

COMPILATION

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CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

Episode 28 - 30



She tapped the keyboard – the screen lit up.

“*Anna Garcia chef*” she typed into a search engine, and waited for the results to load.

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Jack sat back in the deep Chesterfield thinking treasonous thoughts. Up until now he thought the Spotted Pig made the best martini in the Cotswolds, but his world just turned upside down.

This martini – served Hemingway style in a deep tumbler, just like the ones he’d loved in Harry’s Bar in Venice all those years ago – had the strength of a real martini back in Manhattan.

And so cold it made the back of your throat shout for joy.

Wonder how Sarah’s getting on, he thought. She’d love this.

He heard a soft female voice behind him – not the local voice of the young woman who took his coat, but an American voice. “Taste of home, hmm?”

He looked up.

A woman stood – in chef’s whites – smiling down. Dark hair, dark eyes. Backlit by the bar.

“For a second there, I was back in the Campbell Apartments. Already wondering if I should order another,” he said.

“Dangerous. We don’t mix our martinis here like the Brits do...”

Jack laughed. “In thimbles.”

“Exactly. Think you can handle two?”

Jack looked at the woman’s wry expression, then noticed the word “Anna”, in piped italic swirl on her top.

So this is the evil chef. Hmm... Well, she doesn’t look evil...

“Think maybe I’ll listen to the professional advice – Anna? You’re the chef here, no?”

“That’s right.”

“Nice to meet you. I’m also thinking – if the martini’s this good, what’s the wine list going to be like?”

“Growing. But having said that, it’s pretty solid.”

“Thought it would be.”

“Let me know when you’re ready to order,” said Anna, nodding to the menu on the table. “Meanwhile – how about a little something to whet your appetite?”

“Sure,” said Jack. “Everyone get this personal service from the chef?”

“Not everyone. But we’re pretty empty tonight. And when I heard the accent... Brooklyn maybe, hmm?”

“You got it.”

“Cop?”

“Ex. Wow – that obvious?”

She laughed.

“To me. Guess I had a few run-ins with New York cops in my time – social and professional.”

“I’m intrigued. You’ll have to tell me more.”

“Later maybe. I have work to do.”

“Good kitchen runs itself – don’t they say that?”

“Oh, that isn’t true,” said Anna. “Not when there’s only three of you doing service.”

She smiled at him.

“Hope you enjoy the meal.”

“I bet I will,” said Jack.

And he watched her all the way back to the kitchen, then picked up the menu.

Thinking...

Did I just flirt with her? Or did she just flirt with me?

Something Jack hadn’t thought in a very long time.

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Sarah sat back and looked at her open search screens, and then made another note on the yellow lawyer’s pad she always used when on a case.

The search – not quite what she’d expected.

She’d started with the Bayleaf’s opening back in September. She’d expected lots of online ads, articles in local papers, *Cotswold News* – maybe even some early reviews in the nationals.

But there’d been hardly anything. Clearly no PR spend at all.

But why? That wasn’t the way to open a restaurant – especially in September when people are just beginning to think about making Christmas bookings.

She did find a possible explanation: an interview with the owner Karl Desmond, in which he said he was going for a “soft launch”.

“I always find it takes a few months for a restaurant to bed in, find its style, its flavours, its local clientele. Come the spring – that’s when we’ll really launch. And the people of the Cotswolds will see we are taking fine dining to a higher level.”

Confident stuff – and backed up at first by the social media reviews. She scrolled back through the first posts – plenty of three-, four- and even five-star notices.

People liked it, that was clear.

But then, by November – in amongst the five stars – were ones and even zeros. Very few had given it an average rating.

Suspicious pattern, thought Sarah.

She knew plenty about online advertising – and this kind of spread smacked of deliberate manipulation. She made a note to check out the identities and posting record of the bad reviewers.

Maybe there was some truth in Anna Garcia’s allegation that someone was fixing the reviews.

She went back and did a search for “Karl Desmond”. Not much historically, but recent social pages of the Cotswolds glossies had photos of Karl Desmond – and his wife, Lisbet – at various charity dinners.

Sarah studied the pictures.

Karl – jovial, short, bespectacled, in his fifties perhaps. On his arm, his wife Lisbet – taller, younger, looking good in a little black dress and pearls.

The classic happy and wealthy couple.

Onto business directories...

Nothing locally, but quite a few directorships showing for restaurants in the north, mostly around Sheffield. A couple in smart parts of the city centre. A quick street-view search on some of the addresses – reasonable-looking places and certainly not backstreet dives.

But not much evidence of Mr Desmond's expertise in fine dining. None of the restaurants the kind of place hunting for a Michelin star.

But who knew. The guy clearly had fingers in many pies. And plenty of assets in those companies. Perhaps profits made... ready to be invested?

Back to Anna Garcia.

And now Sarah was surprised.

A ton of reviews from her early career in New York. Lots of "new kid on the block" articles – many saying what a breath of fresh air it was to see a young female chef at the pass. Praise for her adventurous style, reinvigorating some tired brands.

And then the big splash when she got a Michelin star.

Anna Garcia, it seemed, was a rising star chef – back in 2005.

But then – nothing over the next few years – apart from a couple of restaurant openings in Washington and one in San Francisco. Some average reviews – but the rising star, it seemed, had risen only so far.

Too much too soon? Sarah wondered.

Had to be a common story in the world of high-end chefs.

No hint as to what happened or why. Just a career that... faded away.

Happens, thought Sarah. Back in the day, when she'd run her web business in London, she'd had some of the top-starred restaurants as clients. Many times she'd chatted late into the night with chefs and sous chefs, heard the horror stories, listened to the tales of hundred-hour weeks, low pay, stress, sometimes savage and unforgiving kitchens.

The restaurant business is a tough and cruel place.

Sarah noted that – in the end – some people can't take any more. They just... burn out.

Was that what had happened to Anna Garcia? If so – why the sudden return to the kitchen?

And why Cherringham?

Why now?

5. Two Sides to Every Story

Jack put down his dessertspoon and savoured the flavour of the panna cotta.

So soft, with a hint of buttermilk that took him back to the childhood streets of Brooklyn and his Italian pals whose mamas knew how to cook the real thing.

And what was in that coulis – cloudberry? Or was it some mysterious local berry he'd just never eaten before?

Then the dessert wine – on Anna's recommendation – a 2001 Monbazillac. Amazing. Golden orange, sweet, full-bodied. Not sticky like some dessert wines could be.

Wow. He had to admit, the dishes on this menu had – unexpectedly – knocked him out.

The bone marrow starter – with that cute spoon to dig out all the beefy goodness...

Lamb sweetbreads with pancetta and sprouts.

Brave choice that – but, again, an Anna recommendation – and was it ever good!

Delicious. Faultless. Just like the service.

How often was a meal life-changing? He realised his routine choices of steak or ribs, as good as they were, were crazy when food like this was on offer.

He looked around the restaurant. One couple finishing off their coffees. The other two tables long gone.

Back in New York people would be cramming the restaurant. They'd be turning bookings away. But tonight – he'd seen no more than a dozen people in here.

And through the window into the kitchen he'd seen Anna and her sous chef – a tall guy with red hair – occasionally look through into the dining area, clearly hoping for some late walk-ins.

What was going wrong?

He saw the kitchen door open and Anna came through, a carafe of coffee in one hand, two cups in the other. Behind her by the entrance, the woman who'd served him throughout the evening was now removing her apron, the evening service over.

And through the gap into the kitchen, Jack could see the sous chef and a young kid cleaning up and wiping down surfaces.

Anna put the coffee pot and cups down on the table, then nodded to the spare seat.

"May I?"

"Sure," said Jack.

"I'm guessing you would have ordered a coffee?"

"You guessed right."

He watched her pour two cups.

"We order the beans direct. Then there's a place over in Chipping Norton grinds them for us."

"The whole 'local' thing runs right through the menu, hmm?"

“Why not? Everything I want to cook I can get within ten miles. Apart from the seafood.”

“Think I can forgive you that.”

“Why thank you, officer.”

“Detective,” said Jack, smiling.

She smiled back.

“I’m flattered you came, ate here, right across the menu, all on your own...” She paused. “But you’re not really here for the food, are you?”

Jack looked at her for a second. Anna was more than an amazing cook.

He shrugged.

“No.”

“Sorry. I asked around. You’re the local private eye.”

“Not a term I’d use. But I do investigate things. When people ask me.”

“People like Sam Walters?”

“People like him, yes. Not saying he did though.”

“So, that who you’re working for?”

“Not ‘working’ for anyone.” Jack wasn’t happy that Anna was the one asking questions.

Tables turned.

“Sam’s wife and co-owner, Julie, is a friend. As is Sam. I heard about what happened last night at the Spotted Pig. Thought I’d check things out, see if I could help.”

“Help *them*.”

“Help you and them.”

“I don’t need help.”

Yeah, Jack thought. *Maybe time to end this.*

“Okay. That’s fine then. Good luck with your restaurant.”

He stared at her. She stared back. Those dark eyes. His words not shaking her.

Takes a lot to shake a New Yorker.

“All right,” she said. Bit of a smile then. “What if I do need help?”

“Do you?”

“You saw the restaurant tonight. Where is everyone? Someone’s killing my business. And I think it’s Sam Walters.”

“You got proof?”

She rolled her eyes. “I don’t need proof. I know him. How he thinks. How he... *ticks*.”

“Really? I always thought Sam was one of the good guys. That not true?”

Anna took a breath, as if not sure she should continue. “I thought he was too. But then, one day, out of the blue, he walked out on me in New York. Left me hanging in every way. Then I end up here, find he’s built a reputation on *my* dishes. *My* menu.”

“Kinda hard to copyright recipes, no?”

“Jury’s out on that, Jack. Back in the city, a chef could get into trouble big time poaching someone else’s secrets. And a chef knows. *All* chefs know. You don’t steal credit from others.”

“That such a big deal? Thought all chefs borrow – that not true?”