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Neil Richards

CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

The Gentleman Vanishes



“My brother Theo,” said Eve, going to a tasselled rope by the fireplace and pulling on it. “He has issues with alcohol.”

The man ignored the crack.

“Theophilus,” he said, going not to Jack, but first to Sarah, taking her hand and stepping just a tad too close. “A pleasure. I assume you’re the brains of this little detecting partnership?”

Then he dropped her hand and turned to Jack.

“And you — must be the muscle?” he said, approaching close as if to inspect.

“Me?” said Jack staring back at him. “Oh, I’m a pussycat.”

“Best not get on the wrong side of Jack,” said Sarah. “He used to be a detective in New York.”

“Gosh!” said Theophilus. “A real life *Noo Yoork cop*, here at Mandeville Towers. *Well how ’bout that?*”

Jack smiled politely at the goofy American accent. For a second he thought Theophilus was actually going to squeeze his arm — but then Eve interrupted.

“Oh, for goodness sake Theo! We’re here to find Daddy, not play silly games.”

Jack watched Theo round on his sister.

“I *know*,” said Theo. “I *know*. I’m the one that supposedly bloody lost him, aren’t I? You don’t need to lecture *me* on the mess we’re in. Though why we can’t hire a *proper* detective agency in London, is totally beyond me.”

“We’re not going through all that again,” said Lucinda.

“Damn right we’re not,” said Eve. “And God, Theo, do try not to get too drunk will you — at least not until our guests have gone!”

“Our guests? *Your* guests you mean! Oh, this is too much!”

Jack watched him spin away, fling himself upon one of the sofas and take out his smartphone, swiping the screen dramatically and sighing loudly.

At which point the door opened and a perfectly dressed maid entered carrying the tea tray.

“Ah, perfect timing, Mary,” said Lucinda, then she turned to Jack and Sarah. “Why don’t we sit at the table while Eve and I tell you exactly what happened on the day Daddy disappeared?”

“Good idea,” said Jack, and as they walked to the far table by the window, he saw Sarah roll her eyes discreetly at him, as if to say — welcome to the mad house.

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Sarah put down her pen and notebook and took a sip of tea. “So — just so I know we have this absolutely right — let me run it back to you ...”

Sarah looked at the family as she repeated the story as told, knowing Jack would have his eyes on them as well.

“Last Sunday — the eight-thirty Cotswolds Express. Your father was seated alone in a first-class compartment, as usual. There are witnesses who saw him on the outward journey to Cheltenham. Staff at Cheltenham are adamant that nobody departed the train there.”

A look to Jack to see if he wanted to jump in. But just a nod.

“The train made no stops between Cherringham Junction and Cheltenham — on either leg. And then, when it returned to Cherringham, there was no sign of your father. Police the next day walked the line and searched the fields for the length of the route and found absolutely nothing.”

“Yes,” said Lucinda. “That’s pretty much it.”

“Did the police search the train at the same time?” Jack asked.

“Yes,” said Eve. “And, of course, that morning we went down to the station — and made damn sure that every inch of that train was scoured.”

“And there’s no way Theo might have missed Mr Mandeville at the station when he went to pick him up?”

“I *am* bloody here, you know,” said Theo, looking up from the sofa. “And no I didn’t miss him. He. Did not. Get off the *damn* train!”

“Actually,” said Eve, “none of the staff recall seeing him either. The police told us that the CCTV footage at both Cherringham Junction and at Cheltenham was checked. Not a sign. Nothing.”

“If you don’t mind me asking — how sound of mind is your father? Could he have been confused perhaps? Got lost at the station? Drifted off somewhere, caught up in the crowd? CCTV is never infallible ...”

“Daddy isn’t well,” said Eve. “But he has a physical condition, not a mental one.”

“What exactly is wrong with him?”

Sarah saw the two women glance at each other.

“Sorry,” she said. “I don’t mean to be intrusive — but whatever it is, we need to know.”

“I understand,” said Lucinda. “Here’s the thing — Daddy was ill for over a year before we finally got to grips with the problem. The local doctor — Finch — do you know him?”

“I do,” said Sarah. “He’s been our family doctor for years.”

“Hmm,” said Eve, with what sounded to Sarah like a tone of dismissal.

“Was there a problem with Doctor Finch?”

“Was there ever,” said Eve. “Finch may be perfectly adequate, that is if you present him with measles or a sore thumb. But anything more serious than that? Let me tell you, you’re better off using Google.”

“Ah,” said Sarah. “I’m sorry to hear that.”

But then she thought, that description of Finch was ... *surprising*. Finch was a doctor she trusted and respected. Not someone she assumed would miss something.

“What were your father’s symptoms?” said Jack.

“Aches. Night-time cramps. Muscle loss. Shaking. Weakness. Headaches — very debilitating headaches ...”

“At first, he played them down,” said Eve. “Stiff upper lip you know. A quality I, for one, happen to admire in people.”

“Finch ran a few tests, couldn’t find anything,” said Lucinda.

“Bloody idiot!” said Theo from the sofa. “I wouldn’t let the bugger treat my donkey let alone a human. If I had a donkey of course. Which I don’t.”

Theo laughed at his own witticism.

Sarah looked over at him. The sisters stared. He turned back to his phone.

Must be lots happening on Facebook today.

“Every time Daddy went out, he became more and more fatigued,” said Eve. “In the end, we got a specialist from Harley Street to come down and see him.”

“Best thing we ever did,” said Lucinda.

“His name?” said Sarah, notebook ready.

“Doctor McTavish,” said Eve. “A week later — finally! — we had a diagnosis. Amyotrophic sclerosis.”

“Ah,” said Sarah. “I’m not sure I’ve heard of it ...”

“Hardly surprising,” said Eve. “It’s a neurological condition.”

“Requires absolute care and rest,” said Lucinda.

“Unfortunately — progressive,” said Eve.

“Incurable,” said Lucinda.

Sarah looked at the two women, their brusque matter-of-factness momentarily gone. They both seemed on the verge of tears.

But — Sarah noted — they didn’t cry.

A pause. Then:

“Am I right assuming it was unlikely your father could have gotten off the train on his own?”

“Not just unlikely,” said Eve. “Impossible. He could barely walk more than twenty yards without Seddon holding him up.”

“Seddon?”

“The butler,” said Eve. “Anyway, Daddy certainly couldn’t open a train door without help.”

“Train window?” said Sarah.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” said Theo. “Do we have to spell it out for you? Daddy was bloody crippled — don’t you understand? Broken! Bugged! Kaput!”

Sarah looked across at Jack, then back at Lucinda and Eve. Lucinda — her face in her hands.

“I understand how distressing this is for you all,” she said, “but, I wonder, could you show us your father’s room?”

“What?” said Eve, eyes wide. “What on earth for?”

“It’s pretty standard procedure,” said Jack. “Gives us a different angle on him. Maybe there’s some clues in there — as to what might have happened?”

“All those notes you took ... and you don’t have any ideas yet?” said Lucinda.

“None at all,” said Jack. Sarah nodded as well.

“No surprise there,” said Theo, not looking up from his phone. “New York detective ... ha!”

“For God’s sake, Theo — shut up will you?” said Eve, then she turned to Jack and Sarah.

“Once again — my apologies for my inebriated imbecile of a brother.”

Sarah forced a smile.

“If you don’t mind ... Bernard’s room? And perhaps some of the rest of the house?”

Sarah saw Eve place her hand on her sister’s shoulder. Lucinda looked up and nodded.

“Yes, yes — of course,” she said, getting up from the table. “Follow me.”

Sarah got up, Jack following. As Eve joined them, she turned to her brother:

“We don’t need *you*, Theo. Why don’t you stay here and try to sober up? Hmm?”

“Whatever,” said Theo, reaching for his tumbler of whisky and draining it.

Eve shook her head and marched over to the door.

Sarah caught Jack’s eye — then they waited for Lucinda and followed the two sisters out into the hall.

Wondering what surprises the rest of the house had in store.

5. A Room with a View

The four of them walked up one side of the enormous curved double staircase — Jack and Lucinda side by side, Eve and Sarah a couple of steps behind.

Jack might not have any idea what had happened to old Bernard — but he certainly was enjoying seeing this mansion.

Quite the palace ...

He took in the line of tall ancestral portraits that spiralled up to the first floor.

“Looks like the Mandevilles have been here quite a while,” he said.

“The house was built in the 1870s,” said Lucinda. “Before that, the family had a large estate near Oxford.”

“I hope this isn’t too personal a question,” said Sarah, “but is Mrs Mandeville ...?”

“Our mother passed away two years ago,” said Eve.

“I’m sorry,” said Sarah.

Jack waited for more information from the two sisters but none came.

When they reached the top of the stairs, some instinct made Jack look down at the marble hall below.

Seddon, the butler, stood staring up at him, a white hand towel over one arm. As Jack watched, the maid Mary appeared from a side room, stepped close to Seddon and started talking to him.

He saw Seddon muttering something — then Mary stopped abruptly and looked up at Jack.

Another word from Seddon — and she scurried away.

Interesting, thought Jack. Something going on there between those two ...

“This way,” said Lucinda.

Jack turned. A long, carpeted corridor led away from each side of the stairs, ending in tall stained-glass windows at each far end.

Lucinda and Eve were already heading off down the right-hand corridor.

He hurried to join Sarah, then followed and caught them up half way down the corridor.

“Excuse me. Sorry, but right now — no other family members live in the house apart from you two and Theo?” he said, as they passed door after door, ancestor after ancestor, down the long corridor.

“No,” said Eve.

“What about staff?” he said.

“We have a gardener and one or two kitchen staff — they all live in Cherringham,” said Lucinda.

“What about Seddon and Mary?”