



*Dead on Dartmoor*

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## CHAPTER ONE

A week before the murder, my van went up in flames.

It seemed fine in the morning, when I took the dogs out. I only had three to walk that day and I collected them in the van as usual, before their owners left for work, and drove them to the woods beyond the edge of town where they could romp around unfettered.

They raced ahead of me in the cool shade beneath the trees, sniffing at trails left by night-time creatures, snuffling at prints in the soft, dark mud. As I followed, they dashed off through the undergrowth, bursting from beneath the shadows onto sunlit grass and sending strutting black crows flapping into the air. Here, in open pasture, I could launch balls for them to chase. I could see up the valley, fields sweeping upward to the moor, green grass fading to tawny yellow and the granite knuckle of a distant tor. It was going to be another fine day.

Later I deposited two of the dogs back at their homes, using spare keys to let myself in.

I don't have a spare key for EB, because his mum is always waiting for him at home. But as we approached her front door, I could see a scrawled note taped to the wood. *Juno, it read, Alan taken to hospital with chest pain. I've gone with him in ambulance. Can you hang on to EB until I get back? I will ring you. Sorry. Elaine x*

EB waited patiently by my feet as I read the message, his overarching eyebrows twitching in confusion. He didn't seem to mind getting back into the van. I let him sit on the front seat with me instead of putting him in the back behind the wire grille where the dogs normally ride. He leant the weight of his warm little body against mine and I turned back to Ashburton, meandering between hedgerows in full green flourish.

It had been a long, hot summer that seemed as if it would never end, sunshine and blue skies lasting through September. But the swallows had flown, and although the sunny weather continued, the green treetops were brushed with bronze and gold; the leaves were on the turn.

I was forced to brake suddenly. A woman was in the road, standing perfectly still, a few inches of floral nightdress hanging down beneath her long blue dressing gown. Her hair was a silver halo but flattened at the back of her skull, as if it had not been brushed since her head left the pillow that morning. I pulled on the handbrake and climbed out, shutting the door on the muzzle of a curious EB. Despite the noise of the van's approach she seemed oblivious of my presence, staring up at the flickering light through the trees above her, at the shifting shadows, and murmuring quietly to herself.

'Hello,' I called out. 'Are you all right?' She turned at the sound of my voice, not by twisting her head, but by

a series of tiny, rocking steps, until she had manoeuvred herself around to face me. Her eyes were blue, her skin rose petals crushed into a thousand tiny wrinkles. She would have been pretty once.

‘Can I help you?’ I asked.

She scowled at me, didn’t answer. A few hundred yards further along the road was Oakdene, a care home for patients with dementia, and I reckoned I was looking at an escapee. ‘Only, if you’re going for a walk,’ I went on reasonably, ‘I think you’ll need your slippers.’

She gazed down at feet wrapped in woolly bedsocks and wriggled her toes experimentally before returning her gaze to my face. It was an untroubled gaze, full of childlike innocence, as if all care, all stress, had been gently washed away. She reached out. For a moment I thought she was going to slap me, but instead she grabbed a handful of my curls, squeezing lightly with her fingers. ‘All curly,’ she breathed in delight, ‘all red.’

All curly, all red – she’d just about summed up my hair.

‘You’re not Samantha,’ she told me, although she didn’t sound sure.

‘No, I’m Juno. What’s your name?’

‘Marianne,’ she declared after a moment’s thought. ‘Are we going in the little bus?’

I glanced back at the van. It was yellow with black writing on the sides. I suppose it didn’t look unlike a small bus, except for EB frowning at us from behind the steering wheel.

‘Why don’t we?’

She allowed me to lead her to the passenger door and sit her in the seat, despite being hampered by EB,

who'd decided that any friend of mine must be a friend of his. Fortunately, Marianne didn't seem to mind an enthusiastic face licking, and responded with cries of rapture and much patting. In spite of the two of them, I managed to get her seat belt done up and headed for Oakdene, hoping to God that was where Marianne had come from. If she hadn't, I didn't have a clue where to take her next, and somehow I had the feeling that she wouldn't know either.

Thankfully, the next bend revealed two ladies in blue uniforms peering anxiously into the hedgerows as they scurried along, as if hoping to find something hidden amongst the brambles and blackberries. I stopped, flashed my lights and tooted at them. At the sight of my passenger one cried out in relief. 'Oh, thank God! Judith!'

Judith? What happened to Marianne?

The woman approaching on my side began talking as I wound the window down. The name badge pinned to her ample bosom identified her as Barbara. She was a comfy, little body and was slightly out of breath. 'Thank you so much! Where did you find her?'

'Not far,' I answered as Judith-Marianne climbed out with the help of her colleague, who was younger and taller, her hair scraped back to reveal a large, pale forehead. 'Has she gone walkabout before?'

'All the time, bless her! She keeps trying to find her way to her old home . . . Oxford,' she added in a whisper.

I'm not sure how many miles away Oxford is, but it's a long way from Ashburton.

I watched her depart without a backward glance to me or EB, her arm linked companionably with that of the care

assistant, the two of them chatting amiably. ‘She seems happy enough.’

‘Oh, she’s a sweetheart,’ Barbara informed me. ‘Anyway, thank you so much . . . um . . .’

‘Juno.’

‘Juno,’ she repeated. She hesitated a moment, brows drawn together in a worried frown, her lips compressed in a line. ‘I wonder . . . our boss doesn’t know she’s got out again. We don’t want to see her locked in her room. I wonder if . . .’

‘Your secret’s safe with me.’ I didn’t know the boss of Oakdene and I certainly wasn’t about to go round there causing trouble.

‘Thank you,’ she breathed and then hurried off after Judith-Marianne and her colleague.

‘Life is full of strange little happenings,’ I informed a mystified EB, watching them go, and we set off once again towards the town.

I was half an hour late arriving at *Old Nick’s* because I’d driven home on the way to check my answering machine for any message from Elaine. She might not have been able to contact me on my mobile: the signal is dodgy on Dartmoor, to say the least.

There was no message. I wondered if EB had been fed before we went walkies this morning, or whether he was still awaiting his breakfast, so I stopped at the baker’s in West Street and bought him a jumbo sausage roll.

*Old Nick’s* has only been open for two months. The shop belonged to an elderly client of mine, Mr Nikolai, who lived in the flat above. He was an antiques dealer. Unfortunately,

Nick was a bit criminal around the edges and got himself murdered as a consequence. Why he decided to leave the entire property to me is still a mystery. I suppose he felt I'd earned it; a feeling not shared by members of his family.

Whatever, it is no longer the shabby, run-down old junk shop it once was, but is now freshly painted in pale green, its windows glossy, and *Old Nick's*, picked out in gold, swinging on the sign above the door. Each time I draw up outside it I cannot resist a tiny stab of pride and offer up a silent prayer of gratitude to cousin Brian, my one remaining relative, who'd come up with the cash for the makeover.

Unfortunately, no amount of cash could magically transport *Old Nick's* from Shadow Lane to North Street or East Street, where it needed to be to bring in the required customers. The little town of Ashburton is one of the four stannary towns on Dartmoor, where locally mined tin used to be stamped and assayed, and the townspeople are proud of its history. It also had a reputation for drunkenness. Nowadays it's a real tourist trap, with more antique shops than taverns; but *Old Nick's* is obstinately stuck around the corner from the scene of all the action. The only other businesses in Shadow Lane are a launderette and an undertaker, so there's not a lot of footfall. Generally, people who don't own washing machines are not in the market for the art, crafts and antiques which we sell, and those who need the services of an undertaker have lost interest in buying things altogether. I've placed a hopeful cafe board at the corner of the lane, pointing the way for customers. *Old Nick's: Art, Crafts, Books, Antiques and Collectibles.*

Another problem is that when Nick died and left me the shop, I already had a business of my own. Not exactly



thriving, but it kept body and soul together. *Juno Browne, Domestic Goddess – Housework, Gardening, Home Help, Domestic Care, House-sitting, Pet-sitting, Dog walking. No job too small.* The legend is still proudly proclaimed on the sides of my van. I don't want, and can't afford, to give my business up: I'm too attached to some of my clients, and until there's sufficient income from the shop I can't even consider it – and that day, I fear, is a long way off. The stuff I sell is mostly bric-a-brac and the profits so far amount to pocket money, whilst the overheads for the shop are draining money I rely on to live.

One sensible move I could make, apart from just selling the property and pocketing the cash, would be to give up the flat I currently rent from Adam and Kate and move myself into the empty rooms above the shop. But I can't bring myself to do that. I'm not of a nervous disposition, but I just don't fancy living in the room where Nick was murdered. Not yet, anyway, not unless I have to.

The lights were on inside the shop when I arrived, and I could see Pat arranging her display of craft items on one of the wide windowsills. She gave me a little wave. I let EB trot into the shop ahead of me. He pattered over to her and began an exhaustive inspection of her trainers. She and her sister and brother-in-law run a sanctuary for abandoned pets and farm animals and her shoes are covered in information of great interest to the canine mind.

I was surprised to see her, though. 'I thought Sophie was opening up today.'

'It was her turn,' Pat stooped to stroke EB as he snuffled around her shoelaces, 'but she got offered a shift at The Dartmoor Lodge so I said I'd swop with her. I don't mind.'

Sophie and Pat man the shop on alternate days, instead of paying me rent. They get free space to sell the lovely things they make, and I get the time to keep my business going. The downside is that I don't get any money.

I've divided the shop into several rental units, hoping to attract a variety of sellers under one roof. Sophie and Pat take up the front of the shop, with two other units behind theirs. My own unit is at the back, in what was once the old storeroom. A sign in the corridor points to it: *This way for bric-a-brac, antiques and collectibles* – an optimistic way of describing a few sticks of junk furniture and an assortment of cheap knick-knacks.

As yet, the only other unit that is taken, and the only one paying me rent, belongs to Gavin, who sailed past the window on his bike at that moment, clad in pointy helmet and full racing gear, like a Lycra-covered stick insect on wheels. I don't know why he dresses up as if he's riding in the Tour de France, he only lives five minutes' ride away. What, I ask, is wrong with cycle clips?

Pat rolled her eyes at the sight of him. 'He's driving Sophie up the wall,' she whispered.

Gavin would be chaining up his bike in the alleyway at the side of the building and would not appear for at least five minutes; even so, I whispered. 'Is he?'

'He's got . . . you know . . . a *thing* about her,' she mouthed. 'He won't leave her alone, always hovering, looking over her shoulder when she's working.'

Sophie didn't really like painting in the shop as customers tended to watch her working, which she found unsettling. She was prepared to put up with it if it might lead to a sale, but wasn't keen on people who hung around too long, stood

too close, or chattered too much. She got all three with Gavin.

I could understand why she attracted him. Sophie was twenty-five but could pass for seventeen without make-up – and carried an air of childlike vulnerability. An orphaned seal pup abandoned on an ice floe could not melt your heart more easily than Sophie Child when she turned her big brown eyes on you. They even worked on me, for God’s sake, so what chance did a poor sap like Gavin stand? Gavin, nineteen, but with all the emotional maturity of a twelve-year-old, was no match for her at all.

I looked down at the artwork that currently occupied Sophie’s desk, the thick watercolour paper pinned at the corners. It was one of her hedgerow paintings: a drystone wall, its rough, mossy stones seen through a delicate tracery of wild flowers, some, as yet, white and unpainted.

Gavin appeared in the doorway, tall and bespectacled, carrying his silly helmet. EB let out a little yip and he scowled. I don’t think Gavin liked dogs. ‘Where’s Sophie?’ was his first question.

‘Good morning, Gavin, and how are you?’ I asked pleasantly.

‘Isn’t she coming in today?’ Poor boy, his disappointment was obvious.

‘She’ll be in later. She’s waitressing on breakfasts at The Dartmoor Lodge.’

‘I don’t know why she wants to bother with that,’ he sneered loftily, ‘wasting her talent.’

‘She’s gotta live, Gavin,’ Pat told him flatly. ‘We can’t all go to the bank of Mum and Dad.’

He grunted, colouring slightly, and hurried through the door at the back of the shop and up the stairs, to change.

There was a bathroom on the landing, once part of Nick's flat, and we used his old kitchen for making refreshments.

'Now he'll be half an hour changing,' Pat complained, 'and then he'll come down with a cup of coffee, you'll see. Never offers to make one for anyone else.'

I couldn't hang around to find out; I had clients to get to. 'Look, Pat, I don't want to leave EB in the van, can I dump him with you? I can put him up in the kitchen if you'd rather.' But EB had already settled down by her chair and I handed her the slightly greasy paper bag containing his breakfast.

The Brownlows were a husband and wife team of GPs with three teenage children and a breezy, devil-may-care attitude to safety and hygiene in the home that I fervently hoped did not extend into their professional lives. I spent half of my allotted two hours washing dishes – the dishwasher was already full – before I could reach the kitchen surfaces I was paid to clean. But after I'd scraped brown gloop out of a gravy boat and cleared up spattered globules of pink icing after someone who'd made a cake, I attacked the waiting worktops and the floor, and left the kitchen looking sparkling; temporarily, at least. I just had time to call in on Maisie, check her agency carer had arrived to help her bathe and dress, change her bedclothes and stuff them in the laundry basket, before I headed out again. I did an hour's ironing for Simon the accountant who likes the collars of his shirts *just so*, and made it back to *Old Nick's* a little before midday.

Sophie had obviously arrived, her jacket and bag hanging on her chair; but there was no sign of her. Gavin was sitting at the table of his unit, hidden behind one of his

graphic novels, and Pat was concentrating ferociously on counting stitches on her knitting needle. Neither of them spoke. There was, to say the least of it, an atmosphere.

EB skipped over to greet me, his claws clicking on the wooden floor.

‘Where’s Sophie?’ I asked.

‘Upstairs.’ Pat directed a fierce glance at Gavin. ‘Trying to rescue her painting.’

I flicked another look at Gavin, whose ears were suspiciously pink, and climbed the stairs to the kitchen. Sophie was by the sink, her painting laid out on one of the worktops, dabbing at it carefully with a sponge.

‘What happened?’

‘Bloody Gavin,’ she responded, not looking up. ‘He would bring me a cup of coffee. I told him I didn’t want one. Then he put it down on my table and knocked it over with his sleeve.’

‘Has he ruined it?’

‘I’d already covered these with masking fluid,’ she said, pointing at the white, unpainted stalks of cow parsley, ‘so they were protected. But some of this background will need repainting.’

‘Oh, Soph, it’s taken you ages! What did you say to him?’

‘Not much. I didn’t need to.’ She chuckled. ‘Pat gave him a real ear-bashing.’ She pushed her big red-framed specs up the bridge of her tiny nose. ‘Well, you know what she’s like.’

Pat was one of most generous and kind people I knew, but she seemed to have it in for Gavin. ‘I hope she doesn’t piss him off too much, I don’t want him to leave. I need his rent money.’

‘It’s one of those days, I suppose.’ Sophie blotted a tiny flower with a corner of paper towel. ‘I was supposed to be taking some stuff to that new arts centre near Dartmeet. I got it all packed up, ready to go.’ She turned her dark eyes on me mournfully. ‘But I’ll have to cancel, I can’t get there now.’

‘Why not?’

‘Mum’s had to work and has taken the car.’

‘I’ll take you.’ I heard the words come out of my mouth before I’d even thought about it.

Sophie continued to gaze at me soulfully. ‘Don’t you have to work this afternoon?’

‘I said I’d help Ricky and Morris, but they won’t mind. I can put some time in for them later. I’ll give them a call.’

I’d kept Nick’s old phone in his living room, sitting on the floor. Like the bedroom, it was empty, cleared of his furniture, walls painted, floorboards sanded down and varnished, new spotlights in the ceiling: just waiting to be rented by traders or to be moved into by me. Pat was of the opinion that the rooms were haunted; at least that’s what she told Gavin to wind him up. I’m not sure I believe in ghosts, but I still couldn’t walk into those rooms without thinking of Nick, hearing his chuckle, seeing his wicked blue eyes. My call made, I went back down into the shop.

‘Gavin,’ Pat called out when I appeared, ‘what have you got to remember to tell Juno?’

He looked up from his reading, returning to the real world after a definite pause. ‘What?’

‘What happened yesterday?’ Pat insisted.

‘Oh . . . yes,’ he responded, peering vaguely through his specs as if struggling to remember. ‘Some woman came in, enquiring about a unit.’

‘Great!’ I was instantly cheered at the possibility of more rent. ‘What does she do?’

He shrugged. ‘I don’t know. I told her she’d have to come back when you were here.’

‘Well, did you take her number?’

‘No . . . sorry,’ he added, in the voice of someone who really couldn’t give a shit and tried to return to his reading.

‘Well, if she comes in again, or if anyone else comes in enquiring, will you be sure to take their details, please? I need to fill these units.’

‘Oh? Yes, of course.’

‘And by the way,’ I added, addressing the room in general, ‘I had eighteen pounds extra in my cash box last night. Someone must have taken a sale for me yesterday. Does anyone know what it was?’

‘That was me.’ Gavin was beginning to look sheepish. ‘You sold a silver thing . . . a rounded knife, bone handle . . . um . . . bit like an apple corer.’

‘That would have been the stilton scoop,’ I told him, ‘it would have been written on the label.’ I was trying not to lecture him but failing miserably. ‘That’s why we all label everything, Gavin, so we can keep track of sales. Next time, please write the details in the book on the counter. That’s what it’s for.’ It was a simple enough system if we all followed it. Poor Gavin; if I’d had any idea what terrible things were about to happen, I like to think I’d have been more patient with him, more understanding of his complete lack of interest, his callow lack of charm – but probably not.

Once we’d loaded Sophie’s paintings, we put EB in the back of the van. He wanted to ride in the front, but dogs tend

to make Sophie wheeze, although EB's mum would have pointed out indignantly that Miniature Schnauzers' coats never shed hair. But I made Sophie check she had her inhaler with her before we left, I know what she's like. We weren't taking any of her big hedgerow pictures, but some of her miniatures: charming studies of birds, bees, dragonflies and amphibians. We took boxes of these together with a portfolio containing prints of her larger works. She had, after a great deal of nagging from me, begun to paint pet portraits, but so far EB was her sole commission.

We took the road to Buckland. No sooner had we climbed the wooded hill towards the church and farmland opened out beneath a wide blue sky, than an irritating ping from my bag announced my mobile phone had returned to the land of the living, and a fuzzy buzzing noise told me that a call was coming in. 'I bet that's Elaine. Have a look, will you?'

By the time Sophie had dug the phone out of my bag, it had switched to voicemail. She listened as I pulled into a gateway to let a farm vehicle pass in the narrow road, a huge machine with spiky arms folded up in front of the cab like the claws of a praying mantis, something to do with hay cutting, probably: the long, dry spell meant that many farmers locally had managed a second cut.

'Alan's fine,' she reported, phone to her ear, as the deeply cut treads of the machine's giant tyres rolled past my window, bending my wing mirror out of position. 'He's had a stent fitted and he's staying in hospital for a couple of nights. Elaine's home and you can take EB back whenever you like.'

'Would you text her and say I'll be an hour or two?'

She nodded and got busy with her thumbs.

\* \* \*



After we'd left Sophie at the collection of old stone farm buildings, which had been converted into the new gallery and arts centre, I took EB for another walk. At the end of the lane we sat on a drystone wall and gazed over fields of stubble scattered with golden rolls of hay. A second crop had been harvested here. In the distance, a machine was lifting the rolled bales into a pile, wrapping them in black plastic ready for silage, an activity we didn't usually see in September.

Back to the arts centre, where we waited for Sophie in the shiny new cafe and tested their crumbly apple cake. She appeared after another twenty minutes, grinning broadly and empty-handed except for her portfolio.

'They're taking all my paintings,' she announced happily, 'sale or return.'

I offered tea and cake in celebration but she declined, and we decided to get going. I put EB into the back of the van, but Sophie decided to hang on to her portfolio and we started off for home.

'This is going to deplete your stock at the shop,' I said, after we'd rattled over a cattle grid and turned onto the road that led home across the moor. The rough grass on either side was parched after the drying winds of summer, the leaves of stunted hawthorn bushes already withering and yellow. 'You're going to have to get busy with that paintbrush.'

'Actually,' she admitted after a sly, sideways glance at me, 'they asked for some local scenes.'

I groaned. 'Isn't that what I'm always telling you?' I took my hand off the wheel to wave an arm at the rolling grandeur of the moor around us, a ragged granite tor like a ruined castle snagging the horizon. 'Local scenes sell!'

She ignored this completely and switched on the radio.

‘Honestly, Soph, what’s wrong with painting Buckland Church or Hound Tor?’

‘Everybody does it!’ she said dismissively. This was an argument we’d had before. ‘Can you smell burning?’

‘Don’t change the subject. What about some paintings of Ashburton? I’ve got lovely photos of St Andrew’s churchyard in the snow . . . Yes I can!’ There was a definite whiff of burning and a blue haze was rapidly filling the cab. ‘I’m going to pull over.’ I’d barely made it to the verge before tiny bright flames began licking their way up from under the dashboard. Sophie dabbed at them ineffectually with her fingers.

‘Out!’ I ordered her, switching off the engine. ‘Get out now!’

She already had the passenger door open, her portfolio clutched to her chest. Smoke was pouring from under the dashboard, hot and black. I had just the time to rescue my bag from the footwell. I held my breath and grabbed the vehicle’s paperwork from the glove compartment. ‘Ring the fire brigade!’ I yelled, coughing. ‘I’ll get EB out of the back.’