COMPILATION

Matthew Costello

Neil Richards

CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

Episode 34 - 36

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Cherringham — A Cosy Crime Series

“Cherringham — A Cosy Crime Series” is a series made up of self-contained stories. The series is published in English, German and Finnish.

The authors

Matthew Costello (US-based) is the author of a number of successful novels, including Vacation (2011), Home (2014) and Beneath Still Waters (1989), which was adapted by Lionsgate as a major motion picture. He has written for The Disney Channel, BBC, SyFy and has also designed dozens of bestselling games including the critically acclaimed The 7th Guest, Doom 3, Rage and Pirates of the Caribbean.

Neil Richards has worked as a producer and writer in TV and film, creating scripts for BBC, Disney, and Channel 4, and earning numerous Bafta nominations along the way. He's also written script and story for over 20 video games including The Da Vinci Code and Starship Titanic, co-written with Douglas Adams, and consults around the world on digital storytelling.

Their transatlantic collaboration has underpinned scores of TV drama scripts, computer games, radio shows, and the best-selling mystery series Cherringham. Their latest series project is called Mydworth Mysteries.

Main Characters

Jack Brennan is a former NYPD homicide detective. Being retired, all he wants is peace and quiet. Which is what he hopes to find in the quiet town of Cherringham, UK. Living on a canal boat, he enjoys his solitude. But soon enough he discovers that something is missing — the challenge of solving crimes. Surprisingly, Cherringham can help him with that.

Sarah Edwards is a web designer who was living in London with her husband and two kids. A few years ago, he ran off with his sexy American boss, and Sarah's world fell apart. With her children she moved back to her home town, laid-back Cherringham. But the small-town atmosphere is killing her all over again — nothing ever happens. At least, that's what she thinks until Jack enters her life and changes it for good or worse …

Matthew Costello
Neil Richards

CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES COMPILATION

Episode 34—36

Digital original edition

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Matthew Costello
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CHERRINGHAM
A COSY CRIME SERIES

The Secret of Brimley Manor

1. The Night Shift

Charlie Barrow got up from the simple wooden chair inside the small stone room — once an old coal cellar, he imagined.

Now, though, it was a place to pass the hours between his nightly walks through Brimley Manor. The room, dank and humid in summer, like it was now, but damp and chilly in the autumn and winter. Even with a portable heater it was almost unbearable in January or February.

Unbearable, that is, if Charlie hadn't had his own little supply of personal anti-freeze.

Not *too* much, he knew.

Just a little nip, here and there.

Harder for Clifford, the gardener-cum-daytime-custodian, a considerably older fellow who, with kids often mucking about in the property, probably couldn't hide away in here and have a dram of Famous Grouse now and then.

No, this night shift suited Charlie.

And the fact that he had to be up all night?

Not a problem at all. He could sleep while *the wife* was up, freed from her incessant chatter and the endless chores she was always discovering — or more likely, creating — for him in their little cottage on the other side of Cherringham.

The cottage — not much of a place but, like this job, perfect for him.

Charlie grabbed his torch, a large silver item packed with four hefty batteries. Tight in his hand, it looked more like a lethal truncheon. The light cast a bright, strong beam.

He slipped his small silver flask into his pocket, always aware of how many sips he had taken.

Needed to make it last till dawn.

Have that last blissful drop as the sun came up.

That is, if it wasn't overcast. The weather was so mixed up lately that sometimes there was no sun to be seen while Charlie waited for Clifford to appear. The old fella, bleary-eyed from just waking up, paper cup of coffee in his hand as Charlie tipped an invisible hat and sailed off to his cottage.

Bit of a hike away, on the edge of Cherringham.

But again, that also suited Charlie just fine.

Leaving the car there, meant *the wife* could go off and busy herself with an errand of some sort.

Plants! That was her latest thing.

As if the bloody cottage wasn't *totally* surrounded with all that God deemed fit to grow in this lovely corner of the world.

Never enough for my Edna, he thought.

Charlie quickly slipped his phone into his pocket. No walkie-talkie needed here since, well, the old Brimley manor house was his purview alone.

"My *purview* …" he said, liking the sound of the word. The meaning — he guessed — would stump anyone from the current dimwit generation with their Facebooking, and Twitter-this, Insta-that.

"Bollocks, all of it," he said aloud.

He enjoyed the company and comfort provided by his own words.

And then — all ready — he marched up the three stone steps, from the small pseudo guardhouse and out into the humid night air.

Charlie certainly didn't hurry as he made his way through what had been — back in the manor house's prime — some sort of a sunken garden.

Now, it was just another neglected and overgrown spot. These days, more pressing areas received the attention of the overworked Clifford and that young lad that helped

him. Those two — barely able to keep the grounds from looking like a dump.

And he had to marvel — imagine! — this place, managed by the mighty Conservation Trust!

“Managed,” he said, his voice low, muttering. “If this is bloody *managing,* no wonder the whole country’s going to hell in a handcart!”

More steps.

Handcart. *Now, just what* is *that?* Charlie thought. *Some kind of wheelbarrow?*

More steps rose up from the sunken flat area of weeds and dead flowers to the gravel path that led to the manor house.

It was dark, save for a few lights outside that barely outlined the hulking shape of the big house and the other outbuildings.

No impressive “sound and light” show taking place here nightly, he thought. Not like some of the Trust’s properties in the area.

Oh no. Brimley Manor? Way down the spending list — for years.

As he reached the top of the steps, he turned and looked left to the small farmhouse, part of the estate, just a couple of minutes’ walk down the roadway that led from the east end of the building. That house, probably no larger than Charlie’s own modest cottage.

But where — apparently — the lone surviving heir of the Brimley “fortunes” lived.

The Honourable Peregrine Brimley.

Honourable? That was a bit of a moot point.

Not that Charlie had ever seen him.

That cottage must have been, he thought, part of the deal for letting the Conservation Trust take over the manor house and run it as — what? — a museum?

Some place of historical value?

Charlie shook his head at the thought — it was hardly either one of those.

Another glance down the roadway, to the small farmhouse. A few warm yellow lights on. That house attached to some fields, a vegetable patch, couple of pigs, a chicken coop.

Not *much* of a farm to speak of, but apparently the Brimley heir was able to get by, selling whatever he grew to the local shops and restaurants.

Charlie, having seen about every inch of the manor house, often wondered just what kind of nutter was Peregrine Brimley?

Was said offspring — grandchild or whatever — as off his rocker as the original Brimley?

Well, as long as Charlie's duties were confined to night time, he doubted he'd ever get the chance to find out.

Charlie turned his attention back to the house looming above him in the darkness, the walls thick with ancient ivy.

Up ahead, a flight of broad stone stairs. The stone, a traditional Cotswolds yellow, like the manor house itself.

Leading to massive wooden doors, as if ready to permit entry to amazing visitors from important places — the great and the mighty.

But why on earth would they ever visit this *place?*

"A mad house." That's how Charlie described it to his mates when he met them at the Ploughman's on his one night off a week. "Stuff in there," he'd say, "well, you just wouldn't believe it."

And his friends, couple of pints in, all said they should come visit, on the one day a month that it was actually open to visitors!

Fat chance of that happening.

Charlie paused at the top of the stairs and fished out a plastic card, his key that opened those great doors. A small concession to modernity that the cash-strapped Trust seemed to have been able to afford.

Things were mighty tight these days.

Never more so than inside here, Charlie thought.

The door *popped* open.

Up to his right was one of the few CCTV cameras recording whoever was about to enter.

Every 24 hours, the recording erased. No high-tech security system or monitoring taking place here.

Just a handful of cameras.

To protect all its treasures. Ha!

And then — knowing that as close as the air was out here, inside, was going to be even worse — he entered Brimley Manor.

2. Something in the Air

Once inside, Charlie knew that he'd better look dutiful, as he shut the door behind him tight, and slipped on the light of his massive torch.

No house lights on — those were the rules. Dodgy wiring at night too much of a risk, he guessed.

Look sharp now! he thought. *You're being recorded,*

He knew that above him sat another CCTV camera designed to catch anyone upon entering. But now it was seeing only Charlie, off to begin his nightly rounds.

Three times a night, same drill.

Why three times? *Wouldn't one check in the dead of night suffice?*

Still, they *were* paying for his services, so why complain?

Not that it was such a princely sum. The funds allotted to his salary were at the same measly level as the other facilities in the house.

Like the cheap and scarce cameras.

Only four of them in the whole place. Though that fella from the Conservation Trust, Mr Jessop, had said "next year, expect the full Monty!" Cameras — linked to a security service — in each room. Maybe even motion sensors, inside and out.

All of which would most likely make Charlie's services he imagined, redundant.

Torch light on, Charlie took a breath. The rule was always to begin on the first floor, and work his way down, following the same trail.

Through the rooms filled with Brimley's weirdness.

And Charlie had to admit, not a night went by during that slow walk through what was dubbed “the collection” that didn’t unsettle him.

You’d have to be made of stone, he thought, *not to get a* little *rattled.*

All that old and strange junk in every room?

And that funny feeling he sometimes got that he was being … well … *watched*.

Impossible, he knew. Come six o’clock, all the daytime staff cleared off home, sharpish: that new girl doing the research, Clifford the gardener, the young lad helping him …

And anyway — you needed one of these fancy plastic keys to get in these days and they were like gold dust. So no way could there be anybody actually *in* the house at night.

Although …

Couple of times these last few months he could *swear* he’d seen a figure just out of the corner of his eye, disappearing down the corridor.

Or a shape — moving — reflected in one of the glass cabinets.

And once he thought he heard footsteps. Even a low voice, muttering, barely audible.

Not that he’d told anyone, mind. Only Edna.

And she’d had a good laugh about it. Tried to spook him for a week after — popping up behind him and saying “boo!”

Not worth the bother, reporting that to the Trust either. They’d only think he’d lost his marbles and get someone else for the night shift.

Maybe I have *lost it?* he thought, laughing to himself. *I’d be the last to know, wouldn’t I?*

He reached the broad staircase, the deep maroon rug only looking red where his torchlight hit it. The rest, murky black, the hand rail barely visible.

He started up, when something hit his nostrils.

Charlie was used to the various smells to be found in the old place, depending on whatever bizarre room you happened to find yourself in.

The smells of age. Of decay. Of cloth material growing sere, crumbly. Yellowed paper racing towards disintegration.

The glue of some exhibits discoloured, cracking.

Even rooms with mostly wood and metal, like the vintage bicycle room, even those smelled of age and strangeness.

But this …

He stopped.

Another sniff, deeper now.

No doubt what it was.

Smoke!

He inhaled deep again, and confirmed that it was definitely a smoky smell, coming from upstairs, but still faint here.

Right here, bottom of the stairs, barely could smell it.

But he pointed his torch up.

And while that light caught the paintings of who-knows-who and who-knows-what lining the staircase — and with one final grisly figure in a huge painting glaring down from the top — he could see, hanging ghostlike in the dark at the top of the stairs, *the thinnest whisper of smoke*.

Charlie, well past his prime, well past any days where speed could be summoned, did his best, hand grasping at the nearby banner, to race up the creaky stairs.

*

Charlie nearly tripped at the top, somehow missing that one last step, fumbling with the giant torch.

He stopped, scanning left, right, looking for the tell-tale trail of smoke, peering into the darkness, trying to work out where the smoke was coming from.

Again, doing exactly what he had been instructed to.

So important, he had been told, in *any* emergency — pipes bursting, fire, electrical problem, anything — to determine *exactly* where it was happening, to guide the fire team there so they wouldn't waste their time.

Losing valuable minutes.

In fact, what Charlie really felt like doing was turning around, getting the hell out of the old place, and *then* alerting the fire brigade.

Let them handle it!

But now he saw wisps of the smoke to the left, in the corridor — and Charlie moved in that direction cautiously …

Passing through — as he knew he would — his least favourite room, the one filled with dolls.

Hundreds of glass and plastic eyes looking at him.

"*The stuff of bloody nightmares*," he had told Edna.

Now they seemed to be waiting for him again, dead eyes all expectant as he resolutely moved through the room to a narrow chamber.

On either side of this tight hallway, built into the wall, glass cases.

Filled with thimbles!

At least, that's what Charlie thought they were.

But in this hallway, still only the faint smell of the smoke.

Which damn room was it coming from? Could be anywhere, all these rooms such funny shapes, a right old patchwork, a proper maze.

To the next room, opening up to see a dozen chunky dress mannequins, all wearing Japanese armour from centuries ago.

Samurai, he imagined.

Breastplates. Curved, ornate swords nearly as large as the figures, strange helmets that looked far less functional than their European counterparts (with a Brimley room devoted to that medieval armour all the way on the other side of the manor house).

Slower now.

He could feel the smoke at the back of his throat.

With his free hand, he dug out his phone, to have it at the ready.

More steps, such cautious steps now, as the smoke thickened.

Until he reached another narrow hallway that led into the next room.

The music room.

Least that's what he called it …

Filled with instruments of every kind.

Old, ancient instruments, kind of thing Charlie was sure nobody played these days.

And then in the corner of the room he saw the forked flickers of a flame.

He backed away, fast as he could, bumping into a suit of Samurai armour, sending the wobbly swordsman falling down with a loud clang, making even more noise as it bumped into another full suit of armour, that smashed backwards into a glass display case, the noise suddenly deafening in the still-quiet manor house.

Charlie had the phone out, screen glowing, even as he took more clumsy steps back, to the hallway out.

Hitting the number that was at the top of his screen.

One ring, two rings.

Then a voice — calm. Almost too calm!

"Emergency, which service do you require?"

"Fire!" Charlie yelled, as if sharing the bad news. "We got a fire."

"Putting you through …"

"Bloody hell!" said Charlie. "Can't you—?"

“Fire service,” came a new voice. “What’s your location, caller?”

“Brimley Manor, Cherringham. Fire! There’s a fire. A bloody fire! *Upstairs*! First floor,” he said, hurrying on. “I can see it now! Room to the left, past the room with Japanese armour. Smoke spreading.”’

The voice finally cut him off.

“On our way,” the voice simply said. Then, as if stating the obvious, “Sir, please leave the house now and get as far away as you can, the engine will be with you shortly.”

And with the alert sounded, Charlie turned his backward crawl into a stumbling bolt, racing back past the perhaps now-doomed dolls, to the stairs.

Take care here … don’t want a nasty trip … tumble down. House going up in flames! That would be bad …

So, the steps, one at a time, hand on the bannister as if locked on.

To the door.

Always so wedged into the frame, needing a real hard yank to open.

Remembering now, even in his panicked dash, to press his key card against the plastic square with the small illuminated red dot near the doorknob.

Quick thought: *What if electricity in the house is damaged, and the door doesn’t open?*

What then?

But he heard a *click*, saw the small red dot turn green and, with as strong a tug as he could, pulled open the door.

The night air had never tasted so good.

And always one to follow good advice, he hurried down the stone steps, across the gravel driveway, and even kept going past his small stone guard house to the side.

Getting as much distance between himself and the fire as he could imagine.

Not looking back.

And as he kept on moving away for just a few more moments, he heard the siren.

The fire brigade on its way.

He'd be safe.

That was good!

But Brimley Manor?

Who knew?

And save for the measly job and the money it offered him … *who the hell really cared?*

3. Anton Jessop of the Conservation Trust

Jack had found parking not far from Huffington's. With the peak tourist season passed, fall in the air, it became a tad easier to find a free space in Cherringham's Market Square.

And with his "new" 1962 MGA — still not a large car though certainly roomier than his old Sprite — he could easily fit in tight spots.

The sleek, racing-green MGA, on an open straight road, a *Roman* road? Pretty amazing to push its 1600cc engine, and see just how speedy it could be.

Jack guessed it would perform real well in a road rally — not an activity that he had yet indulged in.

But with this beauty? Maybe someday …

Might be something fun to try.

And as he entered Huffington's — getting, as always, bright smiles from the staff, none of them ever quite used to the novelty of an American in Cherringham, it seemed — he spotted Sarah sitting at what he thought of as their "usual table".

Near the back, away from the bustle, and when not lunch time, tea time, or morning rush, always a quiet spot to chat.

About Cherringham and crime.

She was sitting with a man who, she had told Jack, wanted rather urgently to meet them. Apparently, the elderly gentleman in the dark suit wanted to discuss "*a matter of utmost urgency and discretion*".

And Jack had responded “You know me, Sarah, I’m a sucker for such ‘matters’.”

At that she had laughed.

Now as he made his way over, a third chair awaiting him, Sarah spotted him, waved, and Jack joined them.

*

The man rose from the table, nodded and shook Jack’s hand.

“Mr Brennan—”

“Jack, please.”

Funny, how he *always* thought how “Mr Brennan” never sounded quite right.

Mr Brennan? That was his dad — tough old guy, hard working.

But Jack, to all those who worked with him, both above and below in the ranks of the NYPD, was always “Jack”.

And he liked that just fine …

“I was just explaining to your colleague here that — oh my name, by the way, Anton Jessop — I’m on the Board of the Conservation Trust.”

Jack nodded as the man produced two business cards.

Jack looked at it. *Conservation Trust.* Having visited many of the historical sites in the area, he knew that the Trust was responsible for maintaining and running most of them.

Then Janey, a waitress who never seemed to let Jack’s visits go unnoticed, was at his shoulder.

“Sorry, Jack. Get you something? Your usual?”

Jack’s usual — these days at least — tea, no milk. A scone, if any were still to be had, with a pat or two of butter. His New York City regimen of endless cups of *joe* … gone. Pleasantly so, he observed.

And the bakery items here? About as close to paradise as one could get.

“Great, Janey.”

The grey-haired woman beamed again, then turned.

Jack nodded at Sarah, who was enjoying her own tea and a scone.

It had been a while since they had done any ‘work’ together. They’d had a few dinners over the past month, catching up on her kids, and news of her assistant Grace’s wedding plans (and boy, was that date looming close).

“Yes, um, so there has been an unfortunate *incident* at one of our local properties, Brimley Manor. Perhaps you’ve visited it? Driven past it, maybe?”

Not only had Jack *not* visited it, but the name rang no bell.

Guess, he thought, *there are always things to be discovered, even in a small village in the Cotswolds.*

“Can’t say I have.”

Sarah jumped in. “It’s not terribly far from here, Jack — tucked away off the Hook Norton road. And not really open to the public. Isn’t that right, Mr Jessop?”

Jessop nodded. “’Fraid so, with the budget cuts and all, and the place in need of work, a *lot* of work … we have actually been opening to the public only one day a month.”

Once a month? Jack thought. *Why even bother?*

“We do our best — of course — to maintain the place, and its collection. The grounds, as well.”

“Collection?” Jack said, as his tea arrived, accompanied by an absolutely beautiful looking scone, with two pats of butter on the plate.

“Yes, the collection of Mr Horatio Brimley. Eccentric old chap. Travelled the world in the 1920s and gathered a rather eclectic array of items.”

Jack turned to Sarah. “You’ve been there Sarah?”

“Can’t say I have. Like I said, I knew of its existence. Assumed it would eventually open full time. Like the rest of

the Trust's sites."

"Of course, that was … *is* the plan."

Jack noticed that Jessop still hadn't responded to his query about the collection within the manor house. *Collection of what?*

Some secret there, Jack wondered?

"And the incident?" Jack said, picking up a dainty butter knife, splitting open the scone, and then smearing butter inside.

While Jessop answered, he took a bite.

Heaven indeed …

"A fire, I'm afraid. Destroyed one room *completely*, and did some major damage to an adjoining space. Fortunately, our night watchman had already begun his rounds, alerted the emergency services. Still, as I said, one room, absolutely destroyed. Everything in it."

"Which was?"

"Musical instruments. From all over the world. Some dating back hundreds of years."

"How awful," said Sarah. "I imagine they were valuable?"

"The actual instruments? Hmm, surprisingly not. Luckily, we have had someone going through all the items during the last few months. Cataloguing them, you see. All very interesting, to be sure. But real cash value?" Jessop shook his head. "Not really. Curios, copies, oddments. Still, there *is* a loss — it will all add up. Damage to the room, the house itself. The sprinklers in the second room made a mess of things there. When the fire hoses went on, that water went down to the ground floor — another room's 'treasures' ruined, I'm afraid."

Jack nodded.

Interesting and all, he thought*. But why did this Jessop, on behalf of the Trust, contact me and Sarah?*

He caught Sarah look at him.

Probably wondering the same thing.

He took another bite of his oh-so-delicious scone. And, as if passing a football, Sarah did the smallest of nods, and turned back to Jessop.

*

Sarah could guess that Jack was — well — as confused as she was.

Fire. Caused some damage. Significant loss.

But why us? she thought.

Jessop paused — perhaps sensing that question.

"The insurance company, of course, has initiated an investigation. Until that's completed, we will get no payment. Any restoration work delayed. But everyone on the Board unanimously felt that we should have our *own* people, if you like, look into the incident. If the insurance company discovers something or not, it's best we know exactly what happened. *How* it happened."

Sarah nodded again: "Was there anything suspicious about it?"

"Suspicious? Ah, well that's not for me to say. But I'm doubtful. Brimley Manor is an old place, just about being maintained. God, one can only imagine what the electrical system was like."

"You mentioned sprinklers damaging a second room," Jack said, "but not where the fire started?"

A nod from Jessop.

"The sprinklers are original to the house, going back fifty years or so. Not exactly state of the art, I'm afraid. And not in every room. It was felt that if an accidental tripping of a sprinkler happened, the entire contents of the room could be *destroyed*. So the music room — all the aged wood of the instruments — well, it simply did not have one."

"Giving the fire an opportunity — however it was started — to take hold?"

At that, Sarah watched as Jack turned to her. The quickest of looks.

And it was almost as if she could see the gears in his mind clicking, connecting.

Questions leading to suspicions. Suspicions leading to theories.

Jack's scone had disappeared. But Sarah could see that her detective partner — sitting across from the representative of the Trust — was *engaged*.

"So, um," Jack said slowly, "why contact us, specifically?"

Jessop took a breath, almost as if the answer to that simply must be obvious.

"We — some members of the Trust and I — well, we've asked around, as to who might help us. Including my good friend in the village, the solicitor Tony Standish."

"Know him well," Jack said.

Jessop paused and nodded at that, waiting a moment before continuing. "Yes, well, quite consistently from everyone, I must tell you, even from the local constabulary — *your* two names kept popping up."

Another breath.

"We can pay your usual fee, of course, to investigate the fire. Interview all the staff, the night watchman … just to be absolutely sure we are not missing anything."

Jessop squinted as if afraid of the answer.

"Think you might consider taking it on?"

Jack grinned, then a look to Sarah as she answered …

*

"Usual fee? I'm afraid that Jack and I, well our usual fee is *usually* zero."

"Oh," Jessop said, a bit disappointed at that.

She hurried to explain. “What we do, we do *gratis*, Mr Jessop. If we feel we can help someone who needs help. And I’m sure you can find a professional who investigates such things.”

But Jessop shook his head. “I’m afraid with all your recommendations, and being local, the Trust would be *most* disappointed.”

Then Sarah had an idea.

She looked at Jack. “I don’t know. Things are pretty quiet in the office; the holiday madness over for another summer. Think you might be interested?”

And she knew the answer to that one.

Those gears, clicking away? *He was already interested*.

A nod. “Sure.”

She turned back to Jessop. “As to our fee, how about whatever you would be paying, you donate to a worthy cause of our choice?”

“*Splendid*. All and sundry will be most pleased to hear this news.”

Then Jessop produced a manila envelope.

“The papers in there have everything you will need: all the people who work at the property, contact numbers for the Trust, my personal contact details. I shall definitely need you to keep me posted. Oh, and I have alerted everyone on that list that we will — in addition to the number crunchers from the insurance company — have some people looking into the incident.”

Sarah reached out and pulled the envelope close.

The title in block letters on the folder itself was interesting.

Brimley Manor Investigation

“And I shall warn them all that they will be contacted by you two.”

And at that, Jessop stood up, as if his good fortune might dissipate if he lingered.

“I’ll do that right now.”

And he stuck his hand out to Jack, then to her. A quick shake, a smile; and the funny little man from the Trust, so precise in his words, sailed to the exit, and out of Huffington's.

Sarah looked at Jack.

"Well — shall we?"

And equally bemused, Jack grinned back as Sarah undid the clasp of the envelope and opened it to see just who they might be talking to over the next few days.

4. A Not-So-Guided Tour

Sarah leaned back in the passenger seat of Jack's new car, enjoying the wind in her hair, this warm September afternoon.

"You still miss the Sprite?" she said, looking at Jack, shades on, his body filling the tan leather seat of the sports car.

"Hmm. Sure. Had a lot of fun in that car — didn't we?"

"That we did," said Sarah. *Thinking back to some hair-raising chases, night-long surveillances, careful tailing …*

"But you know — this car — heck, it's built for a guy like me," said Jack. "Comfy, too. Sitting here — could be in one of those armchairs, what do they call them, all electric …?"

"It'll come to me."

"And boy … put my foot down? Like this?" Sarah heard the engine snarl as Jack kicked up a gear and hit the pedal — the car shot forward along the empty road. "And I can't see *anybody* in these parts catching us."

"Hmm, yes. Speed limits? Cops? Remember?"

"Oh yeah, sure. Well, just saying, you could give anyone a run for their money."

He slowed down.

Looking ahead, she saw a battered old signpost to Brimley village.

"There you go. Think this could be our turn."

Jack slowed some more — and they turned off the main road, down a narrow country lane, stone walls soon pressing tightly in on either side.

"I meant to ask you what you made of Mr Jessop yesterday?" she said.

"Hmm."

“You had that *expression* …”

He grinned at that. “Go on.”

“The ‘*something not quite right here’* look.”

Jack laughed. “True fact. Guess I was trying to figure out why he needs us. Kinda overkill, hmm? What with the insurance people giving it a close look.”

“I know. But I looked up Brimley Manor online last night. Dug around. The Trust has big plans for the house. Part of a new national policy. Multi-million investment.”

“Ah. So — maybe wanting to make sure there’s no bad apples lurking in the barrel?”

“*Exactly*. Or maybe Mr Jessop’s just — pardon my French — covering his ass?”

“Couldn’t have put it better myself,” said Jack, smiling.

Minutes later, they drove through a tiny hamlet — *Brimley village perhaps?* — and Sarah checked the map on her phone.

Hardly a village at all.

“Should be just a couple of hundred yards,” she said, peering ahead.

Round another blind bend, and there was Brimley Manor.

On a hill, just a hundred yards ahead, surrounded by a huddle of barns and buildings, the elegant ivy-covered building rose above them. Its soft Cotswolds stone caught the late sun, and there was a run of five or six windows on the top floor below tall chimneys and triangular eaves.

A “Conservation Trust” sign on the side of the road pointed to an almost-empty visitors’ car park where Jack swung the car round and parked facing the house, next to an old beaten-up Golf.

From this angle, Sarah saw Brimley Manor as its well-heeled visitors must have done hundreds of years ago: a grand residence enclosed in a formal walled garden. Its expansive front lawns were criss-crossed with gravel paths and dominated by a beautifully carved cherub fountain —