

AMY MYERS

CLASSIC CASHES IN

A Case for Jack Colby, Car Detective



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CLASSIC CASHES IN

A Case for Jack Colby, Car Detective

Amy Myers



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all situations in this publication are fictitious and any resemblance to living persons is purely
coincidental.

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*In memory of
Dot Lumley
Super-Agent, Super-Friend*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Jack Colby's sixth recorded case takes place in Kent, where he has his classic car restoration business at Frogs Hill, near Pluckley. It's from here that he also carries out his car detection work. As in his previous cases, some of the settings are fictitious, including Monksford, Frittenhurst, Staveley Park, and Piper's Green, the nearest village to Frogs Hill.

My thanks for helping me with information go in particular to my friend Douglas Tyler, who graphically described to me his experiences as a bank clerk in Hull in the late 1940s, to my car business partner and husband James whose input on classic cars has been the backbone of the Jack Colby series, and to John Bath, chair of the Packard Club of Great Britain. Their help was invaluable, and the interpretation I have put on it is my own.

The team at Severn House has as always been a pleasure to work with, and my thanks are especially due to my editor Rachel Simpson Hutchens and cover designer Piers Tilbury. They've done Jack Colby proud.

ONE

Robberies in days of yore, a getaway car....

‘A *Packard*?’ I repeated blankly. A fleeting memory of *The Ladykillers* came to mind, which features a black 1930s’ Packard in that role, while in the United States it was famed as a magnificent family car. So how did a classic 1936 Packard tie up with the austere sixtyish well-dressed gentleman currently entertaining me to tea in a superbly English country house? ‘You want a *Packard*?’

‘Not a *Packard*, Mr Colby,’ the dry voice explained. ‘*The Packard*. Or if you prefer, a *particular Packard*. An eight-cylinder, right-hand drive, One-Twenty saloon, registered in England although not with the original registration number. Probably pale butter yellow in colour, originally black.’

‘May I ask why this particular car—’

‘No, Mr Colby, you may not.’

I can do dry and stuffy too. ‘In that case, I can’t accept this job. I need to know the context. I work on a freelance basis for the Kent Police Car Crime Unit, and therefore any other job I take has to be that in mind.’

Philip Moxton stared at me thoughtfully. At least he wasn’t an eye contact evader, which was good sign. ‘I used to own this *particular Packard*,’ he said at last. ‘I was obliged to sell it. I want it back. Legally,’ he added, super drily. ‘I don’t expect you to don a mask and striped jumper to whisk away from its current owner, whoever he – or she – might be.’

I laughed. ‘Put that way, I’m almost sorry I can’t dress up in fancy clothes. Have you any idea where this *Packard* might be?’

‘Roughly, yes.’

Again, I was thrown, struggling for a clear idea of the possible task ahead. ‘Then why employ me to find it?’

‘I want you to buy it for me.’

My face, as they say, must have been a study, and it was his turn for mirth – although his was in the form of an unwilling grimace. ‘I shall pay for it. Never fear.’

‘Whatever the cost?’

‘Whatever the cost.’

‘And if it’s not for sale?’ I was even more puzzled now.

‘Its owner has recently died.’

Even more curious. ‘Then—’

He cut me off impatiently. ‘Because I wish it to be bought anonymously. Come, we are wasting time.’

Clearly this was not usual for the chair of the very exclusive Moxtons, the private banking arm of the huge conglomerate Fentons Bank, despite the fact that today he was ‘relaxing’ at his home, Kentish stately mansion called Staveley House. Nor in fact was wasting time usual for me, Jack Colby, car detective. I was beginning to be sorry I’d come. It had been hard enough to find the place.

Staveley House was not far from Tenterden, in the west of Kent, but was the most private of private

country houses I had ever seen. Hidden down a lane leading off a minor road, the entrance to its grounds was so well concealed that one needed more than satnav to find it. I'd been given directions of course, but the gateway had seemed at first sight merely to be the vehicular entrance to a small Kentish stone cottage. It looked far more like a weather-beaten farmgate than the way to approach the no doubt sizeable home of a banking magnate.

Having opened the gate, I had driven in with caution. Evergreen trees and bushes shielded the entrance from undue interest from the casual passer-by and shrouded in mystery the path beyond. Even as I closed the gate behind me I expected a furious farmer to leap out of the cottage to accuse me of chicken rustling – especially as one or two had been pecking incuriously at the roadside.

No one had leapt out, however, although, as I got back into my classic Gordon-Keeble again (having to impress new clients), it seemed to me that the cottage windows exuded an air of careful guardianship. Certainly it had been easy to imagine human eyes behind them watching my every move.

I had then driven along a track bordered on both sides with woodland, with leafy bushes pushing their way outwards over the path with all their late summer confidence. Then abruptly the woodland had ended and given way to a vista of seemingly endless parkland. I had driven well over half a mile before I reached a stark sign reading 'Car Park' and it had been clear my car would have to remain right there. I had left my Gordon-Keeble somewhat nervously as it is very precious to me. Reason had told me however that it was as safe there as in its barn-cum-garage at Frogs Hill where I lived. Emotionally I didn't like abandoning it, but needs must when the mortgage has to be paid and a lucrative job might lie ahead.

I had duly walked along the drive somewhat uneasily wondering what was in store for me, until I was faced with a high wall of neatly trimmed yew hedge, with a gateway that at last gave me a sight of Staveley House. At first glance it had looked mock-Tudor, with its black beams, white plaster, red Kentish peg tiles and a rambling building with the odd gable or tower. A second look, when I took in the splendid chimneys, told me this was the real McCoy, sixteenth-century brick in places and probably much earlier in parts.

Philip Moxton had been there to greet me at the open central door, indicating that some kind of security system had warned him of my arrival. It probably consisted of cameras disguised as blackbirds in the trees. OK, perhaps that was a step too fanciful, but this chap certainly had security on his mind when he bought this place.

Staveley House, I thought, was the kind of stately pile that should have a Rolls-Royce outside, with perhaps a Bentley or two for the kids. So why, I wondered, looking at Philip Moxton now, sipping a cup of tea from an antique bone china teacup, did he want a Packard, even if it was a *particular* Packard. It was true that Packards had been a status symbol in Britain in the nineteen twenties and thirties, but that didn't explain why a man only born, at a guess, in the early fifties would want one. Was it a family car? Possibly, I supposed, in which case a Packard might evoke memories of his childhood long past if his parents had one hanging around. Even so, why should he ask me to buy it for him anonymously, and not tell me the owner's details?

There was one indisputable fact – that he wasn't going to tell me any more. That deceptively mild expression told me he had quelled and quashed far more vigorous questionings than mine. His expression also implied that I could take the job or leave it.

What did I have to lose provided the money transfers were sorted properly? I'd take the job – with a double check. 'Whatever the cost?' I repeated.

'Yes.'

‘One problem then. If I turn up at the dealer’s or owner’s place with the cash I look like a dodgy character. If I give the seller a cheque that also could lead to a problem,’ I explained delicately. I wasn’t in the habit of having twenty or thirty thousand pounds hanging around the Frogs Hill Classic Car Restoration Company business account, let alone in my own private one.

‘I’ll arrange an express bank transfer.’

‘Certainly, but I need to understand you better first.’

He flinched. ‘This is not a social meeting, Mr Colby.’

‘I agree. So we can talk frankly. I can buy the car in the name of Frogs Hill Classic Car Restoration Company, but even so arrangements have to be made. I will be buying it on behalf of a customer, who – I can legitimately say – wishes to remain anonymous. However, that will arouse curiosity in itself. Will you take that chance?’

‘I shall have to do so. Naturally I realized that whether private seller or dealer, there would be an element of risk. Apart from the question of anonymity, I do not know you, except by reputation. That adds to the risk. Do you have more questions?’

The chair was clearly bringing the board meeting to an end by this flattening analysis. It was time to show that I wasn’t to be flattened.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘Why?’

To my surprise instead of cutting me off, he answered me. ‘Because, Mr Colby, I must have the Packard before I die. And that may be very soon.’

That naturally shook me. ‘I’m sorry to hear you’re in ill-health.’

‘I am in perfect health. There is, however, every possibility that I shall shortly be murdered.’

Top that for an exit line. I was so shaken I couldn’t wait to get away, so after a brief exchange of details of procedure I left to rejoin my Gordon-Keeble with great relief. Oddly, I realized I’d rather taken to this man, and surely he couldn’t be serious about his prediction? On the other hand, he didn’t seem the jokey sort, and certainly Staveley House and its grounds seemed to be going overboard in their efforts not to be noticed. The windows of the room where Philip Moxton and I had been sipping tea looked out over the rear gardens which were a spectacular sight with late summer dahlias – but deserted. Did he live in this place alone, I wondered? Had he an army of servants hidden behind green baize doors? Hard to tell.

As I drove up to the stone cottage at the entrance to the grounds, there was still no one to be seen. I opened the gate and drove through, but once again had that prickly feeling down my spine as though I was being watched. Human eyes? Or my imagination? It was pretty odd for the owner of Staveley House to state he was facing the possibility of his own murder but yet have a gate that opened to the touch, an empty lodge and no overt security measures; which suggested there were many of these around, but that they were state of very high art.

I reached Frogs Hill with gratitude. My home lies a few miles from Pluckley on the Greensand Ridge, with the lowland of the Weald of Kent spread out before it. The nearest village is Piper Green, but once there you would still have to work hard to track down Frogs Hill, which lies at the end of winding lanes that amble peacefully along the side of the ridge.

Driving through the gates, I began to relax as the familiar aroma of petrol, oil and grease that speckled my home met my nostrils. It comes from the Pits, our name for the converted barn that houses the Frogs Hill Classic Car Restoration Company. Here, Len Vickers and Zoe Grant are installed, working away to their hearts’ content on such exciting projects as a Jaguar 120 gearbox overhaul and a complete rebuild of a Sunbeam Alpine’s running gear.

Len is sixty plus and curmudgeonly; Zoe is nearly forty years his junior and sharp witted. They ignore the differences between them – if they even notice them – and get on famously through the joint love, the innards of classic cars. Occasionally I'm allowed to help under their eagle-eyed supervision, but really they prefer me to keep to my own quarters in the farmhouse. I do pay the wages, however, so I can demand a modicum of their attention from time to time.

Now was one of those times. Except that I balked at the last moment. It was clear as I got near the Pits that they were both engaged in anxious consultation over a gearbox main shaft and would have no time to spare for what they consider to be unimportant queries from the boss. I left them to it. It was Tuesday, and the Jaguar was already overdue to be restored to its owner in pristine condition.

'What bells do nineteen thirties Packards ring for you?' I asked casually the next morning.

'*Ladykillers*,' Len replied. He isn't a verbose man and he continued reassembling the Jaguar gearbox.

'Right. The Ealing Studios film. One of the cars Alec Guinness and gang used in the getaway after the robbery.' The film had come out long before I was born, but it was one of my parents' favourites.

'Nifty in traffic,' Zoe contributed. 'Clutch and gear shift work like a dream.'

'I know a chap who wants one,' I explained. 'He's not planning any bank robberies so far as I know. Heard of any around?'

'Ask the Man Who Owns One,' Len replied in a rare display of wit. Even I knew the famous Packard advertising slogan.

'Or Harry Prince,' Zoe added, to wind me up.

'No way.' I refused to be wound. Harry Prince, local garage chain magnate, has a hand in a great many pies and he'd like Frogs Hill to be included. That's not going to happen. Harry isn't all bad, but discretion only applies to his own welfare and concerns. Over anyone else's he has none at all.

When Dave Jennings, who runs the Kent Police Car Crime Unit, offers me a job, I can bank on that it's going to involve brain power – naturally enough because he has a great team which means I get the awkward ones. This job for Philip Moxton therefore sounded a bonus in that it should be reasonably straightforward. Which contrariwise made me suspicious that it wasn't going to be anything of the sort.

I was right. When I rang the Packard Club and various other motoring organizations the net result was that there was a rumour that one or two were available in Kent, but nothing more to back it up. That meant I either had to work my way through all the classic car dealers and magazines or use my contacts. I had had strict instructions from Philip Moxton to ring him as soon as I had a line on the car. I should tell him the price, he'd then give me the banking details and as soon as the cash went through I should pick the car up and deliver it to him.

I would have been amazed if I hadn't had fair warning that this was an unorthodox sale. 'Buy sight unseen? What about a test drive?' I had queried.

'Not necessary.'

'Won't the seller think that strange?' I had asked mildly.

A pause. Then: 'Find out the price. Tell me. Ring the seller. Go to see it, and buy it, whatever state it's in. If it's not currently registered or if they want to keep the plates, use your garage plates to bring it straight here. Don't stop for formalities.'

He really was eager. First find your Packard, I thought as I meditated on Zoe's 'kind' suggestion about Harry Prince. The classic car world is a close one which is good – usually – but on the outskirts of this tight-knit circle wolves prowl hopefully around, and Harry is one of them. So definitely not Harry for this job. Then, watching Len and Zoe at work, I had another idea.

Another prowling wolf, less ferocious although even more irritating than Harry, is Zoe's parasite sorry, partner – Rob Lane. Rob has many infuriating qualities, but he's not a crook and brought up amidst the moneyed upper classes as he was, he knows that one does not split on a chum. I am *not* one of his chums, but I am his partner's boss, and therefore his meal ticket, so the same code – albeit warily – is applied to me.

'Is Rob around?' I asked Zoe.

'Working at Favvers.'

Working? Rob? I wisely didn't comment, but drove my Alfa straight over to his parents' gigantic farm near Faversham (Favvers for short). Rob was there, true enough, but working? He was sipping coffee and watching cricket on the office TV. That's my lad. Or rather Zoe's lad, luckily.

'Been to any good car shows recently, Rob?' I asked him cheerily.

'No.' Silence as he watched another few balls. Then he gave me a break. 'Why?'

'Looking for a 1936 Packard that's said to be up for sale round these parts. Confidential job.'

'Ah.' Rob looked wise.

'Thought you might know. Probably a private seller.'

My thinking went this way. Rob moved in the higher echelons of Kent society, thanks to his parents. When William the Conqueror invaded England in 1066 he was famously visited by a contingent from Kent intent on keeping its own economy intact, and I bet Rob's forebears were leading it.

Therefore, as Packards were in their day a status symbol and as Rob and his father like classic cars they might well know who owned the Packard I was after. There couldn't be that many in Kent.

'Who's after it?' he asked.

'Me, Or rather Frogs Hill. As I said, it's hush-hush, but we've got a customer.'

'Fair enough, Jack. Commission?' Rob is sharp when it comes to cash.

I swallowed. 'A sweetener for you.'

I hadn't checked expenses with Philip Moxton but my guess was that this would prove no problem.

'Done. Leave it to me,' said Mr Rob Fixer grandly.

I gave him the details of the Packard I was after. 'I need a price first,' I explained.

His eyes flickered. It's his way of trying to look intelligent which in many ways he is, otherwise Zoe would not fancy him. To me his sex appeal looked non-existent, but then how would I know? Zoe can go into raptures over a Ford Edsel on occasion, so there's no judging what she sees in him.

I wasn't certain I was following the right course in handing Rob the job on a plate, but it was worth a go. Zoe and Len were still engrossed in the Sunbeam Alpine overhaul when I returned to Frogs Hill so I faced up to my responsibilities as a businessman and took the accounts – seriously behind – into the farmhouse garden to work on. This took a fair time and I didn't finish until the early evening.

If you're happy, a summer's evening can be blissful in late summer; if you're not it's the saddest time of day as the sun remembers it's nearly time to depart. It has one last burst with the flower scene strong, birds saying goodbye to their latest broods, and nature at the peak of its fulfilment – which is what makes one sad if one isn't fulfilling anything. Frogs Hill is a refuge, a place of healing, but it's incomplete without someone with whom to share it. Ladies had come and gone at various times in my life, kicking off years ago with my divorce after an early ill-fated and brief marriage.

There's only one lady (apart from my daughter who lives in Suffolk) with whom I had wanted to share Frogs Hill since that time, and that is Louise, who had sailed into harbour only to disappear on the dawn tide. Recently my hopes had been revived, but having succumbed to the temptation to track her down I discovered that she was by then filming in Australia. The mobile number I had for her no longer worked. Emails remained unanswered. The sun was definitely sinking on that false hope.

Only twenty-four hours after I had seen Rob the phone rang. He sounded highly pleased with himself – but then he always does, so I didn't get too hopeful.

'Found it,' he chortled. 'It's for sale – private, not a dealer.'

'Terrific, Rob.' For once I meant it.

'Told them it was for Frogs Hill, as you said, Jack. They asked who the customer was.'

As I'd guessed. 'And you said ...?'

'Not etiquette for you to reveal it.'

'Thanks.' I meant that too. 'Sheer genius on your part.'

'I know.'

Modesty is not his strong point. 'What's the price?'

'Thirty-five thousand.'

That sounded roughly in the right area although on the high side. 'Who's the seller?'

He gave me the address, which was near the village of Frittenhurst, not that far away. 'It belonged to Gavin Herrick, the actor. Died recently. Remember him?'

I did. He must have been a fair age because I remembered seeing him in TV and films years back and not that long ago I'd seen him in a cameo part. His suave style and figure carried him through despite his age.

'Gavin was a pal of my grandfather,' Rob added. 'Well over ninety when he died. Family wants to get rid of the car. I spoke to the son, Tom Herrick.' He paused. 'Had a bit of trouble though.'

There had to be a downside. 'In what way?'

'They were still very curious about this customer of yours. The son's wife – she's a cool one – said they didn't want to sell it to just anybody. The car had to have a good home.'

I'd met this attitude amongst classic car owners occasionally, but this one was unusual as it was coming not from the owner but from the next generation. Normally that means the inheritor determined either never to sell it at all or to offload it on the first good offer.

'They're looking forward to meeting the customer,' Rob continued. 'Is that on?'

'Certainly. The customer is Jack Colby.'

'Over to you, Jack. But bear in mind my reputation is at stake. This sweetener is going to have to be good.'

His reputation? As a country lounge lizard? I managed to keep a serious note in my voice when I replied, 'Naturally, Rob. You deserve it.'

'I know I do.'

I thought this Packard story over carefully, wondering whether my imagination had been overworking. What it told me was that I was not getting the full story. Having come to the conclusion that it was on the right lines, I decided to ignore instructions and visit Philip Moxton unannounced. Caught on guard, he might be more forthcoming, and after all, surely not every casual visitor would be shot on sight.

I took the Alfa this time instead of the Gordon-Keeble. My daily driver would make it look less like a state visit on my part and more of a 'just passing by'. The gate was again unlocked, but I did notice that mysteriously it seemed to lock itself judging by the sharp click as I shut it. Odd. Those windows still glared at me but again no armed guard leapt out.

Someone else did though. A middle-aged man with a scruffy beard, working clothes and suspicious eyes. He was carrying a mug, and looked mightily surprised to see me. He didn't offer me a coffee but he did study me, my car and then me again with great care.

‘Morning,’ I greeted him guardedly.

‘Morning,’ he growled, turning his attention to the coffee, although as I climbed into the Alfa I felt his eyes returning to me. No shotgun took out my tyres as I drove off, so either I must have passed muster or there was a booby trap ahead.

This time I saw a gardener or two in the park, but the car park was empty of human life. Only a line of cars suggested that staff or anyone else was around. Although there was no apparent booby trap, I still had the uncomfortable feeling that there was something wrong about this set-up. Nevertheless I reached the house in one piece and rang the bell.

I thought at first no one would answer it, but then the heavy door was dragged open.

It wasn’t Philip Moxton on the other side.

It was a woman in carpet slippers with a pair of rose nippers in her hand. Offensive weapon? She was clad in smock and jeans, and looked about sixty or so. The housekeeper? No, she looked more like a gardener on the wrong side of the front door.

‘Could I have a word with Mr Moxton?’

‘Who?’ she barked.

That took me by surprise. Maybe she was deaf. ‘Philip Moxton,’ I shouted.

‘No need to yell. And no you can’t.’

‘Is he out?’

‘I’ve never heard of him, whoever he is.’

She really could not have heard. I tried again. ‘He owns Staveley House. He lives here. *Philip Moxton?*’

That did it. She glared at me. ‘I own this house, thank you very much.’

Just my luck to run into the mad woman of Staveley House. ‘Where is he then? In London?’

‘Get out,’ she boomed. ‘I’ve never heard of this Moxton person.’ And then she slammed the door in my face.

Rebuffed to say the least, I drove back to the gate where thankfully the bearded man was now sitting on the dilapidated bench sipping whatever was inside the mug. He was eyeing me rather triumphantly. I thought, while he played his role as village yokel. And role it was, I was sure of that.

‘Can you tell me when Mr Moxton will be returning?’ I had his mobile number to ring but I was feeling obstinate.

‘Wrong house, sir. Never heard of him.’

‘But I visited him here only two days ago.’

‘Not here. I’d have seen you. These big houses all look alike, don’t they?’

‘This *is* Staveley House, isn’t it?’

‘That’s right.’

‘Then it belongs to Mr Moxton whether he’s here or not.’

‘No, sir, it doesn’t and he don’t live here.’

‘Who was it answered the door to me? A lady about sixty, likes gardening.’

‘That would be Miss Janes. She owns this place. Staveley House. It’s hers.’

TWO

Now you see him, now you don't ... Was this a joke? Optical illusion? Were there two Staveley Houses? Out of the question. Philip Moxton was a high-powered billionaire banking executive and not the kind of man to plan elaborate hoaxes. Nor would he employ eccentric house- or gate-keepers. I supposed this Miss Janes might be an eccentric relation but that didn't fit in with the gatekeeper's statement that she was the owner. True, Moxton claimed to be afraid of being murdered, but that wouldn't extend to repelling all legitimate callers. Tax avoidance measure? My take on Philip Moxton was that if he was worried about unexpected guests he'd have a secure gate and security system with guards, not one crusty old gent at an unlocked gate.

'How's the job looking?' Zoe asked me when I reached Frogs Hill. She'd actually left the Pits to question me.

'Very murky. The gentleman was not only not in but not known.'

Zoe frowned. 'Rob says he's an odd bloke.'

'Does he know Philip Moxton or just know of him?'

'Both. By repute and met him once. So go steady.'

'Yes, Mum.'

She glared at me and stalked back to the Pits. Which left me to ponder on my next step. One thing was clear. I wasn't going to put so much as a finger into this potential lions' den until I had investigated further.

I wandered round to the rear of the farmhouse to the barn-cum-garage in which my Lagonda and the Gordon-Keeble live. The Lagonda is a 1938 model redolent of the heady days before the Second World War removed them; although, even then, if one were lucky enough to get petrol, a Lagonda symbolized a kind of hope. The Gordon-Keeble was a sporting symbol of a different age, the 1960s not of Carnaby Street and the Beatles but the years that held a firm assurance that Britain was heading somewhere good. Nothing that the succeeding decades have thrown at us has dented that image for me.

The Lagonda lifts my heart, the Gordon-Keeble is my faithful friend. They are comforting and reliable. Any problem they present can be worked on and fixed. I wasn't so sure that Philip Moxton's job would fall under this category.

OK, I silently addressed them both. Where now? This job was already presenting the unexpected and never a good sign. I like challenges, but this one had all the hallmarks of being one that might escape out of my control. Brake failure! Time to grab the steering wheel, I told myself, so I took a deep breath and returned to my landline to begin.

Philip Moxton had given me his mobile number, which surely wouldn't be something that a banking magnate would normally hand out to a temporary employee. Experimentally I tried his landline first. Even if he was in London for the day, he'd be home by now.

At least the call was answered. 'Wrong number,' snapped the voice that had greeted me the afternoon – if greet was the right word for our encounter.

‘Nevertheless would you tell Mr Moxton ...’ but I was speaking to a dialling tone.

~~I had half expected that reply, and it goaded me on. Now for the mobile number. I fully expected to be on voicemail, but it wasn't. I was pleasantly surprised to hear Philip Moxton's voice, albeit with a mere ‘Yes?’~~

‘Jack Colby,’ I replied.

Immediately the tone of voice changed. ‘You have found it? You have a price?’

‘I do. Thirty-five thousand.’

I decided I would get the business done first, rather than tackle the question of his vanishing act. There was such a silence at the end of the line that I hastened to say, ‘It looks a reasonably good deal depending on the condition. You may be in luck.’

‘May I?’ he asked oddly. ‘Is this a private seller or dealer?’

‘Private. It's over the market price, but I can negotiate—’

‘Private,’ he repeated. ‘And thirty-five thousand pounds. Thank you, Mr Colby. Accept the offer provisional on speedy viewing to check it is the car I require, make the appointment, notify me, and do what you need to in the way of formalities, put the Packard on your garage plates if you wish, but buy it, whatever the apparent drawbacks. Make a cash deposit of fifteen hundred pounds, express the rest of the money to the seller, pick the car up, notify me on this number and drive it straight to me. And he must have heard my intake of breath – ‘you must naturally be concerned about your account. I shall transfer the entire amount of money to you now, plus a commission element which I trust will cover your fee.’

This time I recovered my breath, though to little avail. ‘But—’

‘The money will be in your Frogs Hill account at nine a.m. tomorrow, Friday, Mr Colby, if you send me the details. And, just one more matter, I believe it possible the seller will guess who the customer of yours is. Is there any way of avoiding that?’

‘Only by inventing a fictional customer, which I dislike doing, or better by continuing to insist I cannot reveal it.’

‘Which will provide them with the information they seek,’ he murmured. ‘I understand. However, I am prepared to take the risk, despite its dangers.’

He began to bid me farewell, but it was my turn for ‘just one more thing’. Two in fact. ‘First,’ I asked him, ‘suppose this car isn't the one you owned?’

‘I'm a wealthy man, Mr Colby. I will email you tonight the chassis and engine numbers of the Packard I require. It's unlikely that anyone would go to the length of falsifying the numbers in order to kid me this is the car I am after, so the information I am sending you should be sufficient. And your second question?’

Now for it. ‘You say drive the car to you. Where would that be?’

‘To Staveley House of course.’ He sounded surprised.

‘But today I was passing nearby and thought I'd call on you to give you the news in person. I was given short shrift by the lady who opened the door who claimed she had never heard of you.’

‘A security matter, Mr Colby,’ he replied dismissively, ‘to avoid nuisance and other unwelcome callers. That is a necessary step in my position, both on the telephone and in person. Provided you call this mobile number there will be no problem.’

Put that way, it was reasonable enough, I supposed. I've never been a billionaire banking tyro so I wouldn't know. Nevertheless I still had a feeling that I was treading on quicksand. It had not escaped my notice that while being concerned about his own anonymity in the matter, he had not questioned me on the name of the seller. However, so far everything was perfectly legal, albeit unusual, so why

was I to turn down what promised to be a generous payment for very little work?

It was indeed generous. Fifty per cent commission on thirty-five thousand was something to be welcomed – although I had to remember that Philip Moxton had probably not made his millions by being overgenerous without reason. The money had arrived as promised, but the owners could not see me on the Friday, a fact that Philip Moxton greeted with impatience. Saturday morning therefore found me and my £1,500 cash deposit driving over to Frittenhurst to meet this Packard. The village not far from Headcorn and buried amid former hop gardens, now redundant and turned over to fruit and other crops. It still possesses a church although no longer a pub or even a shop. Oast House, the Herrick home, where once the hops had been dried, was in a prosperous area and looked as if its own house was reasonably prosperous too. It was nowhere near the size of Staveley House but converted oast houses aren't bought cheaply. They aren't large in themselves, however, and this one had a sizeable red-brick extension that blended in well with the oast itself. I could see this was in spectacular condition, built with Kentish ragstone and flint with its distinctive conical roof, cowl and the Kentish rampant horse figure on the vane.

I drove into the yard area where a tall hearty-looking man in his sixties came out to meet me and slightly behind him – both literally and with her welcome – came (presumably) his wife, Moira. I remembered now why the name Tom Herrick had rung a bell – of course, I'd seen his face on television many a time, not in leading parts, but as back-up in practically every crime series on TV. His father Gavin had been one up in the acting stakes.

No sign of the Packard yet, and after we had introduced ourselves, Moira asked me in for coffee, and perhaps it wasn't such a cool welcome as I had thought.

'He'll want to see the old heap first, Moira,' Tom joked. Not a very sensible way of talking about a car that he hoped to sell. He didn't seem anxious about the sale – indeed it was almost as though he thought the sale was a foregone conclusion.

A cool smile from his wife. 'Of course. Stupid of me.'

'I'll bring the lady out for you,' Tom said, walking over to the garage and opening it up.

And there she was. Straight out of *The Ladykillers*, save that as Philip had predicted this beauty was painted a buttery cream, not the original black. Even from the rear this looked authentic, however with its glorious chrome bumpers and hubcaps, narrow wheels and the distinctive revolutionary spare tyre compartment tucked under the luggage boot.

'Looks great already,' I told Moira as he backed it out.

Tom pulled up in front of us and climbed out. 'Not a bad old lady, is she?' He patted the bonnet.

This grand old lady wasn't in the peak of condition but he was right. She might need repainting and some restoration but she oozed charisma in bucketfuls. Her solid, ancient, stylish lines were inviting me inside to relax in comfort. From the few rides I'd had in a Packard that applied to the driver to the passenger. Letting out that seemingly effortless clutch, one could go to the ends of the earth in her, a home from home. This was the 1935 model, the 120, that took the market by storm by being so good and so reasonably priced. That hadn't stopped it from being a status symbol as well.

'Want a spin?' Tom asked.

'Let's all go,' Moira said surprisingly. She didn't look like a car person. 'It would be a tribute to Gavin. My father-in-law died recently, which is why we're selling the car.'

So there seemed no mystery about that. Perhaps I had been imagining there was something odd about this deal – although it was true she seemed somewhat overeager in her determination to convey this message.

‘That would be great.’ Philip Moxton had said a test drive wasn’t necessary, but how could I turn down such an offer? ‘It was Gavin’s own car?’ I asked.

‘Very much so,’ Tom told me. ‘Had it for yonks, from a boy.’

That didn’t seem to fit too well with what I’d been told by Philip. Odd. ‘This particular Packard?’ I asked. ‘Or Packards generally?’

‘Packards in general, I suppose. I don’t know when my father first bought this one.’

Did I sense a slight hesitation in that reply? ‘Is the original logbook still in it?’

‘No, alas.’ He grinned at me affably. ‘An actor’s life is not always a happy one financially speaking and there was a period when my father had to let the car go. Fortunately he was able to buy it back again later, but the logbook had vanished. And the original number plates too.’

So that answered my question – or did it? ‘It was the same car though?’ Without waiting for his affirmation, I carried on, also *affably*. ‘Mind if I check the chassis and engine numbers? Just a formality, but I don’t want to be sued by my customer.’

‘Sure. Go ahead.’

I did and made a careful note but I already knew they tallied.

The spin took us along lanes past fields and woods on either side. The fields are large and open in this part of Kent and I could almost imagine I was driving through the prairies of the USA. Perhaps the Packard thought it was too for its straight-eight engine purred happily along. She handled well despite the steering being on the heavy side for modern taste. Nevertheless she obligingly negotiated the many sharp corners unfazed. The *Ladykillers* gang had chosen well. Next time I robbed a bank this Packard would be my accomplice.

‘What makes you a Packard enthusiast, Mr Colby?’ Moira asked politely as we drew up at Oast House again.

‘A paying customer,’ I parried, ‘although I do admire them. Who wouldn’t? Thanks for the ride. I’m prepared to meet your price on it.’

‘Are you indeed?’ murmured Mrs Cool. Was there a slight note of sarcasm in her voice?

‘Of course.’ I tried to sound cool myself. ‘It’s just what my customer wants.’

A silence, then: ‘So how about that coffee now, Moira?’ Tom asked jovially. ‘We can sort things out more comfortably in the house.’

As we walked inside the former oast house, there was an image flicking through my mind that I couldn’t quite grasp. As we all sat down in their delightful circular living room (once the room where the fires to dry the hops were burning) I pinned this image down. It seemed as if I were in a scene from a thirties play, not by Noel Coward but ... yes, J.B. Priestley. *Dangerous Corner*, one of those time-slip plays. Well into the plot, it takes an apparently insignificant point in the conversation, which results in the story being led in one direction. At that story’s denouement, it reverts to the same ‘insignificant’ point and then explores what would have happened if the point hadn’t occurred.

I wasn’t in a time slip (I hoped) but I did have a feeling that this might be a dangerous corner with more outcomes than the one I had envisaged of simply taking the car to Philip Moxton and gratefully pocketing my commission. And yet on the face of it everything here seemed perfectly normal. Frog Hill had bought cars before on behalf of clients even for one or two who chose to remain anonymous to the seller, so this deal was all straightforward, I told myself. Tom and Moira Herrick seemed hesitant about accepting the £1,500 cash deposit, but that too could be a natural response.

‘Please take it,’ I urged them. ‘My client would not be happy if I didn’t secure the sale. I’ll send the rest of the money as soon as I get back.’

‘Splendid,’ Tom boomed. (Wasn’t he straight out of a thirties play?) ‘Let’s say Tuesday then, this

being a bank holiday weekend. We'll be around all day and have the old lady and all the paperwork waiting for you. All right with you, Moira?'

'Of course,' she murmured. 'Gavin would have wanted the car to go to an appreciative owner.'

'I'll ring you to check the money's come through. I'll send it by BACS.'

Delighted murmurs greeted this. As I rose to go (after the excellent coffee) a photo of Gavin Herrick caught my eye, amid the many photos of Tom and Moira at various stages of their marriage and of a glamorous young woman who was probably their daughter. The photo of Gavin had been taken on his wedding day with his bride.

'Dad with my mother, Nancy,' Tom confirmed.

'Is she still living?' I asked politely.

Tom shook his head and Moira answered for him. 'She died young, but that –' she indicated a picture of Tom and a woman with a young child – 'is Tom with his sister, Gwen. She's two years younger than Tom.'

Just a normal family and the usual photographs. And yet not so normal, I reflected, with Gavin Herrick as part of it. He had been a great actor and Tom too was on the stage. Was there an element of role-playing here that I wasn't picking up?

We talked for a few minutes more and parted on good terms. As I drove off, however, I briefly looked back. Standing by the Packard were Moira and Tom clasped in each other's arms. In joy? Relief at the sale? Or just sad to see it go? Which of these, I wondered – or none of them?

'I do not like this delay. You're sure there will be no trickery?' Philip asked sharply when I rang him (on his mobile of course) to tell him the news that I couldn't pick the car up immediately.

His response puzzled me. 'I can't see why there should be.'

'No undue interest in the identity of your customer?'

I remembered Moira's comment about the appreciative owner, but there had been nothing to indicate that his anonymity had been a serious issue. 'No,' I replied.

A silence. 'Pick the car up on Tuesday as early as you can then. Have you left it to them to confirm the arrival of the money?'

'No. I'll be ringing them. I like to keep control in such situations.'

'Excellent. You should have had a career in banking, Mr Colby.'

'I'll stick to cars,' I joked. 'They're less risky. Despite dangerous corners,' I added without thinking.

A pause. 'We all have dangerous corners in our lives, Mr Colby. They are unavoidable. What matters is how we take them.'

I wondered how he had tackled his and what they were. I hadn't forgotten his calm certainty that someone was out to murder him. My so far brief scanning of the web had revealed that Philip Moxton was the son of Donald and Elsie Moxton, that he was born in 1951 in Kent, and that he was currently chair of Moxton Private Banking. He was divorced, with one son, Barnabas, born 1981. I had toyed with the idea that the gorgon who guarded Staveley House was his ex-wife, but somehow that didn't fit.

'You'll drive the Packard to me straightaway?' he continued.

'To Staveley House?' I asked innocently.

'Of course. That is my home.' A pause. 'I await your call, Mr Colby. On *Tuesday*.'

I logged into my account on the Tuesday morning on tenterhooks. The money had arrived on Friday

and it had now left, so the game was under way. All I had to do was ring the Herricks to check that had arrived safely. I felt as nervous as though it had been my own car at stake, not one for a client, as I rang the Herricks' number. All was well, they told me, and I could pick up the car when I liked. It was suggested right now. It's not often I earn £17,500 in commission (less a sweetener for Rob) for very little work, and I wanted to draw a line under this one.

I was full of the joys of summer as Zoe and I set off for Frittenhurst. She had leapt at the chance of coming with me to drive my Alfa back while I collected the glorious Packard. Philip Moxton had told me to take a taxi and he'd pay on delivery, but Zoe would have none of that.

'I'm that taxi. I want to be in on this deal,' she had declared. 'Anyway, Rob wants to know how it works out.'

Oh well. If *Rob* wanted her to come with me, I had no option. Not that I wanted one. Zoe is a great companion. Her red hair – no longer in the spikes she favoured a year or two back – brown eyes and a lively face gave her a style all her own. One which she doesn't change for Rob, so perhaps there was more to Rob than I give him credit for.

'If you're going to get a custard pie in your face,' she informed me as she fastened her seat belt, 'I want to chuck one back.'

'Have you brought one?' I asked. I wouldn't put it past her.

'No, but I've got a stale doughnut.'

'That'll do.'

'Sure there's nothing weird about this deal?' she asked belatedly, as the Oast House cowl hove into sight and we turned into the driveway.

'No, I'm not sure.'

'Good,' she said happily. 'I bet Len five quid there was something fishy about it. He said no. Maybe American car geeks are always weird. I told him this Moxton man wasn't American but he stuck to his point. So I pointed out that all British ones are too. He denied it. Apparently Frogs Hill had a Studebaker Champion in once and he didn't take to the owner.'

It was a damp dull morning, but even so I could see as we drove up that the Packard looked great. I even heard Zoe catch her breath as we saw it waiting for us. It looked splendid sitting by itself in the large yard, exuding all the confidence and style of a bygone age.

'Phew. Is this a film set?' she breathed. 'Does Marlene Dietrich step out of this beast?'

'I doubt it, but it's for real.' It looked so stagey sitting there that I could hardly believe it myself, but here were the Herricks coming out to greet us so it was for real.

Moira was actually smiling. 'We've polished her up specially for you.'

'Doesn't she look grand?' Tom contributed.

I agreed. I almost had a lump in my throat, as I concluded the formalities with Tom. He wanted to keep the plates so I fixed my Frogs Hill plates on, a few more words passed between us, and then I climbed into the Packard.

Zoe immediately bounded up to me, clearly thinking she was getting the rough end of the deal by taking the Alfa back. 'Where are you taking it?' she hissed.

'Straight to her new owner as ordered.'

'I'll follow in the Alfa. Then I can run you back to Frogs Hill.'

'The new owner –' no names as the Herricks were waiting to see us off – 'says he'll get a taxi for me.'

'I told you – I *am* that taxi.' Zoe would brook no argument. She would be trailing me all the way to Staveley House. No problem. After all, I was driving this magnificent creature.

The gate was actually already open at Staveley House when I swept up with the Alfa tailing me. The lodge keeper – or hit man? – was watching impassively today as though he had nothing else to do but his job than wave me on. I couldn't resist stopping the Packard though. I wound down the window and shouted:

'Here to see the owner of Staveley House, Mr Philip Moxton.'

Not a quiver on his face. 'OK to drive on.' He didn't even query Zoe's arrival. Our earlier encounter might never have happened.

No car park for me this time. It was straight to the house, where I could see Philip Moxton waiting outside. There was someone with him, a man of medium height and exquisite tailoring. He was perhaps in his early fifties, but Philip made no effort to include him in this joyful arrival scene. Zoe was still on my tail but she did have the courtesy to park modestly some way away in order not to mar this wonderful moment.

The look on Philip's face when he saw the Packard was a delight. He loved this car, that was for sure. He must do, because as I pulled up he *ran* over to caress the Goddess of Speed ornament on its bonnet. Perhaps he didn't believe it was real either. The other man stayed where he was, either out of tact or lack of interest.

'You've checked the engine and chassis numbers?' Philip demanded.

'I have.' (I'd already told him that on the phone.) 'They tally.'

'But no logbook.'

I'd told him that too. 'Only for the last twenty years.' I handed over the paperwork.

He nodded slowly. 'Yes, I understand. I'll register it immediately.'

'Do you want a drive in it while my plates are still on it? You'll have to wait until it's registered otherwise.'

He smiled. 'Thank you, Mr Colby. I can wait.'

I was staggered. He could *wait*? After all this rush to buy it? No doubt that he loved it though. His eyes were devouring it, and I could have sworn there were tears in them. And yet he could *wait* before driving it?

Curious people, these bank managers.

And that was that – at least for a few days. I remembered his fear of being murdered, which made it all the odder that he didn't want to rush to drive it. There was nothing I could do about that, however, and nothing more that he wanted of me. I therefore dismissed the job from my mind, rejoicing that at least the mortgage was no problem for a month or two.

And then later that week, everything shifted gear. On Friday evening I was wondering whether to give Helen a ring. She was an ex-girlfriend whom I still met every so often. It seemed a waste of a fine evening to do nothing. Len and Zoe had left for the day and I didn't fancy TV or working in the garden. I was about to ring her when the doorbell rang.

Frogs Hill is out in the wilds which means that unexpected visitors are rare and so a touch of caution is advisable. I peered through the curtains to see a car parked outside. It was a Vauxhall and I didn't recognize it. It was so battered that no respectable armed gangster would look twice at it, however, so I reckoned it was safe to open the door.

I groaned. I was wrong. It wasn't safe at all.

'That's not much of a welcome, Jack.'

It was Pen Roxton, nose quivering. Whatever she wanted, it wasn't going to be anything to help me. She's the sharpest journalist I know, and the quivering nose meant she was after a story.

THREE

I was so appalled that I automatically stood barring the doorway. In fact, this is much the best course of action where Pen is concerned. She must be in her mid-forties, she's sharp-faced, sharp-witted and sharp-edged. I hadn't seen her for some time, not since a memorable occasion when our paths had crossed and she had to retreat defeated. Now like the Terminator she was back, and from the look of her face with a mission just as portentous.

'I'll come in,' she told me. (That's Pen for you.) 'Won't keep you long.'

'Good.' Not that I believed her.

She marched past me as I stood aside, still somewhat dazed. She made straight for the farmhouse kitchen, appraised her surroundings and announced that coffee would be welcome. 'I never drink alcohol on a job,' she informed me virtuously, taking a seat at the table.

I surrendered, made the coffee, produced some passable biscuits and sat down with her, wondering what the 'job' was and how I came into it. I hoped she would take the point that as I had not made any coffee for myself, I must have other plans.

She didn't. She didn't waste time though. 'About this Packard,' she said.

Whoops. On guard, I warned myself. 'Which Packard?' Not a brilliant comeback of mine, and didn't stall her for a moment.

'The one you were driving on the Headcorn road.'

'Well spotted. I was delivering it to a customer. Why do you ask?'

'It was a mid-1930s model, wasn't it?' Pen is reasonably good on classic cars. Or thinks she is.

'It was.'

'Any story there?'

'Not that I know of.' I was doing better now. 'It's not my favourite classic but the one you saw in the magazine was a magnificent example, so I can understand its appeal.' Why, I wondered, had she picked out this particular car? She must have seen me in dozens of different cars over the years. Moreover, it would have been hard to see me at the wheel of the Packard, given its relatively small windows. This made me wonder whether Rob had been chatting.

'The editor's missus heard there was one for sale. Was it that one?'

'No idea. Did she want to buy it?' Pen works for the *Kentish Graphic*, a weekly newspaper that veers between the uprightly moral and the sensational, seldom stopping in between. Pen veers accordingly, though she favours the sensational.

'No. Someone she knew was selling it. She got the impression the car had a history. Want to comment?' Her iPad was ready and waiting.

'That's news to me.'

'Don't fence with me, Jack,' she said amiably.

'Okay. Scouts honour, Pen, I've no idea. I bought it for a customer and delivered it.' (I was never a boy scout but it was true anyway.)

'You bought it?' The nose quivered. 'Why?'

‘I sometimes do – or rather the company does.’

She sighed. ‘It’s been a quiet month, Jack. Take pity on me. Thought there might be something there. The missus thought it was a bit of a family heirloom. Ah well, win some lose some. I’ll call it lost. Thanks for the coffee.’

This was unusually gracious for Pen. She even gave me a smile – which caused me to bear in mind that she *never* calls a story lost. Not before it is lost anyway, and then that makes a story in itself. This renders her a good journalist and a pesky nuisance as well. Nevertheless, I felt almost cordial towards her as I waved her off in her dilapidated Vauxhall.

She leaned out of the window with a passing: ‘Haven’t robbed any good banks recently, have you Jack?’

Surely just a casual remark because a 1930s Packard was the getaway car in *The Ladykillers*. Nevertheless it meant that the Packard remained in the forefront of my mind, instead of beating retreat with honours. It stayed there uncomfortably lodged. Like the Buick, a Packard signalled affluence. It then occurred to me that bank robbers – if successful in their trade – were indeed affluent so Pen’s remark might just have had some significance.

In vain I told myself that other matters needed my attention. I knew Dave Jennings had several jobs in hand that might or might not make their way to me and in the Pits we were especially busy, and classic cars owners revved up for the autumn season before their beloved cars became semi-grounded for the winter. The Packard was a distraction that I couldn’t budge, however, like a particularly annoying pop-up on a computer. Every button I pressed was in vain. The Packard was illegally parked in a corner of my mind, gloating at its power. I mentally kicked it, ignored it or tried to reason with it but it stayed there grinning at me with those stylish headlights.

This went on for a week or so until at last I decided to acknowledge its presence, when I read in the local paper that the grounds of Staveley House would be open this Sunday, for one day only. From which I gathered that this was a rare event indeed, and certainly it seemed out of keeping with my experience of the place.

The idea of dropping in there tantalized me. How did this tally with Philip Moxton’s eccentricities? Would he be there? Would Miss Janes be the owner of the house this weekend? What about his fear of being murdered? I couldn’t believe that he would be present if that had been a serious concern. But suppose he was there? I could ask him how the Packard was running. He might be driving it in the grounds, even if not on the public roads. The last time I checked with the DVLA, the Swanscombe licensing organization, it hadn’t yet been registered.

I thought about taking Liz Potter with me, a friend and former lover, but she turned me down. She had a garden centre to run, and her husband Colin, who sometimes obliges her by helping out, was away. I knew Zoe would be tied up with Rob. Helen was also busy. Life was looking bleak on the female companionship front, until my daughter, Cara, paid me a surprise visit. This is also a rare event, since she’s usually busy helping her partner Harry on his Suffolk farm. The visit therefore might be ominous because she was in trouble but it might also be handy.

‘What’s wrong?’ I asked anxiously, when I found her on the doorstep. I hadn’t heard her car drive in.

She laughed. ‘Don’t be so pessimistic. Can I come in before I tell you? Thought I’d stay overnight. Not inconveniencing your love life, am I?’

‘Far from it. There isn’t any.’ It had taken an upturn some time ago when Louise, my lost love, had left me a note to let me know she had passed by. That was encouraging since no one can just ‘pass by’

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