

MATTHEW COSTELLO

NEIL RICHARDS

Dead in the Water

A CHERRINGHAM MYSTERY



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About the Book

On the night of the school prom, a young teacher is found dead in the Thames in a drug-related accident. It seems – at first – to be another sign that Cherringham High is spiralling out of control. The new head however is convinced that the teacher's death is suspicious and quietly calls in Sarah Edwards.

With her one-time detective partner, Jack Brennan, back in America, Sarah is at first reluctant to take on the case. But when she does get involved, it soon becomes clear that the tragic accident might really be a case of murder – and even Sarah herself could be in danger ...

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.

Matthew Costello
Neil Richards

Dead in the Water

A Cherringham Mystery



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PROLOGUE

1. After the Prom

"That your lot, Maddie?" said Billy Leeper, sliding two pints of lager across the bar, shouting to be heard over the music and noisy crowd.

Maddie looked down at the tray of drinks she'd just ordered.

A big round – and now she realised she'd forgotten to order her own drink.

"Sorry, Billy – one more glass of white wine, please. Any old thing will do – long as it's nice and cold!"

She watched the barkeeper disappear down to the other end of the bar, then looked around.

The Ploughman's was as packed as she'd ever seen it.

Cherringham's favourite local pub – not as posh as the Angel farther up on the High Street, but still the go-to place for any village event.

And tonight, there was more than just the usual Friday night crowd.

A mob of her fellow teachers had come down after the prom for a well-deserved pint, and some of the now-departing pupils were happy to drink with them.

She recognised a few of the boys and girls in their smart suits and gowns, knocking back drinks as if they did it every weekend.

Well, she thought, they probably do.

"Here you go," said Billy, adding a glass of white wine to the tray. "On the tab?"

"Thanks, Billy."

She picked up the tray and turned to go.

"They're all eighteen, I'm assuming?" said Billy, nodding towards the students dotted around the pub.

“Oh, I’m sure they are,” said Maddie, not at all sure, but moving off quickly towards the tables at the rear of the pub.

On the way, she passed a crowded table by the dartboard and spotted a few of the lower sixth-formers, standing with pints and bottles in their hands.

Now, this lot *definitely* weren’t eighteen.

Should she say something?

She could see Callum Brady in the group. And Liam Norris and Jake Pawson.

The Usual Suspects, as they were known up at the school.

In T-shirts and jeans, looking aggressive even just standing there and drinking.

And liable to cause trouble if she told Billy they were underage.

They certainly did plenty of that at school.

Sooner they were gone... the better.

Jake caught her eye – and the whole group stopped talking and turned to look at her.

The look – a challenge.

As if to say: *go on then; just try to get us thrown out.*

If you got the balls.

She turned away and carried on walking with her tray of drinks to the back of the pub.

Dammit, she thought, *what kind of coward am I?*

But when she got to the back room of the pub, she put the encounter with the dartboard crowd to the back of her mind.

In the time she’d been gone, her group had grown even bigger.

Someone had shoved three tables together.

Now there must be nearly twenty – teachers and students both – all laughing, joking, telling stories.

All glad the year was over: summer, university, the future... beckoning.

She lowered the tray onto the nearest table and everybody cheered and grabbed their drinks.

She picked up her white wine and waved to Tim sitting at the middle of the table, talking to one of his star English pupils – or at least, listening to his tipsy rambling.

He gave her a long-suffering smile and mouthed “sorry”.

The boy had taken her seat. She smiled back and mouthed back – “no problem”.

“Here you go, Maddie,” came a voice from the end of the table.

She turned around – it was Josh Owen.

A teacher the kids definitely adored.

A free seat next to him.

Should she?

With a quick glance at Tim, she skirted a group of locals, hemmed in by students, and threaded her way round to the other end of the large table.

“I could say I saved it for you, but that would be lying,” said Josh.

“Well, you certainly know how to flatter a girl. So, how did you like your first Cherringham prom?”

“Good fun, hmm?” said Josh. “I had some great students in that year – sorry to see them go. Nice kids.”

“If only they were *all* nice.”

“Goes with the territory.”

Maddie took a sip of her wine.

“You talk to the new head?”

“Not tonight,” said Josh quietly. “Not the right time.”

“But you are applying for the deputy job?”

“You bet. There’s a lot needs changing – and from what I’ve heard so far, I like her plans.”

“I just hope I’m part of them,” said Maddie.

“You will be – if I’ve got anything to do with it.”

She laughed.

“Hark at you, deputy head, sir, hiring and firing already.”

"You bet. Mind how you behave, Ms. Brookes."

"Always..." she said, laughing.

She liked teasing Josh, playing with him. He had a sparkle, as if he really enjoyed life.

Unlike...

She couldn't help but look down the table at Tim, still involved in a long, deep conversation.

Her boyfriend.

How she hated that word. God, she was nearly thirty.

Maybe I should start calling him my partner? But do I even want that?

Fiancé?

Though not official yet...

Someone brought another tray of drinks over and everyone starting grabbing their refreshed pints and glasses.

As she stared – Tim looked over at her.

He smiled.

She smiled back.

And had a thought... what if Tim wasn't here?

Then the seat next to Tim – empty.

With a nod from Tim, she sailed away from Josh.

"There you are!" Tim said. "I was just saying that I want to do some real camping trips this summer! Get some good long walks in. Proper treks – you know?"

She nodded.

She noticed Tim looking at her.

"How does that sound to you?"

A smile. "Yes. Shake off the school year. Sounds great..."

Tim smiled at that, then turned back to the group.

Out of the corner of her eye she was aware of Josh getting up from the other end of the table.

He looked – for a moment – confused.

She watched him head into the front bar and thought...
Strange...

But then she too got lost in the excited talk of summer plans, the precious time away from kids and school...

Maddie smiled at the group of girls who now had her penned in a corner, chattering about exams and grades, and how totally *awesome* it would be if they got their first choice of uni.

She could see Josh over by a corner table. He seemed to be slugging a beer – *how many was that?* she wondered – as he scanned the room.

And though she was looking in his direction, he didn't give any sign that he'd noticed her.

He just kept scanning the packed pub.

Looking for... what?

Or maybe seeing what?

Tim came over from the bar. Putting an arm around her shoulder, he eased her away from the group of girls.

"God, thanks Tim – if I hear one more exam story..."

But Tim looked concerned. "Something up with Josh?" he said, nodding across the room. Maddie turned and looked at Josh.

"I don't know."

"He's been standing like that for ages."

"I hadn't really noticed," said Maddie.

"Think he's had too much? Let me go check on him."

She saw Tim walk over. Put a hand on Josh's shoulder, who nodded in acknowledgment.

But then she saw Josh shake his head.

Tim gave another quick pat to Josh's shoulder and walked back.

"Something wrong?" she said.

"Guess he's just had a lot to drink."

“Odd... the way he’s looking at everyone.”

“I’ll keep my eye on him,” Tim said. “He didn’t drive here at least... I’m sure he’s fine.”

She nodded and followed Tim as he re-joined the main group of teachers.

Maddie checked her watch.

Nearly eleven. She’d been drinking water for the last hour. Ready to go. She looked around the group – Tim and the others all still deep in conversation.

She couldn’t see Josh.

Maybe he’s left already, she thought.

But then...

She spotted him, in the main bar, having a discussion with Billy.

Which looked more like... an *argument*.

Billy, shaking his head. Josh looking, well, even more wobbly; weaving as he banged a hand on the bar.

Like someone who wanted one more drink.

And was being denied.

Then he turned away from the bar, without a drink.

And he seemed to be looking at the packed pub as if he didn’t know how he got here, what was going on.

She thought: *could go over, have a word*.

But then Josh – though still looking unsteady – walked straight towards her, as if finally seeing her.

He swayed slightly. Holding on to the table edges he passed, anchoring his drunken walk.

Until he planted himself like a tree swaying in a storm, right in front of Maddie.

“Tim, Maddie,” he said. “Been *brilliant*–”

The last word of his sentence trailed off; Josh’s eyes also slipping away, off to the distance.

“Josh – are you–?”

But Tim jumped in.

“Josh. Heading home? Good idea mate. Quite a night, eh?”

Maddie looked at Josh’s eyes. Glazed. Drunk. Or was something else going on too?

It was good that he was heading home.

“I’m... okay. All the noise in here. Can’t even think. But sure... um, anyway...” He looked at his watch. Stared at it like he had never seen it before. “Time to leave you two to yourselves. Gotta... get some air... some-”

The words trailed away.

He smiled at Maddie.

A sad, confused half-grin.

Maddie – thinking someone *really* should walk him home – saw Josh smile one more time, then sail to the door and out.

He doesn’t have far to go, she thought. He’ll be okay.

She couldn’t just leave Tim and the others.

Can’t be the first time he’s had one too many.

At least that’s what she told herself.

2. The Bridge

"Want to come in for a bit?" Tim said to Maddie as she dropped him off. "Nightcap?"

Maddie forced a smile.

"Been quite a night. Think bed sounds about right..."

Soon as she said that, she felt, well *that* could be read the wrong way.

But Tim nodded, accepting the gentle turndown.

"Home safe," he said, leaning in for a quick kiss on her cheek.

She kept the smile on.

"You bet," she said. "Night."

And when Tim shut the car door and headed into his cottage as she pulled away slowly.

But - she was not going home.

Maddie drove as slowly as she could up Cherringham High Street, peering into every dark shop doorway, every little alleyway.

Searching for Josh Owen.

He'd looked in a bad way, something wrong.

Maddie - always the worrier.

She'd driven by his house. Lights on. Curtains open. But no Josh.

And when she called his number - no answer.

And now, it was past midnight and the streets were empty.

If he was out here - surely she'd see him.

She passed small groups of leftover students from the prom, huddled together on street benches or sitting on the stone steps of the village hall.

Laughing. Hugging.

Kissing.

Puffs of smoke escaping as well.

She took a turn at the end of the High Street, heading down a quiet street one way, then at another corner, looping around.

The night was still warm, but there was the beginning of a summer mist coming up to the village from the river.

The street lamps hazy. Sounds deadened.

Soon she passed The Ploughman's again, looking dark, closed already.

Billy was good at that. Getting everyone on their way home, and leaving the bulk of the cleaning up to the next day.

This... she thought... is pointless.

Going round in circles.

Maybe over nothing.

At least – that's what she told herself.

She drove slowly past Cherringham's tiny police station.

Lights on there – but she quickly pushed away any idea of telling them about Josh.

After all – what would she say?

Then, with her head swivelling left and right – *one last time* – she told herself...

A tap at her window.

She jumped – the sound so unexpected.

It was one of the students from the pub – Jake Pawson.

Troubled kid, the other teachers said. Some of them said "just trouble".

Maddie pressed the window button and it slid down.

Over Jake's shoulder she could see his mate Callum Brady, slumped against a wall.

Jake leaned in; the smell of alcohol strong.

"Miss – hi!" Then, with a nasty leer: "You lost?"

"I'm... I'm okay. Just – um, you okay, Jake?"

"Always. I'm *always*... good."

She nodded, ready to raise the window.

"You out here... looking for someone?" he said, every other word slurred, his face leering. "Someone special?"

She started to shake her head.

"Coz, well, must be something going on, with you teachers. Tonight, I mean."

Then Jake laughed, the sound cruel, punctuating the otherwise quiet summer night.

"Anyway. You know where to find me. Eh?"

Then Jake's laugh broke into coughs and Maddie saw her chance to escape.

"Thanks, Jake. I'd better go..."

He kept his hands on the window as she pressed the button for it to go up.

"Whoa, whoa! Thought we were having a nice little–"

Last second, he unhinged his fingers.

And Maddie pulled away and headed down toward the Ploughman's.

She stood in the deserted car park of the Ploughman's and watched the mist swirling in the orange glow of the street lamps.

This is a waste of time, she thought. *I should head home – get to bed.*

Then she heard a shout – in the distance.

A shout? No – more like a howl. Was it an animal? A fox maybe – caught in a trap?

No. There it was again – and this time clearly human. Somewhere down by the river. The sound – mournful, complaining, drifting into the night.

Was it Josh? She had to know. She climbed back in the car and drove off towards the bridge.

A thin moon had risen over the hills behind Cherringham and she could just pick out the shape of the fields running down to the river.

But as she headed out of the village, she saw the mist thicken down in the valley ahead – a solid, cloudy layer running from where the Thames curved in from the north, to where it ran past the village itself. The chilly water hitting the hot summer air.

She pulled off the empty road, still some distance from the centuries-old bridge, and turned off the engine.

Didn't want to race headlong across, not if Josh was standing here somewhere.

A wispy cloud covered the bridge like a blanket, hiding the road, the stonework – both vanished.

As soon as she got out of the car, Maddie could hear the water coursing through the arches of the bridge, tumbling over the weir.

But then – she heard the voice again.

Yelling. So loud. More than a howl now – a shriek.

Josh.

Somewhere on the bridge. But even though she was close, there was no way she could see, not with that fog hugging close to the river.

She started running, already planning ahead.

She'd get him into her car, drive him home. Make sure he got there safe.

And as she ran, she called out: "Josh!"

But then – quick as that – the howls stopped.

Josh gone?

To check the roadway suspended over the steaming river she'd have to enter that fog bank, a wall over the river.

Like walking into a cloud.

And Maddie had never felt more scared in her life.

When she walked into it, the gossamer cloud seemed to dissipate – as if her violation of it made it move on. Or, simply, being in it she could now see more. The white line down the centre of the road. The old stonework of the bridge itself. But no Josh.

Had he run away when he heard her voice?

Again, she tried to make sense of this. Josh being here, his acting so crazy after... well... who knows what? None of that seemed like the Josh she knew. One good thing at least – he wasn't here.

A wind came then. A warm breeze, yet it still raised goose bumps. And with the feathery fog blowing away for a few moments, she walked over to the stone parapet of the bridge.

Her hand grabbed the edge. She felt a sweat on the stone, left behind by the mist.

Josh had bolted away.

At least he wasn't here.

And maybe she could simply go home. Check in with him tomorrow. She looked down.

A thin layer of mist still clung to the water's surface. But that, too, was yielding to the steady breeze. And, as it did, she saw something in the cold light from the moon.

Just yards away – where the river took a small kink, the strong current sending it bouncing into an embankment, kicking into some exposed rocks, sending up flashes of white – something was there.

Something... that slowly revealed with the dissipating mist.

Not something.

Someone.

Maddie's eyes locked on the clearing image, until she saw it... *knew* who it must be. Her hands released from the

stone railing – to go down there – hurry there. *Make sure, make sure, make...*

But even as her hands moved she could see the terrible truth.

Josh's eyes wide open, staring up into the night sky.

His limbs akimbo, like a marionette thrown against a wall, each arm, each leg twisted to point in a different direction as the steady current tugged at his lifeless body.

Until – like losing a battle – his body pulled free of the rocks, and joined the dark river as it raced away, under the bridge, away, away...

And Josh was gone.

Floating so fast downriver.

And then Maddie kept repeating words in her head as if it was impossible, as if it couldn't ever be true.

Nonetheless, fact.

Josh Owen is dead.

PART ONE

A Questionable Death

3. School Run

"Mum, I can't wear this – look at it."

Sarah Edwards glanced away from her bedroom mirror to the doorway where her daughter Chloe was holding up a crumpled white blouse.

"The ironing board's out downstairs. Put it there, love, and grab some breakfast," said Sarah, turning back to the mirror to check her hair. "I'll be down in a minute to do it."

Sarah heard Chloe muttering as she went downstairs. Her daughter might be seventeen but she didn't seem ready to accept that ironing might be a chore she could do herself.

God, I'll be glad when this term's over, thought Sarah. *I can't take much more of this chaos.*

Getting this new house – bigger, with an office, and a real garden – had seemed a great idea at the time.

But now, surrounded by unopened boxes filled with their life, she wasn't so sure.

Grabbing a cardigan from one of the packing cases that were stacked in a corner of the bedroom, she stepped round a pile of books and headed down the landing.

"Daniel – it's five past," she called as she passed her son's bedroom.

"I'm awake," came a muffled voice.

"You'd better be – we're going in ten minutes," said Sarah.

That seemed to do the trick. As she went down the stairs she heard the familiar clumping and moaning which meant that Daniel was getting dressed.

She went past more boxes in the hall, then into the big kitchen-breakfast room at the back of the house, where she

spotted Chloe now leaning against the dresser, eating a bowl of muesli.

Riley, the crazy spaniel they'd been looking after for nearly a year now, sat patiently at Chloe's feet hoping some morsel might drop his way.

Jack Brennan's dog, to be sure, but the spaniel certainly felt like one of the family now.

And who knew if Jack would ever come back from the States – reclaim his dog; his old life?

Sarah crossed the kitchen, laid out her daughter's blouse on the ironing board and tested the iron.

She loved this room. And right now, in the height of the summer, the morning light streamed in through the folding glass doors that ran the width of the house.

That sunlight felt like an invitation to take the day off, sit in the garden, sip a glass of white wine, and watch the swallows dipping and gliding over the river.

But, no – not today.

First, she had the school run to endure. A gauntlet! And then another long day in the office at her computer, checking the final copy for an autumn ad campaign she was handling. The job that had promised to pay her enough to risk everything and move into this bigger house on the edge of Cherringham.

This house was the dream cottage she'd been wanting for years. When it suddenly came up for sale two months ago, she'd leapt at the chance.

With some help from a surprise inheritance – thank God for great aunts – she'd just been able to afford it. In spite of the mortgage company's suspicion that a single mum wouldn't be able to meet the payments, the deal had gone through only two weeks ago.

But what a time to move house – a month from the end of school term and crunch time at work!

"Sorry, Mum, forgot – I made you a tea," said Chloe, dropping her muesli bowl into the sink then bringing a mug

over to Sarah.

"Thanks, love," said Sarah. She took a gulp of tea, then: "Give Riley a quick run round the garden could you?"

"Sure," said Chloe, opening the folding doors.

Chloe loved that dog.

The minute he saw the doors open, Riley launched himself through them and out into the garden. At least *he* got to enjoy it!

Sarah watched him race around joyously in the warm summer air.

"Seen my lunch box?" said Daniel from behind her.

Sarah turned to see her son in school uniform but no shoes, scratching his tousled head and leaning against the door.

Not quite ready.

"In your bag I expect," said Sarah.

"Hmm, good call," said Daniel finding his bag, then taking the lunch box over to the fridge and opening the door. Sarah watched him rummage through the contents of the fridge.

"Can I have this cheese?" he said.

"If you take some salad too," said Sarah.

"Salad is the work of the devil," said Daniel, grinning.

"Unlikely," said Sarah, hanging the blouse on the back of a chair. "I think the devil has other fish to fry."

"Hmm, how does the devil fry fish? Discuss in no more than five hundred words..."

"I've done your blouse, Chloe," Sarah called through into the house, joining Daniel at the fridge. "Look, there's a nice pasty, okay? And some tomatoes."

She watched Daniel shove the food into the plastic container and shut the lid. The container looked pretty grubby.

"Did you wash that?"

"It's fine," he said, putting the box in his school bag. "Didn't smell *too* bad yesterday."

"Don't they teach you anything in biology? Mould? Bacteria?"

"Don't do biology."

"Shame," said Sarah. "And talking of biology – your shoes are under the sofa. Useful for feet."

Daniel smiled, and she watched him drift off to the living room to find them.

He was growing up too fast as well. It's what people always said... goes so quick. But when you are in it, you hardly notice.

Except today, this morning, she was noticing.

Sarah finished her tea, gathered up the rest of the dishes, slotted them into the dishwasher, and opened the back door to let Riley in. Then, hustling now, she filled his water bowl, locked the back door, quickly checked Daniel had shut the fridge, grabbed her handbag and car keys, and *whoosh!*

She headed out into the hall.

"Two minutes, guys, or we really *are* going to be late!"

Then her mobile rang.

She checked the screen: Tony Standish.

Now, of all times!

Tony – such a dear family friend – a solicitor who had not only supported Sarah a few years back when she stumbled into becoming a part-time detective, but had also, on more than one occasion, commissioned her and Jack to investigate a case.

Rushed or not – Tony must be answered.

"Tony."

"Sarah, my dear, how *are* you? The new place and all? Must be madness!"

Tony's voice, so old-school, like a country doctor from a 50s film. So soothing.

"Oh, school run, you know, Tony."

Though Sarah knew that Tony and his long-term partner had never had to endure a school run.

Wonder how he felt about that, chaos or no chaos?

"Oh dear, forgive my timing," said Tony. "So – I shall be very brief. Lunch today – my office? Say around one?"

"Gosh, well, I–"

"Terribly short notice, I know – but, well, I need your help, Sarah."

"Of course," said Sarah, unable to say no. *It's Tony after all!*

"I shall look forward to it."

"Excellent," said Tony. "Bye now."

Sarah clicked her phone off and dropped it back in her bag.

She could see the kids now waiting expectantly in her old Rav-4, which stood in the gravel drive.

"Back later, Riley," she called, out of habit, into the empty house.

Then, she locked the front door behind her, climbed into the car, started the engine, and sped off up to the lane that led to Cherringham.

Thinking...

Tony Standish needs help? That used to mean only one thing. A problem of some kind. And maybe...

A new case.

But then she thought: *I don't do that anymore.*

Sarah shut the door to her office, took the three stone steps down to the pavement and started to thread her way through the tourists up the High Street.

Early July, so it wasn't even high season yet in Cherringham, but – God! – already the coaches were turning up like clockwork, morning and afternoon, delivering visitors from all over the world on their Cotswold tours.