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# CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

## The Secret of Brimley Manor



“You saw flames, right?” said Jack.

“Smoke first. Smelled it, too. But then, yeah. The fire. Scared the hell out of me.”

You remember where, exactly?”

“God. I told the insurance people already. Why you—?”

Sarah saw Jack step forward, rest a gentle hand on Charlie’s shoulder. “Appreciate your help with this, Charlie. We’re just, um, trying to get the full picture.”

“Hmm. Right. Well,” said Charlie, walking over to the corner where the panelled wall had been smashed open, “the fire was over here in the corner. That’s where it started. Course, then I got the hell out of here.”

Jack nodded and followed him.

Then he leaned down and pulled at some of the tattered wood.

Sarah saw loops of old electric wiring spill free from behind the blackened panel, the cladding burnt away, just bare copper.

“You think that maybe the wiring might have caused the fire, Charlie?” said Sarah.

“Me? How would I know? I’m no bloody electrical expert.”

“Just thinking, you must have some idea.”

Charlie shrugged: “Electrics in this house are always on the blink. Fuses going. Whole circuits failing.”

“So then — there’ve been incidents in the past?” said Jack.

“Dunno. Might have been. Far as I know, nobody writes that stuff down. But you can see for yourself. Wiring’s rotten through and through. Bloody ancient!”

“Risky place to work then, right?” said Jack.

“Tell me about it.”

Sarah watched Jack walk away from the corner, as if done thinking about the fire. But then he stopped, and again turned to Charlie: “There any other way into this room?”

“Eh? What does it look like? You got eyes — there’s the door. That’s it.”

“Just checking, Charlie. Hard to tell — what, with these panels burnt — if there might have been a door to another room.”

“*Nope*. Only one way in — we came through it.”

“Okay. So if — just for the sake of argument — if someone had set the fire, you would have seen them?”

“*And* heard them,” said Charlie. “This place — take a deep breath and the floor creaks.”

Sarah watched Jack walking the room slowly again, still taking in every detail. Charlie watching him.

“Your shift — you stay in the house all night long?”

“Ha! As *if*. Do my three rounds, then back to base.”

“Base?”

“Cellar, tucked away at the side of the house. Got my gear there, kettle and whatnot.”

“Can we see that?”

“What the hell—? Um, well. If you must.”

“Charlie, ever get security problems?” said Sarah. “Break-ins? Burglaries?”

“Not that I’ve seen. Kids from the village couple of times, mucking about. Trying to break windows. Nothing serious. Local cop gets out here quick enough if I call.”

“No incidents recently?” said Jack.

Sarah saw Charlie pause. Then: “No.”

“No change to the staff? Nobody left in a huff?”

“Nope. Well, we did get a new lad started with Clifford couple of months back.”

“Clifford — he’s the gardener, right?” said Jack.

“What I said.”

“And the lad?”

“Ben Davis, his name. From London. Black, he is.”

Sarah caught Jack’s eye as they both took in Charlie’s words: the night watchman, she guessed, was from an age when the man’s colour would have been a talking point.

“But no other changes recently?” she said.

“Same old, same old,” said Charlie with a shrug. “We try and keep the place standing — that’s all. While the Trust does bugger all to help.”

“The other side of the house, the rooms across the hallway ... more of the same?” said Jack.

“Ha,” Charlie said. “If by the ‘same’ you mean filled with a lot of old junk and who-knows-what, then yes. Can show you what’s over there if you like, though the fire didn’t come close—”

Jack shot a look at Sarah.

*Always fun, she thought, wondering what’s going on inside Jack’s head.*

If there was one thing he *always* did, at least when they were questioning someone, it was keep all those cards nice and close.

“Perhaps later. But now, Charlie, I wonder if there’s a place we could sit and chat a bit more? Only a few questions ...”

At this, Charlie seemed to stiffen a bit. Folded his arms as if that question presented some kind of danger.

“Um, I *s’pose* so. I mean, all I know about is what they pay me to do here. All alone at night, so not sure what else—”

Jack smiled. Again, another technique of his, she well knew, the way he could disarm someone.

That smile projecting the idea ... *not to worry. Just have a few questions.*

*That’s all ...*

She doubted that Jack thought Charlie was in any way suspect.

But then, he always said — and she had learned by now that the old phrase was true — *no one is above suspicion.*

He waited for Charlie’s answer.

“How about your cellar?” said Sarah.

She saw a flicker of alarm on Charlie’s face.

“Cellar? Hmm. Be a bit cold down there,” he said. “Tell you what — let’s try the kitchen. Can be a mess but it’s got a table and a few chairs. Some nights, I even make *myself* a quick cup a tea. We could do that.”

“Perfect,” said Jack.

And then — his smile still in place — he turned to Sarah.

*That was another thing ...*

Jack could seem so attuned to what Sarah was feeling, maybe even thinking.

“Sorry, Sarah — we’ll have to run the gauntlet of those dolls’ eyes.”

Sarah grinned back. “I’m just glad we’re not doing this at night.”

And then, as Charlie started to lead the way out, having heard that exchange, he said:

“Got to tell you. That room there? Those dolls? It’s one place in this whole house that — night in, night out — I just never got used to. The *willies*, that’s what it gives me.”

And with that bit of a confession, Charlie headed out of the burnt-out room, through the other rooms to the stairway down.

Where a cup of tea and — with luck — some useful answers awaited.

## 5. Meeting the Staff

Jack followed Charlie down the dark corridors, Sarah just behind. There seemed to be no logic to the layout of the ground floor: some rooms were enormous, some tiny, some had no exterior windows, some were connected by narrow corridors, others just opened one after the other.

*Crazy place. Did someone actually design it like this?*

But all the rooms were stuffed with what — to Jack’s eyes — was a totally chaotic collection of objects and art. Model ships, bicycles, glass bottles, statues, children’s prams, models of early flying machines, cameras, clothes, one room completely filled with divers’ helmets ...

As they took one tight corner into another corridor, he caught Sarah’s eye — she shrugged and grinned.

*She’s finding it as weird as I am,* he thought. *So it’s not just me being a Connecticut Yankee.*

Heading down one corridor, they passed a line of portraits. Jack could see a likeness running through all of them: thick, wiry hair; eyes fierce and uncompromising.

*An aggressively weird stare ...*

“These all Brimley’s, hmm?” he said.

“Scary-looking bunch, aren’t they?” said Charlie, not stopping.

“There a Brimley still alive?”

“Oh yes. Peregrine Brimley,” said Charlie. “The grandson.”

“He doesn’t live here anymore?” asked Sarah.

“Used to — when he was a kid. So I’m told.”

“And now?”

“Got a farm real close, just across the valley. Think that used to be part of the property. Before they started slicing off pieces of land, selling it. Keeps himself to himself. Funny bugger apparently.”

“You don’t know him?” said Jack.

“I ain’t never seen ’im,” said Charlie. “Least not knowingly.”

Jack was about to ask more — when they reached a closed door.

“Kitchen’s just here,” said Charlie.

From the other side, Jack could just hear low voices.

Not raised, not loud, but there was clearly an argument going on — the voices barely a whisper, hissing fast.

“The staff, I reckon,” said Charlie, pausing only for a second before opening the door wide.

Jack saw straight into the kitchen. Across from a farmhouse table, a young woman in T-shirt and jeans stood leaning against an old stove, arms flapping mid-gesture but now frozen as she looked up to the door.

Right in front of her, close, just inches away, his back to Jack and the door, stood a tall young man who turned as the door opened, his face agitated, but now showing surprise.

“Who the—?” said the man; the woman simultaneously adding “Can’t you bloody knock when you—?”

“All right, Sophie? Ben?” said Charlie. “You making tea? Just us — looking for a place to chat. About the fire.”

Jack stood with Sarah at the door as the two young people took in the fact they had witnesses to their argument.

“Hope we didn’t interrupt anything?” said Jack, smiling. “Jack Brennan.”

“Sarah Edwards,” said Sarah, giving a little wave.

“What? A chat?” said the guy, frowning. Then he seemed to soften. “Oh right, yeah, you two — you’re the guys from the Trust, huh? Come poking your noses in?”

*So this is Ben*, thought Jack. *The accent — South London*, he guessed.

“Not *exactly* from the Trust,” said Sarah. “We’re local, but Mr Jessop asked us to check in, make sure the investigation into the fire was running ok.”

Jack watched Ben walk around the table towards them.

“*Check up on us*, you mean?” he said, his face serious.

“No, no,” said Jack, still smiling. “Though, yes, we’d like to chat with you at some point, Ben.” He turned to the woman: “And you too, Sophie, if that’s okay?”

“I suppose so,” said the woman, looking nervously at Ben, then back at Jack. “When?”

Behind him, Jack sensed Sarah stepping forward.

“We’re here so ... how about right now?” she said.

Before Sophie could answer, Jack saw Ben flick a quick look at her, then he turned full-on to Sarah, his stance almost aggressive.

“Sorry. I can’t hang about here talking,” said Ben, “I got stuff to finish in the hothouse. Fact, that’s where I’m heading now.”

“That’s okay, Ben,” said Jack. “I can come with you. Sarah?”

“Sure,” she said.

“What about me then?” said Charlie. “All done? I thought you wanted to talk to me too? I can’t wait, you know. Gotta come back here tonight. Need my bloody rest!”

Jack put his hand on Charlie’s shoulder again: “Totally understand, Charlie, we really do. Why don’t you head off and we catch up with you ... maybe tomorrow? I mean, if need be.”

“Hmm. Well. S’pose so,” said Charlie. “I’m done then?”

*Spoken like a man just given a reprieve.*

“You’re done.”

Jack watched him shuffle off through the door, then he turned to Ben.

“Saw the hothouse when we arrived,” he said. “How about we chat on the way?”

And as Sarah stepped forward to pull out a couple of chairs, Jack could see that he and Sarah had succeeded in forcing the issue.