

MATTHEW COSTELLO

NEIL RICHARDS

Dead in the Water

A CHERRINGHAM MYSTERY



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.