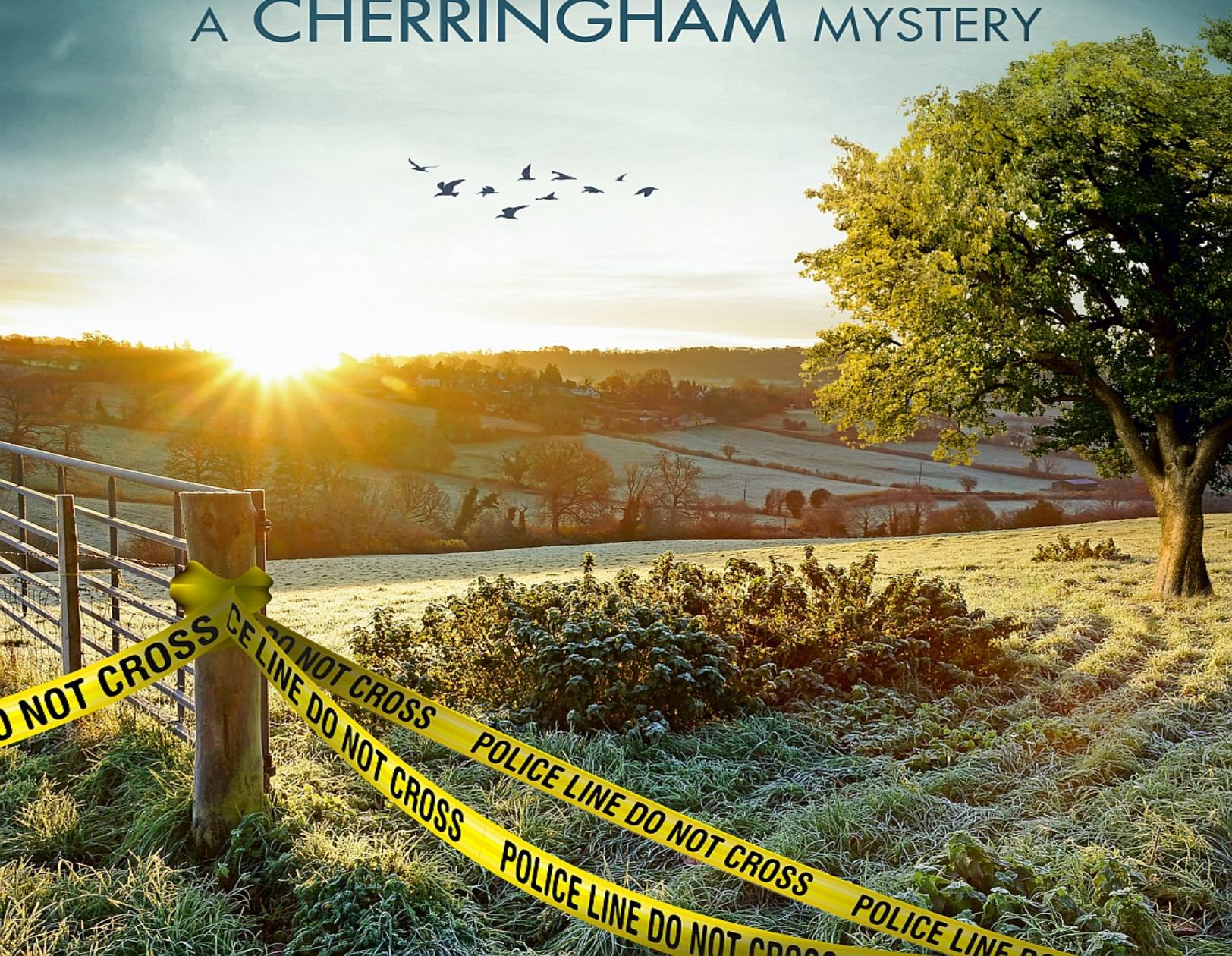


MATTHEW COSTELLO

NEIL RICHARDS

The Body in the Woods

A CHERRINGHAM MYSTERY



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About the Book

It's Carnival week in Cherringham. Most of the locals are looking forward to the regatta, the parade, and the fireworks. Jack and Sarah are too, until they find themselves faced with a baffling twenty-year-old cold case ...

A cold case that soon heats up when a member of the Carnival Committee suddenly goes missing. Jack and Sarah investigate — and quickly come up against a wall of silence.

Are the two cases connected? What dark secret from Cherringham's past is being kept hidden?

As the Carnival rolls to its spectacular finale, Jack and Sarah race against time to stop the murderer from killing again.

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.

Matthew Costello
Neil Richards

The Body in the Woods
A Cherringham Mystery



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PROLOGUE

1998

1. A Deadly Decision

He stood up as the bus pulled into the main square of this small English village.

His heart — racing. So crazy ...

To do this thing — to come here — without telling anyone. But he had to! There was no way he could *not* do it.

The sun was already setting as he got off the bus. An old couple looked at him as if they knew he wasn't from around here.

Was it that obvious?

So cold now in the open air, out of the heat of the bus. He wore a thin sweater but, with the sun gone, he could have used a real jacket.

The cold only added to the chill he felt in coming here.

So impulsive, his friends would say. *He just doesn't think!*

But there was no way he could sit, and wait, and wonder. Was it all really over? So exciting, so amazing, so thrilling ... now nothing?

He walked. Aimlessly at first. Down this alley, this lane, until he finally stood in the shadows. He felt alone. The weather was turning colder. So stupid to not bring warm clothes.

So many things he should have thought about.

But one thing he did bring, despite the risk. In a little side pocket of his backpack.

The small plastic bag.

A quick look to either end of this curving alleyway.

He undid the zip-lock. Then — another look down the curve of the alley — he slid a finger in.

Just a taste.

He brought the finger to his nose and inhaled, the white powder vanishing from his fingertip.

Then that sweet rush — and he actually felt warmer. And this dark lane, not ominous at all.

He could see things quite clearly.

He refocused on his task.

He turned, and walked away from the shelter of the lane, towards the lights and shops and people of the village.

He passed the pub. “The Angel” he read on a sign, with a figure of a beautiful angel hovering above the letters.

Already filled with people.

So warm, so inviting. But no.

Then he passed a run-down hotel. He looked at the faded sign by the gate: “The Bell”.

Across the road was a sign — the street map of the village. He hurried across the High Street. He could just make out the words on the washed-out map by the light of a nearby street lamp.

There!

Yes! That was it for sure!

He had to catch his breath. His heart began to race.

Only moments away.

He took a deep breath and started walking again — away from the lights of the village into the inky blackness.

PART ONE

The Body

2. A Perfect Morning

“This is the life, eh?” said Ray Stroud, climbing down from the cab of Tom Vining’s rusted pick-up truck and taking in the view.

Ahead of him, the long grass of the meadow spread all the way down to the river, dotted with poppies and wild flowers that shone red and blue in the morning sun.

And even though it was barely eight o’clock, the air already felt warm.

It was going to be another fantastic June day.

And I’ll be fifty quid richer by the end of it, he thought, already tasting that first pint of Hooky ale down at the Ploughman’s.

He reached back into the cab for his takeaway breakfast, still warm from the transport café out on the Cherringham road.

Carefully he unwrapped the mega-deal sausage, bacon and double-egg sandwich, and squirted a sachet of tomato ketchup deep into its greasy folds.

He took a big bite, egg and butter oozing down his chin, looking back at Tom.

“Gonna be a scorcher,” he said.

“Don’t count on it,” said Tom from inside the cab. “My phone says it’s going to rain this afternoon.”

Ray looked up and wiped his mouth with his sleeve.

What the hell did phones know about the weather?

Then he watched as a small convoy of vehicles appeared at the far side of the field and headed straight for them, bumping over the rough ground.

“This the gaffer?” he said.

“Might be,” said Tom, climbing out of his cab and standing next to him. “Might not be. Far as I can tell, we got two bosses on this job and neither of them knows his arse from his elbow.”

Ray carried on eating while he watched the vehicles line up in the corner of the field.

Two cars — each with a single occupant. And a minibus packed with people and baggage.

Not hard to work out who were the bosses and who were the workers.

He watched as the drivers, carrying laptops and shoulder bags, got out of the cars and immediately huddled together, pulling out papers and pointing around the field.

Meanwhile, the side doors of the minibus slid open and Ray saw the passengers pile out.

Students, they looked like. A few skinny blokes with wispy beards, shorts and shiny new boots — but mostly bright-eyed girls in T-shirts and jeans. All carrying rucksacks, buckets and yellow hard hats.

Having them flouncing around ... nice perk of the job!

Pretty obvious from here that those hands would all be soft and spotless.

Two weeks digging up this field, he thought, they're gonna have skin bad as mine.

Ray inspected his own hands: calloused, ingrained with dirt, nails torn and discoloured. Then he rolled up his empty breakfast wrapper and chucked it through the window of Tom's cab.

He watched as the students dragged tents and boxes into the shade of the trees that lined one side of the meadow.

Good place to make camp, he thought. Wanna stay out of that sun today all right.

The two bosses exchanged a few words with the group, then headed over towards the truck and the trailer.

“Here we go,” said Tom out of the side of his mouth.

The men approached and the taller of the two stuck his hand out towards Ray.

“Mr Vining?” he said. “Professor Cresswell, Western University, Department of Archaeology. I believe we spoke on the phone.”

Ray didn’t take the hand — but instead nodded towards Tom who now stood next to him.

“I’m Vining,” said Tom, not moving.

Ray saw the man — his hand now hovering in mid-air, unshaken — look confused.

Then Tom held out his hand and put him out of his misery.

Ray smiled to himself. For as long as he had known Tom Vining, the digger-driver had a gift for putting people off their stride — especially if they were in charge. Not a tactic that worked if you were rubbish at your job — but everybody knew that Tom was the best digger driver for miles.

A specialist. An artist. And always in demand.

“This is Ray,” said Tom, nodding to him. “My banksman.”

The professor looked confused at the word. “He walks along, checking as I dig. Digging with a shovel. Just need good eyes and a strong back.”

“Ah, yes, terrific,” said Cresswell. “Wonderful to have you on board, Ray. Have you ever worked on a dig before?”

“No,” said Ray, “but I’ve dug a lot of holes.”

He watched Cresswell adjust his glasses, clearly trying to work out if Ray was taking the piss.

Then a sheepish smile. “Oh, very funny, very funny,” he said at last and nodded to the man next to him who smiled back.

Ray looked hard at the other man. He recognised him from the village. *Right ... that was it ...* leading groups of tourists round on the Cherringham History Tour.

“This is Will Goodchild who’ll be on site running the dig on my behalf. Will’s our local Roman expert — isn’t that right, Will?”

Ray saw Goodchild frown, as if he wasn’t happy with that description, then smile awkwardly at Ray and Tom.

The historian didn’t seem to recognise him.

No surprise there, thought Ray, him not exactly being a regular down at the Ploughman’s.

“Yes, um, the university’s in charge, of course,” continued Cresswell, “but as far as you’re concerned, Will’s your, um, line manager. I shall be running things from the ivory tower! Isn’t that right, Will?”

Will shrugged, clearly finding it hard to smile at Cresswell’s joke.

The professor continued. “Now, um, Tom — you’ve given Ray here an induction I hope? Health and safety regulations? Paramount importance you know, on a dig like this, with students around. No accidents!”

“Don’t worry,” said Tom turning and looking Ray in the eye. “He’s not as thick as he looks.”

“Good to hear it,” said Cresswell, laughing uncertainly. And then: “Oh no. Ray — I mean — good to hear you’ve had your induction, not that you’re er ...”

“No worries, Mr Cresswell, I know what you meant,” said Ray.

Guy like this ... always has trouble putting two words together talking with someone who does a real day’s work.

And now, with the man fumbling, awkward, Ray knew that he was one point up against the big boss.

“So, to the job. Like I said on the phone, Mr Cresswell, I’ve worked a lot of digs over the years,” said Tom.

“Indeed — you come highly recommended. And we’re grateful you’ve joined us. So here’s the plan for today. I’ve got my first- and second-year students over there, along with a few experienced volunteers. They’re setting up camp right now.”

Then, a broad smile from the man, struggling to be in charge and radiate a sense of bonhomie with the labourers.

“They’re under strict instructions to get some tea going. Can’t dig without tea, hmm? We’ve got portaloos coming and a food trailer some time later this morning. In the meantime, as I say, Will here is in charge. Any questions?”

Ray looked at the ground.

“No?”

Ray watched Cresswell waiting for a response. Even Goodchild didn’t seem too bothered about being chummy.

“One last thing,” said Cresswell. “Timing.”

“Oh yes?” said Tom.

“We’ve got four weeks — and four weeks only — to finish this dig before the farmer wants his field back. Can’t afford any delays of any kind. So all hands to the pump, eh?”

“Pump?” said Ray with a straight face. “We didn’t bring a pump.” He watched Cresswell deciding whether to reply or not. After a pause:

“That’s clear then,” said Cresswell. “Here’s to a successful dig, Mr Goodchild!”

He slapped Will on the back, then turned and headed back up the meadow to his car. The three of them watched him go. Then Goodchild turned:

“No need for you two to wait for the tea. You can crack on, get the digger up and running, start sorting one or two trenches straight way. That sound like a plan?”

“‘Spose it’ll have to be,” said Tom.

Ray watched Goodchild’s face carefully. Maybe this bloke wasn’t going to be such a walkover.

Goodchild pointed down towards the river.

“Now the aerial photographs — and the geophysics — all show up some very interesting shapes across this meadow, and into the woods you can see down there by the fence. Oh — before I forget — the rest of those trees will

have to come down first — you have brought some chainsaws I assume?”

Ray nodded and looked down the slope where the adjoining woodland spilled over into the meadow.

Years ago, this had probably all been part of one estate, the woodland blurring into pasture.

Then the land must have got sold, and that fence, driving down to the water’s edge, had gone through the edge of the woods.

Down on the riverbank, Ray could see stacks of timber where some of the bigger trees — oak and chestnut probably — had already been felled.

Even from here, it looked like fine timber.

Could do with some of that myself, he thought.

“Jolly good. So, the idea is that there may or may not be a Roman building of consequence somewhere under the field or in the woods there. We certainly know there was a road. And — here’s the tremendously interesting bit — that road may actually lead to a ford or even an ancient bridge down there across the Thames. If it does then that’s one hell of a find and I’m sure you’ll be as thrilled as I am!”

Actually, Ray couldn’t have cared less, thinking only of his pay. And the food trailer later. But he tried his best to *look* thrilled. Sometimes jobs like this meant good money and maybe a good tip at the end too.

He could see that Goodchild expected a little more enthusiasm — but a bridge? Was that really what all this fuss was about?

He’d been hoping they were looking for treasure. Big chests of Roman gold. A hoard — that’s what they called it wasn’t it?

A few years back, a couple of Ray’s mates had dug up a Roman plate worth a fortune.

Changed their lives, that had ...

But a bridge? No way was he going to get rich finding what’s left of an old bridge.

“Anyway, first things first, we want to get some test holes dug, get the general ‘lay of the land’, eh? How does that sound?”

“Sounds just fine,” said Tom.

“Good. Soon as you’ve taken out the last of the trees, I’ll have some pegs and lines laid down there, mark out the first trench. You can join me with the digger when you’re ready, hmm?”

“Will do,” said Tom, though neither he nor Ray moved.

“Look sharp then,” said Goodchild staring at them both. “Four weeks — remember?”

Ray watched Goodchild back away, then turn and head up the field to his car.

“No cup of tea for us then,” said Tom.

“No bloody treasure either,” said Ray. “He’d better be paying cash or this is a right waste of time.”

“That’s what Cresswell said on the phone,” said Tom, loosening the chains on the digger. “Day’s end, you get your dosh.”

“Only I don’t want no messing about with National Insurance numbers or anything.”

He watched Tom shrug. “*I told you. It’s sorted.*”

Ray looked at him suspiciously. This wouldn’t be the first time Tom had got him a job and the money had mysteriously gone south.

“When you’re done working out your beer and weed money,” said Tom, “you can give me a hand getting the digger down.”

Ray nodded. Tom was his real boss here.

“Don’t forget — you owe me three quid for breakfast, you said that—”

“Broken bloody record you are, Ray Stroud.”

Ray watched him head round to the trailer and drop the ramps.

I’ve got four weeks of this, he thought. Still — all these students here — the grub’s sure to be good. Might even be

able to sell 'em a bit of weed too ...

Shame about that cup of tea, though.

3. A Summer Storm

Two hours later and Ray had worked up a right sweat.

First he'd fired up the chainsaw and felled the last of the trees, right up to the fence line. Dragged the timber down to the water's edge, ready for stacking.

Then Goodchild had made him chop out the remaining bushes at the edge of the meadow so he could peg out some string for the digger.

Turning out not to be such an easy boss, that one.

And all that time while he was busting his ass, Tom had stayed up at the top of the field in the shade, drinking tea and chatting to the students.

Cheeky bugger, thought Ray, watching the digger driver light another fag. I'm burning up down here.

The sun sat high in a clear blue sky. And now that all the trees were down, there was not an inch of shade.

Ray stared at the deep, dark woodland just the other side of the fence. Tall trees in full leaf, dense bushes, just dapples of sunlight.

Nice and cool in there, I bet, he thought.

But Ray knew the gaffer would spot him if he slipped away for a secret sit-down and a roll-up.

He took off the heavy strimmer harness and laid the machine on the ground. Then he lifted his hard hat and goggles and wiped his sweaty brow.

At least down here by the river's edge he caught a bit of a breeze. He watched a pretty little pleasure boat chug past, full of tourists.

Some of them waved and took pictures of him. He stared back.

Silence again. He took in the scene.

Not much different from the view from his own not-so-pretty boat, a few miles downriver in Cherringham.

The cool, dark water gliding past. The odd swan chugging up and down. Cattle dopily chewing cud in the meadows on the other side of the water, lowing in the heat.

Then he heard a loud *snap* from inside the wood. Like someone standing on an old branch, breaking it.

Ray turned and peered into the darkness of the trees.

He saw a flash of movement.

Some kind of animal? Wild boar maybe?

No. Surely that was ... someone watching ...

Just a glimpse — deep in the silent wood — but yes, a face.

He blinked, wiped away the sweat again, screwed up his eyes against the sun, peered into the darkness ...

Yes, there it was again — a movement!

And, for a second, he saw a shape move between the trees.

A man. Definitely.

Trying to stay out of sight.

But why?

Who?

Loopy birdwatcher maybe? Not a day for birdwatching, with all these people around.

And then a chilling thought.

Someone watching ... *him?*

He ran through a quick mental inventory of people he wouldn't want to see in a dark wood.

People he owed money to.

People he owed more than money. People maybe with long memories ...

Nah, most of them would still be in bed at this hour.

Chill, he said to himself. *Maybe it's just the tax man trying to catch me out.*

He looked back up the slope of the meadow towards the vehicles and the digger. All the students were there still,

setting up tables and tents, laying out tools. Goodchild poring over papers on a table.

He looked back at the wood.

The mystery man had gone.

Leaving Ray feeling ... more than unnerved.

Feeling something ...

Wasn't right ...

"Told you it was going to rain," said Tom from inside the cab.

Ray shovelled another load of thick, wet, black soil into the wheelbarrow and looked up at the digger driver in his high cab.

Tom was grinning. Dry as a bone in there.

"You and your bloody phone," said Ray.

Tom revved the engine, prodded the bucket into the mud, lifted the digger onto the back of its tracks, and did a clever turn that looked near impossible.

Guy knew how to work the machine, that was for sure.

Bloody show-off, thought Ray.

But he knew it was Tom's skill — not cutting up the surface — that was the reason he had got this job in the first place.

Ray drove his shovel into the soft ground, picked up the wheelbarrow and pushed it up the hill towards the big pile of soil.

Already today, he'd done thirty loads and he was knackered. Digging through gnarled tree roots. Rotten ground.

And soaked through.

Seemed everyone else had waterproofs. He could see the students and the volunteers huddled together under a big awning, drinking their bloody tea and waiting for the rain to stop.

No rest for the wicked, he thought, running the wheelbarrow fast up the plank, nearly slipping off before quickly tipping it onto the top of the pile.

Then, with a quick flip, he turned it round and headed back down the hill.

He and Tom had dug three shallow trenches in different parts of the field, each time watched carefully by Goodchild and the others, all holding trowels and buckets.

Stop-start work it was. Scrape a bit, wait for them to have a good butchers at the ground looking for God knows what. Then, scrape a bit more, wait, and so on and so on.

All for a bloody bridge too!

Then Goodchild had taken steps closer to the digger, and held up a hand to broadcast his words like they were in the middle of a hurricane and not just heavy rain.

“Time for one more trench — eh, chaps — before close of play?”

Ray had hoped that they’d already hit the end of bloody play!

But then Goodchild had marked out another grid by the woods for them to dig, and disappeared up the field.

All right for him, sitting in his car listening to his damn radio, thought Ray. *While I’m out here in a bloody downpour, sodden through, boots full of water, covered in mud, not a cup of tea all day ...*

He skirted the moving digger carefully, so that Tom could see where he was, then parked the wheelbarrow and watched the big bucket scrape another six inches of topsoil out of the marked-up area.

Then ...

Some instinct made him look into the trees.

A flash of white again.

Was that another movement?

Dammit — who the hell was hiding in there watching?

He decided to have a proper look and took a couple of steps towards the copse, but then—

“Ray!”

He turned, to see Tom, sticking his head out the side window of the digger, waving to him. He walked back towards the digger.

“Ray. Take a look will you, mate?” said Tom, nodding at the trench.

Ray stepped carefully along the side of the pegged area. The trench was about twenty feet long and four feet wide, and — he had to admit — beautifully level at around a foot deep. Its edges clean and carved by the bucket — green grass on one side, black soil where the turf had been peeled back.

Nice work, in spite of all them roots. But in the centre — Ray could see a big patch of differently coloured soil — brown and grey, with bits of gravel in it.

He turned back to Tom. “Someone’s already dug this up,” he said.

Tom nodded — head jutting out still, getting splattered by the rain. “That’s what I thought,” he said, turning off the digger and stepping down from the cab.

Ray looked around the field.

“Odd place to dig a hole,” he said. “Think it might be treasure?”

In which case, he would do all he could to keep it hidden from Goodchild and his bridge-hunters!

“Never know,” said Tom, inspecting the dirt. “Only one way to find out.”

“No need to tell the gaffer, eh?” said Ray.

He watched Tom peer through the rain, past the digger, at the archaeologists at the top of the field.

A grin. “Shame to get him out of the dry when it might be nothing,” said Tom.

Ray knew exactly what Tom was thinking. The digger was in the way — Goodchild couldn’t see them.

“Gonna get the shovel,” Ray said. Tom watched while he went over to the barrow and brought back the shovel.

With the digger in the way, he and Tom were hidden from view.

Ray took the shovel and slammed it into the discoloured area of dirt. Here, the blade went in easily — way easier than the root-blocked soil elsewhere — and he took a great bite out of the earth.

He looked at Tom. The digger driver looked back at him, eyebrows raised.

What we got here then?

Ray took another shovelful, then another, dumping each load into the barrow.

The earth loose. Looser than it should be.

“Funny,” he said, “if this was dug when the Romans was here, you’d expect it to be more compact, like the rest of the site.”

“Doesn’t have to be Roman, does it?” said Tom.

“Treasure’s treasure — long as it’s old.”

Ray stopped for a breather and looked down. He’d dug quite a pit. At least three feet deep. And still the soil was loose.

“Bloody deep hole they made, whoever they were,” he said. “Whatever they put down here they didn’t want anybody finding it.”

“Exactly,” said Tom, grinning.

Ray grabbed the spade again and slammed it into the soft, sticky earth.

Crack.

Something hard.

“Aha!” said Ray, dropping the spade to one side and looking up at Tom.

Tom grinned back at him.

“Pass me one of them trowels,” said Ray, nodding to the bucket of tools which one of the students had left on the digger.

Ray waited for Tom to hand him the trowel, then went down onto his hands and knees, and started scraping at the

bottom of the hole.

Now this — was exciting.

“What is it?” said Tom.

“Hold your horses,” said Ray.

He peered into the dark hole, the air moist and sweet, the soil so dark and rich, but veined through with gravel and brown dirt.

He felt the trowel scrape something hard.

Wood? Metal?

A treasure chest?

He scraped faster along the line, feeling a contour emerging. Something pale.

He put the trowel to one side and used his fingers — clawing away at the muddy soil, sliding his hand along this shape, which now felt somehow ... familiar.

His fingers slid into a slot along the length of the thing — smooth, then knobbly.

Then, the realisation ...

He jerked back.

“Bone,” said Ray.

“What?” said Tom. “Bugger.”

Ray stopped digging.

“Probably some old sheep. Or a cow.”

He stood up, brushed the mud from his jeans.

“Waste of bloody time, that was,” said Ray. “Just our bleeding luck.”

“Looks like you’ll have to shove all that muck back in there, mate,” said Tom.

Suddenly, this mess was all Ray’s to repair, now that their hopes of a treasure were dashed. “Before the gaffer sees what you’ve done.”

Ray wiped the rain and sweat from his face and stared at Tom.

Bastard, he thought.

Then something shiny caught his eye in the hole.

He peered down into the dark pit. Yes — there ...

“Hold on,” he said, getting down onto his knees again. “I think we just got lucky.”

He reached into the soil, fingers scraping at the dirt. Bits of old cloth coming away, lifting clods of earth with them.

Then ...

There *was* something shiny.

Something metal — he could feel it so hard in his fingers.

Quickly he scraped more soil away.

Yes! It was some kind of jewellery — must be!

Diamonds! Gold!

He reached down and grabbed the thing and pulled it upwards, and as it popped out of the thick earth, it seemed to lift a long chunk of old bone with it, the cow bone, or pig bone, or sheep bone, or whatever the hell it was.

The white bone, now lifting from the dark suffocating ground, coming up fast with the suction of the muck suddenly stopping ...

And then Ray stopped dead, not understanding, not believing what his eyes were telling him ...

His eyes staring at this ... thing ... in his grasp, this thing that his own fingers had just held, slipped through, shaped, felt ...

No damn doubt about it.

A human arm, broken, bare, white — skeleton fingers splayed wide at its end.

And caught up in the bits of bone — a shiny, glinting metal and glass watch.

And now, so clearly visible in the soil ...

A skull, bone-white, shrouded in tattered cloth, its eye sockets mud-full, its teeth bare and brown as if the head was about to call out to Ray, to thank him for freeing it after all this time.

“Oh bugger,” said Ray, stepping up and away from the corpse, standing in the relentless rain and staring at his

own muddy, shaking hands.

“Now look what we’ve bloody done.”

4. The Carnival Committee

Jack Brennan sat back in the wooden chair that felt like it was designed for a much smaller human.

When he shifted in the tight seat, the chair gave out a sequence of loud creaks in protest.

Everything's so old in this country, he thought.

Back in the states, something one hundred years old was an heirloom. A treasure!

Here — just furniture.

He took in the crowded meeting room of the village hall. With its big oil portraits of past mayors, and tall windows set in stone, it looked like a cross between a medieval castle hall and a church.

When he was a kid back in Brooklyn, he'd seen places like this on TV: only thing missing was Robin Hood swinging in on a chandelier, sword aloft, coming to rescue Maid Marian.

But this evening, not everything looked like it belonged in a history lesson.

Up on the high wall ahead of him, a big projection screen had been set up. Below it, behind a long table, Jack saw the dozen or so members of the *esteemed* Cherringham Carnival Committee, all business-like with laptops and folders, smartphones and laser pointers.

He recognised most of the faces from the village. In fact, two or three, he knew pretty well: his old friend local solicitor Tony Standish, the vicar Simon Hewitt, and local plumber Pete Bull.

A few he hadn't seen before: one in particular, a harassed looking man in a tired suit, who sat at the end of the table, hunched over his phone.

He took in the rest of the audience, the ranks of loyal volunteers, all here, he knew, to run through the final plans for the yearly carnival.

Just a week away. Highlight of the summer. And — Jack had to admit — one of his favourite times of the year. A real taste of English village life, in all its eccentric, bizarre and sometimes beer-filled ways.

He'd lived in Cherringham for a few years now but this was the first time he'd been invited to glimpse "behind the curtain", to see how the event was organised.

Just have to wait to find out why I'm so privileged, he thought.

He checked out the back of the hall. He'd hoped that his good friend — and partner in their occasional detective work — Sarah would be here tonight.

As well as running a web design business in the village, she also edited the online village *Newswire* and Jack knew tonight was her last chance to check the carnival schedule before she published.

But Sarah had texted him to say she was just running out of time — *I thought kids were supposed to get easier when they grew up* — and could he be an angel and take some notes?

Shame she's not here, thought Jack. He missed her at events like this.

"Want to swap seats, Jack?" came a voice from his side.

He turned to see Josh Robinson, the aged owner of Cherringham Electricals, peering at him behind big spectacles.

"Sorry, Josh," said Jack, "can't seem to stop the damn thing squeaking."

"Not built for a big fella like you," said Josh. And then a tad louder: "Sooner this meeting starts, the better."

And, as if the committee had heard Josh's advice, Jack heard the tinkle of a hand bell from the top table and the room went quiet.