

“Excuse me,” Tony said, in a voice that might possibly have garnered attention in a courtroom, but not here.

Sarah saw Tony look at the other council members with an expression of “what do I do?”

He should use a megaphone, thought Sarah. Or at least a big gavel to rap on a solid chunk of wood.

Tony tried to raise his voice.

“If we *could* have everyone’s attention *now* — please!”

Not bad, thought Sarah.

And finally, the noisy crowd stilled.

Tony looked surprised that he was able to effect such a change. Now, with their grumbling attention, he could proceed.

But as he did, Sarah shot another look at Chloe, sitting close to the “Save Our Hall” group’s organiser, Syms.

Handsome, charismatic, and a good ten years older than Chloe.

All things that made Sarah uneasy.

Even though she kept reminding herself that, after Chloe's breakup with her French fiancé Pascal, well, her little girl *wasn't* so little anymore. She was an adult. And now, back in the village where she grew up, she was clearly showing it.

For now though, the "Save Our Hall" group — as tense as they looked, perched on their folding chairs, ready to spring into quick action — remained quiet.

Tony moved to the business at hand.

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"This is — as I'm sure you all know — *not* a meeting *proper* of the Parish Council. It is an informal *hearing*. A chance for us *all* in the village to learn more about the umm ... *challenging* plans for this, our very own and dearly-loved Village Hall. And for you to

umm ... share your views with your council members before our crucial vote on the proposals at the formal meeting on Friday.”

At this, Jack saw Tony smile benevolently at the audience packing the room, more like a vicar at a Christmas service than a council leader in a charged political meeting.

But if he was expecting applause, he didn't get any.

Just mutterings from the various groups across the room. The tension in the room — thick.

“Ahem, yes,” said Tony, frowning. “Um, so in order that we might hear about the proposal — as it were — from the ‘horse’s mouth’, we have with us this evening Mr Ted Ross of Ross Leisure Holdings, who will talk us through his company’s plans.”

Jack was surprised that Tony, used to the civility and restraint of a courtroom, got that far into his opening.

On the word “plans”, the “Save Our Hall” group immediately sprung to their feet.

They turned and faced the sea of people looking at them.

“Save our hall! Save our hall!”

On cue, the signs were hoisted up — that simple message scrawled in big black letters.

Some in the audience joined in, Jack could hear. Others yelled out for the group to *sit down*.

The crowd divided. On both sides, Jack saw faces he knew from the village — many of them good friends.

Tony meanwhile, was a rabbit in the headlights.

He must have expected this, Jack thought.

Jack leaned into Sarah.

“Think it’s going to be a tough night.”

“Poor Tony,” she said.

“And your dad too,” Jack said, nodding to the podium where he could see Sarah’s father

looking out rather nervously at the crowd.

Michael Edwards, Jack knew, had agreed — *pro temp*s — to fill a sudden vacancy left when one of the older council members decided that it was — hello! — time to make the big move to the Costa del Sol.

Sarah's dad probably didn't bargain for this, Jack thought.

“Yes. And the thing is, I'm not sure how he feels about the issue. Money in the village is so tight — they've pretty much had to freeze spending.”

“Which is why you're 'pro' the development, I guess?” said Jack.

“Me?” said Sarah. “God, I don't *know*. I'm hoping I'll be clearer after tonight.”

“I wouldn't count on it,” said Jack, smiling.

The chants of protest went on for a few minutes until, like a conductor, Ralph Syms turned to his cadre of protestors and held up his hands.