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CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

Mystery at the Manor



BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

I could probably do the stairs, he thought, if I was having a good day, or night.

Thing is, he never knew whether he'd be having a good day or night. The foolish stair lift was at least dependable.

Riding up, Victor had a good view of the family paintings, all layered with dust on the frames, the paint peeling in places, the colours gloomy with age as sullen generations of Hamblyns from a rosier economic time still found things to scowl about.

The chair stopped, and turned slightly so that Victor could unstrap and slip off. And as he did, he turned on a floor lamp in the hallway. He found himself only using the lamp these days rather than the large overhead lights to avoid the jacking up his already frightening electricity bill. As most

nights, the thought of a quick visit to his bathroom, and then sliding under the covers, grew ever more appealing with each step.

He slept with the light on. For some reason, it didn't keep him awake at all, and that was even without an eyeshade.

The soft yellow light on the bedside lamp made the gloomy bedroom seem almost warm, even with its tattered carpet, yellowing antimacassars sitting on a quite uncomfortable armchair, and the ceiling-high windows that looked over the dark path that led from the village road to the circle just outside the house, now already covered by falling leaves.

Care of the grounds? That too had been let go, with only the minimum being done. A once a month visit by the ground-keeping company was all Victor could afford.

Oh well, he thought. Not that I ever get out there.

Then a flash of humour. He could always make people laugh, and even himself.

And he thought ... *don't get any leaves inside here!*

He smiled at that, and then felt himself begin to drift off to sleep.

But that drifting, in the soft yellow light of the room, was interrupted, as if he was sliding down a velvety-slope before something pulled him short.

It was a *smell*. He sniffed, as if that could dispel the odour. But it only made the smell seem stronger, and he opened his eyes, realizing with a rush what the smell was.

Fire. Something burning.

And now he struggled to sit up, pushing himself to look around the bedroom.

Nothing here. No fire here. But somewhere in this great house, there was a fire.

He reached for the over-sized mobile phone with a big keypad that was always by his bedside.

He pressed a button — as he had done before, on those other times.

A voice. Then: “It’s Victor Hamblyn, in Cherringham, you know, Mogdon Manor and ...”

“Yes, Mr Hamblyn we can see it’s you. Is there a problem?”

“Yes! A fire!”

“We’re on our way. Can you get out of the house?”

He nodded, not realizing for the moment that a nod couldn’t be heard.

Because he wasn’t thinking of the words being said. He suddenly had only one thought.

He let the phone slide from his fingers, the dispatcher's voice fading as it hit the rumbled sheets and Victor Hamblyn struggled out of bed, even forgetting his slippers as he started for the hall.

Outside of his room, small eddies of smoke swirled around. His head pivoted left and right trying to see where all that smoke came from, but he saw no clues. The blackish smoke seemed to be all over, like a stream rising up to his ankles, then higher.

From his vantage point at the top of the stairs, he could see a cascading waterfall of smoke trip its way down to the bottom floor.

But instead of going down the stairs to the door that might lead him to safety, Victor, in as much of a hurry as he could, turned and