



Dead in Devon

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PROLOGUE

Murder is a messy business, especially for the person who has to clear up afterwards: in this case, me. I didn't commit the murder, you understand, I just found it. Him, I found him: poor Old Nick lying on the hearthrug, his skull smashed in and a lot of what should have been inside it spattered across the tiles of his fireplace.

I knew something was wrong when I arrived at his front door. It should have been tight shut, that door, leaving me staring at the scratched, black paintwork as I waited for Nick's shuffling footsteps to approach, heard the rattle as he drew back all the bolts and wondered, for the umpteenth time, why the silly old fool didn't save

himself the bother and let me have a key. Very tight on security was Old Nick.

But the door moved at my touch, swung wide as I pushed it, leaving me staring down the corridor at the half-glass door that led to the back of the shop, and at the stairs rising to the flat above. I should have been following him up those stairs, listening to his laboured breathing as he climbed, hearing his radio playing in the kitchen, smelling his breakfast toast.

As I began to go up, I called out. There was no sound of running water from the bathroom on the landing, no movement from behind the frosted glass panel in the door. I tapped on the glass anyway and called his name. As I reached the turn of the stair I could see the main light was on in the living room, although it was daylight outside. I ran up the last few steps, calling out, thinking perhaps he'd had an accident, or a stroke, that he'd been lying there all night: which, as it turned out, he had.

'What were you doing there?' the detective inspector asked me later, as we sat across the table from one another, in a hastily requisitioned interview room at the back of an estate agent's.

'It's Tuesday. I work for Old . . . for . . . Mr Nickolai on a Tuesday,' I explained.

'What do you do?' He was a large, kindly-looking man, probably someone's favourite uncle, and was doing his best to set me at my ease. Not so his companion, the young detective constable sitting beside him. From her there emanated an air of silent contempt, almost hostility. Perhaps she was practising her bad cop; perhaps she just didn't like me. She was a striking-looking girl, ebony hair

bobbed around a pale face and large, violet-blue eyes, but her mouth was disapproving and small, almost lipless, like the mark left by a fingernail in uncooked pastry.

‘All sorts . . . furniture and things . . .’ I answered, ‘. . . for Mr Nickolai.’

I wasn’t at my most coherent.

‘You’re his cleaner?’ The inspector’s sandy eyebrows shot up in surprise.

‘If you don’t mind my saying, you seem too . . .’ He left the sentence hanging but I knew what he was getting at.

‘I’m working my way down in the world.’

My voice didn’t sound my own. My throat ached with sobs, with silent screams.

I rolled the ragged ball of damp tissue up my hot cheek and sniffed, staring into the mug of walnut-brown tea growing cold on the table in front of me. I’d tried picking it up earlier, but my hand had shaken too much and I’d been forced to abandon the attempt.

‘Now, Miss Browne . . . may I call you June . . .?’ The inspector asked gently.

‘Juno,’ I corrected him. ‘My name is Juno.’

‘Juno?’ he repeated. ‘Like the goddess?’ The young detective constable gave the faintest smirk, a tiny tug of her little mouth. Perhaps she didn’t think I was goddess material.

‘Is that your van parked across the road, the old Astra?’ The inspector went on, making a connection, ‘“Domestic Goddess” is written on the side. Is that yours?’

Mine. All mine. You can’t really miss it. It’s a bright, cheery yellow with black writing. *‘Juno Browne, Domestic Goddess – Housework, Gardening, Home Help, Domestic Care, House-sitting, Pet-sitting, Dog-walking. No job too*

small.' The paint job had cost me more than the vehicle.

'So, you clean Mr Nickolai's flat?' He returned to the murder in hand.

It was a bit more complicated than that. 'Not his flat, no . . . He employed me to help him with his stock . . . clean up things he might want to sell . . . take to auction . . . But recently, he decided to reopen the shop. I've been helping him get it ready, redecorating . . .'

'How long have you been working for him?'

'Um . . . about five months.'

'You got to know him pretty well?'

I nodded, forced to blow my nose. 'Yes, I think so.'

'Juno, do you know of any reason why anyone would have wanted to harm Mr Nickolai?'

I hesitated for a fraction too long and he leant forward intently.

'There were the Russians,' I breathed out at last.

'Russians?' he repeated, frowning.

I sniffed into the disintegrating tissue and nodded.

He cast a brief glance at his companion and then back at me. 'What Russians?'

CHAPTER ONE

It was the day before I met Nick, the day he phoned. It must have been back in May. I'd taken the Tribe out in the morning, as usual, and loaded them into the back of the van at the end of our run. They were exhausted after racing around up on Whiddon Scrubs, and there was much heavy panting and scratching going on.

I'd parked the van on the brow of the hill, the last place before the road drops down towards Ashburton, the last place I could be sure to pick up a phone signal. Down in the town it's patchy to say the least, and where I live it's non-existent. I slid behind the steering wheel and dropped the silent dog whistle into my shoulder bag.

Somewhere in that cavernous void lurked my mobile phone and I rooted around until I found it. There were no messages. I glanced in the rear-view mirror. Behind the wire grille that separated us, Nookie the Huskie gazed at me with eyes of Arctic blue before she yawned, turned around a couple of times, and lay down with the others.

As I started up the engine, I lingered a moment over the view. It was still early, the sky pale and soft, dove grey above distant trees, where the tower of St Andrew's pierced the mist that floated in a veil over the valley. I turned the ignition, the radio blurted into life and Vivaldi spilt out all over the Devon countryside.

He interests me, Vivaldi. They used to call him The Red Priest. Perhaps other red-haired people just catch my attention. Anyway, all that strident strumming of violins was a bit intense for such an early hour, and I turned the radio off.

The old Astra rattled down the hill. We were among fields now. The whistling winds and gorse of the moor were far behind us, tatty sheep and shaggy ponies left nibbling by the roadside. In the wing mirror the sign recommending travellers to *Drive with Moor Care* disappeared as we rounded a bend. Our road dipped, vanishing between dense hedgerows frothy with white cow parsley, tiny pink stars of campion sparkling among dark ferns. This is one of the back roads into Ashburton, where trees mesh overhead in a tunnel of flickering green. It's pretty enough, but dwindles to a narrow twisting lane with few passing places, and as everyone who lives locally seems to drive a tractor or a four-by-four, and is either incapable of backing, or unprepared to give an inch on

grounds of vehicular superiority, it can be a two-wheels-forward, four-wheels-back sort of journey.

That morning I was lucky, forced to pull in only once, stopping by a farm gate to let a tractor trundle by, and delivered the members of the Tribe to their respective homes without much delay. Sally, the arthritic Labrador was joyfully received by her equally arthritic owner, but Nookie had to be let into an empty house and fed. At least, after her run, she would sleep away the morning, and her lonely wait for her family to return would not be too long.

Ashburton is a nook-and-cranny sort of place, a solid stannary town of narrow streets and even narrower pavements, ‘nestling’ as the guidebooks like to say, among hills on Dartmoor’s doorstep. In distance the town is a mere slip road away from the A38; in time, a century or more: a place where old cottages and ancient pubs stand wedged between elegant Edwardian town houses, a place of quaint corners, secret courtyards and long walled walks. It’s a honeytrap for tourists and day trippers coming off the Expressway, the last place for a comfort stop before they head on up to the moor, the perfect setting for a cream tea or a pint of local ale, a leisurely browse among shops selling expensive gifts and artisan foods, shops selling nothing which is not rustic, artistic or picturesque. There are no fewer than sixteen antique shops, and that’s not counting the flea market and the auctioneers, and most of these are packed within the framework of streets surrounding the broad junction where East Street becomes West Street, and North Street becomes St Lawrence’s Lane.

The old town looks lovely, but it’s a nightmare for the poor working woman trying to go about her business,

getting stuck behind coaches in streets that were never intended for anything wider than a horse and cart, or trying to avoid knocking over knots of trippers, who stand about like waiting skittles in the middle of the road as they gawp at the delights around them. By the time I turned off North Street, my temper was not so much frayed as shredded. After walking the Tribe, I'd done two hours' house-cleaning for the odious Verbena Clarke, it was way past my lunchtime and I was starving hungry. You wouldn't like me when I'm hungry.

The lane in which I live is quieter than the main thoroughfare and a lot less picturesque. No Georgian houses in sugar-almond colours here, no thatches and hollyhocks, just a narrow cobbled street with what used to be a bookshop, now sadly boarded up, halfway down. The only other building of interest is *Sunflowers*, the vegetarian cafe owned by my landlords, Adam and Kate, set in what was once an old stable.

Beyond this, the pavement narrows to nothing, the cobbles peter out and the road degrades into a rough track pocked with potholes and gives up entirely in a dead-end patch of ground edged with a tangle of dusty bramble bushes and dominated by an old Victorian lamp post. Some people regard this as an excellent place to abandon shopping trolleys, tip old mattresses, dispose of defunct microwaves and the like. I use it to park the van. Not that anyone is likely to be mad enough to want to steal it, but parked there I can see it from the house, if I peer out of the window on the landing.

Adam and Kate inherited a cavernous Victorian property, which they have never had enough money

to renovate. It's gloomy and damp, with creaking floorboards and rotten window frames, but there's little rental accommodation in Ashburton, the rent is cheap, and beggars can't be choosers. They're happy to have a tenant living above them who doesn't complain about the mouldy wall in her kitchen, the windows rattling, or the draught screaming like a banshee under the living-room door. To be fair, they've made several attempts to improve the place, but always run out of funds before these improvements can be completed. *Sunflowers* is not in a prime trading position and doesn't do as well as its excellent menu deserves.

When I got back that morning my landlords were still at the cafe, dealing with lunches, and the house was empty. I trotted up the steps from the garden gate, making a mental note that it was time I gave the shrubs in the front garden a good haircut.

I was on a promise to look after them that I hadn't honoured for some time.

I let myself in and went upstairs. Although the first floor is technically mine, I don't have a door that blocks it off entirely. The landing is shared territory because of access to the airing cupboard and the loft. I could see Kate had been upstairs today. A plastic box had been left on the table outside my living-room door, an offering from *Sunflowers*. 'Aubergine and Potato Curry' was scrawled on the label, the writing blurred by partial defrosting. I picked it up with a smile. Having landlords who own a cafe means there are always plenty of leftovers, and I'm not proud.

My flat consists of a living room, a small kitchen, one

bedroom with a brass bedstead and tiny original fireplace, and a bathroom with a dodgy boiler.

I unlocked the living room. Bill was sitting on the windowsill pretending to be a vase, his tail curled neatly round his feet. He likes the view from my living-room window, looking down into the mad tangle of the oddly shaped garden beneath, across to a crooked line of rooftops, and the green hills beyond. I stroked the short, black velvet between his ears and he started a deep, rasping purr, turning his head to gaze at me adoringly from one blazing, emerald eye. He'd lost the other as a kitten, in an encounter with an outraged chicken and his beautiful black nose was raked by long scratches. Bill's not my cat, you understand; he belongs to Adam and Kate downstairs. Whenever I leave my place I make sure he's locked out; and whenever I come home, he's back inside. Like a magician, it seems he can enter and exit at will; none of us can work out how he does it.

I made myself a mug of coffee, a peanut butter and banana sandwich and settled down in the armchair, kicking off my shoes and heaving my socked feet up on to the coffee table. I raked my fingers through the tangled mess of my curls and gave my head a rub.

Bill stretched his long body on the windowsill and wandered over to join me, leaping on my lap and flexing his claws into my thighs in appreciation. 'It's no good settling down,' I told him through a mouthful of sandwich, 'I don't expect I'll be here long.' I could see the red light flashing on the answerphone and reached over him awkwardly to press play.

I didn't recognise the voice. It was foreign and heavily

accented, hesitant, awkward at talking to a machine. *I want speak to Miss Browne . . . er . . . Juno. This is Mr Nickolai . . . Nickolai Antiques. I want her come work for me.* He left a number. I dislodged a disgruntled Bill so I could reach for a pen to jot it down, and then phoned back.

‘Mr, Nickolai?’ I asked when the phone was picked up. ‘Juno Browne. You called about a job?’

He gave a rich chuckle. ‘You come today?’

‘No, I’m sorry. I’m already booked for the rest of the day.’ I’d received a distress call yesterday from Ricky and Morris and had promised the afternoon to them. I couldn’t let them down.

My diary was open, ready on my lap. ‘I’m pretty full up tomorrow,’ I told him. ‘But I could pop around about lunchtime, to discuss the job.’

‘S’good. Tomorrow. Nickolai Antiques, you know where is?’

‘Shadow Lane?’

He grunted in assent. ‘Do not come shop door – flat door, round side.’

‘I’ll find it. About twelve o’clock, then?’

‘See you twelve o’clock. I look forward.’ He chuckled again. ‘I never met goddess before.’

‘Mr Nickolai, are you looking for a regular cleaner . . . ?’ But he’d already rung off. ‘Because I don’t have any regular slots left,’ I added lamely and put the receiver down.