I know your Rotary pals are pretty keen to write this off as just another of Bill's magic disappearances. And a very annoying one at that. But I just don't buy it."

"You have ideas, Jack?"

"Well — what if Bill took ill, hmm? Guy could have had a heart attack, stroke — anything."

"Good Lord," said Michael. "You're right. They were all so busy sounding off about him — I don't think anyone took another view."

“Wait, so he could be somewhere in the hall, unwell ...” said Sarah.

“You head over there right away,” said Michael. “I’ll round up some help. God I feel so stupid not having even considered this.”

“Better safe than sorry, Michael,” said Jack. “Come on, Sarah.”

And he headed to the door of the pub, hoping he was wrong.

Hoping that Santa wasn’t ill, or worse ...

### 3. An Empty Room

Sarah watched Todd Robinson open the lighting panel and flick all the switches to “on”.

“Okay. That’s three floors and the cellars — all lit up,” he said.

He closed the door on the panel, wiped his hands on a rag and turned to them.

“I hope you’re wrong,” he said. “Bill’s a good bloke, and it’ll be our fault if we’ve left him lying somewhere.”

“Dad’s bringing more people over, Todd,” said Sarah. “Maybe we should start in the obvious places. Where was he last seen?”

“Caretaker’s storeroom,” said Todd. “That’s where he changed into his costume.”

“You show us the way?” said Jack.

“Sure,” said Todd.

And Sarah and Jack followed Todd across the main hall towards the staircase that led down to the ground floor.

\*

The stairs ended in a hallway that opened to the village hall office and smaller meeting rooms — all spaces Sarah knew well. After a quick look around, Todd led them back to where Sarah knew there were storerooms, and a small kitchen used for local events. The hallway split and, looking right, she could see the kitchen area.

But Todd hurried to the left, where the hallway grew so narrow she guessed it could only lead to some kind of cupboard.

Todd stopped at an open door, and led them into what must be the caretaker's storeroom.

For a few seconds Sarah and Jack stood there just taking it in.

Like all such places, Sarah imagined, the room was chock-a-block with all kinds of bits and pieces; the tools and equipment that kept the old building running.

Each year there was talk on the parish council about the need for a massive renovation of the whole hall. And each year the cost proved too daunting. This room looked like the proverbial firetrap.

"Tight space," Jack said, pointing out the obvious, but with his height he probably felt the tight confines even more.

Todd nodded.

"If you ask me, I think it's amazing this place can function at all. Sam — the caretaker — does his best. But with this cramped space ..."

"No basement?" Jack asked.

"Not a full one. More of a crawl space, ancient really. Used to keep costumes and instruments down there, but after the flood about fifteen years ago ..."

*Sarah remembered that!*

A storm like Cherringham had never experienced before. A massive hurricane threatening the mighty trees that — mostly — somehow resisted the fierce winds. The rain was continuous, the river actually breaking its banks and flooding way beyond the meadows.

And even this hall, up the hill in the village, caught in a torrent of water pouring off the high ground ...

*A mess.*

"After that, everything was moved to the top floor. Some stuff was sent out to people's homes. Just not enough storage."

Then Sarah saw the line of three clothes hooks. One with Bill's jeans, another with a flannel shirt, a sweater, and

a jacket.

*As if he'd planned to be straight back after his big appearance, get dressed — and normal life would resume.*

But not tonight.

She walked over to the clothes.

And at her feet, Bill's shoes.

*Right, he'd still be wearing official shiny black Santa boots.*

Seeing the clothes dangling, the shoes waiting, it did seem as though Bill Vokes had simply vanished.

She turned to Jack.

"We ought to check the pockets," she said. She saw Jack nod, then he joined her and they patted down the hanging clothes.

"Wallet, some change," said Sarah holding out what she'd found. "Set of keys. House keys, from the look of it."

She turned to Jack.

"Pack of cigarettes," he said, holding it out.

"Nothing else?" said Sarah. "No phone?"

She watched as he shook his head. Then he opened up the pack carefully.

"Brand new pack. Just one gone."

Then he sniffed the pack.

"Menthol," he said. "Didn't know people still smoked these."

"Ha," said Todd. "Bill must be the last one, I reckon!"

Jack began looking around the room, and Sarah joined him, removing objects from a shelf, some dangling wires (probably old light fittings), then opening a creaky filing cabinet whose contents rattled, sounding like a home to nails, screws, and bolts.

Mops and brooms leaned into one corner, while an industrial vacuum cleaner sat near the door.

Seeing all this, imagining Bill getting ready, the Santa costume, the boots, the big white beard ...

*She had a question.*

"Todd, is this a dead-end back here?"

He looked away as if he hadn't thought about that.

"Um, I'm not sure, but I think there's some kind of side door, for deliveries and so on. Out in the hallway."

She looked at Jack. "Let's take a look then," he said.

\*

The narrow hallway dog-legged one way, then the other, past a small cramped toilet, until it ended in two doors.

One, when Todd opened it, revealed a cupboard filled with supplies. Not a bit of vacant space there. But the other, with two grimy book-sized windows at the top, was clearly a way out.

*And that door — open a crack.*

Todd was about to pull it open, but Jack quickly reached out and touched his arm.

"Hang on a second, Todd."

The electrician turned to Jack, his hand on the doorknob.

And Sarah already knew what Jack was about to point out.

"What?" Todd said.

Jack looked right at her, as if their minds were in sync, taking this in even without understanding what it meant.

"The door's open."

"That happens, I suppose," Todd said. "Breeze. Getting pretty blowy out there."

*Right, thought Sarah. And someone leaves their street clothes and just disappears in a bright red Santa outfit?*

*That just "happens" too?*

Sarah looked at Jack. "You think Bill went out here?"

A nod. "And maybe left the door ajar so he could get back in."

Sarah looked at the open door, a bit of snow having blown in, melting on the old wooden floor.

“But look — the floor’s pretty dry” she said. “So he didn’t come back in.”

“It does appear that way.”

At which point, in the cramped hallway by this door to the outside, Todd laughed.

“*You two!* I heard about how you work things out. Real detective stuff. Funny to see it up close.”

Jack smiled.

“What is it Sherlock Holmes says? Just ‘the science of deduction’, Todd. All right, let’s go out and see what we can see.”

With another nod to the electrician, he pulled open the door, snow blowing in with the draught.

And then Todd stood to the side to let Jack take the lead as they walked out.



## 4. A Look at the Snow

Sarah was just steps behind Jack as he stopped.

He turned to her. "Not much light out here."

And Todd, with an eagerness as if he was now part of the team said, "I'll go get a torch."

And when he was gone ...

"Sarah, back here, with the Christmas lights about to be turned on, there'd be nobody, right?"

"Everyone would be round at the front. Except for Bill. Getting ready for his big moment."

Todd came back and handed Jack a long silver torch which — when Jack slid it on — created a bright circle of light.

And following Jack's lead, Sarah remained planted just steps outside the doorway while Jack slowly aimed the light from the door, moving it slowly back and forth on the ground outside.

And at first, she didn't see anything but the soft white eddies of snow, heavier now, apparently the wintry blast kicking in again. The car park, half-full of vans, the snow around them dirty and grey.

But then ...

She touched Jack's arm — he stopped moving the torch back and forth.

"Wait a second. See there?"

She pointed to the pavement at the side of the hall, and Jack kept the light locked in that direction.

"What is it?" Todd said.

Jack nodded.

"Footsteps. Barely visible, with the snow filling in spaces. Still ... you can see them there. Good spot, Sarah."