

COMPILATION

Matthew Costello

Neil Richards

CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

Episode 13 - 15



Contents

Cover
Cherringham — A Cosy Crime Series
The authors
Main Characters
A Cosy Crime Series Compilation
Copyright
A Lesson in Murder
The Secret of Combe Castle
A Fatal Fall
Next Compilation — Episodes 16—18

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 two years 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. Three 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

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Episode 13—15



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Matthew Costello
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CHERRINGHAM
A COSY CRIME SERIES



A Lesson in Murder



1. Sink or Swim

Sophie White raced up the back stairs of Florence House, her footsteps on the worn stone echoing in the cold space as she climbed the three floors.

Damn, damn, double damn, I'm going to be late, she thought. Prep's never supposed to over-run on a Saturday, this is so unfair ...

At the top of the stairs she pulled open the heavy fire door that led to the Sixth Form dorms, ran past the crowded common room, and the kitchen where she glimpsed the usual weekend breakfast crowd.

Oh, cheese on toast, if only I could join in ...

But even if she had time, she wasn't sure she'd be welcome. Freya and her crowd would be in there.

And since the new term started they'd been blanking her.

She reached the end of the corridor, pushed hard on the door to her own room, and in one move flung her laptop bag onto her bed.

"Walk, don't run," came a voice from the other bed.

Sophie looked over: her roommate Hannah was lying back against the pillows watching something on her iPad, her hand hovering over the shared biscuit tin.

"Walking's for Year Sevens," said Sophie digging into her wardrobe, clothes flying. "Can I borrow your tracksuit? Mine's covered in mud."

"Gross," said Hannah with a shrug, munching on a biscuit.

Sophie didn't need a yes — after six years of school together it was unspoken.

What's yours is mine, mine yours. Live fast, die together. Friends till the end. No lies, no secrets.

Each time they moved up a year at Cherringham Hall School for Girls, she and Hannah had bound themselves tighter to each other with a new motto. And now they were in their last year, full-on Sixth Formers, just three terms to go before ...

Sophie stopped herself thinking about that. About leaving. It made a pit in her stomach. Way too scary.

"So what's the rush? Seeing someone?" said Hannah. "Secret admirer?"

"As if ..." said Sophie. "I'm running the Minnows club for Ms. Braithwaite."

"Tough," said Hannah. "Duty calls."

"Exactly."

"Hey — did you know you're late?"

"Very funny."

She grabbed her swimming costume, Hannah's tracksuit and a pair of trainers, then reached over, and pulled out a handful of biscuits from the tin.

"Seventy calories each," said Hannah.

"Doesn't count," said Sophie heading for the door. "It's breakfast."

"That make a difference?"

"Duh, yes. Latest research."

"Gotta love science."

Sophie raced out. "Later ..." she said, over her shoulder.

"Still on for Oxford this afternoon?" she heard Hannah say, as she turned into the corridor.

"Can't wait!" she shouted back, then she was off heading for the stairs again.

She checked her watch. Three minutes — she might just make it.

*

Being late — for anything — was a cardinal sin at Cherringham Hall. Sophie knew the ethos back to front and upside down, it was drilled into all the girls from their first term:

‘Cherringham girls will be bright, independent, free-thinking, creative, confident, resourceful, tolerant — and above all, reliable.’

And the teachers made it clear that while most of those qualities might take a while to develop, the bit about ‘reliable’ — being on time — was one that had to be acquired *immediately*.

She wheeled off the main school corridor and took a short cut through the Dining Hall.

As she slalomed past the formal tables, she glanced up at the portraits of Cherringham alumni on the walls — explorers, poets, politicians, novelists, Nobel-prize winning scientists, businesswomen, International sportswomen.

Sophie and Hannah used to joke that the reason they’d all succeeded was that they were *never late*.

And generally, now that she was a laid-back Sixth Former, Sophie wasn’t that bothered about being a few minutes late. But today was different.

Just a few days ago, on the very first day of term, Ms. Braithwaite had called Sophie into her study and told her that she — yes, *she*, Sophie White — was to be this year’s House Guardian. Short of School Captain, House Guardian was the most responsible position in the whole school.

Now Sophie was terrified of letting Ms. Braithwaite down.

Ms. Braithwaite was the most ... *perfect* teacher in the whole school. Everybody loved her. And she in turn knew everyone in the House, knew all their problems, all their fears and struggles.

If Ms. Braithwaite liked you, if she valued you, there was nothing you couldn't do. House Guardians chosen by Ms. Braithwaite were out there now in the world now doing brilliant things. Sometimes you saw them on the news being interviewed.

Sometimes they were even *doing* the interviews, dressed in those big jackets and helmets they wear in war-zones.

Through the big main front door now, Sophie hit the gravel at the side of the Hall at speed. Out here, autumn leaves billowed in the cold wind — she knew there'd be no teachers around to tell her off for running.

Only Tahir the caretaker's son, trimming the hedges. She saw him look up and watch her as she ran past, then turn back to his work ...

Being late would be unforgivable. The Minnows — the Year Seven swimming club — was Ms. Braithwaite's pride and joy. Being asked to run it was not just a responsibility. It was a privilege.

Ahead she could see the glass and steel of the brand new sports hall — The Prince Said Building. The plush lobby area — where the girls were supposed to wait — looked empty ...

Oh no, they've already gone through, she thought, pulling open the door, and feeling a blast of warmth.

The entrance to the pool was down a flight of stairs at the far end of a glass corridor which gave onto the gym.

She jogged along the corridor. Through the glass she could see plenty of familiar faces from all years pounding treadmills, rowing, spinning ... Some smiled and waved.

She took the stairs to the pool two at a time. The air was even warmer here, she could smell the chlorine, and now she could hear the loud chatter of the Year Seven girls as she headed towards the changing rooms.

Was Ms. Braithwaite here already?

She pushed open the double doors and the noise immediately stopped. She looked around: twenty or so girls in their black regulation swimming costumes, frozen in mid-sentence, stared back at her.

Like statues.

“Good morning, girls,” she said.

“Good morning, miss,” they all responded.

“Is Ms. Braithwaite here?”

There was a pause. Sophie waited to see who would drum up the courage to reply. Did they even know she wasn't even a teacher — just a sixth former?

“No miss. We don't think so,” came a voice from the crowd.

Sophie breathed a sigh of relief.

Phew. She'd got away with it!

“Line up now, girls, and we'll go through to the pool,” she said, echoing the words she herself could remember from all those years ago when she'd been a Minnow too.

“Don't forget to pick up a towel from the basket on the way please. And no talking until we're all lined up — lined up, remember — at the side of the pool.”

Taking a towel herself, Sophie led the girls through into the pool area. While the group followed her instructions, she went through the routines she'd observed so often: she walked around the pool checking the life-saving equipment was all in place, the panic buttons lit, the floats in order, the water pumps functioning.

She took one last look around. Although the pool was underground, the lighting was bright and warm. The water was flat and calm. The room temperature was perfect. When Ms. Braithwaite arrived the class would look drilled and perfect.

Despite the rush, this morning was going to be fine.

*

With ten minutes to go before the end of the lesson, Sophie finally relaxed. The morning hadn't been at all what she expected.

Just moments after she'd lined up the girls by the pool, a message had come from the Staff Room saying that Ms. Braithwaite was 'indisposed' and could Sophie please take the session on her own?

So that's what she'd done. That's what a 'Cherringham Hall girl' was supposed to do, she knew. *Pick up the pieces — and adapt.*

How many times had she heard that over the last few years?

And in the end she'd enjoyed it. She'd got to know the new girls and — she hoped — they trusted her. She'd worked on technique, on confidence, on breathing. She'd pushed them — but not too hard. She'd watched them race and made a mental note of the girls who might have potential.

That's exactly what Ms. Braithwaite would do, she thought.

And now, while she sat high up on the lifeguard ladder, she was letting them have fun, go a bit crazy with the inflatables. She scanned the pool, checking all the girls were safe among the brightly coloured floats and shapes. She watched them splashing and laughing.

Sophie glanced at her watch. She'd given them just another five minutes: if everyone got changed without too much fuss, she could be out of here and on the one P.M. train to Oxford with Hannah. Shopping!

Fantastic!

Then — so fast! — all the lights went out.

The whole pool area turned dark. Blacker than Sophie had ever known: not just a dull, shadowy grey with shapes faintly visible, but a total blackness as if a blindfold had been pressed against her face.

Sophie swayed in her chair and nearly fell, then thought:

Oh my God — the girls!

The laughing and splashing in the pool had turned into cries and shouts, she could hear anxious voices from every corner of the water ...

What's happened? I'm scared! I can't swim! Miss, miss!! I'm going to drown!

Sophie gripped the sides of the lifeguard chair. Her thoughts were racing, but from somewhere deep within, a calmer spirit seemed to take over.

"Listen, girls!" she called out. "The lights have failed. That's all. Nothing to be scared of. Now everyone stay calm. We're all safe. Nobody's going to drown. I promise."

She could sense the children in the water below, listening to her.

"So listen carefully ... I want you to do just what I say? Okay?"

There was no answer.

Louder now.

"Okay?"

Then a series of meek voices. "Yes miss, yes miss ..."

"First — I want you all treading water. Got that? Nice and gently. Don't think about the dark, don't worry. Everyone treading?"

More meek replies from all corners of the black pool.

"Now very slowly — I want you all to swim to the side of the pool — follow my voice. I'll keep talking."

She heard the sounds of splashes, arms slicing the water, legs kicking.

"When you get to the side, grab hold. If you're already at the side, just call out please so that others can swim to you. Okay?"

She heard some voices now just below her ... "Over here! This way? Come on — almost there."

She thought: *this is going to be all right.*

Slowly Sophie climbed down from the lifeguard's chair, until she was standing — she assumed — by the side of the pool.

Her heart was racing.

She breathed deeply and made herself calm down. At the far end of the pool, she knew, was the panic button. But already her sense of direction was falling apart.

It should be lit, she thought. Why isn't it lit?

Somehow she had to walk round the pool, avoiding the floats and rings, and hit that button, to get help.

"How are we doing, girls — everyone at the side of the pool?"

How come I sound so calm ... she thought.

A chorus of voices saying ... "Here. I'm *here* too."

Not one saying that word which could have been so scary in this darkness, the pool turned into a black sea.

The word ... *help*.

They were all working together.

"Well done, girls. Now listen — don't try to climb out. It's too dark. I'm going to get help. Everybody understand?"

More agreement from the sea of voices just below her, the entire class invisible.

Now Sophie put her arms out in front of her and started to walk, then stopped. This wasn't going to work, she could be anywhere; she might just stumble and fall, into the pool

...

So she got down on her hands and knees and crawled on the tiles, her hands flat on the wet tiles, reaching ahead into the darkness, feeling her way forward, inches at a time.

Until ...

Yes! She could feel the shallow drain that ran around the edge of the pool. All she had to do now was follow it until she felt the ladder in the corner, then turn, and crawl

along the width until she was level with where she knew she'd find the button on the wall.

"Everybody okay?" she called softly, as she crawled.

"Yes, miss," came voices from around the pool.

Someone was giggling.

That's good, she thought.

"This is quite an adventure, isn't it?" she said.

More laughter.

At last her hands touched metal — the steps! Now, she just had to slip around them, and crawl down the width of the pool, and then -

With a crackling buzz and a sudden flash, the lights came back on.

For a second Sophie's eyes were blinded. She forced them open and looked around.

The girls were huddled close, lining one side of the pool. She counted them quickly ...

All there — thank God! she thought.

"Everyone okay?" she called.

"Yes, miss!" they shouted.

Someone cheered — and then all of them joined in, whooping and crying out in relief. She watched as they launched themselves from the sides, splashing and shouting, so quickly back to play.

Fear vanishing.

Sophie stood up. Her eyes were wet — she wanted to cry. She took a deep breath and wiped her tracksuit down — it was soaking wet from her crawl.

Time to get the girls out, she thought.

They were getting a bit over excited. The shrieking and laughter echoed louder and louder.

She looked down to the far end of the pool. One group of girls seemed to be ... fighting?

She could see them scrambling and pushing each other.

She saw someone pushed under the water.

Then she realised — they weren't playing.

That screaming wasn't laughter.

What was going on?

As if in slow motion she ran towards the shallow end, where now she could see the girls pushing each other, crying out, as if in a frenzy to get out of the pool.

They're panicking, she thought. *Why?*

Lights are on. Danger over.

I've got to stop this—

And then as she got closer she saw a shape in the water.

Not a float or a ring or a ball ...

Something that didn't make sense. Something that didn't fit, as she tried to figure out what it was.

Then, finally seeing what it was ... understanding what the shape was ... she instinctively recoiled, then with a skid, she fell on the slippery, wet tiles.

A rat.

A rat, floating on the water. Brown, a foot long, its tail seeming longer, its mouth open, hair matted, eyes staring ...

Then another, right nearby, bobbing up and down in the now-heaving water as the screaming girls dragged themselves up the sides of the pool to get away, crying, yelling ...

And as Sophie picked herself up she saw there seemed to be rats everywhere in the pool. Ten, twenty, maybe more ... *God ...*

So many rats floating among the panicking girls as they fought to climb the ladders, and escape.

Their matted bodies pressed against the children's black swimsuits as the water churned.

As the girls scrambled from the pool and ran, Sophie picked herself up, staggered to the now-lit panic button on the wall, and hit it hard.

A siren sounded and red lights flashed.

She turned back to the pool. The last of the girls were running, stumbling along the side towards the exit.

One small girl stood alone in the water of the shallow end, sobbing, frozen, eyes shut. Unable to move, shivering.

Sophie could see dead rats floating all around her.

She reached down under the girl's arms and plucked her from the pool, then pulled, half-carried her, after the other fleeing Minnows towards the safety of the changing room.

2. Cherringham Hall

Jack pulled up in his Austin Healey Sprite right outside Sarah's house and thought about putting up the top.

Although it was a bright sunny afternoon, he'd learnt from bitter experience that October weather in the Cotswolds could flip in an instant.

But if they were going on a run into the countryside, nothing could beat the Sprite with the top down ...

Heck, let's risk it, he thought, and headed for his friend's front door.

It opened before he could even reach for the bell, and Chloe — Sarah's daughter — stood there, hardly recognisable from when he'd last seen her in school uniform in July.

"Hey, Jack — perfect timing!"

"I'm famous for it, Chloe," he said.

He looked at her clothes. Short skirt, summer top, no coat, handbag, full make-up, the works.

Well on her way to being a young woman, with all the challenges that would bring Sarah.

"Rain's forecast," he said. "Chilly, too."

As in ... *maybe you'd want to dress for fall?*

"I know. Mum told me. That's why I need a lift to the station ..."

"Oh," said Jack, grinning.

In many ways, Chloe reminded him of his daughter when she was that young. "I think me and your mom were about to ..."

Jack saw Sarah appear behind her at the door, putting on a coat.

“Don’t listen to her, Jack,” she said. “She’s going to walk; she’s got plenty of time. The station’s minutes away. We’ve already discussed this.”

“Mum, you are so *mean!*”

Yes, he remembered those days. The ‘discussions’ that felt more like battles.

“And Jack’s car has two seats only. Two — remember?”

Sarah handed her some cash, and Jack watched the mother and daughter kiss affectionately.

Good. Nothing serious there.

“Ten quid for the train fare — not for shopping or coffees, okay? No trying to skip the ticket.”

“Mum! When have I ever done that?” said Chloe, heading for the street. “Well okay, maybe once — and I forgot!”

The girl’s grin was irrepressible.

“The one time you got caught, hmm?”

Jack stood back as the familiar scene played out on the garden path.

“See you tonight,” called Sarah, “and text me if you’re going to be late.”

“Yeah, yeah. Bye Mum, bye Jack!”

Jack turned to Sarah: “She is growing up,”

Sarah shook her head. “Tell me about it.”

“We set to go?”

She shut the front door and he walked with her to the car.

“I’ll get you up to speed on the way,” she said, climbing into the passenger seat. “You think we should have the top up if it’s going to rain?”

“Probably,” said Jack. “But hey, let’s live dangerously a little. It’ll be winter soon enough.”

He started the engine and then pulled away.

The little buzzy interchange of Sarah’s family had reminded him how he should get out more often.

That, and the idea that he and Sarah were finally back on a case.

If it was a case. As of now, they knew nothing.

Either way, the thought of the drive to come, through the English autumn countryside had put Jack in a very good mood.

*

Jack pulled off the dual carriageway and nudged the Sprite through a couple of sharp bends, before relaxing as the road straightened out along the crest of a hill.

“So, although it’s a private school, I know you guys call it a public school. I may have been here a while but, well.” He grinned at Sarah. “It still doesn’t make sense.”

“Come on ... It’s like that soda you told me about, the one they make in Brooklyn.”

“Hmm?”

“The egg cream. Has no egg, no cream.”

He laughed. “Not exactly the same thing — but I hear you.” He looked up at the sky, clouds indeed turning darker.

May have to stop soon. Get the top up.

“But okay ... if you go to that school, you get what’s called a private education.”

“Exactly. It’s not difficult, Jack.”

“No, not difficult,” he said. “As long as you agree with me that it’s not logical either.”

And that made Sarah laugh.

Yes, good to be out with her again. They had done and seen so much over the past couple of years.

But it was always fun just to talk.

A New York Yankee in Queen’s England.

The road seemed to stretch for miles ahead.

Roman road, got to be, he thought, something else he’d learned since moving here to live on his river barge. A

straight road meant ancient — predating the hedges and farm tracks, a road made by the conquering legions.

He slipped into fifth gear, just loving the moment, fields and woods dropping away into valleys on either side, big white clouds on a wide horizon.

“How come I’ve never heard of this school if it’s such a big deal?” he said.

“It’s very exclusive,” said Sarah. “And weekends and holidays, the girls tend to go into Oxford or down to London on their time off. Not much in a little village like Cherringham for them.”

“Don’t want to mix with the yokels, huh?”

“I suppose some of the parents might feel like that,” said Sarah. “As for the kids ... look at Chloe. She can’t wait to be off to the big city!”

“Right. You never thought of sending Chloe there?”

“Forty thousand a year? I don’t think so, Jack.”

“Whoa — that’s sixty thousand dollars. Parents have got to be serious players, huh?”

“Oh yes,” said Sarah. “Politicians, oil execs, pop stars, Far Eastern government officials, you name it ...”

“Hence the call to us — and not the police. Discretion’s the word?”

“Exactly. They’ll only talk in person about ... whatever it was.”

Then Jack brought up something they had discussed. A slight change in how they did their detective work. Now with so many cases solved ...

“We going to charge them a fee?”

“I think so — don’t you? The school can certainly afford it.”

“You bet,” said Jack. “Usual split between the local charities?”

Some months back, over a long and pleasurable dinner at the Old Pig on Cherringham High Street, Jack and Sarah

had drawn up a list of suitable good causes that could benefit from their sleuthing.

“Hmm, maybe. Though I was thinking ... Chloe’s school’s fundraising for a new sports track.”

“Okay,” said Jack. “Lion’s share to them — kinda like that. The Robin Hood principle, rich kids to poor kids huh?”

“Exactly. Hey — better slow down a bit, Jack — the entrance is along here somewhere.”

Jack dropped down a gear, enjoying the manual, so different from the automatics back in NYC.

This ... was driving.

“Of course, we’ll have to deliver,” he said.

“When haven’t we?” said Sarah.

“True,” said Jack. “But most times when we get involved in a case, we know what the deal is. This time ...”

“Like I said — when they called, they definitely didn’t want the police looking into it. Had to be in person — and in the strictest confidence.”

Jack slowed. Ahead he could see a discreet sign by a turning: Cherringham Hall School for Girls, Main Entrance.

He indicated and turned. The perfectly tarmacked road dipped down through woods of oak and chestnut, eventually emerging into broad open meadows.

“Wow,” said Jack. “Quite the public school.”

Below, in the valley, among gentle pastures dotted with trees, lay the most beautiful English country house he’d ever seen. Behind it he could see sports fields, tennis courts, accommodation blocks, all carefully landscaped so as not to spoil the view of the house.

“Sarah — whatever you were thinking of charging — add a zero ... I mean, of course, a *nought* at the end, huh? In fact, add two noughts.”

*

Jack parked in the visitors' car park at the back of the main house and put the top up on the Sprite. He'd hardly finished before a smartly dressed young woman came over.

"Ms. Edwards? Mr. Brennan?" she said, offering her hand to them both. "I'm Fliss Groves, the headmaster's secretary. We spoke on the phone. Do follow me."

Sarah watched the woman turn sharply on her heels and head back into the building at a clipped pace. She grabbed her briefcase from the car and looked at Jack.

He winked at her: "You heard what the lady said. It's the headmaster's study for us ... pronto!"

She smiled, then hurried to catch up.

As she crossed the threshold into the school building the smells took her right back to her own school days.

From the age of seven to eleven she'd been at a girls' boarding school near London. Her father had been in the RAF then, stationed overseas, and it was just the done thing to send the kids home to be educated.

She'd hated it — so lonely for her, and when her dad retired and the family moved to Cherringham, she'd been overjoyed to be going to a normal day school — albeit one with two thousand pupils.

Now, looking around the grand entrance hall here, with its two sweeping staircases and tall portraits of pupils past, nothing could be more different from Cherringham Comprehensive.

She and Jack followed the briskly moving Ms. Groves through an archway down a corridor to a door with the word 'Headmaster' etched on it in gold leaf. She tapped gently on the door and entered, beckoning Sarah and Jack to follow.

"Your guests from the village, Gavin," she said, before leaving and shutting the door behind her.

Sarah took in the huge room, filled with light from massive windows. And less an office, more furnished like a country house sitting room: three large sofas around a low

table in front of a log fire. A desk, more modern portraits on the book-lined walls. Oak floors with thick Turkish rugs.

And standing with his back to the window, a tall figure who now stepped forward to greet them both.

“Sarah — Jack — yes?” he said. “I’m Gavin Ward. Welcome to Cherringham Hall.”

He shook Sarah’s hand and she warmed to him immediately. Relaxed, in his forties, she guessed, and with an ex-military air she recognised from so many of her father’s friends.

“I do *so* appreciate you coming out here at such short notice — weekend too, awful of me to presume ...”

“Your secretary made it clear that you had a serious problem, Mr. Ward.” said Sarah.

“Gavin, please,” said the Head. “We’re all on first name terms here.”

He gestured to the sofas and Sarah sat. She watched Jack take the sofa opposite. No accident, she knew from past experience: it was important they had eye contact in these first interviews.

As if they could silently signal when it was a good time for a different line of questioning, like a ball being passed.

“There’s coffee on its way,” said Gavin. “In the meantime, let me tell you what’s been going on.” He took a breath. “What happened.”

Sarah watched him carefully. Behind the urbane smile of his introduction, she could see that he was under some strain.

“Perhaps you will then be able to tell me if you can help us,” he continued.

Sarah took out her notepad and pen. Gavin looked at them both in turn, and then began.

“It all started about a month ago ...”

3. A School Under Siege

“A month. Four terrible weeks. And Jack, Sarah — what I am about to tell you must remain in the strictest confidence. The reputation and security of Cherringham Hall is at stake. More than a century, shaping young girls’ lives—”

Sarah watched Jack raise a hand, and the headmaster seemed to pick up on the fact that he didn’t need to launch into a speech about the long and glorious history of the school and its alumni.

“That goes without saying, Gavin. Sarah and I only want to help your school with whatever the matter is.”

Gavin smiled, nodded. “That is indeed what I have heard about you. Very discreet! Lady Repton was singing your praises.”

“Great lady,” Jack said. He looked over at Sarah.

One of those moments when the ball was being passed.

Sarah ran with it. “Oh — I did mention to your secretary, that although we don’t take a fee for our services, we do suggest a donation to—”

Gavin clapped his hands together. “Of course.” He reached over to his gigantic dark wood desk and picked up an envelope. “I hope you’ll find this appropriate.”

He handed Sarah the envelope.

No need to open it, she thought.

Considering this plush environment, no doubt it was more than adequate.

“Right then,” said Jack. “Perhaps you can give us the details?”

Sarah watched Gavin leaned forward, as if having a conspiratorial chat.

“At first, they seemed like pranks. A fire alarm set off, one whole house evacuated in the middle of the night, even had the local fire brigade turn up. That’s the kind of thing some of the more spirited — um — antic girls would do.”

“Sure. Sounds like it,” Jack said.

Despite what was sitting in the envelope, Sarah was beginning to wonder if there was anything here for them to investigate at all.

“Then, there was the food incident ...”

“Food?” Sarah asked.

Gavin nodded. “One dinner, and everyone who had the potato dauphinoise fell ill. Really ... ill. And trust me, our kitchen is pristine, absolute highest marks for cleanliness, food preparation.”

“You think someone slipped something into the dauphinoise?”

Gavin raised his hands. “How else?” He took a deep breath as if stealing himself. “Then there were the cars ...”

“Hmm?”

“Three of the staff’s cars were vandalised. Tyres slashed. Some of our best people! We kept that quiet, of course. But now I was getting rather worried.”

“You could have called the police on that one,” Jack said.

“When we didn’t know who or why? With all the support our parents have for this institution? I mean, what if it had been one of the girls?”

“A Cherringham Hall girl?”

Gavin leaned back. “Over the years, we have had our more difficult students. We’re not immune to the vagaries of our society today. Usually they are dealt with ... one way, or the other.”

Kicked out, Sarah guessed, no matter how much money Mum and Dad had.

“But this most recent incident, from yesterday. I think — when you hear — you’ll understand why we called you. Frightening, really.”

Sarah sensed that the headmaster was reluctant to even tell them what had happened.

"It happened in the pool ..." he began.

*

When Gavin stopped, Sarah saw Jack look over.

Probably making sure my head isn't spinning after that grisly tale.

"Wow," Jack said. "The other things — guess they are all serious enough. But that, those girls, the floating rats. Yikes ..."

"Exactly. I have had to speak personally to each and every one of the girls' parents, to reassure them that we would spare no expense in finding out how such a thing could have happened."

No expense.

Yes, Sarah guessed, whatever cheque sat in the envelope it would be for a significant sum.

But when Gavin Ward stopped, he looked from Sarah, then to Jack.

"I'm sure now you'll understand why I called you. So tell me, what do the two of you make of this? Does any of it make any sense?"

And Jack nodded, reached out for his cup of coffee. He took a slow sip.

The man likes his thinking time.

Then he slowly put the cup down.

"Tell me, Gavin ... does anyone have a grudge against the school?"

Too quickly — Sarah thought — Gavin shook his head.

"Impossible. I mean, we provide the very finest education, and the absolute best guidance onto and into University. We're such a ... friendly school. I can't imagine anyone having what you call a 'grudge'."

Another nod from Jack. "Because it seems to me, with all the events you have told us about ... well, there is escalation there. Each one, a bit worse. And despite what you said, it sounds a lot like someone sending Cherringham Hall a message."

Gavin leaned close again.

"A message? What kind of message, for God's sake?"

It felt like that to Sarah as well.

Someone wasn't happy. And all the incidents were exactly what would happen if someone had it in for the exclusive school.

"The message?" Jack finally said. "Not sure. I think that's why you called us, yes? To find out. And if you give Sarah and me some time to discuss, I think we might begin."

Gavin nodded.

"Of course. I'll tend to things outside. You can chat here. If you need anything, the button on my desk summons Fliss."

As Gavin stood up, Sarah said: "We'll do our best."

Jack stood as well. "You have a fine school here, Gavin. So — I'd really like to find out why someone means it harm."

Sarah looked at Jack.

The word — *harm*. Interesting. Hinting that already Jack suspected there were secrets, maybe things the headmaster omitted.

Hinting that as much as he needed their help, they might not get everything from Gavin Ward that they could use.

We've been here before. People holding things back.

Gavin took both their hands at the same time, a polished smile back on his face. "Good to hear. So — I'll leave you to your ... plans."

And then he walked out of the enormous room, leaving them alone.