

Death Comes to Dartmoor

By Stephanie Austin

Dead in Devon

Dead on Dartmoor

From Devon with Death

The Dartmoor Murders

A Devon Night's Death

Death Comes to Dartmoor

A Devon Midwinter Murder

a&b

*Death Comes to
Dartmoor*

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To Katy and Phil

CHAPTER ONE

I left Ashburton at the fag-end of a long, hot summer. There were no murders in my absence. During the ten days I was away there were certainly some interesting goings-on, but no suspicious deaths. According to some of my more uncharitable friends, this was simply because I wasn't there. It was even suggested that it might be safer for the residents of Ashburton if I stayed away permanently. I think this is unkind. It's not my fault I'm good at finding dead bodies. And, as it turned out, whatever strange power arranges these things, was merely saving them up until I got home.

When you run two businesses, even taking a short holiday is not an easy thing to contrive. I had to time it carefully. The shop wasn't a problem. Sophie and Pat have looked after *Old Nick's* on a daily basis ever since it opened, and with the tourist season tailing off

at the start of the new autumn term, it was unlikely that a shop selling art, crafts, antiques and second-hand books was going to be overwhelmed with business. In fact, our takings were so dismal whilst I was away it wouldn't have mattered if we'd hung the *closed* sign on the door.

It was the other half of the business – the domestic goddess half – which was the problem. I walk five dogs on weekdays, as well as clean for, and generally help out, a variety of human clients. It was making sure their needs would be taken care of whilst I was away that was the difficult bit. But I hadn't seen my cousin Brian for over two years, and I needed a break. He's my only remaining relative, my mother's cousin, which makes him either my second cousin, or first-cousin-once-removed, I'm not quite sure. He's always been more like an uncle to me, older, wiser, chummy and kind. He'd recently come home on leave before taking up his new diplomatic posting, so I popped up to London to see him, spending ten days in his flat. He was off down to Portsmouth for a week's sailing after that. He wanted me to go too, but I get sea-sick and anyway, there is only so much of Brian's hag-wife, the toxic stick-insect Marcia, that I can stand. I promised to visit him again later, once he'd taken up residence in Paris.

As it happened, things worked in my favour. My most ancient client Maisie, ninety-six and still counting, was to receive a visit from her daughter, Our Janet, down from the wilds of Heck-as-Like, or wherever she lives up north, so I was able to organise my holiday

at the same time. I managed to subcontract the dog walking to Becky, who runs a mobile dog-grooming business. Mrs Berkeley-Smythe was away on a cruise and wouldn't need my services till she got back, and I knew my friend Elizabeth would keep an eye on Tom Carter. Everyone else, as far as I was concerned, could manage without me.

I haunted the markets of London, lusting after antiques I couldn't afford to buy for *Old Nick's*. I was determined to keep my money in my pocket, despite Brian's assurance that anything I bought could easily be buzzed down to Devon by carrier, no trouble at all. I went shopping with Marcia, resisting her attempts to drag me to the gym each morning, and we bonded, slightly. We don't really like each other, but for Brian's sake we did our best to get along. Why, after fifty years of contented bachelorhood, he had decided to marry a widow with two grown-up daughters, I don't know. To be fair, Marcia is probably an ideal wife for a diplomat. She's fluent in three languages, can organise a formal dinner party at the drop of a hat and apparently plays a fiendish hand of bridge.

At first, I felt energised by the buzz of London, the rush, but the excitement quickly wore off. I found myself longing for muddy lanes and birdsong. At the end of ten days when every day had been crammed with shopping and sightseeing, each evening spent at an expensive restaurant or a West End show, I was more than ready to come home. As my train headed back into Devon, I found myself letting out a breath.

From Exeter the railway line hugs the south Devon coast, passing red cliffs on one side and the open sea on the other. The train stops at Dawlish, where on wild nights sea spray washes over the carriages. During a storm a few years back, the rocks beneath the line were swept away, leaving the track swinging like a rope bridge a few feet above the churning waves. The track turns inland after Teignmouth, running alongside the lazy grey waters of the Teign estuary to Newton Abbot, which is where I got off.

Despite my determination not to shop, I'd come back from London with far more bags and baggage than I'd left with. I'd received several offers from people happy to pick me up from the station but decided I'd rather sneak back into Ashburton with the minimum of fuss. On the other hand, I didn't fancy the bus ride with all my baggage, so I compromised and took a taxi. My last little luxury, I warned myself, before I got home. The previous occupant had left a copy of *the Dartmoor Gazette* on the back seat, and I gave it a quick flick through to see if anything interesting had been happening whilst I'd been away.

Not much. Someone living in the village of Scroriton had lost her Labradoodle, convinced it had been stolen, and police were searching for three men who'd been spotted climbing out of the back of a lorry just disembarked from the ferry at Plymouth. Then, buried at the foot of an inside page, I found something fascinating.

District councillor and property developer, Alastair Dunston, was granted a restraining order against a member of this newspaper's staff at a court hearing in Exeter today. The injunction bars our reporter, Sandy Thomas, from being within one hundred yards of Mr Dunston's home. Mr Dunston was quoted as saying that Ms Thomas had exceeded the considerable liberties afforded to members of her profession, stalking him and harassing members of his family. Ms Thomas was also accused of causing an affray at a fundraising dinner attended by Mr Dunston and was bound over to keep the peace.

What had Sandy been up to? She can be a pestilential nuisance, as I knew to my cost, forever pestering me with questions when I'd accidentally got myself involved in a murder investigation. It was she who saddled me with the title of 'Ashburton's Amateur Sleuth', a source of cringing embarrassment to me ever since. Merely the sound of her breathy, Welsh voice on the phone was enough to wind me up. But she was just doing her job. She could be pushy, but I couldn't imagine her making so much of a nuisance of herself that someone had taken her to court. And what had Alastair Dunston been up to that had aroused so much of her interest? I squinted at his photograph. He was quite good-looking. County councillor *and* property developer, that was a likely conflict of interest for a start. But causing an affray, what was that all about? I noticed that the newspaper hadn't

offered any comment on her activities. Poor old Sandy. At least they hadn't given her the boot.

By now the taxi had pulled up outside of my house, forcing me to abandon the newspaper. I had to get out and pay the driver, who retrieved my suitcase from the back but drew the line at carting my baggage up the steps to the front door. I watched him turn his vehicle around at the end of the lane, then gathered up my chattels and began the ascent.

I was happy to be home. *O, Little Town of Ashburton, how still we see thee lie*, straight off the slip road from the A38, wedged between the dual carriageway and the Dartmoor foothills. It doesn't have the biscuit-tin prettiness of some Dartmoor villages, no duckpond or thatched cottages. It's an old stannary town, where for centuries tin mined on the moor was assayed and stamped. Shops catering for tourists may have replaced its ancient trades, but it's quirky, with lanes and passages the tourist can easily miss, the ruins of history buried in its stone walls, with green hills rising up behind it and a little river sliding sneakily through its heart. I love it. I never want to live anywhere else.

I'd worried about Kate whilst I was away. I rent the top floor of the house she occupies with Adam. They're expecting their first baby in a few weeks and she's been having a rotten pregnancy, her daily sickness not confining itself to mornings, and with no sign of her nausea abating as the birth approaches.

I dumped my baggage at the foot of the stairs, pausing to extract a parcel from one of my shopping

bags, and headed for Kate's kitchen door. She answered my knock, grinning as we hugged. She looked beautiful as ever, but heavy-eyed, as if she wasn't getting enough sleep.

'How was the trip?' she asked, and added mischievously, 'How was Marcia?'

'We managed not to come to blows,' I admitted, 'although she doesn't approve of me at all.' I had, in her words, *wasted* the expensive education that Brian had paid for by setting myself up as *some sort of paid dogsbody* and not pursuing a proper career. Becoming the owner of what she referred to as *a junk shop* had done little to raise my status in her eyes. 'Anyway, never mind me, how are you?'

'I'm not throwing up so much,' she admitted, eagerly unwrapping the gift I had brought her. She held up the spotted Babygro. 'Aw . . . thanks! But this one,' she added, stroking her beachball tummy, 'keeps me awake most nights, kicking.'

'How's Adam managing at the cafe?'

'Chris Brownlow is still helping out. He doesn't go back to college until next month.'

Chris was the son of one of my clients and had taken on working at Sunflowers as a holiday job.

'Cup of tea?' she asked. 'Piece of cake?'

Frankly, I was ravenous. Breakfast at Brian's seemed like a long time ago, but I knew I'd emptied my fridge before I went away and I'd better go shopping. Besides, I wanted to call in on *Old Nick's* before closing time. 'Not just now, thanks.' I squeezed Kate's arm. 'Catch you later.'

As I dumped my bags on the sofa upstairs, I could see the red light of my ancient answerphone flashing. For a moment I thought it might be a call from Daniel. But it wouldn't be. With a sinking feeling inside, I remembered it would never be a call from Daniel again.

I pressed the play button and a loud, slightly raucous voice demanded to know what I'd been up to in the big city. It was Ricky. 'Give us a call when you get back,' he urged, so I settled myself down on the sofa, kicking off my shoes and putting my feet up on the coffee table. The shopping could wait. Within moments, Bill appeared from my bedroom, leapt onto my lap and began an enthusiastic greeting procedure, treading my midriff with his paws and purring like a Geiger-counter, whilst simultaneously headbutting the hand that was holding the phone. He must have missed me. He'd probably been living in my flat the entire time I'd been away, going downstairs only for meals. I smoothed his black head and told him how gorgeous he was.

'Druid Lodge Theatrical Hire,' came a slightly weary voice at the end of the phone.

'Ricky, it's me.'

'Princess, where are you? At the station?'

'No, I got a taxi home.' I ignored his tutting. 'There was one waiting at the station entrance,' I lied, 'I thought I might as well get in it.'

'Expensive journey home,' he sniffed.

Yes, it had been.

'You know we'd have picked you up.'

‘Well, I’m here now.’

‘So come on up! *Maurice* and I would love to see you. You can tell us all about what you got up to in London. D’you see any shows?’

Ricky and Morris are two of my oldest friends and I love ’em dearly, but actually, I’d been fancying a quiet night in. Then I remembered something. ‘Do you know anything about this business with Sandy Thomas? The paper said she’d been accused of causing an affray. Something to do with some councillor?’

‘You mean Alastair Dunston.’

I knew I could rely on Ricky. ‘You know about it?’

‘Know about it?’ He cracked with laughter. ‘Darlin’, we were there! It was a fundraising bash for the air-ambulance.’

‘When was this?’

‘A few weeks back.’

I frowned. How come I hadn’t heard about this until now? ‘Where was I?’

‘Oh, gawd knows! Up to no-bleeding-good, I expect. Look, why don’t you come up to the house, let us cook you supper? You can hear all about it and tell us about your trip.’

‘Deal,’ I agreed without hesitation and disconnected. I glanced at my watch and then at Bill, who’d settled down on my lap, purring, his paws tucked under, his one emerald eye closed in contentment. Anyone would think he was *my* cat. ‘Sorry,’ I told him, lifting him off my lap. ‘But I want to get to the shop before it closes. I’m going to have to get going.’

Sophie and Pat man *Old Nick's* for me in return for the rent-free space they occupy. They have done so since I unexpectedly inherited the shop from a former client, Mr Nickolai, after he just as unexpectedly got himself murdered. It's an arrangement that works well. Neither of them can afford to pay rent. Sophie doesn't sell enough pictures and all Pat's money goes on running a sanctuary for abandoned animals with her sister and brother-in-law. But their being in the shop gives me time to pursue my domestic goddess business, the one that actually earns me some money. Most days, they take it in turns. But that afternoon they were both in the shop, Sophie's dark head bent over a watercolour she was painting and Pat frowning over some jewellery on her worktable. Elizabeth was there too, arranging books on the shelves in alphabetical order. She comes in to offer a hand now and then. As always, she looked cool and elegant in a spotless white blouse, her silvery-blond hair swept up into an elegant chignon, and made the rest of us look scruffy.

'Nice to see the place is still standing,' I announced as I walked in. 'Hello!'

'That's about all it is,' Sophie complained. 'The till's hardly rung all week.'

'It hasn't been quite that bad,' Elizabeth corrected her with a smile. 'The book exchange is starting to work well.'

'At least it brings people in through the door,' Pat agreed, without looking up from what she was doing. 'Hello Juno.'

I passed her a bag of some unusual beads I'd picked

up from a specialist shop in Covent Garden. I'd bought big, soft paintbrushes for Soph and an Edwardian hair-slide for Elizabeth. They all went through the you-shouldn't-have-but-I'm-glad-you-did routine and after recounting my adventures in London I had a brief and rather depressing look at the sales ledger.

Sophie tickled the palm of her hand experimentally with a new paintbrush. 'At least Christmas is coming.'

I shuddered. 'It's only October.'

'Now you're a shopkeeper, Juno, you've got to start thinking of these things early.' Pat held up what looked like a pumpkin earring. 'I'm making these for Hallowe'en.'

'Exactly, I've got you and Soph to think about these things. It doesn't make any difference to me. Antiques are the same whatever time of year it is.' I had to admit that in the run-up to last Christmas they'd made the shop look fabulous. If only *Old Nick's* was on North Street or East Street, instead of stuck down narrow and dingy Shadow Lane, it might have made a difference.

'These things take time to build,' Elizabeth observed. 'There's no point in getting despondent.'

'No. Grit and determination is what it takes.' I thumped the counter with my fist in mock resolution and announced I was going to the loo.

Nick's old bathroom is on a landing halfway up the stairs, part of the old flat above the shop and, together with his kitchen, comprised the staff facilities. I was just about to come out again, having done what I needed, when I heard Sophie say, 'Are we going to tell her?'

‘Let sleeping dogs lie, that’s what I say,’ Pat responded. ‘Juno’s going to find out about it soon enough. Why upset her before we have to?’ I pulled the bathroom door to softly and listened.

Sophie sounded angry. ‘What the hell’s he done it for?’

‘He needs a proper phone signal and broadband to be able to work.’ This was Elizabeth’s voice. ‘He’s got nothing up at that farmhouse.’ They were talking about Daniel, my all too briefly loved-and-lost lover. He’d inherited a farmhouse up on Halsanger Common, a few miles out of town. Practically a ruin, it lacked even the most basic of facilities and he was living in a caravan whilst it was being rebuilt. ‘I don’t suppose he’s renting an office just for fun.’ Elizabeth retained some contact with Daniel through the doctor’s surgery where she worked as a part-time receptionist and where he was a patient.

‘But does he have to rent one around the corner?’ Sophie demanded. ‘So near to here?’

‘I imagine finance has something to do with it and there probably wasn’t a lot of choice.’

‘You don’t think he’s done it deliberate, like?’ Pat asked. ‘To be near Juno?’

‘In order to torment himself, you mean?’ Elizabeth asked mildly.

‘He’s the one who broke it off,’ Sophie objected. ‘He can torment himself all he likes, but I don’t want him tormenting Juno.’

Pat grunted. ‘I don’t know why he broke it off in

any case. I know she gets up to some daft things, damn dangerous some of 'em, but what's the point in worrying?'

'Don't forget he lost his first wife in tragic circumstances.'

'Well, I know,' Pat conceded, 'and that's all very sad. But, be honest, any one of us could get killed any day, just crossing the street.'

Elizabeth gave a soft laugh. 'True, but Juno does have a tendency to throw herself into the traffic.'

'You sound as if you're defending him,' Sophie accused her.

'I think I understand why he broke with Juno,' she responded calmly, 'but I still think he's wrong.'

I decided it was time to stop lurking on the landing and came down into the shop.

'So where is it, then?' I asked as the three of them turned to look at me. 'This office that Daniel has rented?'

Sophie threw Pat an agonised glance.

'It's around the corner on East Street,' Elizabeth responded before either of them could speak, 'above the beauty therapist.'

'At least he won't have to go far to get his nails done.'

No one laughed. Sophie's eyes glistened dangerously. 'Don't look so tragic,' I told her. 'It's all right. Really.' I smiled but couldn't contain the sigh escaping from my chest. 'I can't control what he does so . . .' I shrugged, 'it makes no difference to me.'

This was a lie. During our short relationship, Daniel had worked away a lot, so I was used to long periods of not having him around. And if he stayed up in his lonely

caravan, out of my way, perhaps I would stand some chance of forgetting him. But if he was renting an office in town, we were almost certain to run into each other. And that would be a different thing altogether. Suddenly, I wished I'd gone sailing with Brian after all.