

# A CHRISTMAS CAROL MURDER

## by Heather Redmond

### EXCERPT

#### Chapter One

*Hatfield, Hertfordshire, England, December 1, 1835*

They hadn't found the body yet. Old Sal was surely dead. Feathers had caught on candles, igniting the blaze. Maybe a yipping dog had some part in the fiery disaster. The marchioness's advanced age had surely contributed to the fatal misadventure. The marquess, her son, had nearly killed himself in a futile attempt to rescue her.

Charles Dickens's cough forced him to set down his pen. Ink dribbled from it, obscuring his last few words. He found it hard to stay seated, so he pushed his hands through his unruly dark hair, as if pressing on his sooty scalp would keep him on the pub bench. Only three hours of sleep before being dragged from his bed to make the twenty-three-mile journey from his rooms at Furnival's Inn in London that morning. Nervous energy alone kept his pen moving.

He rubbed his eyes, gritty with grime and fumes from the fire, both the massive one that had destroyed the still-smoking ruins of Hatfield House's west wing, and the much smaller one here in the taproom at Eight Bells Pub. Some light came in from out of doors, courtesy of a quarter-full moon, but the windows were small.

He called for a candle and kept working.

Putting the messy slip of paper aside, he dipped his pen in his inkwell. Starting again, he recalled the devastation of the scene, the remains of once noble apartments now reduced to rubble and ash. He filled one slip after another, describing the scene, the architecture, the theories.

When he ran out of words, he let his memories of massive oaken Tudor beams, half-burned; heaps of bricks; lumps of metal; buckets of water; black-faced people; and unending, catch-in-your-throat soot—all that remained of forty-five rooms of storied, aristocratic things—fade away.

The ringing of St. Ethelreda's venerable church bells returned him to the moment. Had it gone eight p.m. already? Hooves and the wheels of a cart sounded in the narrow street outside. A couple of men passed by, discussing the fire. The door of the pub opened and closed, allowing the flash from a lantern to illuminate the dark room.

Charles noted the attempts to make the room festive. Greenery had been tacked to the blackened beams and draped around the mantelpiece. He thought he saw mistletoe mischievously strung up in that recess to the left of the great fireplace.

Next to it, a man slumped in a chair. He wore a tired, stained old surtout and plaid trousers with a mended tear in the knee. Next to him waited an empty stool, ready for an adoring wife or small child to sit there.

Charles stacked his completed slips of paper on the weathered table and took a fresh one from his pile, the pathos of that empty seat tugging at him. He began to write something new, imagining that last year at this time, a sweet little girl sat on the stool, looking up at the old, beaten man. How different his demeanor would have been then!

Charles drew a line between his musings and the lower blank part of the page. His pen flew again, as he made the note. *Add a bit of melancholy to my Christmas festivities sketch.*

Unbidden, the serving maid delivered another glass of hot rum and water. The maid, maybe fourteen, with wide, apple-colored cheeks and a weak chin, gave him a sideways glance full of suspicion.

He grinned at her and pointed to his face. "Soot from the fire. I'm sending a report back to London." His hand brushed against his shoulder, puffing soot from his black tailcoat into his eyes.

She pressed her lips together and marched away, her little body taut with indignation. Well, she didn't understand he had to send his report by the next mail coach. Not much time for sentiment or bathing just yet.

By the time he finished his notes, the drinks hadn't done their job of settling his cough. He knew it would worsen if he lay down so he opened his writing desk to pull out a piece of notepaper.

*Dearest Fanny, he wrote to his sister. Where to begin? I wrote to my betrothed this morning so I thought I should send my news to someone else. Was ever a man so busy? I am editing my upcoming book. Did I tell you it will be called Sketches by Boz? I have to turn in the revisions for volumes one and two by the end of the year, in advance of the first volume releasing February eighth. I am also working on an operetta, thanks to that conversation with your friend John Hullab, in my head, at least. I hope to actually commence writing it as soon as my revisions are done.*

*I remember all the happy Christmas memories of our earliest childhood, the games and songs and ghost stories when we lived in Portsmouth, and hope to re-create them in my own sweet home next year. How merry it will be to share Christmas with the Hogarths! To think that you, Leticia, and I will all be settled soon with our life's companions. Soon we will know the sounds of happy children at our hearths and celebrate all the joys that the season should contain in our private chambers.*

He set down his pen without signing the letter. It might be that he would have more to add before returning to London. He had no idea how long it would be before they recovered the Marchioness of Salisbury's body, if indeed, anything was left. Restacking his papers, he considered the question of her jewels. Had they burned? At least the priceless volumes in the library all had survived, despite the walls being damaged.

His brain kept churning, so he pulled out his copy of *Sketches by Boz*. He would edit for a while before retiring to his room at the Salisbury Arms. No time for sleep when work had to be done.

Pounding on the chamber door woke him. Daylight scarcely streamed around the tattered edges of the inn's curtain. Charles coughed. He still tasted acrid soot at the back of his throat. Indeed, it coated his tongue.

The pounding came again as he scratched his unshaven chin. Had the *Morning Chronicle* sent someone after him? He'd put his first dispatch from the fire on the mail coach. Pulling his frock coat over his stained shirt, he hopped across the floor while he tugged on his dirty trousers. Soot puffed into the air with each bounce.

"Coming, coming," he called.

The hinges squeaked horribly when he opened the door. On the other side stood a white-capped maid. She wore a dark cloak over her dress. A bundle nestled between her joined arms. Had she been kicking the door?

"Can I help you?" Charles asked, politely enough for the hour. To his right, his boots were gone. He had left them to be polished.

The girl lifted her bundle. The lump of clothes moved.

He frowned, then leaned over the lump. A plump face topped by a thatch of black hair stared back. A baby. Was she hoping for alms? "What's your name, girl?"

"Madge, sir. Madge Porter."

"Well, Madge Porter, I can spare you a few coins for the babe if you'll wait for a moment. Having hard times?"

She stared hard at him. He realized the cloaked figure was the tiny serving maid from the Eight Bells. "He's my sister's child."

"I see. Is she at work?" He laugh-choked. "She's not in here with me, if that's what you're thinking."

Her mouth hung open for a moment. "No, sir, I don't think that."

"What, then?" He glanced around for his overcoat, which had a few coins in a pocket. "What is the babe's name?"

"Timothy, sir." She tightened her weak chin until her pale skin folded in on itself. "Timothy Dickens?" she warbled.

"Dickens?" He took another glance at the babe. Cherry red, pursed lips, and a squashed button of a nose. He didn't see any resemblance to his relatives. His voice sharpened. "Goodness, Madge, what a coincidence."

Her voice strengthened. "I don't think so, sir."

He frowned. The serving maid did not seem to understand his sarcasm. "I've never been to Hatfield before. My family is from Portsmouth. I don't know if your Timothy Dickens is a distant relative of mine or not. Who is his father?"

"She died in the fire."

He tilted his head at the non sequitur. "Who?"

"My sister. She died in the fire. She was in service to old Sarey." Charles coughed, holding the doorjamb to keep himself upright. This was fresh news. "How tragic. I didn't hear that a maid died."

“They haven’t found the bodies.”

“That I know. I’m reporting on the fire, but then, I told you that. Thank you for the information. I’ll pay you for it if you wait a moment for me to find my purse.”

She thrust the bundle toward him. “Timothy is yer son, sir. You need to take him.”

Charles took a step back, waving his hands. “No he isn’t.”

“He’s four months old. It would have been last year, around All Hallow’s Eve. Do you remember the bonfire? She’s prettier than me, my Lizzie. Her hair is lighter, not like yers or mine.”

“Truly, I’ve never been in Hatfield before now,” he said gently. “I work mostly in London.”

She huffed out a little sob. He sensed she was coming to a crescendo, rather like a dramatic piece of music that seemed pastoral at first, then exploded. “I know yer his daddy, sir. I can’t take him. My parents are dead.”

He coughed again. Blasted soot. “I’m sorry. It’s a terrible tragedy. You’re young to be all alone with a baby.”

Her entire being seemed to shudder, then, like the strike of a cobra, she shoved the wriggling bundle into his arms and dashed down the passage.

His arms fluttered like jelly for a moment, as if his bones had fled with the horror of the orphaned child’s appearance, until the baby opened its tiny maw and Charles found his strength.

Then he realized the blankets were damp. Little fatherless, motherless Timothy whoever-he-was had soiled himself. The baby wailed indignantly but his aunt did not return.

Charles completed his reporting duties with one hand while cradling the infant, now dressed in Charles’s cleanest handkerchief and spare shirt, in the other arm. Infant swaddling dried in front of the fire. When Charles had had his body and soul together well enough to chase after little Madge Porter, the proprietor of the Eight Bells had told him she wasn’t due there until the evening.

He’d begged the man for names of any Porter relatives, but the proprietor had been unhelpful. Charles had tripped over to St. Ethelreda’s, still smelling smoke through a nose dripping from the cold. The canon had been of no use and in fact smelled of Hollands, rather than incense. He went to a barbershop, holding the baby while he was shaved, but the attendant refused to offer information.

When the babe began to cry again, he took him to a stable yard and inquired if they had a cow. A stoic stableman took pity on him and sent him to his quiet wife, a new mother herself. She agreed to nurse the child while Charles went to Hatfield House to see if the marchioness had been found yet.

He attempted to gain access to the marquess, still directing the recovery efforts. While waiting, he offered the opinion that they should pull down the remaining walls, which looked likely to kill the intended rescuers more assuredly than anything else in the vast acreage of destruction. Everyone coughed, exhausted, working by rote rather than by intelligence.

After a while, he gave up on the marquess. He interviewed those working in the ruins to get an update for the *Chronicle*, then went to the still-standing east wing of the house to see the

housekeeper. She allowed him into her parlor for half a crown. The room's walls were freshly painted, showing evidence of care taken even with the servant's quarters. A large plain cross decorated the free space on the wall, in between storage cupboards.

The housekeeper had a tall tower of graying hair, stiffened by some sort of grease into a peak over her forehead. Her black gown and white apron looked untouched by the fire. When she spoke, however, he sensed the fatigue and the sadness.

"I have served this family for thirty-seven years," she moaned. "Such a tragedy."

He took some time with her recital of the many treasures of the house, storing up a collection of things he could report on, then let her share some of her favorite history of the house. But he knew he needed to return to gather the baby from the stableman's wife soon.

"Do you have a Lizzie Porter employed here?"

"Yes, sir." The housekeeper gave a little sob and covered her mouth. "In the west wing, sir. I haven't seen her since the fire."

His fingers tingled. "Do you think she died?"

"I don't know, sir. Not a flighty girl. I doubt she'd have run off if she lived."

"Not a flighty girl?" He frowned. "But she has a babe." He was surprised to know she had kept her employment.

The housekeeper shook her head. "She's an eater, sir, but there never was a babe in her belly."

The story became steadily more curious. "Did she take any leave, about four months ago? In July or August?"

The housekeeper picked up her teacup and stared at the leaves remaining at the bottom. "An ague went around the staff in the summer. Some kind of sweating sickness. She had it like all the rest. Went to recuperate with her sister."

"Madge?"

She nodded absently. "Yes, that Madge. Just a slip of a girl. Hasn't come to work here but stayed in the village."

"I've met her. How long was Lizzie with her?"

"Oh, for weeks. She came back pale and thin, but so did a couple of other girls. It killed one of the cook's helpers. Terrible." The housekeeper fingered a thin chain around her neck.

It didn't sound like a group of girls made up the illness to help Lizzie hide her expectations, but the ague had been timed perfectly for her to hide wee Timothy's birth. Who had been the babe's wet nurse?

"Do you know where Madge lives?"

"Above the Eight Bells, sir. Servants' quarters." The housekeeper set down her cup and rose, indicating the interview had ended.

Charles checked around the pub again when he returned to town, just a short walk from the grand, if sadly diminished, house. The quarters for servants were empty. Madge seemed to have gone into hiding. How she could abandon her nephew so carelessly, he did not know, but perhaps she was too devastated by her sister's death to think clearly.

A day later, Charles and the baby were both sunk into exhaustion by the long journey to London. Charles's carriage, the final step of the trip, pulled up in front of a stone building. Across from Mary-le-Bow Church in Cheapside, it had shop space, three floors of apartments, and a half attic on top. He'd had to hire a carriage from the posting inn where the coach had left them on the outskirts of town. While he had no trouble walking many miles, carrying both a valise and an infant was more than he could manage. At least they'd kept each other warm.

He made his awkward way out of the vehicle, coughing as the smoky city air hit his tortured lungs. In his arms, the babe slept peacefully, though he had cried with hunger for part of the long coach journey.

Charles's friends, William and Julie Aga, had taken rooms here, above a chophouse. The building exuded the scent of roasting meats. His stomach grumbled as he went up the stairs to his friends' chambers. William was a reporter, like Charles, though more focused on crime than government.

Charles doubled over, coughing, as he reached the top of the steps. He suspected if he'd had a hand free to apply his handkerchief, it would come away black again.

The door to the Agas' rooms opened before he had the chance to knock.

"Charles!" William exploded. "Good God, man, what a sound to torture my ears."

Charles unbent himself and managed a nod at his friend. William had the air of a successful, fashionable man-about-town, even at his rooms on a Thursday evening. He wore a paisley waistcoat under an old black tailcoat, which fit him like it had been sewn directly on his broad-shouldered body. They both prided themselves on dressing well. His summer-golden hair had darkened due to the lack of sun. He had the look of a great horseman, though Charles knew that William, like he, spent most of his time hunched over a paper and quill.

"I like that fabric," Charles said. "Did Julie make you that waistcoat?"

"Charles." William waved his arms. "Whatever are you carrying in your arms?"

Charles dropped his valise to the ground. It grazed his foot. He let out a yelp and hopped. "Blast it! My toe."

William leaned forward and snatched the bundle from Charles's arm. The cloth over little Timothy's face slid away, exposing the sleeping child. "No room in the inn?"

"Very funny," Charles snarled. He rubbed his foot against the back of his calf. "That smarted."

"Whose baby?"

"A dead serving maid's. I remember you said that a woman across the hall from you had a screaming infant. Do you think she might be persuaded to feed this one? He's about four months old."

William rubbed his tongue over his gums as he glanced from Timothy to Charles, then back again.

"He needs to eat. I don't want to starve him. Also, I think he's a little too warm." Charles gave Timothy an anxious glance.

“Let’s hope he isn’t coming down with something.” William stepped into the passage and gave a long-suffering sigh. Then, he crossed to the other side and used his elbow to bang on the door across from his. “Mrs. Herring?”

Charles heard a loud cry in the room beyond, a muttered imprecation, and a child’s piping voice, then the door opened. A girl about the age of his youngest brother, Boz, opened the door.

“Wot?” she said indistinctly, as she was missing several teeth.

“I need your mother,” William said, smiling at the girl.

The girl turned her head partway and shrieked for her mother. A couple of minutes later the lady of the house arrived, a fat babe burping on her shoulder. She appeared as well fed as the infant, with rounded wrists tapering into fat fingers peering out from her cotton dress sleeves.

“Mr. Aga!” she said with a smile.

Charles instantly trusted Mrs. Herring’s sweet smile. Her hand had gone to the top of her daughter’s head for a caress, the sort of woman who genuinely enjoyed her children.

“Good lady,” Charles began. “I’ve been given the custody of this orphaned child due to a rather dramatic situation. Might you be able to take him in to nurse?”

Mrs. Herring stepped toward William. She took one look at the sleeping Timothy and exclaimed, “Lor bless me!” She handed her larger infant over to her daughter, then reached out her hands to William. He promptly placed the bundle into the mother’s arms.

Charles saw Timothy stir. He began to root around. “Hungry. Hasn’t been nourished since this morning.”

“Poor mite,” Mrs. Herring cooed. “How could you have let this happen? They must be fed regularly.”

“I don’t know how to care for a baby,” Charles admitted.

“But I remembered my friends had you as a neighbor. Can you help him?”

“We’ve no room for the tiny lad,” Mrs. Herring said sternly. She coaxed her daughter back inside.

“I can pay for his board,” Charles responded.

Mrs. Herring didn’t speak but her eyebrows lifted.

“Just for tonight at first,” William suggested with an easy smile. “You can see the situation is desperate.”

Charles reached into his pocket and pulled out a shilling. “I’m good for it. Truly. This would pay for days of his care if I hire a wet nurse. He has an aunt but she disappeared. I couldn’t find her before I had to return to London.”

“We’ll talk to you again in the morning,” William said. “I won’t leave the building until we’ve spoken.”

“Where am I to put him?” she asked, staring rather fixedly at the shilling. “The bed is full and we don’t have a cradle.”

William nodded wisely, as if he’d thought of this already. “Mr. Dickens and I will consult with my wife and bring something suitable. If you can feed him while we wait?”

Mrs. Herring reached out her free hand. Charles noted she had clean nails. She seemed a good choice for wet nurse. He placed the shilling in her palm and prayed they could make longer-term arrangements for a reasonable price.

Timothy let out a thin wail.

“He sounds weak,” Charles said, guilt coloring his words.

“I’ll do what I can.” Mrs. Herring glanced at the babe in her arms, then shut the door.