

The Monster in the Box

Ruth Rendell

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CHAPTER ONE

He had never told anyone. The strange relationship, if it could be called that, had gone on for years, decades, and he had never breathed a word about it. He had kept silent because he knew no one would believe him. None of it could be proved, not the stalking, not the stares, the conspiratorial smiles, not the killings, not any of the signs Targo had made because he knew that Wexford knew and could do nothing about it.

It had gone on for years and then it had stopped. Or seemed to have stopped. Targo was gone. Back to Birmingham yet again or perhaps to Coventry. A long time had passed since he had been seen in Kingsmarkham and Wexford had thought it was all over. Thought with regret, not relief, because if Targo disappeared – more to the point, if Targo never did it again – what hope had he of bringing the man to justice? Still, he had almost made up his mind he would never see him any more. He would never again set eyes on that short, muscular figure with the broad shoulders and the thick sturdy legs, the coarse fairish hair, blunt features and bright blue eyes – and the mark that must always be kept covered up. Wexford had only once seen him without the scarf he wore wrapped round his neck, a wool scarf in winter, a cotton or silk one in summer, a scarf that belonged to one of his wives perhaps, no matter so long

as it covered that purple-brown birthmark which disfigured his neck, crept up to his cheek and dribbled down to his chest. He had seen him only once without a scarf, never without a dog.

Eric Targo. Older than Wexford by seven or eight years, a much-married man, van driver, property developer, kennels proprietor, animal lover, murderer. It was coincidence or chance – Wexford favoured the latter – that he was thinking about Targo for the first time in weeks, wondering what had happened to him, pondering and dismissing the rumour that he was back living in the area, regretting that he had never proved anything against him, when the man appeared in front of him, a hundred yards ahead. There was no doubt in his mind, even at that distance, even though Targo's shock of hair was quite white now. He still strutted, straight-backed, the way a short man carries himself, and he still wore a scarf. In his left hand, on the side nearest to Wexford, he carried a laptop computer. Or, to be accurate, a case made to hold a laptop.

Wexford was in his car. He pulled in to the side of Glebe Road and switched off the engine. Targo had got out of a white van and gone into a house on the same side as Wexford was parked. No dog? Wexford had to decide whether he wanted Targo to see him. Perhaps it hardly mattered. How long was it? Ten years? More? He got out of the car and began to walk in the direction of the house Targo had gone into. It was one of a terrace between a jerry-built block of flats and a row of small shops, an estate agent, a nail bar, a newsagent and a shop called Webb and Cobb (a name Wexford found amusing) once selling pottery and kitchen utensils but now closed down and boarded up. Mike Burden had lived here once, when he was first married to his first wife; number 36, Wexford remembered. Number 34 was the

house Targo had gone into. The front door of Burden's old house was painted purple now and the new residents had paved over their narrow strip of front garden to make a motorbike park, something Burden said he resented, as if he had any right to a say in what the present owners did to their property. It made Wexford smile to himself to think of it.

There was no sign of Targo. Wexford walked up to the offside of the van and looked through the driver's window. It was open about three inches, for the benefit of a smallish dog, white and a tawny colour, of a feathery-eared, long-coated breed he didn't recognise, sitting on the passenger seat. It turned its head to look at Wexford and let out a single sharp yap, not very loud, not at all angry. Wexford returned to his car and moved it up the road to a position on the opposite side to the white van, between a Honda and a Vauxhall. From there he could command a good view of number 34. How long would Targo stay in there? And what had he been doing with the laptop or the laptop case? It seemed an unlikely place for any friend of Targo's to live. When he had last seen the owner of the whitish-tawny dog and the white van, Targo had been doing well for himself, was a rich man, while Glebe Road was a humble street where several families of immigrants had settled and which Burden had moved out of as soon as he could afford to.

He noted the number of the white van. He waited. It was, he thought, a very English sort of day, the air still, the sky a uniform white. On such a day, at much the same time of year, late summer, he had visited Targo's boarding kennels and seen the snake. The scarf round Targo's neck had been of black, green and yellow silk, almost but not quite covering the birthmark, and the snake which he draped round it had been the same sort of colours, the pattern on its skin more intricate. Accident or design? Nothing Targo might do would

surprise him. The first time he had seen him, years and years ago when both were young but he, Wexford, was very young, Targo wore a brown wool scarf. It was winter and cold. The dog with him was a spaniel. What was it called? Wexford couldn't remember. He remembered the second time because that was the only time Targo had been for a few minutes without a scarf. He had opened the front door to Wexford, left him standing there while he picked a scarf, his wife's, off a hook and wound it round his neck. In those few seconds Wexford had seen the purple-brown naevus, shaped like a map of some unknown continent with peninsulas running out to his chest and headlands skimming his chin and cheek, uneven with valleys and mountain ranges, and then Targo had covered it . . .

Now the front door of number 34 opened and the man emerged. He stood on the doorstep talking to a young Asian, the occupant, or one of the occupants, of the house. The young man, who wore jeans and a dazzlingly white shirt, was at least six inches taller than Targo, handsome, his skin a pale amber colour, his hair jet black. Targo, Wexford noticed, might have grown old but he still had a young man's figure. The T-shirt he wore showed off his heavily muscled torso and the black jeans emphasised his flat stomach. He had left the laptop behind. While he was in the house he had taken off his blue-and-white scarf. Because it was warm, no doubt, and, incredibly, because it was no longer needed for concealment. The birthmark had gone.

For a moment Wexford asked himself if he could possibly have made the wrong identification. The yellow hair had gone white, he couldn't see the bright blue eyes. It was the purple naevus which had been the distinguishing mark and which primarily identified him. But no, this was Targo all right, squat, stocky, muscular Targo with his cocky walk and his

confident stance. The Asian man walked a few steps down the short path with him. He held out his hand and, after a slight hesitation, Targo took it. Asians shook hands a lot, Wexford had noted, friends meeting by chance in the street, always men, though, never women. Someone had told him the Asians at number 34 owned the defunct Webb and Cobb next door – for what that was worth. No doubt they received rents from the tenants of the flats above.

Targo came across to the van, opened the driver's door and climbed in. Wexford could just about see him stroke the dog's head, then briefly put his arm round it and give it a squeeze. If there was any doubt left, the dog identified him. A memory came to him from the quite distant past; the first Mrs Targo, by then divorced, saying of her ex-husband, 'He likes animals better than people. Well, he doesn't like people at all.'

The white van moved off. It might be unwise to follow it, Wexford thought. He hadn't much faith in his powers of following a vehicle without its driver spotting him. It would be easy enough to find out where Targo now lived, harder to say what use discovering his address would be. He sat there for a few moments longer, reflecting on how the first effect of seeing Targo had been to make him aware of his own physical shortcomings. Yet when he had first seen him, all those years ago, he had been a tall young policeman, very young and very fit, while Targo was squat and over-muscled and with that horrible facial mark.

Sometime in the years since they had last encountered each other, Targo must have had the naevus removed. It could be done with a laser – Wexford had read in a magazine article about new remedies for disfigurement and deformity. The man had been making a lot of money and no doubt he had spent some of it on this improvement to his appearance as others had their noses reshaped and their breasts augmented.

The strange thing, he thought, was that Targo still sometimes wore a scarf even on a summer's day – until he remembered and stripped it off. Did he feel cold without that neck covering he had been wearing for most of his life?

A girl was walking past his car, starting to cross the street between it and the Honda. She looked about sixteen, wore the dark blue skirt and white blouse with a blazer which constituted the uniform of Kingsmarkham Comprehensive and, covering her head, the hijab. In her case it was a plain headscarf, the same colour as her skirt, but, unflattering as it was, it failed to spoil her looks. Her dark brown eyes, surmounted by fine shapely eyebrows, glanced briefly in his direction. She went towards the house Targo had come out of, took a key from the satchel she carried and let herself in. Too old to be the daughter of the handsome young man. His sister? Perhaps.

Five minutes later he was parking the car on his own garage drive. Instead of letting himself in by the front door, he walked round the back and surveyed his garden. It was a large garden which Dora had been doing her best to keep tidy and under control since their gardener had left three months before. It had been a losing battle. Those three months were the time of year when a garden needed constant attention, lawn-mowing, weeding, deadheading, cutting back. Very little of that had been done. I suppose I could spend the weekend making a real effort, he thought, and then added, no, I couldn't. We must get a gardener, and soon. He took a last look at the ragged lawn, the dead roses dropping petals, the nettles springing up vigorously among the dahlias, and went into the house by the back door. Dora was in the living room, reading the local evening paper.

'We have to get a gardener,' said Wexford.

She looked up, smiled, said in a fair imitation of his voice, 'Hallo, darling, how lovely to be home. How are you?'

He kissed her. 'OK, I know that's what I should have said. But we do need a gardener. I'll get you a drink.'

In the kitchen he poured her a glass of Sauvignon from the fridge and himself one of Merlot from the cupboard. No good putting nuts or crisps into a bowl because she'd snatch it away from him and hide it somewhere as soon as she saw it. He thought again of Targo's muscly body and then he carried the wine into the living room.

'What do you think about Muslim girls wearing the hijab?'

'Is that the headscarf? I think they should if they want to, really want to for themselves, I mean, but shouldn't be coerced into it, certainly not by fathers and brothers.'

'It must be the most unbecoming headgear for a woman to wear. But I suppose that's the point.'

'Or if you're Muslim you don't find it unattractive. Which brings me to Jenny. She's been here talking about some girl, a Muslim girl, she's sixteen, in her class at school. She seems to think you ought to know about it.'

'Know what?' Wexford liked Burden's wife, knew she was intelligent and a good teacher, but if only she wouldn't try to get him involved in investigations which wasted his time and usually came to nothing. 'What's wrong now?'

'This girl – she's called Tamima Something, Tamima Rahman, and she lives with her family in Glebe Road, next to where Mike and Jean used to live –'

'I've seen her. I saw her today.'

'How can you know, Reg?'

'Well, unless there are two sixteen-year-old Muslim girls living next to where Mike used to live in Glebe Road and attending Kingsmarkham Comp, I can be pretty sure I've seen her. What's Jenny's business with her?'

'She says Tamima got seven or eight GCSEs, A-stars and As and Bs, and if all goes well she'll be going on to sixth-form

college. But the girl seems unhappy, uneasy even, worried about something. She's got a boyfriend, a Muslim like herself, so that ought to be all right but Jenny doesn't think it is. She thinks you ought to see the family, find out what's going on. Mike, apparently, isn't interested.'

'Good for Mike,' said Wexford. 'He's better than I am at being firm with people who want to waste his time. Now, how about this gardener? Shall I put an ad in the *Courier*?'