

Matthew Costello

Neil Richards

CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

Secret Santa



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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.

About the Book

Bill Vokes has played Santa at the children's Christmas show for years. But with the show just hours away, he vanishes with no explanation. The whole village is baffled. Did something bad happen to loveable Bill: upstanding citizen, churchgoer, life and soul of the party and the holiday season?

Jack and Sarah are on the case — and soon discover there are secrets about this Santa that no one could have imagined ...

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 three 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 ...

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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.