

COMPILATION

Matthew Costello

Neil Richards

CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

Episode 4 - 6



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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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Neil Richards

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Thick as Thieves



1. The End of the Rainbow

Jerry Pratt gunned the engine of the old Land Rover and gripped the steering wheel hard as the wheels struggled against the steep muddy slope of Winsham Hill.

"Come on, you beauty!" he shouted as the engine raced and the old wreck slipped and slewed dangerously to one side.

The vehicle lurched forward, tyres at last clawing into the dirt of the old farm track as Jerry regained control.

"Jeez, I thought you'd lost it," said Baz, who was sitting in the passenger seat next to him, his hands gripped tightly on the old metal dashboard.

Jerry looked at his old mate and punched him on the arm, laughing.

"Ha! You was well frit Baz, you fat bastard. Mind you don't wet yourself on my front seat!"

He swung the Land Rover round on the gravel strip in front of the long copse of trees which edged the hill, then stopped and turned off the engine.

"Don't know why you don't just use the track off the cricket pitch like any normal bloke," said Baz grumpily.

"Coz I ain't normal, now am I?"

"Too bloody right, you ain't."

Jerry laughed again, pulled out his cigarettes and offered one to Baz, who shook his head.

"Given up, haven't I?" he said glumly. "Abby doesn't like it. What with the baby here."

Jerry rolled his eyes.

"You want to watch it, mate. You're well under her thumb."

"Yeah well, it'll happen to you one day, Jerry. You just wait."

"No chance. I'm a free spirit me!"

Jerry grinned.

Yep, that's me. Free as a bird, he thought.

Poor as a friggin' peasant too.

He lit a cigarette, grabbed his jacket and climbed out of the Land Rover, looking around as he did. From up here they said you could see five counties — though he never believed it. Just crap made up by the tourist authority, he thought — and anyway so what? What was the point of seeing five counties? They all looked the same. Just fields.

Still — he had to admit. This time of day, it was a nice enough view. Maybe he should make a habit of getting up before eleven ...

He turned back to look at the tree line.

Behind the copse (which he knew was stuffed full of nice plump pheasants at the right time of year) was Cherringham cricket pitch. And behind that was Cherringham itself.

Baz was right — that *was* the best way to get onto Winsham Hill. But it wasn't any fun. And also it was a bit ... public for Jerry's liking. Didn't matter what you did round Cherringham, always some busybody ready to stick a nose in, complain, find fault.

So he preferred the back way, the quiet way, the less *normal* way round the village.

Anyway — where was a young, red-blooded, good-looking bloke like him supposed to find his thrills these days? Certainly not up at the chicken factory turning roosters inside out for six quid an hour.

One day he'd be rich and famous and he'd build a big mansion up here looking out over the five stupid counties and he'd sit on the deck at the back smoking dope and having beers with his mates and the people of Cherringham could stuff it.

"I charged the batteries Jerry, because I knew you'd forget," said Baz from the back of the Land Rover, interrupting Jerry's dreams of a golden future.

"And I didn't bother charging them my old mucker, because I knew you would do just that," said Jerry.

Baz held open the back door of the vehicle and offered up the two metal detectors.

"Choose your weapon," he said, climbing out.

Jerry considered. The Mark IV was heavier — but it gave off less background noise. The Expro-Navigator was lighter, but fiddly.

"Give us the Expro, Baz, got a dodgy shoulder this morning," he said.

"Lifting too many pints I s'pose," said Baz. "All right for some."

Baz handed it over and Jerry rested it on one side while he reached in for his boots. He watched as Baz picked up a spade and the other detector and went over to the crest of the hill and stood, hands on hips, staring out across the valley.

"What shall we do — begin at the bottom and work our way up?"

Boots on, Jerry grabbed his equipment, locked up the Land Rover and joined him.

"Nah, we'll start about halfway, I reckon, then work down."

The top of Winsham Hill was rough meadow — and to one side was the track they'd driven up from the valley. Halfway down, the gradient softened and the land was split into fields of differing crops that went all the way down to the Avon Brooke — a meandering stream that curved around Cherringham and fed into the Thames.

"You see Low Copse Farm?" said Jerry, pointing down into the valley beyond the stream.

Baz nodded: "Butterworth's place, yeah?"

"That's the one. He reckons this strip of land has been farmed for a couple of thousand years."

"So there might have been old buildings down there?"

"Correct. And tracks, roads. Places where people sit. Have a nap. Drop stuff. Lose stuff. Bury stuff. Hide stuff."

"Treasure!" said Baz.

"Yeah, well, maybe," said Jerry. "If we're lucky."

"You haven't been lucky yet, though have you?"

"No Baz, I haven't. Which is exactly why you're here. You're going to bring me luck, old son."

"And do half the bloody work for you too," said Baz.

Jerry slapped him on the shoulder. Baz was born grumpy and needed constant encouragement, he thought.

"Well, yes. This is true. But in return — you will get half the bloody treasure when we find it."

"*If* we find it," said Baz. "And even then we have to split it with Butterworth."

"It's his farm, Baz. His land."

"Don't seem fair to me — he just sits at home having his tea and we do all the work."

"Well them's the rules."

"Hmm, if you say so," said Baz. "But this is the third Saturday I been out helping you and I'm getting a bit fed up to be honest."

"Three Saturdays and no treasure yet? What is the world coming to?"

"No need to take the piss Jerry, I'm just saying, that's all."

"I know mate," said Jerry, softening. "So let's get started shall we? Sooner we start detecting, sooner we get lucky."

And so Jerry hoisted his spade onto his shoulder, lifted his detector and set off down the hill to find his fortune.

2. Finders Keepers

Baz wiped the sweat out of his eyes and straightened up.

Gawd, my back hurts, he thought.

He checked his watch. Five o'clock. Nearly seven hours they'd been working this field. Back and forth they'd gone across the mud, swinging their detectors slowly from side to side, listening out for the tell-tale ping of a find.

They'd started off walking side by side but then Jerry said they should split up and work different sections of the field. Somehow that was supposed to increase their chances, though Baz wasn't quite sure why.

The furrows went up and down the slope and Jerry's logic was that they should go from one side to the other, working against the furrows. He said they'd been lucky it was just ploughed. It was late for Butterworth to be planting maize, but with all the rain they'd had he'd had to wait till the last minute.

Trouble was — all that rain meant the newly ploughed field had turned to mud when they walked it. Baz's boots were clogged and heavy. So from his point of view, it didn't feel lucky at all.

His back hurt. His legs hurt. And his arms hurt from holding the big damn detector that hadn't detected a thing.

Jerry had picked the lightweight detector: no surprise there. Baz knew he was a sneaky bastard, but he never went up against him. You didn't want to fight Jerry — he fought mean and dirty. He was thin as a length of spit and all wiry. He never seemed to eat, all he did was drink, but in a fight Jerry was all muscle.

Like one of those horrible dogs that sink their teeth into you then get all locked and won't let go.

If Jerry was thin — Baz felt fat and slow. He always had been — right the way through school. Obese, they called it now. Same damn difference. Anyway, Abby was just the same as him and she didn't care so why should he?

He leaned on his shovel and looked across the field for Jerry.

At first he couldn't see him — then he spotted him sitting resting against a fence post, smoking. Jerry gave him a wave.

Baz waved back.

Lazy bastard.

He reached into his pocket, pulled out his energy drink and drained it. Last one — empty. Some fine day this was turning out to be. He'd spent seven quid on drinks and snacks, and what had he found so far?

He scraped inside his trouser pocket and pulled out his treasure. One metal button. Two bits of scrap metal. And three shotgun cartridges.

Still, it was nearly over. Just one last square in the corner to do, then they could head home.

He slung his shovel over one shoulder, put his headphones back on, and adjusted the dials on his detector. Then he held it out so the coil was just above the ground, and set off to finish the field.

Not going to do this again. Waste of bleedin' time, he thought.

Jerry watched Baz going backwards and forwards like a zombie in the far corner of the field, and he felt anxious. It was getting close to six o'clock and at this rate they wouldn't get to the pub till seven. Way too late for him!

And what was it with Baz? Why was he so slow?

Maybe I should get someone else to help, he thought.
Tell Baz he's not up to it ...

Truth was — he had a soft spot for Baz. His wife was a right bully — and Jerry knew that if he didn't get him out of

the house for a few hours now and then Baz would just top himself one day.

And — you had to hand it to Baz — he was thorough. Never walked away from a job till it was done.

Jerry ground his cigarette into the mud and headed over to tell Baz to stop.

But he didn't need to. Baz did stop.

Jerry watched as Baz bent down and dug at the ground, then passed the coil over the mud and dug again. Then he got down on his knees and started scrabbling at the dirt with his hands.

Jerry quickened his step.

Baz sat up, took his headphones off and waved to him frantically, suddenly moving fast.

"Jerry! Jerry!"

Jerry didn't need the invitation. He started running and when he reached Baz, the big man was still scraping hard at the topsoil with his spade, flinging great chunks of soil everywhere.

"Whoa, Baz! Stop! Gently, gently, mate!" said Jerry, kneeling down beside him. "You got somethin'? What is it?"

"Got a giant reading, Jerry. *Immense!*"

"Well calm down, calm down now. Could be anything. Bit of old plough. Buried car. Second World War bomb—"

"Bomb? Jeez!"

Baz stood up fast and backed away, dropping his shovel.

"Or ... it could be something valuable — in which case, we don't want to scratch it, do we?"

He smiled up at Baz who blinked and nodded.

"Yeah, right. Could be valuable ..."

Carefully Jerry scraped more soil to one side and felt with his fingers. There was something there all right, something flat, maybe embossed. He tried to lift it — but it was too big, held down by the thick, solid mud and clay which seemed reluctant to release the prize.

Baz kneeled down next to him.

“Like this, Baz,” said Jerry, showing him how to push the soil away a handful at a time. “Nice and gentle.”

It only took a minute — and then finally the shape of the mysterious object was revealed.

It was circular — a good couple of feet across with a raised edge. And heavy. Jerry tried to lift it up.

“Gawd — have a go at that! It’s bleedin’ heavy!”

Baz took the other edge and lifted. His eyes widened in surprise.

“Blimey. It’s metal. But what is it, Jerry? Is it treasure?”

Jerry took the bottle of water sitting in his jacket pocket and poured it onto the object. The mud flowed away, leaving the surface underneath black with a slight blue tint. He looked closely. There were figures etched onto the metal, people without any clothes on, dancing, playing trumpets, holding spears.

“I don’t know, Baz. It might be an old tray. It might be junk. It might be one of them plates you carve a roast on ...”

“B-but it might be treasure?”

Jerry looked at Baz, his face lit up like a little kid at Christmas.

“It might be.”

Though in truth, he didn’t think it was.

When had he ever got that lucky?

3. By the Book

Pete Butterworth sat at the old farmhouse kitchen table, his arms folded, waiting. On his shoulder he could feel his wife Becky's hand — warm, reassuring. He looked around the room. There were five of them in the kitchen altogether — but no one had spoken for some minutes.

At the head of the table, peering at the metal plate through a magnifying glass like some kind of Sherlock Holmes, sat Professor Peregrine Cartwright, one-time Head of Roman Archaeology at the University of Oxford. Every now and then he rotated the heavy object and made another entry in a small notebook which sat on the table in front of him.

Sitting in the kitchen chairs across the table from Pete sat Jerry and Baz — 'the world's most unlikely treasure hunters' he used to call them.

Until now, perhaps.

They'd traipsed in just as he'd finished milking, bringing a trail of mud into the house and both talking so much he didn't at first have a clue what they were on about.

Then they'd gently up-ended the old sack onto the kitchen table and he and Becky had both stepped back in surprise.

"We reckon it's a historic tea-tray," Baz had said.

"Medieval, probably," Jerry had added.

The object still had clods of mud on it and the darkened metal didn't look promising, but Pete had seen enough farm finds in his time to know this wasn't a tea-tray.

And it certainly wasn't medieval.

While Becky carefully rinsed it off in the big old kitchen sink, then placed it on newspapers on the table, Pete had

explained to the two lads the complicated formal process of recording archaeological finds.

The authorities had to be informed immediately and if that didn't happen you'd swiftly get fined five-thousand pounds.

After that the British Museum itself decided whether your find was what they called 'treasure trove'. Then they valued it and paid you the market value after which the amount was usually split between the farmer and the finders according to the agreement they had in place.

"And luckily, Jerry," Pete had said with a smile to his wife, "I've got that very agreement which you signed with me — right here."

And he'd taken out the piece of paper which — if this 'tray' was what he thought it was — would save the house, the farm, his livelihood and his family from going bust before the year was out.

He thought again. *How unlikely.*

Because Pete Butterworth was very broke indeed, and it seemed like only the miracle of hidden treasure would save him from financial meltdown. Lady Repton, who owned this land that Pete's family had farmed for three generations, had already made it clear that come April the rents were going up — again.

Professor Peregrine Cartwright laid down his magnifying glass, closed his notebook and surveyed the room dramatically.

Uh-oh, here comes the news, thought Pete. *What will it be?*

His heart was beating like a steam hammer.

"Firstly," said the elderly archaeologist, "I'd like to say that you acted correctly in calling me here this evening, Mr Butterworth. All historical finds must be correctly notified to the authorities as soon as possible. Requesting the assistance of an expert such as myself — albeit retired, I

must add — to verify such finds always ... How may I put it ... oils the wheels of the relevant processes—”

“Eh?” said Baz.

“He means we’ve got to do this ‘by the book’ and he’s going to help,” said Jerry, as if he was a translator.

“Right,” said Baz, though he still looked confused.

“If I may continue?”

“Please do, Professor,” said Pete.

He realised that Cartwright was used to being in charge and decided he should just let him carry on. Becky moved round, pulled the chair out and sat next to him. Her hand reached for his under the table and she gave it a squeeze.

“Thank you so much,” Cartwright continued smoothly. “Now, first of all we must establish the security of the site. Mr Butterworth, perhaps tomorrow you could get some fencing organised and hire in some additional help in advance of further excavation?”

Pete nodded, not sure where this was going.

“In the meantime, I shall contact the British Museum myself, first thing in the morning,” said Cartwright. “Now, if the artefact is to stay here, you will need twenty-four-hour security. I can recommend a trusted service based in Oxford. They’ve done this type of thing before and you’ll only need it for the weeks it takes the British Museum to kick into high gear.”

Pete looked at his wife.

Round-the-clock security? How in the world could he pay for that? He had heard it could take a year to get the money from something like this.

There had to be another way.

“Professor, is there something else we might do? The bank perhaps. Could they—”

Cartwright produced a small laugh as if the idea was absurd.

“Banks steer clear of such things. Liability issues all over the place. But ...”

Cartwright paused, and looked as though an idea had just occurred to him. He stroked his beard and nodded.

"There is one thing you might do. I could — perhaps — take it with me to my own house in Cherringham? I have a substantial safe designed specifically for the storage of such valuable objects. I suppose ... I could adopt stewardship in this case."

"That would be excellent," Pete replied.

"Then we're agreed?"

"I think that's for the best," Pete looked to Becky for agreement. Luckily, she nodded.

"Hang on," said Jerry. "You mean you're going to *take* the tray? But it's ours!"

"My dear boy," said Professor Cartwright, "I couldn't possibly let *you* have charge of it."

"Why not? It's our tray. We found it."

"I do not dispute that fact. There is no argument about ownership here. Though I should perhaps disabuse you of the notion that this is a tray."

"Eh?" said Baz again.

"Professor Cartwright," Pete interjected, asking what he'd been dying to know since Jerry and Baz had brought it to him. "I just wonder if you could tell us what in fact it is?"

"Of course, of course!" Cartwright replied enthusiastically. "It's a rather fine example of fourth-century Roman silverware. A platter — or plate. Decorated with various marine deities, and with a fine Bacchus and some breathtakingly detailed Maenads."

"Silver?" said Jerry, sounding disappointed. "So, not gold then?"

"Of course not," Cartwright replied, as though the very suggestion was absurd.

"So not worth very much then?" said Baz, now looking rather downhearted.

"On the contrary, I would surmise it is worth rather a lot of money."

Pete's heart skipped a beat.

"Come on prof," said Jerry. "Let the monkey see the nuts! How much are we talking about?"

Professor Cartwright sighed as if the very notion of placing a value on a Roman artefact was the height of bad taste.

"Well ... The Mildenhall Platter — a similar find from the 'forties — is far inferior in workmanship and quality. And the complete hoard was valued then at approximately fifty thousand pounds, if my recollection is correct."

Pete swallowed and felt his wife's hand squeeze his own tightly. Fifty thousand pounds! Even split down the middle, ten or twenty grand would be enough to get the family out of trouble. Across the table Jerry and Baz gave each other a high five.

"Result!" said Jerry. Then to Baz: "What I tell ya?"

"Wahey!" echoed Baz rubbing his hands together in glee.

Professor Cartwright coughed impatiently.

"However, with inflation to consider of course, you might confidently expect the plate to be valued by the authorities today at somewhere between one and one-and-a-half million."

Pete felt the blood drain from his face.

"Give or take a few hundred thousand," the professor added, as if playing with them.

At this the room went silent again and Pete could swear they had all stopped breathing. Professor Cartwright stood and looked down at them all.

"So we all agree that it is probably the wisest course of action that I take the plate — the Cherringham Plate as it will no doubt be known — and store it overnight in my safe?"

Pete was unable to speak. He looked at his wife and saw there were tears streaming down her face.

“Yes,” he said, holding back the tears himself. “I’m sure you’re right.”

“Now if we can wrap it in some material, and help get it into my car ... and then I’ll be off.”

4. Party at The Ploughman

Jack Brennan pulled his Austin Healey Sprite into a space off to the side of The Ploughman's car park, and killed the engine.

Just about the last free space. Must be some kind of celebration going on, he guessed. Maybe he should just head back to The Grey Goose, fix a martini and-

But no. One of his resolutions for the New Year — one which he had been good at keeping so far — was to start living more like a local and less like the visiting Yank.

He was singing in the Rotary Choir, which was a start ... but what would a real Cherringham local do from time to time?

That's right: he'd stop in at the pub, have a chat with whoever might be there. Taking a deep breath, he got out of his sports car and walked up to the double glazed doors of the classic pub.

It definitely seemed like a party inside.

Jack nodded and smiled, seeing a few people that he had bumped into before, and also a lot of new faces. He navigated the crowds to a vacant spot at the bar where three people kept the beers flowing, the foamy heads of pints dotting the bar's countertop.

"Pint of bitter," Jack said with what he hoped seemed like practised ease.

The barmaid, Ellie, cute, maybe the same age as his daughter, gave him a smile as she grabbed a glass and brought it to the old-fashioned pump. While she filled the glass, Jack turned and tried to figure out what was going on here.

Two men stood off to the right near the dart-board, seemingly the centre of attention.

One thin, wiry, the other all round and doughy. They were surrounded by people who, glasses held close, acted as though the two men were visiting royalty, when what they really looked like were down-on-their-luck farmhands.

"Here you go, Jack," Ellie said.

"Thanks," he said scooping up the pint, and vacating the bar, moving slightly closer to hear what the two men were talking about.

"So, tomorrow's when we find what's what. Ain't that right, Baz?"

The thin man nodded towards his friend who responded with a slur in his voice, indicating that he must have been putting away the pints rather quickly.

"Er ... and we'll tell yers all how it went. Drinks on the house!"

One man in the crowd with a full grey beard that masked his face, turned to the group and shouted: "Hear that boys — drinks on the house!"

But Jack saw the thin guy quickly lose his smile and shoot Baz a look that said ... *shut the hell up*.

Baz hurried to clarify.

"When we get our money. You bet. Just n-not now."

The old man with a beard seemed to deflate.

He had been that close to a free pint or two.

"The *perfessor*," the man continued, "says it could be worth a million. Maybe more."

The crowd produced a communal 'oooh'. That was a lot of money in Cherringham. A lot of money anywhere.

Jack turned to a young guy, dressed in overalls, skull cap on his head, listening.

"Excuse me — just curious ... what's up with these guys? Win the lottery or something?"

The guy turned to Jack. "Nah, they found treasure! Roman. Worth tons."

"Really? And they have it here?"

The man shook his head. "Some professor guy has it. Safe keeping until the museum people come tomorrow."

"Big news for Cherringham," Jack said.

But the guy had gone back to listening to the two treasure hunters, now describing in detail exactly how it was found, milking their moment. Jack had a thought as he drained his pint. Could be there was an interesting local story here — and he knew just who to tell.

But first, maybe he'd get a bit more information.

He waited until the crowd of people had thinned: the epic tale of the great discovery had come to an end and, with no free rounds on offer, people decided it was time to sail home.

The man called Baz was slumped on a chair in the corner while the other treasure hunter stood by the pool table, talking to a woman who was as round as he was thin.

Good time to get more information.

He walked over and stood by the two of them for a moment.

Finally the man looked up. Though tall, Jack had a good inch on him.

Jack gave him a smile.

"Congratulations," Jack said, tilting his glass towards the man.

The man grinned back and clinked his near-empty glass.

"Jack Brennan. And quite the discovery, Mr—"

"Jerry Pratt," the man said. "Yeahs, helluva find."

"Had a question."

The man's eyes narrowed. Up close, Jack realised that he had seen him at The Ploughman before — not that he was someone to take note of.

Now though, with great wealth heading Jerry Pratt's way, it was a different story.

"Heard you have a professor looking after your find?"

Jerry told him about the safe, and how tomorrow they'd all be there when the safe was opened and the expert from the British Museum evaluated their prize.

"All? Beside you two, who would that be?"

"Pete, his farm. And Lady Repton, she owns the property."

"All get a cut?"

Jerry acted like he didn't like that thought, since his gaunt face screwed up again, lips pursed. Even with a million to be divided, who wants to share?

Humans are indeed funny when it comes to money, Jack thought.

Though maybe that wasn't exactly the right word.

Jack found out the professor's name — Peregrine Cartwright — but by that point Jerry looked suspicious. "Why all the questions?" he asked.

Jack smiled, hoping to defuse that suspicion. "Got a friend. She puts out the *Cherringham Roundel*, the online newsletter for the village."

Jack might as well been speaking Esperanto.

"Anyway, bet she'd like to cover that story, be there when the expert examines the plate, get your picture."

Jerry nodded. "Yeah, sure. Why not?"

"Good. Big news for Cherringham, right?"

The man leaned into Jack, not as bad as Baz, but still a bit wobbly. "Big damn news for me, that's all I know."

Then he laughed, turning back to the dumpling of a woman, all wide-eyed, standing in apparent adoration of a man who — though he looked like he was shy of two nickels to bang together — in truth might now be a millionaire.

Jack put his glass down on a nearby table and, with another nod to Jerry, headed out to the car, thinking.

Interesting night to drop in at the local. You never know

...

"It's sometime tomorrow morning, Sarah," Jack said.

"Think you can get an invite?"

Sarah sounded excited at Jack's idea. As she had told him, sending out the weekly online newsletter for the Cherringham Council — filled with local updates and events — wasn't much of a gig, but she enjoyed putting it together.

And, he guessed, every penny counted. The discovery of the Roman artefact came as close to real 'news' as anything.

"I heard that Professor Cartwright had retired. Never met the man, seen him about the village. But I could try calling him."

"And the woman who actually owns the ground?"

Jack thought that this whole legal process of discovered treasure was incredibly convoluted and fussy.

Never fly in the States, he knew. Finders definitely keepers there.

"Lady Repton. Never met her either. The Reptons own a lot of the land round here — but word is they're struggling. This could save her ..."

"I'm guessing a lot of people are thinking just that."

"Jack — shall I try to get you an invite as well?"

"No. I can read about in the *Cherringham Roundel*."

Sarah laughed. "Along with the results of the St James Bring-and-Buy Sale."

"Oh, that too." He looked around at the night sky, dotted with stars. It was getting late.

"I'll let you know how it goes," Sarah said.

"Great."

"And Jack — thanks for the heads-up."

"Sure. Speak soon."

The call ended, Jack paused another few moments, taking in the unusually clear sky.

He was struck with an amazing thought. That perhaps right here, on this ancient road down to the river, Roman legions marched by, camped out, battled local tribes.

Right here.

I'm not in Kansas anymore, or the good old USA.

Coming to England and being surrounded by all that history made it seem more alive, somehow — like the plate — buried a few feet underground, a marker left by an empire that once conquered this island.

Maybe tonight, he'd sit for a while and read some Gibbon. Not the easiest bit of reading, but he knew if you wanted to understand how empires rose and fell, Gibbon's history was the one to go to, even after all these years. And with that Jack walked to the Sprite, glad tonight to be a 'local' ... and maybe even thinking it could be permanent.

5. A Surprise at the Professor's

Sarah sat straight-backed in Professor Peregrine Cartwright's sitting room.

Lady Repton occupied a leather chair, a walking stick held tightly in her right hand, with Cartwright by her side. They chatted quietly, while the men stood around the perimeter of the ornate room with its brilliant bronze walls and thick purple drapes, now pulled open, letting sun fill the room.

As for the men — a motley crew indeed, Sarah thought.

The two treasure finders looked as though they'd had a rough night, faces puffy, eyes sunken as if the morning sunlight streaming in might damage their brains.

The farmer — Pete Butterworth — looked nervous; fidgeting as he shifted on his feet, looked at his watch, checked his phone, then began the routine all over again.

Cartwright had seemed delighted when she called, excited that Sarah wanted to cover the evaluation for the *Cherringham Roundel*.

"It's only an online newsletter," she explained. "The Village council asked me to—"

"Of *course*. It's simply wonderful to have an event like this covered. Why, it's history coming to life!"

"And fortunes to be made," she said.

"Er, yes that too. I will need to check with Lady Repton, of course, but I can't imagine she'd have any objections at all. The more attention we bring to this great find, the better!"

Enthusiastic didn't exactly capture the professor's response.

Except now the treasure evaluator from the British Museum was late. Apparently road trouble on the M40. He had sent Cartwright a text to say that he was close, but the delay had put everyone in the room on edge.

Sarah had the thought: *everyone here not only wants the money from this find — they need it.*

Just then the bell to Cartwright's cottage sounded and everyone snapped to; the discoverers doing their best to stand up straight, Pete Butterworth spinning around to face the front door.

Cartwright patted Lady Repton's hand, and with a big grin, he dashed to the front door.

Sarah thought: *this is exciting.*

And as if visiting royalty, the evaluator entered the room.

"Everyone, may I present Doctor Reginald Buchanan, with the Department of Portable Antiquities and Treasure at the British Museum."

Buchanan had a rotund physique that looked like a throwback to another century. A 'bay-window' is what they used to call it, Sarah thought. Wearing a vest which struggled to remain buttoned and sporting a carefully manicured moustache, he had the look of a man who had just stepped out of Mr Wells' time machine.

Something about their manner suggested to Sarah that Buchanan and Cartwright had met before. Made sense — the Oxford history professor and the antiquity expert ...

"Cup of tea?"

Buchanan raised a hand.

The evaluator didn't seem too taken with Cartwright nor had he offered an apology to the assembled group for his delay.

"No," he said, turning the two-letter word into an elongated call one might use to attract an owl.