

Matthew Costello

Neil Richards

CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

Mystery at the Manor



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Cherringham — A Cosy Crime Series

“Cherringham — A Cosy Crime Series” is a series made up of self-contained stories. A new episode is released each month. The series is published in English as well as in German, and is only available in e-book form.

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.

His writing partnership with NYC-based Matt Costello goes back to the late 90's and the two have written many hours of TV together. *Cherringham* is their first crime fiction as co-writers.

Main Characters

Jack Brennan is a former NYPD homicide detective who lost his wife a year ago. 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. Two 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 ...

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1. The Attic

Victor Hamblyn sat in his easy chair, one gnarled hand locked on a claw armrest, the other holding — none too steady — a glass of sherry in a cut crystal glass.

No matter that the size of the ‘pour’ seemed minuscule. Victor had other supplies stashed around this draughty castle of a home.

That is — if he could remember where.

Then peeking into the living room, the always cheerful face of Hope, his oh-so-tolerant carer and nurse: “I’m off now, Mr Hamblyn, see you bright and early!”

The sound of her footsteps echoed off the cold stone flags and then he heard the heavy front door slam shut.

He was alone now. He supposed there would come a time when he’d need someone to actually get him to bed, but at ninety-one, amazingly, he wasn’t quite there yet and he’d do his best to postpone that final indignity. He took a sip of sherry.

Nice. Not the best, but he could scarcely afford anything near the best, not these days. But, as he often said in his younger days while sipping an inferior gin and tonic at the Raj Club — it was ‘drinkable’.

Of course, back then anything was drinkable, save for the water, which could quite literally kill you. That, and any uncooked food.

Had things changed in India?

Sometimes, he thought about what it was like today. India, the place of his youth, now supposedly an economic powerhouse while the not-so-Great Britain muddled along.

Another sip. Half gone. Simple pleasures. That’s what a sherry was. That, and one’s memories.

The grandfather clock in the hallway bonged. Still worked, though it had a tendency to lose a few minutes every day. Still that deep, throaty sound! Another simple pleasure.

And with one last sip, he shakily put the glass down. The seat of the chair was high, padded with extra cushions so he could more easily push himself to a standing position.

Two hands on the armrests and ...

Success!

And then Victor Hamblyn began a slow navigation to the staircase.

It had been years since he'd actually climbed the great staircase.

Going up now would be hard without the ugly contraption that Hope had insisted must be purchased.

'Those children of yours. You get them to pay Mr Hamblyn,' she had scolded. 'It isn't decent, you struggling like this.'

And in due course, after the usual bickering the machine had been installed.

Hope had seemed most nervous about leaving him alone to do this part, but when he demonstrated that he could slide onto the seat of the electric chair and fasten the belt to hold him steady for the ride up, she agreed to depart before he was safely ensconced in his bed.

Now, strapped in good and tight, he hit a button and, with a whirring noise, the chair began ferrying him upstairs.

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