

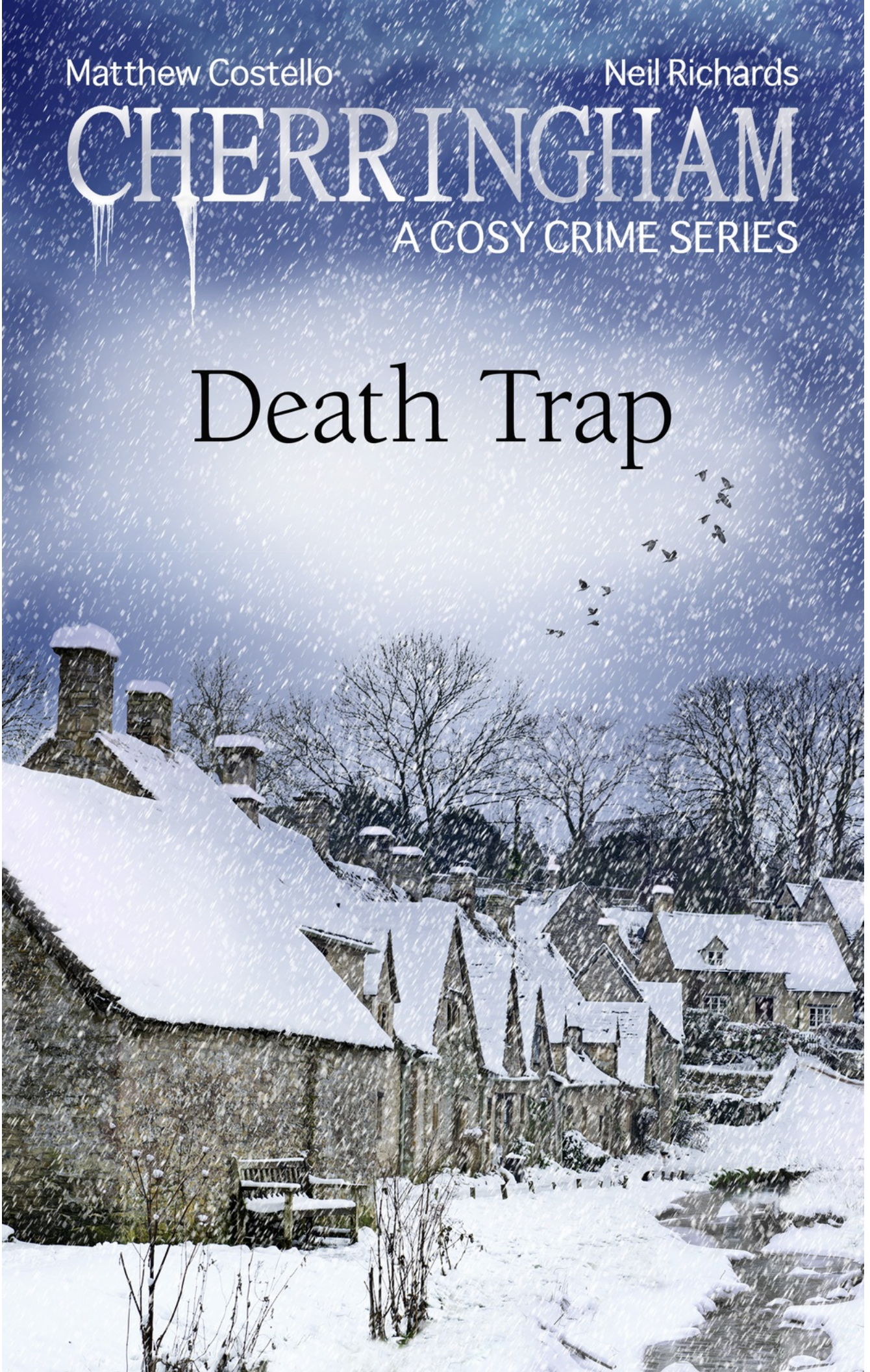
Matthew Costello

Neil Richards

# CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

## Death Trap



## 5. A Winter's Tale

Jack zipped his puffa jacket tight, pumped the fuel line on the little outboard motor and then pulled again on the cord.

The engine coughed into life. He unhooked the painter line, pushed off from *The Grey Goose* and then headed downriver.

He settled back into the stern of the little boat — ski-gloves on, woolly hat pulled down tight against the bitter cold — and looked around him.

What an amazing morning. In the handful of years he'd lived in Cherringham, he'd never seen snowfall like it.

Drifts four or five feet thick on either bank. The line of houseboats like a Christmas scene — all with more than a foot of snow on their decks and roofs, wood smoke trickling from stoves, and only the sound of a couple of generators as the giveaway that this wasn't the nineteenth century.

Up on the hill, Cherringham village blurred into the snow of the meadows and woods — the warm stone of the buildings barely peeping out from under the thick overnight blanket.

On this morning after such a storm — a bright blue sky. But in the far distance, over Winsham Hill, he could see a band of thick grey cloud, lingering.

*As if waiting.*

*Not a good sign — surely more snow to come.*

Beside the boat, the deep waters of the Thames flowed icy and black. Any colder and it would surely freeze.

A frozen Thames — how many times had that ever happened?

But right now, the river was the best way — maybe the only way — of reaching Sarah's house, half a mile the other side of Cherringham Bridge.

Her home was just outside the village centre, but after a storm like this, definitely isolated.

She'd called him after breakfast.

Not to check up on him, she had said. Though she always worried about how cold it could get on the boat. Just to "make sure all was okay".

And to talk about something.

He'd agreed to pop over.

"So, maybe get the kettle on, if you'd be so kind ..."

What she was about to discuss with him was apparently best done in person.

\*

Sarah watched from the kitchen as Jack tied up the boat at the little jetty at the bottom of her garden and trudged up through the thick snow towards her cottage.

“See?” said her father, Michael, at her side. “No way you two could walk up to the village today. Worse than ’63, isn’t it?”

“Um, I missed that by twenty years, Dad, remember?” said Sarah, smiling.

“Hmm? Oh yes, right. I suppose you did. Well, it was bad, I can tell you. Fact, I do believe the river froze that year and your mother and I got the skates out of the loft ...”

Jack reached the house, and Sarah opened the French windows to let him in, a blast of cold air sucking the warmth from the kitchen.

Her spaniel Digby jumped up and down in excitement at seeing Jack.

“Digby!” she said. “Calm down!”

“Oh, it’s all right, Sarah,” said Jack, banging his boots on the sill to get rid of the snow, then giving Digby a welcome pat. “Good to see you, boy! Oh — hey Michael — wasn’t expecting you to be here.”

“Jack,” said Sarah’s dad, shaking his hand as he stepped into the kitchen and Sarah shut the door quickly.

While Jack took off his jacket, she went to the stove and poured him a mug of coffee, handed it to him. Then she and her father waited as Jack took a good swig.

“Oh, that’s better,” he said.

“Damn cold out there on the water, I imagine, hmm?” said Michael.

“Oh yes,” said Jack, hands around the hot mug. “But a normal winter’s day back in Sheepshead Bay. The fishing boats would always go out, storm or no storm.”

Another sip. “So, what’s with the urgent summons this morning?”

Sarah looked at her father, who nodded.

“Been a bit of an incident up in the village,” he said. “Man found dead. In the snow.”

“Right. Heard the helicopter go over first thing,” said Jack. “Air ambulance, hmm?”

“Village is completely cut off,” said Michael. “Only way in or out — probably for the next couple of days, given how much more snow they say is coming our way.”

“Saw the clouds. Not sure we need any more snow. And I’m guessing they took the body away?” said Jack.

Sarah nodded.

“Who was it?”

“Chap called Edward Townes,” said Michael.

“The writer? Local guy?”

“That’s the one. You know him, Jack?”

“Nope. Not personally. Read a couple of his books. Kinda swashbucklers. Old-fashioned. But perfect for a day like today, sat in front of a stove, mug of coffee ... maybe something stronger.”

“Dad here knew him from the Cherringham Historical Society,” said Sarah.

“Ah,” said Jack. “A friend? I’m sorry, Michael.”

“It’s okay, Jack. Edward ... more of an acquaintance than a close friend. Keen on history, tried to get things right. I liked that.”

“Sure,” said Jack, nodding. “So, is there something you’d like me — us — to do?”

Sarah caught Jack's eye, decided to hurry things along a bit.

"Here's the thing. Edward wasn't just found lying in the snow. He was in the old village stocks."

Jack put down his coffee mug.

*Now that got his attention,* thought Sarah.

"You're kidding me? You mean head, hands ... in the thing itself?"

"Apparently," said Michael. "I got a call from Tony Standish first thing. He was Edward's lawyer. Known him for years. Sounded quite upset." Michael took a breath. "You know Tony. Bigger heart than most lawyers, that's for sure."

Sarah saw Jack nod. Tony had helped on many a case in the past.

"I'm sure," said Jack. "Those stocks — they can't be more than a hundred yards from Tony's house, hmm?"

"Just near the village hall," said Sarah.

"Any idea what happened?" said Jack.

Michael shrugged. "Here's the thing. There was a bit of a party for Edward up in the village last night. At Astley Hall. To launch his latest book. But Tony said Townes left early — more than a little worse for wear apparently. In the middle of the blizzard."

"And, Jack, some kids found him around seven this morning, on their way to go sledging."

"Poor kids. That will be something they won't forget. And you say he was actually *in* the stocks?" said Jack. "You think it was some kind of prank that went wrong? Pretty easy to get out of them."

"Prank? That's what Alan Rivers thinks," said Sarah. "Or maybe Townes was so, well, inebriated he put himself in the stocks — got stuck somehow. And well, the doctor they flew in said it looked like hypothermia and a heart attack."

Sarah sensed a shift in Jack. More than curious.

She could always sense when he turned ... suspicious.

"Alan's not chasing it up?" said Jack.

"With this snow? Said he's got a ton of urgent tasks this morning," said Sarah. "And he's got no backup. No one who could get here anyway."

"Course they'll do a post-mortem back in Oxford," said Michael, raising his eyebrows. "In the meantime, and this is off the record, he did say he was happy for us to look around."

Sarah felt Jack look right at her. Jack had learned to trust her instincts as well. And that always made her feel good.

Jack turned back to her father. "Michael — you don't think it was so innocent?"

A hesitation. Her father clearly uncomfortable with what he was about to say.

"No, I don't," said Michael. "And nor does Tony. Edward Townes didn't play 'pranks'. He played around — if you know what I mean. Drank more than a bit. But silly games — definitely not his style. Especially with that storm raging."

"Okay. Then what do you think happened?" said Jack.

"'Fraid I don't," he smiled at his next words, "have a clue."

"And yet you and Tony think it's suspicious?"

“Exactly. Knowing Edward, and all. And, well, you can guess what this little meeting is about. We’d like you and Sarah to dig into this a bit — before all the witnesses disappear back to London.”

Michael took a deep breath.

“There’s not a lot of time. But there *is* an opportunity, with everyone here, if you and Sarah move fast.”

“You mean everybody from the party — they’re still around?” said Jack.

“Nobody in or out of the village all night, Jack,” said Sarah. “Most at the Bell Hotel, sleeping everywhere. We won’t get a better chance to find out what happened.”

She watched him pick up his coffee, take a mouthful. *Thinking.*

“Okay,” he said. “Yeah. We need to see everyone — and fast. But, how are *we* going to get to the village? In fact — Michael — how did *you* even get here?”

“Aha, well,” said Michael, picking up his car keys from the kitchen table and heading towards the hallway. “That’s something I *do* have under control. Come and see.”

Sarah watched as Jack — giving her a wink — followed her father.

Michael opened the front door and there, in the little driveway at the front of her cottage, stood his new pride and joy.

“Land Rover Defender,” said Michael. “My new toy. Or rather — my second-hand toy. Snow chains — the works.”

Sarah watched Jack appraising the vehicle.

“That’ll get us up to the village?” he said.

“If anything can, this will, no problem,” said Michael.

Jack shook his head. “Love your confidence, Michael.”

Then he turned to Sarah.

“So — what are we waiting for?” said Jack, draining his mug.

\*

Jack sat in the back of the Land Rover, looking out through the misted windows as Michael drove slowly up Cherringham High Street.

There’d been heavy snow here once — a few years back — when he and Sarah had helped find a man missing from a care home.

But nothing like this.

More like his memories as a child of upstate New York, staying with his grandparents, sledging on their farm.

Far as he could see, no snow plough had reached the village, and only a couple of other tyre tracks lay on the road, already filled in with snow. He guessed only farmers’ tractors had risked the snow and ice.

*But so far, Michael’s Land Rover ... doing quite all right!*

And as he drove slowly through the village, it was an amazing sight they passed. Massive snowdrifts came up to the lower windows of the terraced cottages lining either side of the street.

*Such a rare snow storm for Cherringham.*

Apart from a few kids bravely playing snowballs, there was nobody out this morning. One kid studied the Land Rover as it passed as if gauging whether to pelt it with a snowball.

*Something kids did everywhere.*

But the kid hesitated. And just watched the lone vehicle drive by.

As they came past the Cherringham Village Hall and into the square, he saw that even Huffington's — the coffee shop — was closed.

"Ah, there's Tony," said Michael, nodding to where Jack could see a man in an old duffle coat and scarf standing by a tall drift, rubbing gloved hands together.

Not a morning to stand outside!

Michael parked, and, as they all climbed out, Tony walked over.

"Perfect timing," he said, briskly shaking everybody's hands. "Jack — Sarah — can't tell you how grateful I am, you coming this morning, especially in conditions like this."

"Not at all," said Sarah. "We want to help."

"Totally," said Jack. "Bad business, hmm? How about we go we see where it happened?"

"Of course." And Tony led the way across the square to where Jack saw a tangle of yellow police tape — surrounding the medieval stocks.

A must-see on the tourist map of Cherringham.

*And now a place of death.*