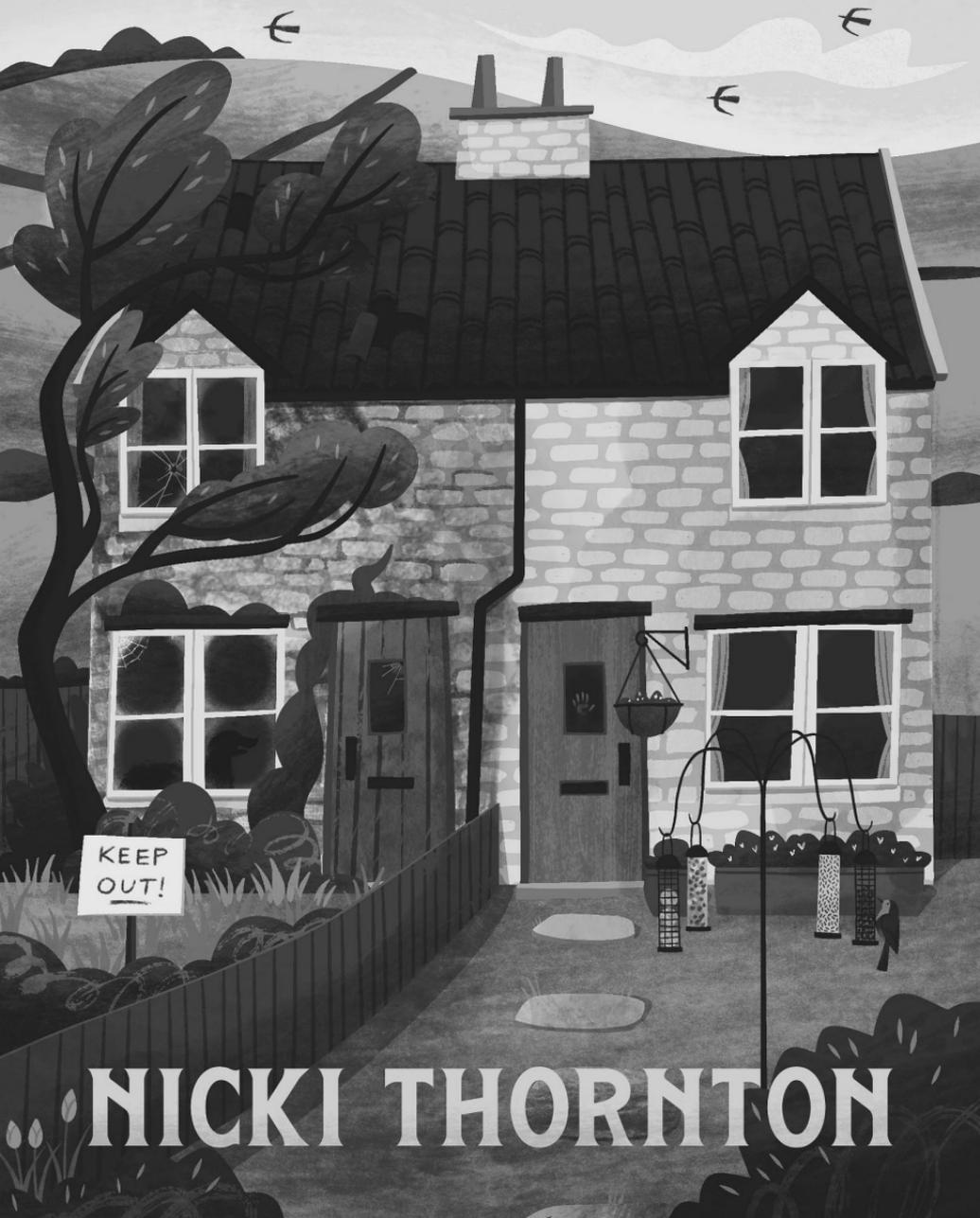


A LITTLE BOOKSHOP OF MURDERS MYSTERY

WHO SHOT JACKSON BRODIE?



NICKI THORNTON

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Who Shot Jackson Brodie Sampler



**CHIMNEYS
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Contents

| | |
|-------------------------------|----|
| 1 Keera | 1 |
| 2 Verity | 9 |
| 3 Verity | 14 |
| <i>About the Author</i> | 18 |
| <i>Also by Nicki Thornton</i> | 20 |

1

Keera

From the second he walked into my bookshop I knew what he was.

Tall. Late fifties. Greying hair clipped short. Upright. Muscles less from pressing weights, more pressing faces to the pavement. Mint-coloured polo (ironed) paired with black jeans even in this weather (and ironed). A poor attempt to look casual. Black shoes (too shiny) that squeak as he crosses the tiny space between the door and where I'm hiding behind the counter with a fixed, tense smile.

One of the many downsides of running a bookshop is that you cannot choose who's going to walk in your door.

'Hello Keera. Lovely shop,' he says. 'It is Keera isn't it?'

How does he know my name?

And what has brought police into my lovely bookshop?

Not to kick-start a reading interest in romantasy. Too much to hope he's here to buy a book at all. Easier to imagine he's the

front man, the distraction, making sure I'm in place as a SWAT team descends on all sides to drag me into an underground room for questioning.

All my past misdemeanours rise up from my memory and he slides a slim briefcase onto the counter; unclips it with two unnaturally loud metallic clicks. His hands go inside his briefcase. I hold my breath.

He slides a printed dossier of A4 pages across the counter.

Refusing to Remain Silent *the unvarnished truth of forty years a copper by former DCI Mitch Ravenscroft.*

'You're an author! Wow, did not see that coming.' My shoulders drop and I resume breathing.

His wolfish smile I see less as predatory, more nerves. Mitch, I guess. So even hardened coppers get the jitters going into a bookshop to ask for help trying to find readers for what they've written. I guess it's why he's here.

'You've a book coming out!' I say. 'That's why you're looking shifty! Well, it's not often I get to feel intimidating, especially not to police. I'm a bookseller. You're with Ripper Press. Small publisher, but love the name. Do you want to tell me about it?'

Mitch clears his throat. I get a whiff that he went for a coffee before coming here and hope he supported one of our nice local, indie cafes.

'None of the big publishers could see making millions from a memoir by an ex-Met officer who didn't deal in any high profile crimes,' he says, more relaxed now he's got the difficult reveal out of the way. 'I'd love to prove those big publishers wrong. I'd love at least to cover my very small advance. Would you be interested in helping? Would you be kind enough to stock it?'

I'm more in the habit of asking tricky questions than answering them. I'd like to ask why an ex-Met copper would trail into

my tiny, wholesome village bookshop, *Between the Lines*, to ask for support. He feels a long way from home. But Mitch is waiting and still I hesitate. Because Mitch is about to discover a brutal truth. Brutal truths might be commonplace in the police, but the one in publishing is that there are millions of books out there, tens of thousands of authors – and only a few hundred bookshops and nowhere near enough shelf space.

‘Opening my bookshop opened my eyes to a lot. Like I never knew how many people are writing books,’ I begin. ‘My shop probably has less shelf space than my biggest-reading, well-heeled *Crossways* customers. Deciding what to stock—nothing but a total nightmare!’

The door opens to admit Verity Anderson, granddaughter of one of my bookgroup members; here for the summer under rumoured cloudy circumstances that have got *Crossways* gossiping, although it doesn’t take much. Verity’s a recent English student, a big reader. Would Verity be up for London-based true crime?

‘Hi!’ I say. She smiles back at me.

Verity’s volunteering next door for the new *Eliza’s Deli*. Owner Eliza Somers wears floaty summer dresses and chats effortlessly while serving salads and small cakes. Verity sports unobtrusive straight brown hair, long, grey skirt and top in the same, shadowy colour. I could more easily believe she’s auditioning for an undercover agent than enjoys selling olives.

Her arrival gives me a moment to consider how I tell Mitch his book is not the greatest fit to fly off my shelves.

‘Things all good with you?’ I ask as Verity goes straight to my popular nature-writing section.

If Mitch was pitching a book about the joys of sheep farming, my customers would be more easily sold.

‘Hi Verity.’ Mitch greets her. ‘It is Verity isn’t it?’

Verity looks as pained as you might expect if an obvious police officer (even ex) knew your name when you’d only been in town a few weeks. We share a worried glance. *How does he know both our names?*

‘I hardly ever sell true crime,’ I admit. There, I’ve said it.

How will Mitch react? It’s me who’s nervy now. Many authors argue. Quite a few get angry, as if shouting at me will encourage me to support them. Another of the mysteries of bookselling.

Mitch smiles and shrugs. ‘A tough crowd, I get it!’ Which makes me warm to him.

‘Now I have books to save!’ I say. ‘I need to move into kick-ass superhero bookseller mode and save the books in my window. It’s been so unseasonably hot the covers are beginning to curl in all this bright sunshine. But I got distracted by a crime thriller about stolen birds eggs.’

‘Reading on the job? I’m sure it happens,’ says Mitch.

‘Rather too much, I’m afraid. Although being distracted by bird eggs was unexpected. The Impossible Thing, brilliant read. If you’re looking for a recommendation.’

‘I can’t think why I haven’t been in here before, this is a lovely shop,’ says Mitch. ‘Busy writing this book I guess! Many start writing, but few ever finish. I’m not surprised now I know the unbelievable amount of time involved. I can imagine selling books is challenging. Particularly selling a memoir of a copper no one’s heard of.’

Mitch gives a wry chuckle. ‘But when your very small publisher drops hints that any publicity is down to you, my first strategy was making friends of my three local bookshops. And they are all lovely! One of the things I’m liking about your book world is how incredibly kind booksellers are. Kindness is

something people are generally short on when talking to police.’

‘You’re local?’

‘I am now. Tom over at Lindford Books has very kindly asked me to give a talk.’ Mitch crooks an enquiring eyebrow at me. ‘Not too much blood. Unless your tough crowd could do with a bit of blood? Bit of excitement?’

We both unobtrusively slide looks towards where Verity’s happily browsing. Not much blood in nature writing, although perhaps there should be.

Mitch’s hand hovers over the manuscript on the counter between us. ‘I got into the writing game through a side hustle offering authors insider tips on crime authenticity. A few big names, actually. One of the things I love about the book trade over police work is the shiny glitter that surrounds authors. In the force it’s never glitter you get covered with. I really want to make this work.’

Could I make this work? Can I help Mitch?

I’m not sure, but I find I’m asking myself: *what would Liv Trent do?* One of the unexpected benefits of my fresh start and new life and opening a bookshop has been how many customers have become friends, particularly Liv Trent, who is exhaustingly full of smart ideas. Author events being one.

My definition of a good time is finding people the right book to read. Liv’s is going for the evening crowd: celebrity authors, interviews with sassy questions over wine. Her plan is to get me organising, filling venues and hosting. It fills me with more terror than my previous life. And that involved a lot of police and blood.

‘Armchair detectives used to mean people who read crime fiction,’ says Mitch. ‘Now its podcasts and online chats and people trying to solve real-life cases of murderers who got away

with it. I'm told true crime is quite the hot ticket. Just keep me in mind for a talk. The author you get when you can't get a famous author. My plan in moving here was to take an easier path. Only partly worked. But it's my patch now.'

Mitch is not alone in hoping Crossways offers a door to a simpler life. I know about needing to take a step back from the worst side of life. Even demure Verity, frowning at a tough choice between two popular nature books, came to wholesome Crossways for a fresh start. If the rumours are true, which they very probably aren't. Crossways is big on chatter, low on facts.

I came here for a fresh start, despite my family, friends and particularly Supportive Mum, being keen to point out I knew nothing about bookselling. Or retail. Or small businesses. Or events. Or villages. She gave my wild and risky bookshop plan a year. *'No, two, because you never know when to give up, Keera, so you'll stick it out long after you should have given it up. And then you'll end up with debts as well as regrets over abandoning a promising career.'*

But I am still here. Am I getting any better at bookselling? Mostly, I thank my lucky stars I have Liv. Liv is actually good at all of it and so full of boundless enthusiasm and ideas I have started to feel she's my boss. I know she's right about events. Mitch is right here...

'Maybe a crime writing workshop might suit your tough crowd?' he offers. Can he tell I'm wavering? 'My book's not all murders. There are some fun bits.' Mitch twinkles at me. 'There's one case where a girlfriend gave a watertight alibi and then her boyfriend made the tactical error of going off with her best friend, then she was singing like a canary. I haven't actually said the singing like a canary bit in the book. I have tried to avoid some cliches.'

I smile and wonder if this is the moment I stop trying to resist Liv's mission and go along with her tactic for success in life, which is to turn everything into a party.

Imagine showing off to Liv Trent that I've booked an author event without any help.

But true crime? Will anyone turn out for that? Or a crime writing workshop? Is anyone around here writing their own book? It seems unlikely.

'How do you even choose which of your cases to write about?' I pick up the manuscript sitting on the counter between us.

'There are always cases that stay with you,' Mitch says. 'Too many, sadly.'

'Because the cases were so shocking? Too much blood? Or because you feel you're responsible for the wrong guy languishing behind bars for years?'

We both throw another discreet glance at Verity, embroiled in the battle of the nature writers.

Mitch rubs his chin where his skin looks a little raw from a close shave.

'Obviously there was one I had to include, the one I'd most love to get a new lead on. My hope is the book will spark some chatter. Something new will come of it. And that keeps my deluded hopes alive that it will become a surprise bestseller.'

'Surprise bestseller? That's not a myth publishers like to dangle, a bit like children and Santa Claus for ensuring good behaviour? So. What would you most like a lead on?'

'Well. Moving here was supposed to be a soft curve down to retirement. Instead, I walked into one of the worst cases of my career. Just imagine. If we could get a new lead on the Crossways Killings. That would be something.'

The world feels as if it's tilted and there's a rush of blood to

my head.

‘Your book features an unsolved murder in *Crossways*?’

I turn, thinking I heard Verity take a sharp breath. But she’s very absorbed with Merlin Sheldrake and Guy Shrubsole and who will win the nature-writing war.

‘Not just one murder, two,’ Mitch says quietly. ‘Ah, you’re new here. What they call a media sensation. Interest faded when there wasn’t enough for journalists to get their teeth into. I have a feeling it’s a *Crossways* shameful secret brushed under the carpet. Maybe I’m just too addicted to checking under carpets,’ says Mitch. ‘Or an expensive rug, this is *Crossways*. An impossible crime. I’d like to prove that wrong too.’

‘You hope your book will get people talking about an impossible crime that happened right here?’

‘It was a tough one. The victims weren’t local. No witnesses. One of those random crimes. But a small village where everyone knows everyone and no one saw anything...? Sometimes all it takes is for things to get stirred up, a reminder that it hasn’t been forgotten. One tiny new lead, something overlooked at the time. That’s how lots of old cases get solved. Where’s the harm? Because the *Crossways Killings* is the very definition of a case that will only crack if someone decides to talk.’

‘When someone starts singing like a canary?’

‘Because they always do sing.’ Mitch nods. ‘Eventually.’

2

Verity

An about-to-be published book that no one had read yet, containing potentially explosive insider facts. Just sitting there on the dumb bookseller's counter. It took all Verity's focus to remain calm.

Verity knew about the Crossways Killings, of course she did (unlike the dumb bookseller). Surely anyone planning to move to a new place did basic research into Anything Even Remotely Interesting About Crossways.

Verity had had zero hope of anything but boredom while staying with her grandmother in her summer of shame. But here, in this tiny, untidy bookshop, Verity had never felt more filled with the surge of clarity and purpose while she feigned interest in a book on fungi.

An impossible crime. Words to make you tingle.

She'd accepted this fresh-start offer from Grandma after her parents hinted they weren't keen for her to move back into her old room (as if she was keen on that option). Grandma's wasn't so much her best offer as her only offer.

This was her lot. What you got for being twenty-one, with

your biggest skill being your ability to write essays about books. Nearly three years of university brought to an abrupt end with all the accompanying debt, but no degree. Living with your Grandma and volunteering dishing up olives in a dull village. But all the community positivity, all the chocolate-box niceness, had to be concealing something slitheringly dark and properly poisonous. Verity wouldn't have been surprised if Crossways was ruled by mind-control aliens, a cult, or werewolves.

But of course, Crossways' secret was a shockingly brutal murder.

And in an unexpected twist, fate had been with her all along. She'd been on a date with destiny and was now close to a huge, unparalleled opportunity. An actual real-life cold case presented to her, along with someone with a plan to solve it.

But she'd have to tread carefully.

'This must be a lovely job,' Mitch chattered. Chat had gone all boring once Keera had offered to help him sell his book. 'Books are so wholesome.'

But were they? In books Verity saw war, oppression, murder, obsession. And that was just the kids' section.

She needed to find a way to get Mitch to involve her in his quest to finally unmask the Crossways Killer. But how? Without jeopardising the terms by which she got a roof over her head this summer?

Grandma gave her a daily reminder Verity had been put on the naughty step.

'Being interested in people is not the same as obsessively poking your nose into their lives and digging into their secrets. What you won't accept, Verity, is that you can do more harm than good.' Grandma had said in what were becoming feature breakfast lectures (not Verity's best time).

Verity had finished the dregs of cereal chocolate milk with a spoon rather than tipping it up and drinking it, because Verity was on best behaviour. And even a breakfast lecture meant Grandma switched off her jaunty Tidal playlist. Eighties was a bit much in the morning. So a point to Verity. But nowhere near the score she'd get if she could find answers to the biggest mystery in Crossways.

Then Verity would prove everyone, including Grandma, wrong. She'd make Grandma see it wasn't *causing* trouble that Verity relished – it was noticing it. But where to start?

From listening to a lot of true-crime podcasts, Verity knew you were lucky if you started with much more than a sliver of new intel. Mitch was right and fresh eyes might produce the tiniest lead, the beginnings of a crack. So what slivers had Mitch revealed in his book about the deaths of those two incomers, who had apparently done nothing wrong other than moving to Crossways?

And how could Verity get to read that manuscript?

'*What I want for you this summer is to find a way to use your skills and imagination for something less obsessive; something valuable and productive,*' Grandma had said only this morning.

Valuable. Productive. This from the person who was, unironically, making her work for the summer for no pay. And considering what a forensic sort of a person Grandma was (and she was a chemist), you'd think she'd be careful about how she used terms. Like *obsessive*.

'You really don't need to come to bookgroup tonight.' Keera unexpectedly brought Verity into the conversation.

'Oh I don't mind,' said Verity quickly. In truth, bookgroup was essential to making her summer of shame bearable, because Verity already had a few small cases to solve. Embarrassingly

small. Revealing the true secret of David Purkiss's shed or Isha Cheema's winter holiday exposé weren't going to get anyone's pulse racing, but this was Crossways. And solving something was how she'd impress Grandma, even though she knew she had her work cut out as Grandma Smollett was nothing if not stubborn and used to winning all her arguments.

'I can have a word with your grandma,' offered Keera.

'No! I mean, please don't worry. It'll be fine.'

This would be a disaster. Not least because Keera had a terrible reputation for blundering in and always saying completely the wrong thing.

'Grandma made me follow her up and down Crossways high street in my lunch break and she spent a small fortune on artisanal cheeses,' Verity said. 'Apparently that makes it a proper Crossways party tonight. How could I miss that?'

Keera grinned. 'Bookgroup is full of people who like their cheese.'

Bookgroup was full of people who prided themselves on being crucial to Crossways, a bit like those fungal cordyceps with far-reaching underground bonds: tug on one and you never know where the networks would end.

What could be more perfect to find out secrets than where people felt chatty, rather than under scrutiny? Verity was grateful to her earlier self for starting her *I am not going to bookgroup, no way, campaign* early, drawing battlelines over the breakfast table. Bookgroup was a secret weapon, a way to move forward without Grandma knowing what she was doing. Because Verity could quiz them right under Grandma's nose. And she was going to have to be at her slipperiest and best to conceal her covert case-cracking. Until she could amaze and impress everyone with the big reveal. And now there was a chance she

could expose someone, very possibly living right now, quietly among the very good and very dull people of Crossways.

A murderer.

What could be more useful and productive than that?

3

Verity

‘Goodbye Verity. Lovely to meet you. See you soon.’ Mitch was leaving before he’d said anything useful.

Verity flinched when Mitch opened the door as it let in the sharp retort of a crow-scarer, bringing the raw of the countryside into the soft silence and papery aroma of the bookshop.

He’d left his manuscript on the counter.

Mitch’s departure also let in a ferociously ugly tabby who greeted Verity with his famously over-loud miaow.

‘Hey Jackson Brodie!’ said Verity, stroking his fur.

Jackson was a roamer cat with a lot of untidy brown fur. A dark patch on his right eye looked like he’d been punched in a brawl, and he carried a world-weary air, as if he’d come off worst in too many fights. His pale paws were dark with dirt and he was constantly cleaning them.

‘Eliza says she’s never known a cat to be such a digger,’ Verity said. ‘She can’t believe he found anywhere to dig as it’s been so dry lately. Terrible what’s happened to his tail. Dinner time again, Jackson?’

‘We’re both feeding him, aren’t we?’ sighed Keera, going to

find a cat bowl in a crammed side room in desperate need of a clear out. ‘What about his tail?’

‘Lots of people feed him,’ said Verity. ‘You’d think that means everyone loves Jackson Brodie. But he must have an arch enemy, mustn’t he?’

‘Do cats have arch enemies?’

‘Well Jackson must. Eliza’s determined to get to the bottom of it. She quizzes everyone. See how his tail’s not straight? Someone’s taken a shot at him.’

‘Jackson Brodie was shot?’ said Keera, pausing in shaking out cat food. ‘Good for Eliza to try to find out what happened.’

‘Everywhere has its dark side I guess.’

‘She means by accident I hope,’ said Keera, fussing the cat as he ate. ‘Who would shoot you?’

‘Crossways is surprisingly full of guns,’ said Verity. ‘But not awash with things that need shooting. More sheep than zombies. Not that guns work well against the undead. Everyone deserves justice, don’t they. Even cats.’

‘Absolutely. What is everyone saying?’

‘Eliza says Crossways rumours are notoriously unreliable, but that doesn’t stop them spreading. She’s looking for evidence about who shot Jackson.’

‘Although it can be informative to listen to the gossip.’

Verity wasn’t as interested in rumours about the cat as she was in her boss, as one of her cases was: *Who Would Harm Eliza Somers and Why?* Eliza took a keen interest in the lives of all her customers, not just the furry one. Her caring attitude was probably part of the reason the deli had been such an instant success, because she definitely over-priced her olives. But Verity was curious. Why would a single woman, only in her thirties, choose to move to a village backwater to set up a business selling

a range of salty continental cold meats and sugary small cakes?

Verity had squeezed little out of Eliza above that she'd been a teacher and had worked in all sorts of remote places, but got tired of travelling.

'Talking of rumours,' said Verity, seizing the opportunity to move along her caseload. 'What do you think of the story that Eliza's here hiding out from a violent ex-lover? Jackson's not the only one who looks like he's been in a fight.'

'If anyone can get to the bottom of that,' said Keera, 'it would be you.'

This was true. Grandma had volunteered Verity to step in after Eliza had appeared one day with a black eye, bruising to her leg, difficulty moving and suspected cracked ribs and was struggling to run the deli on her own. Naturally, with injuries like that, Verity asked herself if someone was out to deliberately harm friendly, community-positive, olive-selling Eliza?

Verity was on the inside track, but so far she'd found only one excuse to go upstairs to Eliza's flat above the shop, where there must be clues to Who Would Harm Eliza Somers and Why?

There had been too-little time to do more than observe the furniture was big for such a small space, as if Eliza had left somewhere in a hurry. And no time to look properly at what was all over the big dining room table: what appeared to be a detailed research project.

Verity had no chance to do more than glance at it, be intrigued and curse herself for not having her phone with her so she could take photos and look properly later. She'd be more prepared next time.

Sometimes all you needed was a sliver to find a crack and split a case wide open. But Verity was only here for the summer. Now in her caseload she had: Who Did the Crossways Killings and

Why? Priorities.

‘Eliza’s lucky to have you helping,’ said Keera. ‘And if you want a hint for a successful bookgroup evening, I’d say don’t put the cheese anywhere near Grant Michaels. Especially if it’s expensive cheese.’

‘Noted.’ Although Verity had her own plans for what would make for a successful evening. ‘Guess I’ll see you later.’

To think that for a while, Verity had been worried her biggest summer entertainment was going to be investigating Who Shot Jackson Brodie?



About the Author

Nicki Thornton ran her own bookshop for more than ten years, but luckily, none of her customers were ever murdered.

Nicki ran a bookshop to spread the joy of books and reading. She remains enthusiastic about anything to do with bookshops and promoting reading for pleasure.

A bookshop is often the heart of a community. Definitely where people swap gossip! And this is what inspired the Little Bookshop of Murders mysteries.

Nicki has always adored crime fiction and first wrote crime fiction for children as a fun way to introduce young readers to the genre. She writes stories for readers who like mysteries in the golden age tradition, but with a modern edge.

You can get news from Nicki and a peek behind the scenes of her writing life by joining her VIP Club. It's free to join and is part of the Substack community.

And as an exclusive offer to readers of this book, signing up will get you access to a secret page on Nicki's website where she

shares many of the locations that inspire her books.

Substack - nickithornton.substack.com

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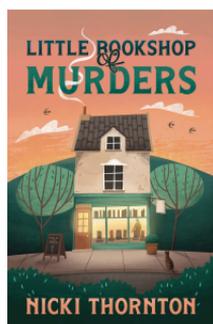
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Also by Nicki Thornton

Nicki Thornton's debut middle-grade fantasy crime thriller *The Last Chance Hotel* won the Times/Chicken House Children's Fiction Competition and was translated into 15 languages. Her novels have been nominated for awards including the Carnegie Medal, the CrimeFest Best Crime Novel for Children and Spec-savers National Book Awards.



Little Bookshop of Murders

One burnt out lawyer. One shiny new bookshop. One dead customer.

Former lawyer Keera Munroe wants to put her past behind her with nothing more challenging than selling enough books to pay the bills. But when Keera opens a bookshop in idyllic Crossways, there's a lot she cannot leave behind, like the fact she's hard-wired to seek out truth and justice. Or her nose for trouble - and that's telling her village life is not quite as lovely as it appears. Right about the time the first body turns up.



The Last Chance Hotel

Hard-working Seth is the kitchen boy in the remote Last Chance Hotel, owned by the nasty Bunn family and their toxic daughter, Tiffany; his only friend is Nightshade, the kitchen cat.

Seth dreams of leaving, and of a future beyond the Last Hope Forest, away from Tiffany's schemes to torment him.

He wonders if his chance for change might finally have arrived when a bunch of strange characters come to stay.

But things go terribly wrong when the dessert Seth carefully made to impress kindly Dr Thallomius, instead poisons him.

Seth finds himself at the heart of a murder investigation with a lot more than Tiffany to worry about when he becomes the main suspect and accused of the crime.

