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CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

Box Set: Episodes 1-12



4. Jack and Sarah

Jack leaned back into his deckchair and puffed gently on a Cohiba — a real Havana — and watched the sun drift gently down behind the distant village.

These moments, on warm summer evenings like this, were perfection.

Ahead of him the Thames flowed, still deep and broad enough to attract little cruisers, kayaks and rowing boats out for an evening spin.

At his side on the warm wooden deck, Riley snoozed, as if he knew he was off duty. And on the other side, on the little card table, was a vodka martini, the clear liquid catching the light of the setting sun.

The silvery shaker sweated on the table next to it,

Back at Marty's Bar in Sheepshead Bay, Jack would tell the owner how to make the perfect martini. For Marty, the "bat and ball" of a shot and beer chaser was about as complicated as it got.

Katherine had loved her martini as well. All the way until the very end.

He took a sip. *To Katherine*, he thought.

On his lap sat the little box of floaters, twine, feathers and hair from which he was about to make his first ever fishing lure. He might be over fifty but there were still things he was learning, and fly-fishing was one of them.

He breathed out, satisfied. Perfection? Maybe, if he hadn't been alone, though he swore to himself that he had to stop thinking about the past and the future he had lost.

And every day it got easier.

"Excuse me!"

The voice was loud — louder than it needed to be on a quiet evening like this — and somehow impatient. Riley stood up, ears perked, to see what the fuss was.

Jack turned awkwardly in his deckchair to look at the river bank. A woman stood by his gangplank watching him. She was in her late thirties, medium height — about five-seven — maybe a hundred-forty pounds, slim, blue eyes, blonde spiky hair — kind of an elfin cut.

White blouse, long blue shorts, trainers. In good shape, a runner, maybe, from the look of her legs and waist. Professional, business-like.

You can stop working as a detective, but you will always be one, he thought. Still liked to get the details straight. Every picture — and every profile — tells a story.

"Can I come aboard?"

Jack considered this.

"No. Sorry."

The woman looked taken aback — as if he'd just insulted her.

"Oh. I see."

Jack watched her as she considered her next approach. Since he had never signed up to any of the English rituals of politeness, antiquated manners and codes of behaviour, he had kind of got used to this reaction.

“I’m terribly sorry” she said. “What I mean is — do you have a moment?”

“How can I help you?” He took a puff on the cigar, its silvery ash growing.

“See ... something happened, on the river. Maybe you saw all the police, and I wondered if you were on your boat last night?”

“I might have been.” He forced a smile. “You doing some undercover work, officer?”

She smiled back at that, and brushed at her hair. “No. Sorry. It’s just, I wondered if you heard anything?”

Jack thought for a minute.

“No. Now, if you don’t mind, miss—”

“I mean — heard anything unusual. You know?”

“I did say, ‘No’.”

“So you didn’t hear anything at all?”

“The answer’s still the same — no.”

“You see, the thing is, a friend of mine — well, the police say she fell in the river and drowned, you see, in the night, just down there.”

“Uh-huh. I saw the police lights. And — to be honest — wasn’t terribly interested.”

Another puff, followed by a last sip of his martini. Time for another.

“In the weir. Someone found her, caught there. Dead. Just this morning. My friend Sammi. So anyway, I was walking along here, thinking that if she fell in it might have been up here somewhere. So that’s why I wondered if maybe you heard something in the night?”

The woman smiled as if that might make him more interested in helping her. He almost felt sorry for her. How could she know he was done with all of that?

Totally done.

“No. Not a thing.”

The woman frowned, and chewed her lower lip.

She was obviously disappointed — but there wasn’t anything he could do about it. And anyway, the last thing he wanted right now was a conversation about some poor girl who had fallen into the river and drowned. He wanted to get back to making his fly and watching his sunset, which was almost over.

But the woman lingered.

Persistent indeed. Then:

“Fine,” she said. “Okay. And thanks for your help.”

Persistent *and* sarcastic. “No problem.”

She took a step away then stopped, and turned. “Oh I can see that. Not a problem — for *you*. Anyway, if you happen to remember anything perhaps you could tell the police? That would be very ... good of you. Think you could do that?”

“Sure. I’ll remember that.”

She started to walk away, and Jack swore he could hear, so faintly, *bloody Yank*.

Haven’t done much to improve our “special friends” view of Americans.

Riley watched her go, then came back to Jack’s side and lay down again.

Jack settled back in his deckchair. He picked up the shaker, poured, and took a long sip of now melted ice water, then stared at the deep, flowing water of the Thames as it slid by his boat.

Then he took up the little roll of twine and a tiny red feather, and started to lay out the hooks on the card table.

So they reckoned the body had fallen in the river up here? And suddenly he wasn't thinking about the fly, the cigar, or even the sun slipping below the horizon.

Well that didn't make any sense. No sense at all.

5. The Day After

Sarah stared at the artwork from the Bassett and Son Funeral Directors marketing manager and shut her eyes. Was this really what her life had become? This time three years ago she would have been wowing clients in Cannes with her ideas on kickass social media campaigning.

Now it was ‘Buy One Funeral, Get One Free’. Was she really going to have to explain why that worked with pizzas but maybe not with Death?

And God, did her head hurt.

The kids had burned their tea last night, setting off the fire alarm. In the fuss she’d forgotten to eat. Then she’d drunk a whole bottle of red wine on her own — memories of Sammi swirling — and fallen asleep on the sofa in front of a stupid chick flick that she always watched and always hated.

Grace put a coffee on her desk and smiled.

“Oh, bless you. What would I do without you, Grace?”

“You’d probably make a profit — a tiny one -- but I’m not complaining.”

Sarah laughed. Grace was a total find — eighteen, hard-working, smart and ambitious. Oh, to be eighteen again.

Sarah put her head on her arms on the desk. Maybe a power nap would help. The phone rang — Grace picked it up and put it through to Sarah’s extension.

“Some guy for you. Says it’s important.”

Sarah mimed — *who is it?*

“Dunno. Sounds American, I think.”

Sarah frowned. There was only one American she’d talked to recently and she didn’t want to spend another second in his company. Surely it wasn’t him.

She picked up the phone.

“Sarah Edwards.”

The voice on the other end didn’t miss a beat.

“Your friend Sammi. Been thinking. This notion she fell in upriver. That your idea — or the police?”

Sarah didn’t have time to think, let alone be annoyed. The American from the boat — what was this about?

“It’s what the police say. The evidence, I guess.”

“Well the police are wrong. You want to know what really happened to her?”

“I don’t know what you mean ...” said Sarah.

“I can’t really say it clearer. Do you want to know how your friend Sammi died?”

What had happened to the hostile Yank?

“Yes. Yes, of course.”

“Good, because I doubt that she fell in.”

“That’s what I was thinking as well.”

“Ok — free now? I’ll see you at the weir in ten.”

“But ...” The line went dead. Sarah stared into space, then picked up her handbag and phone.

“Grace — I’m going out for a bit. “ Then on impulse she added, “And if I don’t come back — tell the police I went to see that American living down on the river. Okay?”

“The American? What’s happening Sarah?”

But Sarah had gone.

She parked the car in the weir car park.

The police tape had gone. Nobody would ever guess that a body had been pulled out of the frothing water just twenty-four hours earlier. Village life and the villagers all ready to move on, nice and tidy.

She looked up at the sound of an outboard motor. A boat was approaching — and in it sat the rude American she’d had the misfortune of meeting the day before. Sitting next to him was his brown Springer Spaniel.

At least the dog looked friendly.

The tall American looked almost comical in the little boat. Deeply tanned, in a faded white polo shirt and jeans, he had a confident, self-contained look, as if he truly didn’t care what the world thought of him.

His salt-and-pepper hair was tousled, like a boy who’s not seen a mirror for a whole summer. The stubble on his face from the night before had vanished.

And as the boat got closer she could see that the jeans — though faded — were pressed.

He nodded to her, and cut the outboard, easing the boat against the jetty. He threw up a rope up — surprising her — but she caught it and wrapped it once round a bollard.

“Hop in,” he said, looking up at her. “Riley — make some space there.”

The dog shuffled up to the bow of the little boat. Sarah stayed where she was.

“What’s up — you scared of the water?” he said. “Or is it the boat?”

“It’s not the boat I’m worried about. It’s *you*. Were you a boatman back in the States?”

“Boatman?” He laughed. “It’s okay. I know what I’m doing. More or less. Done a lot of fishing off Breezy in my day.”

“Breezy? Wherever the hell that is. So — you want me to get in your boat when I don’t even know your name?”

“Jack Brennan.”

“And you are here to ...? You could be anybody. The friendly local serial killer — you name it.”

“Well, I’m not. I used to be a cop, a NYPD detective actually. If you’re nice hey I’ll even show you the badge. I got awards, citations — all that jazz. You can check me out. But right now, I want to show you something important about your pal Sammi.”