

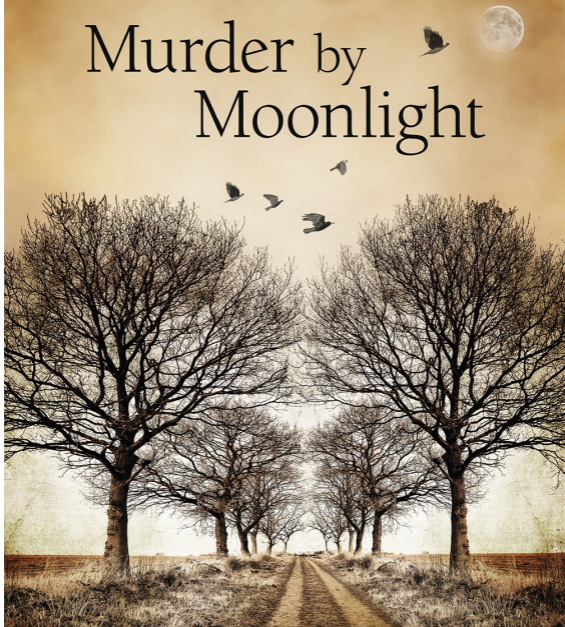
Matthew Costello

Neil Richards

# CHERRINGHAM

A COSY CRIME SERIES

## Murder by Moonlight



BASTEI ENTERTAINMENT 

together in the commercial trenches of the Cherringham economy.

And as if she could feel his eyes, Kirsty quickly redirected her gaze to the front, just catching the ever hawk-eyed Roger Reed about to fire another withering glare her way.

Kirsty smiled as she sang as if to say, *see, I'm looking at you!* Roger seemed to smile back. But then Kirsty realized the smile was aimed at her fellow soprano Emma Hilloc, standing beside her, singing as usual just a quarter tone flatter than the rest of the choir. Another reason to reconsider whether she really belonged here ...

Anyway — a few more carols, and they'd finally break for the night.

And that thought really made Kirsty smile.

Kirsty had gone to recover her coat and bag from the little cloakroom at the back which was filled with the smell of mothballs and the dry wood of the old building and where finding one's things at the end of the rehearsal was a game of hide-and-seek.

When she spun around, ready to make her exit, she faced Martha Bernard, the choir's pianist.

Though retired from full-time work, Martha remained active in the Rotary, loyally organizing the snacks for each session: tonight's were multiple iterations of biscuits, cakes and the obligatory weak tea, and Martha was hoping to escape unnoticed.

“Running away so fast, Kirsty?”

Kirsty fixed a smile to her face.

“No, Martha. Just getting ready for my walk home. I'm snowed under with work right now. Orders for Christmas, you know ...”

Not true, and Kirsty felt that Martha could see that.

“You young business women! Always bustling about. It’s a different world from my day. As you know.”

Martha stood leaning on her walking stick. In her other hand she held a plate piled high with biscuits as if it might anchor Kirsty and prevent her quick dash away.

“Can’t I tempt you? Got your favourite. Oatmeal raisin.”

Kirsty looked at the plate, chocolate chips side by side with what indeed looked like yummy, crunchy oatmeal raisin biscuits. A few homemade shortbreads sat to one side as if not up for the competition. Martha’s eyes seemed to drill into her.

“Why not,” Kirsty said, taking an oatmeal raisin cookie.

And because Martha was so studious in her preparations for the snacks at all these events, Kirsty knew she didn't have to ask the usual question, the question that was part of her daily life, something she watched, no matter what she ate or where she went.

For under Martha's watchful instructions to all who baked, Kirsty could be absolutely sure that there were no peanuts in the pile of goodies.

She quickly dispatched one oatmeal raisin, then another.

Martha smiled, seeming to take a special interest in Kirsty.

*Is it because I'm a woman on my own?* she thought.

Which was true — and also not.

“Oh, go on, take a few more for the walk back to your cottage,” Martha said, the plate still extended like an ancient offering.

”I’d love to, Martha,” said Kirsty. “But I mustn’t spoil my supper.” *Hard to say no — they were yummy indeed.*

She could see over Martha’s shoulder. Most of the Rotarians were sipping their tea, chatting, enjoying the odd mix of classes, professions and interests. Her good friend Beth was right at the heart of the group, laughing, at ease with Emma’s husband Thomas. She caught Beth’s eye, gestured that she had to leave — and Beth smiled and nodded back at her.

And for a moment she had to think ... *maybe not such a bad organization after all.*

*For those who like that kind of thing.*

Maybe she could move into the tenors with Beth next week — have a bit more of a laugh ...