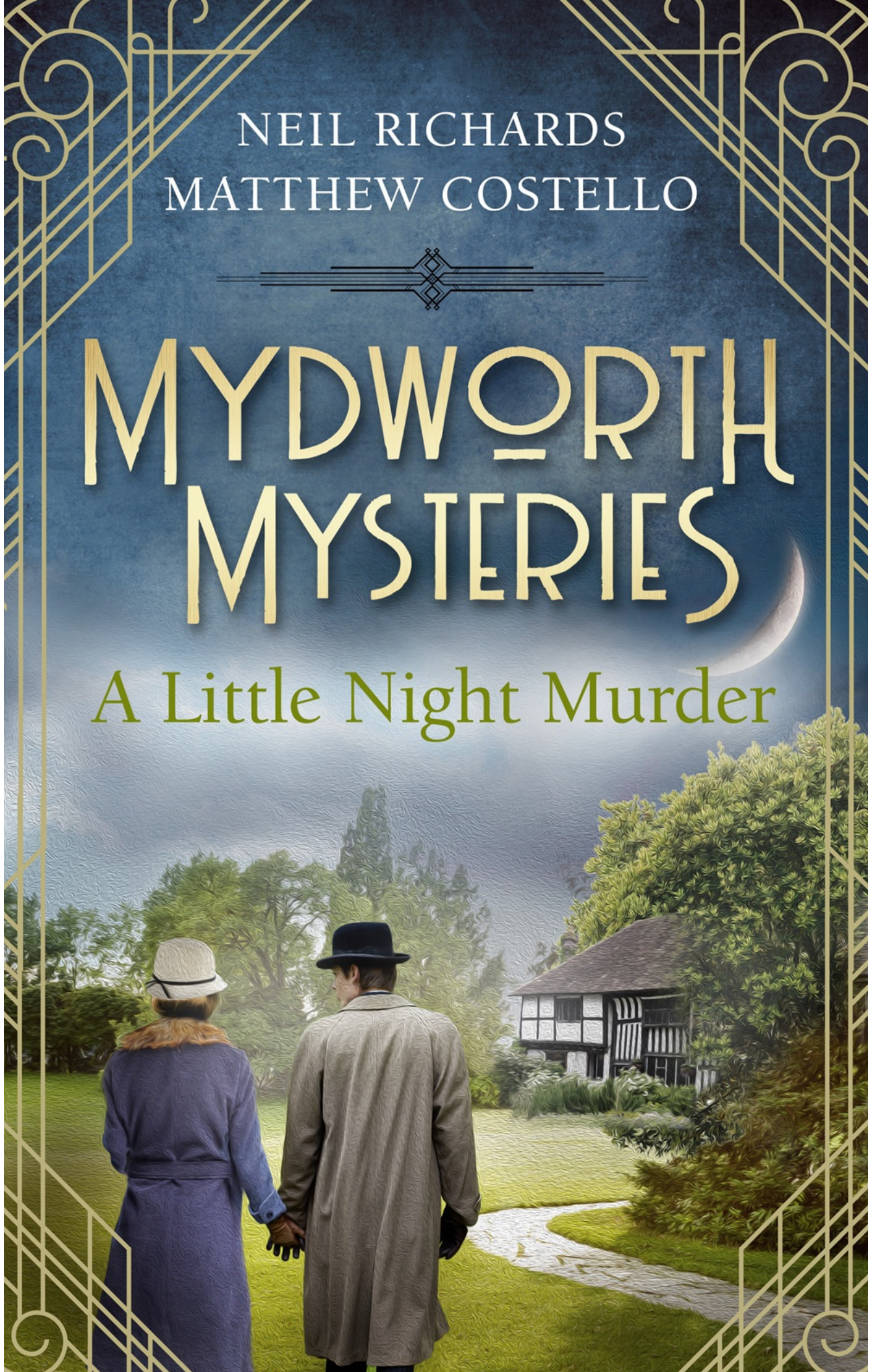


NEIL RICHARDS  
MATTHEW COSTELLO



# MYDWORTH MYSTERIES

A Little Night Murder





A miniscule front garden, of sorts, where a few flowering shrubs did battle with brown vines poised to take over.

A scattering of flagstones, looking randomly placed, led to the front door. Less of a path than a half-hearted collection of stones.

It was mid-morning, the sun warm, and a dead boy's mother waited inside.

Am I up to this? Kat wondered.

But no time for doubt, she knew, and she knocked on the shabby door three times.

\*

The woman who opened the door was the picture of someone in grief.

Her entire face sagged, as if unable to fight gravity or the pain; her eyes, puffy and red from crying. That crying, for a mother, had to be near constant, day in and day out, as she waited for the terrible pain to somehow – *please God* – lessen.

In one hand, Elsie Buckman held the door open, perhaps using it for support. In the other hand, a cloth napkin, tightly twisted and braided around her fingers.

In the Mid-East, Kat had seen women, veiled, holding a string of beads tightly. Worry beads, her station chief had explained. “*See that, and you know that they have something to worry about... or grieve.*”

“Mrs Buckman?”

The woman's lower lip trembled just a bit, as if she had gotten out of the habit of actually speaking.

“Nicola Green asked me to, um, pop around.” The woman looked confused.

Kat hurried to add more: “To talk to you about...” A hesitation here, but the next words absolutely necessary for this conversation. “Your son.” *Did a new pearly tear suddenly form in the corner of each eye?* “About what happened.”

The woman released the door. Stepped back, her face still looking so confused and tortured.

“D-do come in,” the small, round woman said, backing up as if opening the gateway to a grand manor house instead of what was – it would soon become clear – a hovel.

\*

Elsie Buckman had gestured to one of three chairs at a round wooden table that sat beside the smallest of cooking areas.

A single oil lamp added to the morning sunlight that did its best to dispel the gloominess of the house.

A dirt-brown easy chair squatted atop a rug with frayed edges. Most of the uncovered floor showed wide floorboards, with big gaps, probably with years of dirt and mud trapped within those too-wide openings.

Kat took the chair, doing her best to put the woman at ease.

“You're the American. His wife. But Miss Green said that—”

*The woman's confused about why I'm here on my own.*

"My husband... he is also looking into things, Mrs Buckman."

"Oh—"

The woman's face suddenly animated.

"Please, call me Elsie." Then, as if remembering what was actually happening here, she added, "M'lady."

Probably pointless to suggest that a simple "Kat" would do.

Then, the woman looked around her so-small cottage as if she had just been planted there in error.

"Ah, sorry – some tea perhaps? I can get the kettle going in no time at all."

Kat didn't feel as if she really wanted any tea.

Instead she said: "That would be nice."

The woman turned, the cloth in her hand gripped tight enough to be bandaging an unseen wound. The fingers free though as she lit the narrow gas stove, which came to life with a *whoosh*.

A tap turned on; coughing as it sputtered out water.

Kettle on, the mother finally turned back. Even this simple process had spoken of the woman's pain, Kat thought.

\*

Tea was served in a pair of courtly cups featuring men in stockings twirling a woman in full gown and pompadour this way and that, in some idyllic meadow scene.

*Probably the sweetest thing in the cottage*, Kat thought. The woman sat opposite her at the tiny kitchen table.

"Elsie," said Kat, "Nicola said that you don't *believe* that your son's death" – the word, like a physical slap spoken in the mother's presence – "was an accident?"

Kat had brought out her small notebook as she asked the question, not knowing if there was anything here to be learned or not.

The woman's face changed – the droopy pouches that were cheeks, the eyes that seemed barely able to remain open – took on an unexpected animation.

"Accident? No, not an accident! My son, my Syd... Somebody had it in for him, I know it!"

Elsie leaned across the table, her eyes burning into Kat's.

"This... *somebody*," said Kat, "was it a person that Syd knew? Somebody that you know?"

Kat watched Elsie carefully as these words seemed to sink slowly in.

"Know?" she said, her shoulders drooping again. "I don't... It's just..."

*Maybe there's no mystery here at all*, thought Kat. *Maybe this is just a poor grieving mother, desperate for a different truth.*

Then the woman seemed to find a focus again.

"Two months ago, it all started," said Elsie. "Syd... he'd been going out more and more since the spring, you see. Out most nights. All night long. But he was bringing home

a good bit of money he was, paying his share..."

"And you didn't ask him where that money was coming from."

"Oh, I knew all right. Same game as my Billy all these years. But Syd – he was after more'n just rabbits."

"You knew he was poaching deer."

Elsie shrugged.

"So what happened? Did people come round – tell him to stop? Threaten him?"

"No. Nothing like that. Just... he started to get all jumpy. Listening out all the time. Hearing noises outside. Nerves, like. I asked him what was up, and he said... He said... someone had it in for him. I asked him who. But he just went all quiet on me, told me to mind my own."

"This is all useful Elsie. Very useful," said Kat nodding. She made a note in her notebook. "Tell me, did anything else happen in the last couple of months? Anything... unusual?"

"Unusual?" said Elsie. "No, nothing unusual. Though... Syd did go away for a couple of days."

"Away? Where to?"

"I don't know. He put on his good shirt, had a wash. Went off. On the train it was. Came back next day."

"He ever do that before?"

"Lord no. Maybe out boozing all night. But not going away proper somewhere."

"When was this?"

"Oh, June some time. Beginning of June."

"And how was he when he came back?"

"Funny you ask that. He was cheery, he was. Dead cheery. Like the cat that got the cream."

And Kat was about to ask more about this mysterious trip when – at the other end of the kitchen area – a door popped open.

A man walked in, hoisting one of his denim overall straps back into place, licking his lips, face specked with black and grey stubble, but his head nearly bald with only thin wisps jutting left and right.

Elsie turned. She radiated a sudden tension that Kat could feel.

And even from here, Kat caught the whiff of alcohol emanating from the man.

From Elsie's husband.

And Syd Buckman's father.

\*

"Wot?" the man said, still struggling to get that strap into place.

From the look of things Kat could guess where the man had been. Outside.

House like this, well, indoor plumbing was a luxury well beyond their dreams.

"Billy, this is the woman that Nicola..."

"That one."

Billy Buckman shook his head. Just based on appearances, Kat guessed a man like this would have little respect for something like the WVS and its services for women.

“Lot of good *any* of this will do... and hang on! Where’s the other one? Mr High and Mighty? The one who’s *s’posed* to be so clever?”

Billy had actually taken steps closer. This place clearly his domain.

And while Kat tended to reserve judgement on people – a useful policy especially when one travelled the world, representing one’s government – in this case she would make an *exception*. She did not like this man, this drunk. *One bit*.

“Mr Buckman, Sir Harry and I are trying to help you,” as she said that last word, she looked at Elsie, “about your son. The accident.”

Billy took another step as if these were fighting words. He raised a hand, and pointed a finger right at Kat.

*Yup, definitely do not like this man*, she thought.

“Tell you *wot*. You’re a Yank, right? That *accident* was just that. An accident. And we don’t need your bloody meddling.” Billy Buckman snorted, a bullish gesture apparently designed to emphasise the point he was making. “You hear that, now, don’t you?”

Again – that finger, aimed at Kat like a gun.

*Lot of things I could do*, Kat thought. *Including leave*.

But then Elsie spoke.

“M’lady.” The mother shot a glance at her wobbly husband as if reminding him just who sat at their tawdry table.

And now, perhaps a case of old habits dying hard, Billy nodded. Summoned a bit of sheepishness. “All right. All right. Thing is, *we’ve* been so upset here. B—but I can tell you why I know... *wot* I know.”

Kat nodded. “That would be good.”

Another snort. Then Billy stepped over to a cabinet above the sink, and pulled down a bottle of amber liquid. A half-full bottle of whisky, that he opened, and poured into a glass.

Kat watched as Elsie now bristled with tension, her eyes narrowed, looking at her husband.

The whole posture, the gaze speaking of... fear.

*Fear of her husband*.

Billy took a swig of the booze. Licked his lips.

And began to speak. Slowly. Carefully.

As if to make sure he said exactly what he wanted to, no more, no less.

“I knew my lad was out poachin’,” said Billy, his hand wrapped around the glass of whisky. “See, that’s where... yes... where he must have got the money he walked around with.”

He nodded as if that explanation made perfect sense.

“Been bagging himself a lot of them deer. Fetching good prices too! That’s what it was. Elsie – isn’t that right?”

Kat quickly swivelled to look at the wife, body positioned the same. Eyes still narrowed to worried slits.

But now her lips, which had been pursed, moved.

“I... I...”

Billy waited. And an unspoken threat hung in the air.

And Kat had to wonder, *How brutal could this drunk of a husband be?*

And as Billy’s rheumy eyes locked on Elsie, the woman nodded. Two... three quick jerky nods – but not turning to look at Kat as if to really affirm that she agreed.

*Because she didn’t.*

*Billy was lying right now.*

He took another big glug of the whisky. Refill time coming soon.

“But here’s the thing. I told the boy... standing right here... told him time and time again... that even with all his training, what I gave him... you got to be careful with guns. Even the best of ’em can make a mistake. Terrible thing...”

A slow, dramatic shake of his head, and Kat ever more convinced that the father of the dead boy was lying again.

“That’s what took our boy. Bit of carelessness, a stumble, and well...”

And now Billy turned to Kat, his face brightening, either at the fact he had concluded his successful deception... or from the ruddy burn of the alcohol.

“There you go. Sad to say. An accident.”

And from Billy’s look, she guessed he expected her to leave. All the facts – as fabricated by Syd’s father – on the table. Elsie silenced.

*And that was the thing that most worried her... the woman, trapped with this man.*

But Kat wasn’t done.

Time to see how Billy stood up under some more difficult questions.

\*

“Mr Buckman, I actually need to ask you about something else.”

Billy’s forced smile evaporated and he shook his head.

“Told you – we told you – all we know. That’s it. You understand?”

Kat nodded.

“Um, yes. I’m sure you think that’s it. But what do you know about the threats?”

And here Kat was hesitant. Would this next sentence make the poor woman’s life harder?

“The threats against your son...”

She looked at Elsie but the woman, a stone figure now, didn’t turn and look at her.

“Threats against his life, Mr Buckman. You must know about those?”

And now, for a completely different reason, Billy paused before speaking. Finishing the tumbler of alcohol. Then, with a bang, slamming the filmy glass down on the small counter space near their sink.

“*Listen...* sounds like you don’t hear too good. Is that a problem with you Yanks? Don’t listen? Don’t hear? I told you what we know. And we don’t know nothin’ about any threats.”

“And what about the trip that Syd took last June? I suppose you know nothing about that either?”