

COMPILATION

Matthew Costello

Neil Richards

# CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

Episode 10 - 12



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# **Cherringham — A Cosy Crime Series**

“Cherringham — A Cosy Crime Series” is a series made up of self-contained stories. A new episode is released each month. 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 a year 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. Two 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 10—12**



# »be« by BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT

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Matthew Costello  
Neil Richards

# **CHERRINGHAM**

## **A COSY CRIME SERIES**



**A Deadly Confession**





# 1. Good Friday

Eamon Byrne zigzagged through the thicket, his expensive new running shoes gripping hard on the muddy trail, his arms fending off stray branches, which threatened to flip back into his face.

‘The Flying Father’ they called him — and boy was he flying now!

He risked a quick glance at his special watch and felt a thrill as he took in the figures: his split times were amazing this morning; surely a personal best.

*Stick this in your pipe and smoke it, Liam*, he thought.

Pace — eight miles an hour. Heart rate — a tad high, but surely nothing to worry about.

Three more kilometres out of ten left to run — but they were the easy three, flat along the riverbank by the meadows. Only the hard uphill dogleg through Marchmain’s Woods could possibly slow his average now.

Days like this — when the running was fluid, easy, effortless — were rare and unpredictable. No amount of training made them happen more often. They came out of nowhere, and he knew by now not to question them.

*Just enjoy this feeling*, he thought, *for it is a gift from God, and he’s not been giving much to me lately.*

If only Liam could have joined him this morning. Liam understood the numbers. Liam would have shared his joy.

*Ah well, if Liam cannot be my witness then it shall have to be God*, Eamon thought. God is infinitely good.

And what a weekend to celebrate His goodness.

In just an hour’s time, showered, shaved, his mind emptied of all matters of the flesh, Eamon would be

celebrating Good Friday mass with the nuns at the church of St. Francis.

Good Friday — the most solemn of days in the Christian calendar. And yet the harbinger too of the most joyous day — Easter Sunday!

Many times over the years he had questioned his calling, his faith. He'd not been the only one to do so either — indeed the Bishop recently seemed to have made it a personal ambition to have Eamon defrocked.

But each time one of the great landmarks of the ecumenical calendar rolled around — Easter, Christmas Day, Palm Sunday — the thrilling drama and mystery of the event reminded him that the priesthood was the only life he could ever lead.

Although, in truth, at times it seemed he lived two lives as a priest.

On the one hand — the Shepherd of his flock, ministering to their every spiritual need. And on the other — the Flying Father of the international marathon circuit, raising hundreds of thousands of pounds for the poor and the needy and the lost.

And then of course, there was that ... other ... life he lived. The secret life he kept so tight, so close that few — if any — knew of it...

God is forgiving, he also believed.

*But no. Now is not the time to think of that.*

He emerged from the trees and turned hard right onto the gravel path which ran alongside the river. The air down here smelt sweet and clear.

He lifted his head high to take in the beauty of the spring morning.

The sun had only been up an hour and the meadows sparkled with dew for miles.

Up on the far hill, the village of Cherringham slumbered still — a late lie-in being taken by one and all on the first day of the holiday weekend. He could see the Cotswold

stone of the houses glowing warm in the rays of the rising sun.

He heard a sound behind him on the river, and, still running, turned...

...to see a pair of swans coming in low to land in the water by the moored barges. The birds seemed to hang in the air beside him and for a brief second he thought he could feel the thread of God's creation binding his own running figure to the swans, to the waters, to the meadows, and the orange rising sun.

Then the swans hit the water and he pushed his pace higher and left them behind.

His body felt on top form this morning, the muscles of his legs flexing painlessly, his breathing strong and unforced.

*Sixty-two years old and fitter than half the men in Cherringham!* he thought.

The drugs he was on for his heart were a miracle indeed — but a scientific one. No matter what stresses he faced, there was no danger now of repeating that awful moment last autumn when he'd felt his chest lurch and his pulse race, and he'd heard the communion chalice crash to the stone at his feet and it had all gone dark...

No. Science was keeping him alive. Though, of course the Almighty had a small say in that too...

*Is this what it feels like to be truly happy?* he thought. *I'm sure as heck don't deserve it.*

As his feet pounded a rhythm on the muddy towpath, he tried to corral the worries that had plagued him this last week, that had woken him each morning in a cold sweat, and forced him onto his knees on the hard stone of St. Francis's church to pray for guidance...

They're like demons, he thought. But demons of my own making.

He'd been in trouble before. Many times. But he'd been younger then, more agile. Maybe not so canny, but full of

bluster for sure.

And he'd also not been playing for such high stakes.

What in God's high heaven had made him do it? How did he think he was going to get away with it? But he knew the answer even as he asked himself the question.

Pride. Lust. Greed.

That oh-so-familiar threesome of sins which had shadowed his life from the moment he'd walked out of the seminary as a young man right up to this very day.

What soothing pleasure those three imposters had given him over the years. But now ... what a payment they were exacting. Colluding with each other to wreak revenge upon him.

How on earth was he going to get out of this mess?

He was running out of time. Maybe over this weekend he could call in some favours. Yes, that might work. A flight back to Dublin, slip down to the Temple Bar, mix with the tourists, but he still had old friends there he could trust.

People he could rely on. To help — no questions asked.

But then ... dammit. There was the *other* thing. Jesus, that would be even worse, if that got out, that would be the end of him.

*Enough! Concentrate on the run — just the run!*

He heard his watch beep and flicked his eyes to its face. Another terrific split, unbelievable, just two kilometres to go.

*Eat your heart out Liam, I'm kicking your ass today!*

Ahead of him he could see the river making its lazy loop away from Cherringham and around Marchmain's Hill, with its steep slopes and dense wood.

He could stick on the river path, but the course — his regular run — took him up the punishing slope and through the woods, before dropping down to St. Francis' Convent.

Ten kilometres exactly.

With one final glance at his watch he turned off the track and headed into the dark woods.

\*

Eamon's breath was coming hard now, each lungful seeming to tear his chest apart. No need to look at the heart monitor on this climb — he knew it would be tipping the danger point — drugs or no drugs.

Marchmain's Hill was always tough. But a run like today, with such a fast start, this was always going to hurt.

*No pain, no gain*, he thought. *Which saint said that, now?*

He forced himself to think technique. Breathe deep, control the exhalation, every step another metre. Chest up. Head high.

Look ahead — focus on the top of the hill, just a couple of hundred yards ahead through the forest path.

He thought back to the New York Marathon — that final blistering mile, the crowd cheering him on, the finish line just a blur, his whole body like jelly, his spirit flailing.

And then — that rush of faith which had seemed to lift him off the ground, propelling him as if a pair of angels had been tasked with saving him.

The Flying Father does it again!

Nearly ten thousand he'd raised — he handed the Cardinal the cheque himself, right on the steps of St. Patty's! His final time incredible — *unworldly*.

The memory of that triumph spurred him on now, his feet driving into the hard clay, the tall trees seeming to whoosh past as he squeezed through the overhanging branches and tall shrubs.

Just fifty yards to go to the top then it would be a race downhill to the convent, the wind on his face cooling him, a long shower, hot coffee, a cooked breakfast—

*Only minutes away!*

And then:

He didn't see what tripped him. But something caught his foot and he went down hard, his chest crashing into the unforgiving ground, his arms and legs scraping raw as he tumbled.

He landed with his back slamming hard against a tree and groaned in pain.

*What the hell? Was that a rope?*

For a second, he lay there mentally checking — arms, legs, broken bones. Heart...

*Jeez, that's pumping like a good 'un, better calm down, breathe slowly.*

He looked up through the tall trees to the watery blue sky above. If his heart packed up on him now, nobody would find him up here for hours. He was on his own.

But no, he wasn't. For now he could hear movement in the trees right behind him.

Thank God.

But as he lay on his back staring at the sky, a figure stepped in front of him, peering down at him.

Someone he knew.

And someone who knew the things he had done.

*Oh God,* thought Father Byrne as the face loomed close.

And he began to pray, but suddenly God seemed to have vanished.

## 2. A Surprise Visitor

Jack sipped his coffee, leaned back in his camping chair and checked again that the old fishing rod by his side was nicely secured.

Twenty yards out into the river he could see the little yellow float bobbing innocuously — no sign of a fish yet.

But heck — he had all morning with nothing to do but relax.

And what a morning he'd picked for a day off all chores.

There wasn't a hint of a breeze. And although it was only nine, already he felt a little heat in the spring sun, a soothing warmth on the back of his neck.

He looked over at Riley, his Springer Spaniel who lay snoozing in the long grass in the sunshine: he'd given up chasing rabbits and taken the day off too.

Apart from the mooing cows in the meadows on the other side of the river, and bustling birdlife all around, there wasn't a sound to disturb the peace. Although today was Easter Sunday, it was still too early for the holiday crowd — picnickers, walkers, kayakers — to have gotten this far upstream.

He peered out at the float again: the river was flowing softly — in fact, he couldn't recall it having rained for at least a week.

*Now that's gotta be some kind of English record,* he thought.

He watched a pair of swans glide downstream towards his home — the squat Dutch barge, the Grey Goose, last in a line of barges and houseboats that stretched half a mile down to Cherringham Bridge.



Home for two years now, since he'd retired from the NYPD and followed his and his wife Katherine's dream of retiring to England and living on a river barge.

But then...

*But then...*

So fast, she became ill, the cancer so aggressive. And then their shared dream ended before it began.

It wasn't until months later, months where he barely left the home they had shared, that Jack knew what Katherine would have wanted.

So he came here, to Cherringham, on his own.

Jack reached down to the basket at his feet and chose one of the local biscuits he'd grown so fond of. He crumbled a bit of biscuit and threw it into the water.

He wasn't sure if that worked but he'd seen the real fishermen do it, so why not?

He'd brought his rod and line up here to a little kink in the river where last year he'd had his first go at fishing since he was a kid — and caught two small fish which his neighbour Ray had identified as dace.

Not big enough to eat so he'd thrown them back.

One day he was going to go fish for trout with the little flies he'd made during the winter, and Ray had promised to give him some tips.

In truth, though, he didn't care if he caught something or not. Just sitting here in the English countryside with not a care in the world was the whole point of the exercise.

As any fisherman could tell you.

A movement further down the river bank caught his eye. Someone was walking slowly up the line of moored boats from the bridge. It wasn't anyone he recognised, so Jack kept watching.

Boats were vulnerable to the opportunist thief, though Jack had been lucky so far.

First rule of barge life — look after one another.

He watched as the man reached the Grey Goose and stopped, then walked slowly the length of the boat, clearly peering into the windows.

Nestled in tight to the riverbank Jack realised he was probably invisible to the stranger. He saw that Riley was now standing next to him, ears alert, ready for orders.

*Just snooping — or casing the place — or worse?* thought Jack.

He gently unhooked the rod and laid it to one side so he could move quickly if he had to.

Jack watched as the man stepped onto the gangplank, climbed aboard and disappeared from sight. Within seconds Jack was up and moving fast along the riverbank, Riley beside him.

But as he neared the boat, there was no sign of the uninvited visitor.

Jack and his dog silently stepped aboard. Jack could hear Riley growling.

"Not yet, Riley. I'll tell you when."

Jack edged towards the wheelhouse, cursing himself for having left it open — had the guy gone in? He edged forward and tried to see down the steps into the saloon...

"Mr. Brennan, is it?" came a voice from the foredeck. Jack stepped back and looked down the length of the barge — and there was the stranger facing him and waving.

Jack watched him walk down the side of the boat. As he approached, he thrust out his hand to shake Jack's.

Jack didn't take the hand.

"Ah. You'll be thinking I was after the family silver," said the man. "In the absence of a doorbell I invited myself aboard."

"So I see," said Jack, sizing him up. Tall and well-built, the man looked to be in his early fifties with a trim and confident air and a big affable grin.

"Liam O'Connor," he said, squatting down to ruffle Riley's ears. "And who's this fella?"

"That's Riley. We're still working on the attack training as you can see."

"Well, no need to attack me."

"Jury's still out on that one, Mr. O'Connor. Leastways until you explain why you're on my boat."

"Mea culpa, Jack," said O'Connor, smiling.

Jack wasn't in the mood for friendly chats.

"You are on my boat, uninvited. I still have half a mind to throw you overboard."

"Since I can't swim, I'd rather you didn't do that."

"So — you'd better have a good reason for trespassing."

Jack watched O'Connor put up his hands in mock surrender.

"I'm here ... because I need your help."

"Go on."

"Might we perhaps talk somewhere a little more private?"

"This'll do."

O'Connor shrugged: "I'm here because, well, a dear friend of mine died two days ago, on Good Friday."

"Sorry to hear that."

O'Connor hesitated. Then: "It happened less than a mile from here."

Jack had been keeping to himself. The big old religious holidays could be hard for him ... so he just stayed on the Goose.

"I think — not sure — that he might have been murdered..."

*This ... was news.* "And — word around the village is that you're the man to find out who did it."

"Murder? That is actually the police's job," said Jack, unconvinced. "And I hadn't heard anything about a murder..."

"Well, right. You see they say he had a heart attack."

"Maybe he did," said Jack. "Just who are we talking about by the way?"

"Father Eamon Byrne."

"A priest?"

"Yes."

"What do the police say?" "Everyone thinks he died while out running. Overdid it." O'Connor looked out over the river, out to the meadow as if he could picture the fallen priest. "Eamon *never* overdid it. At least, not the running, that is..."

"And so you think somebody killed him?"

"I do."

"Why?"

"Father Byrne wasn't ... let's just say, he wasn't your average priest."

"Back where I come from, there's no such thing as an average priest."

"Ah — so, you've known a few priests?"

"In Brooklyn? You might say that..."

"Are you a Catholic, Mr. Brennan?"

"I was. Once upon a time."

"Like in the fairy tales?"

"Your words, not mine."

Jack waited.

O'Connor's grin had faded.

"I'm here because I'm hoping you can help me. Can you ... will you?"

Jack waited — and wondered if he really wanted to get involved in another case. He looked upriver to the little sheltered spot where his coffee and his fishing rod were waiting.

"I can pay you," said O'Connor.

"I'm not for hire."

"I see. I do have a very old Lagavulin I'm looking to share with somebody."

Jack smiled at that. "How old?"

"Thirty year."

"The real McCoy?"

“Never been opened.”

“Not something most people have lying around.”

“It was given to me. A thank-you present.”

“Some thank you.”

“They needed help. I did what I could.”

Jack saw in O’Connor’s face the implied suggestion that he should do the same. That — but mostly the tantalising thought of the thirty-year-old single malt — persuaded him.

“Okay. Can’t turn that down. Come below and I’ll put some coffee on. And you can tell me why somebody should want to murder a priest.”

### 3. The Fête

“Do I get ‘danger’ money?”

Sarah pulled up outside St. Francis’s church and gave her son Daniel a quick glance in the passenger seat next to her.

“Danger?”

“Yes, you know, going to a crime scene?”

Sarah laughed. Maybe it wasn’t such a good idea bringing her son while she met Jack at the convent’s Easter fête.

“No,” she said. “But you can have a fiver to spend on the stalls.”

“Hmm. Dunno, Mum. Fiver’s not going to go very far.”

“Daniel — it’s a church fête not Alton Towers.”

“I bet you pay Grace more.”

“Grace is a grown-up. And she doesn’t come out on cases.”

“So this *is* a case.”

“It might be. And it might not. I think it’s mostly a fête — if we can find it of course.”

She looked at the Victorian chapel — Cherringham’s Catholic church — so unlike the old church of St. James in the heart of the village. A large house stood next to it. Was that the rectory? If so — where was the convent?

Back when she was a teenager living in Cherringham, the convent didn’t exist. But even then she didn’t remember ever visiting St. Francis’s church down here on the busy road out of the village.

To one side of the church was a track, the hedges on each side overgrown. Maybe the fête was down there?

“You think this is it?” she said.

"Might be," said Daniel peering down the track. "I think I can see cars down there."

Sarah had brought Daniel along at Jack's suggestion. What better reason for visiting a fête than to give a twelve-year old a fun afternoon out?

Except this twelve year old would rather be on his PlayStation and had demanded payment for his efforts.

*Least he has some business sense,* Sarah thought.

She steered her Rav-4 slowly down the gravel drive. On either side the shrubs and trees looked overgrown, but as they rounded a bend, bunting and flags hung across the track signalled she was in the right place.

She came to a gate and saw a nun sitting at a small card table by a sign marked "Spring Fête — Save St. Francis's Convent!"

She drew up alongside and lowered her window.

"One adult, one child please," she said to the nun who looked hardly older than a child herself.

"Three pounds," said the nun smiling. "Have you visited us before?"

"First time," said Sarah.

Sarah handed the money over and the nun dropped it into a little basket.

"Follow the signs to the retreat house and park by the old stables. You can't miss it."

"Thanks."

The young nun gave Daniel a smile.

"Make sure you have the cream tea. The scones are truly miraculous."

Sarah nodded, and drove on.

"This is cool, Mum. A real case," continued Daniel. "Have the nuns murdered somebody? Is there a killer on the loose? Are we going to interrogate someone?"

Daniel was lost to his imagining of detective work, probably thanks to all the American TV he watched.

"I'd be good at that."



"At...?"

"Interrogating." Daniel grinned. "I could get the killer to talk!"

Sarah shook her head. "Daniel — all I know is — there's something 'up' and Jack wants to meet."

"Yeah," said Daniel. "Bet it'll be murder, all right. Brilliant!"

"And he wants a low profile — which is why you're here, remember? Just here to enjoy the fête?"

"Sure. I'm the cover. Make you guys look innocent."

"Exactly."

"Child exploitation," said Daniel.

"Work experience," said Sarah, laughing.

*What a kid...*

Sarah drove on and the convent came into view.

"Wow," said Daniel. "This is amazing. I never knew this was here."

"Me neither," said Sarah.

As she followed the drive to one side, she leaned forward to see the house as they passed. A dilapidated eighteenth-century white stucco country mansion, picked out in faded blue pastel with an enormous wisteria growing up one wing.

The place was set in gentle lawns which rolled down to woodland. She could just see a glimpse of the river beyond.

*Beautiful spot. Serene.*

"All these trees keep the convent private," she said. "No wonder we've never seen it before."

"Good place to hide a body," said Daniel.

She shot him a look. "One more mention of bodies or murder and that five pounds becomes three — okay? Or maybe a ride back home?" said Sarah, parking the car to the side of the house next to a tattered sign which read 'Retreat Parking'. She was reassured to see Jack's little green sports car parked under a tree.

Daniel raised his hands.

"Mum's the word ... Mum." Then, as he looked out the window, "What's a retreat?"

"A place people come for peace and quiet," said Sarah. "I wonder if they have any vacancies?"

"Doesn't look very comfy."

Sarah followed Daniel's gaze: nestled under the trees was a long single-storey converted stable. There were tiles missing and the paint was peeling. In the windows were threadbare curtains.

"I don't think comfort's part of the deal, love," said Sarah, getting out of the car and waiting for Daniel to get out before she locked it. "Come on, let's go spend that five pounds and find Jack." And she headed towards the Convent of St. Francis.

\*

Finding Jack didn't take long.

Soon after she'd first met him she'd heard him sing in the local choir and there was no mistaking the tenor voice which was booming out from the bottom of the lawn.

With Daniel at her side, she threaded through a handful of stalls set up at the edge of the house, advertising raffles, treasure hunts, and a tombola.

There weren't many people but it was still early afternoon and the fête had only been going a few minutes. As far as Sarah could see, the stalls were all being run by nuns — most of them as young as the one at the gate.

She headed for the sound of singing.

Nestled in the trees at the bottom of the lawn she could see a statue of the Virgin Mary surrounded by plastic chairs — and in front of them, incongruously, another nun playing an electric piano loudly.

Behind her, Sarah saw a large handwritten sign: Pick a Hymn for a Pound!

Jack was belting out 'Abide With Me' alongside two old ladies and a child. As she and Daniel approached he spotted her and gave her a big grin and a thumbs up.

She waited for the hymn to finish, then clapped enthusiastically. Jack paid his pound and came over.

"Hey Sarah," he said. "Daniel — how's it going?"

"Ready for action, Jack."

"Good man. Your mission is to get around the whole place, figure out who's who, play the stalls and listen up for anything suspicious. Got it?"

*Good grief, he's actually encouraging him...*

"Check," said Daniel. Sarah could see he was taking this seriously.

"You see anything strange, don't get involved — just come find us."

Sarah watched as Jack took a five-pound note from a clip in his pocket and handed it to Daniel: "Reasonable expenses. I don't need receipts."

*Now the junior detective had ten pounds!*

"Cool!"

"Rendezvous in one hour at the cream teas. Okay?"

"Three-fifteen, at the teas. I'll be there — sharp!" said Daniel checking his watch, then headed off towards the growing crowd of visitors at the stalls.

Sarah turned to Jack as the two of them followed her son back towards the house: "What's with this mysterious meeting then partner?"

She listened as Jack told her about his visit from Liam O'Connor.

"Who would want to murder a priest?" she asked.

"What I said too."

"So, what's the evidence?"

"Pretty flimsy to be honest — Liam's just got a gut instinct that something's wrong," said Jack. "He and Father Byrne used to run every morning rain or shine. Always in training for the next marathon, you know? Seems our

victim had become world famous for his charity runs in the last couple of years. So, anyway, Thursday night Byrne calls Liam, says he's not feeling so good and cancels."

"Maybe he just changed his mind, too late to call and let him know?"

"Sure. But then apparently not only did he run, but he changed the route at the end. Which Liam says he would *never* do."

"Why?"

"They run a precise 10K course so they can keep tabs of their times. Very competitive these priests it seems."

They'd reached the stalls at the side of the house, so Sarah took a left by another enormous wisteria, towards a run-down conservatory where teas and cakes were being served.

"And Liam — is he a priest too?" she said.

"He was — a long time ago. He and Father Byrne went through the seminary together. Had some wild times, so he says. They kept in touch, stayed friends for life — even though Liam left the Church. 'Lost his faith' he said — though he didn't tell me how."

"And now — what does he do?"

"Didn't say," said Jack. "I do know he drinks, runs, sails, parties, gambles, and gets into trouble."

"Most of which isn't exactly compatible with being a priest, even an ex-priest," said Sarah.

"Don't you believe it," said Jack. "I've known priests back in NYC that do all of the above — and more."

"Of *course*," said Sarah. She gestured at the statues and crucifix in the conservatory. "This is your world, isn't it?"

"Used to be — growing up in Brooklyn," he said.

"Parochial school with the Dominicans. Altar boy, the works. My dad's brother was a priest, Jesuit missionary. The Brennans were pillars of the church."

"But not this Brennan?"

"Too much the sceptic. Minute I left home, I was out of there."

"No urges to return?" Sarah said.

"I like the music. And the incense catches me by surprise sometimes. Nostalgia at Christmas, maybe. But go back?" He shook his head. "Not for me."

Sarah stopped in front of another tall statue of the Virgin Mary. "But Liam must have another reason for thinking Father Byrne was killed..."

"He does," said Jack. "Byrne was a big fan of horse racing, it seems. And Liam says he'd got himself mixed up with some pretty unsavoury characters who were putting the squeeze on him."

"Seriously? Round here?"

"He owed *big*, according to Liam," said Jack. "He was getting threats. Liam says he'd never seen Byrne so scared."

"Okay," said Sarah. "Maybe he's onto something. But I heard in the village that Father Byrne had a heart attack?"

"True," said Jack. "But, what if said heart attack takes place while someone's got your arm twisted round your back and your wallet in their fist — then it's not quite so innocent."

That stopped Sarah.

She knew Jack well enough by now to trust his instincts.

"What's the plan?" she said.

"There's only a handful of nuns here in the convent. But they all will have known Father Byrne," said Jack. "Let's split up, sniff around a little, ask some questions — and maybe find out exactly what happened on Friday morning."

"Not sure the nuns will like that..."

Jack smiled. "No more than I did when they grilled me on American History. Me — I just might enjoy this..."

## 4. Vows of Silence?

Jack bought a scone — as recommended — and handed a pound to the young nun looking after the baked goods table.

She went to get change.

“No, keep it,” Jack said. “All for a good cause, right?”

The young nun smiled, her round face framed by her starched habit. He thought of the tough life these nuns live, what they needed to give up.

He had to wonder ... *what brings them here, to do this?*

“Thank you, sir,” the nun said.

Jack nodded. “Say, I heard about what happened to your Father Byrne, Sister...”

A cloud seemed to pass over the nun’s face.

“Sister Julianne. And yes, it has been quite a shock to the community.”

“I imagine. Seemed like he was healthy, as well. A runner...”

A young boy ran up with coins in his hand.

Julianne leaned down to him. “Back for more, I see?”

The boy grinned and nodded.

“Very well, though at this rate you’ll soon be clearing me out soon!”

The boy grabbed another scone, planted it in his mouth, and dashed away as if he had stolen it

“Got to love the young ones,” she said. “So innocent. The world hasn’t made its mark yet...”

*Innocent*, Jack thought.

*Interesting choice of word.*

“You knew Father Byrne well?”

She shook her head. "No, I mean, I attended his masses, and he liked telling his jokes. Such a traveller, with all that running."

"Fit," Jack said, pointing out the obvious.

"But I suppose..." she hesitated, "not his heart."

Jack had to wonder.

Did Sister Julianne know what Jack and Sarah had been doing in the village, the detecting?

Or did she just want to talk?

"I heard about that. Still, a runner like that. Not sure it makes sense, hmm Sister?"

Sister Julianne became quiet as if she realised she was talking about one of the church's own with someone who was — in fact — a stranger.

But before he moved on, Jack had another question.

"Sister, I assume you have someone here in charge, a—"

"Mother Superior. Sister Mary Bryan."

"Right. We had one back in my New York school as well." He leaned in. "She used to scare the living daylights out of me."

That brought a smile.

"And if I wanted to find her?"

"Over by the raffle table. She can see all the stalls from there."

Jack smiled. "Under her watchful eyes? Thanks — I may have to come back for some more scones. They are ... addictive."

Sister Julianne blushed.

And Jack headed over to the raffle table.

\*

Sarah thought that this was a bit ... odd.

The fête going on just as normal, under a brilliant spring sky. And yet, someone near and dear to the convent had died just days before.



Could be simply because they really needed the money — times were hard here, she could tell, from the main house in need of repair, the cracked tarmac of the driveway, damaged roofs, and the windows that appeared to be missing curtains.

Still — she wasn't sure exactly what she was supposed to be doing here.

Just stop someone, ask them about the departed priest? She hoped Jack was having better luck.

Which is when she felt a strong tug on her sleeve.

"Mum!" Daniel behind her.

He wore a sprinkling of white powder on his upper lip.

"Doughnut?" she asked.

"Just one. But Mum, I've been doing what Jack said, walking around listening really well."

*Oh no*, she thought. *Jack's created a monster. My very own Sherlock Holmes Junior.*

"Yes, and...?"

Daniel leaned close, now conspiratorial.

"There's not just nuns here, Mum."

"Right, Daniel everyone is invited to the fête."

"No, I mean living here. At the convent. There are ordinary people too. I heard one of them talking to one of the nuns. Talking about their retreat, now that the priest was dead. See—" Daniel pointed. "Over there, that woman in jeans. She's living here."

Sarah quickly reached out and gently pushed Daniel's incriminating finger point down.

"Don't point, Daniel. Well, I told you that this place is also a retreat house, as well. A place to pray, meditate. So I'm not surprised—"

"But if there are ordinary people here, then what if one of *them* is the murderer?"

*God. At least he's whispering*, Sarah thought.

"Daniel, we don't know—"

"And maybe there are others here..."