

How to Get Murdered in Devon

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
Death on Dartmoor Edge
How to Get Murdered in Devon



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For Sue Tingey



CHAPTER ONE

‘There’s a body in the boot of my car.’

I considered this joke in very poor taste. Just because I’ve discovered the odd corpse myself. ‘That’s not remotely funny,’ I said.

There was a pause at the end of the line. Daniel sounded breathless. He repeated his words deliberately, weighing each one with care. ‘There is a body in the boot of my car.’

I realised he wasn’t joking. ‘When you say body, you mean . . . ?’

‘A dead one, yes.’

I struggled to make sense of what he was saying. I’d dropped him off at his car barely fifteen minutes before, outside Moorview Farm. I’d only just got back through the door of *Old Nick’s*. ‘Have you phoned the police?’

‘Of course. They’re on their way. Now I’m phoning you.’

‘Where are you?’ I knew there was no phone signal at the farmhouse. ‘You must have run down the hill.’

‘I didn’t fancy driving, obviously.’

The sarcasm didn’t fool me. I know the man I love,

and I could hear how shaken he was. ‘Daniel, are you sure this person is dead?’

‘Oh yes,’ he answered softly.

‘I’m coming straight back.’

‘If you could, Miss B. The police will want to talk to you anyway.’

‘I’ll be there in a few minutes,’ I promised him.

‘I’m going to have to go,’ he told me. ‘I can see a police car coming. I’d better get back to the farmhouse. Meet them there.’

The line went dead. I shoved my phone back into my bag and swept up my keys from the counter, where I had dropped them a minute before. ‘I’ve got to go.’

Sophie looked up reproachfully from the painting she was working on. ‘It’s Friday, Juno. You haven’t forgotten I’ll be going in a little while?’ She’d be off to catch her bus to Cardiff soon, to spend the weekend with her boyfriend who was at university in St Davids. She’d come in early to open up the shop as a favour to me. I was supposed to be in charge today. Pat, busy at the animal sanctuary she helps to run, couldn’t do Fridays.

‘It’s okay, Soph. Just put the *CLOSED* sign on the door if I’m not back before you go.’

She arched her dark brows quizzically, as if finally taking in the fact something was wrong. ‘Are you alright?’

‘I’ve got to go back to the farmhouse. There’s a problem with Daniel’s car.’

She frowned. ‘The one you just bought him?’

‘Yes, that’s the one,’ I called back as I headed for the door. The car I’d just bought him.

* * *

We weren't even due to pick the dratted vehicle up until later in the day, but our plans began to go awry before Daniel had even arrived for the weekend. He was booked on a flight direct from Donegal to Exeter. Not the friendliest way for an environmentalist to travel, I admit, but the train-ferry-train journey just took too long for a weekend trip. By the time he made it to Ashburton, it would be time for him to turn around and go back again. I was supposed to have collected him at the airport at five yesterday afternoon. We had tickets for a concert in the evening. But an accident on the road from Inishowen meant he missed his flight from Donegal and there wasn't another direct one that day. The best alternative was for him to board a flight to Bristol and then take the train down to Devon. In the end, I picked him up at Newton Abbot railway station at close on midnight. We'd both missed the concert. I didn't fancy going on my own.

I raced back up the hill to Halsanger Common, making Van Blanc take the twisting narrow lanes as fast as I dared. One day soon I must do something about Van Blanc. Trying to run two businesses and having a plain white van was a waste of advertising space. But which one should I advertise? Or should I have *Old Nick's Antiques and Collectibles* painted on one side of it, and *Juno Browne, Domestic Goddess* on the other? I couldn't make up my mind. But right now, I had more important things to think about.

The glowing green leaves of summer, the flickering sunlight and lush, frothy hedgerows, which had delighted me on my leisurely drive down the hill,

whizzed by unnoticed now. I was worried about Daniel. It must have been a shock opening up that boot and discovering, well, whoever it was. He had never found a dead body before, whereas I had a nasty reputation for finding them. Could this all be an elaborate hoax, I wondered as I hammered up the hill, someone's idea of a not-at-all-amusing joke?

The common opened up around me, and I brought Van Blanc to a jerky halt at the end of the track leading to Moorview Farm. I could see two police cars parked outside the farmhouse. The old stone building had been almost derelict when Daniel inherited it, most of the farmland sold off. Now it stood caged in scaffolding while seemingly endless renovation work went on, and the day when it might be ready for him to live in slipped further and further away. Nearby was the caravan he had bought to stay in while the work went on; but that was before a shortage of funds forced him to take a job in Ireland to pay for it all.

The car I had bought him a few days before, a dark grey Volkswagen Bora – old, reliable and cheap – was being guarded by a nervous-looking constable in uniform. The boot, I noticed, was tightly shut. It would remain shut, I imagined, until the divisional surgeon arrived to examine its grisly contents. A second officer was busy unreeling tape with *DO NOT CROSS* printed on it, one end tied to the gatepost. As I climbed out of the van he strode towards me, about to give me the *I'm-sorry-madam-you-can't-come-in-here* routine, when a voice hailed me from the door of the caravan. Detective Constable Dean Collins waved as he jogged down

the path. 'It's alright, Charlie, let her in,' he told his uniformed colleague. 'Hello, Juno. Daniel said you'd be on your way.'

'Where is he? Is he alright?'

'He's a bit shaken up, but he's okay.' He grinned suddenly. 'He's not like you, always discovering dead bodies.'

'Not *always*,' I responded indignantly. 'I've only found the odd one, occasionally.'

'It's not catching, is it?' he asked, his grin fading. 'Your lover boy's not going to turn into a sleuth as well?'

I decided to ignore this. An amateur detective was the last thing Daniel would want to turn into. We've broken up before because of my investigating activities. He's always hated my tendency to poke my nose in where it wasn't wanted, begged me to stick to safer behaviour like dog-walking and selling antiques. 'So, where is he?'

'In the caravan there, telling the boss all about it.'

'He'll want to see me after?'

'The boss will, yeah. Meantime,' he said as opened the door of a police car, 'why don't we sit inside and you tell me what happened. Off the record.'

Off the record perhaps. Dean and I might be friends – in fact, I was godmother to his daughter Alice – but that didn't mean he wouldn't be comparing what I said to him now with whatever I told Inspector Ford later. I slid into the back seat, and he sat in the front and turned around to look at me. 'So, first off, tell me about this car.'

'Okay. Well, Daniel's been coming backwards and forwards between here and his job in Ireland for the

last few months, as you know, whenever he can take the time off. He usually grabs a quick flight and leaves his car behind in Inishowen. But he decided it would be useful to have his own set of wheels to drive when he's here. It would save him borrowing my van. If he's here on weekdays, I need it myself for getting about between clients.'

Dean nodded patiently, waiting for me to get to the relevant bit.

'He didn't want to spend a lot. We thought we'd look for something this weekend at the car auction in Exeter. Then one day last week, I saw this car parked in Ashburton with a *FOR SALE* sign in the window.'

'This car over here?' He pointed to the Bora.

I nodded. 'The price was right and it had recently passed its MOT, so I called the phone number and arranged to see the owner.'

'When was this?'

'Monday. She had moved it by then, had the car at her house. So, after I'd finished work for the day, I drove up to see it.'

'Where?'

'Not far from here, a big place on the road to Bag Tor. Langworthy Hall, it's called.'

'And who was the owner?'

'It was Julian Horrell.'

'Hang on,' he stopped me, frowning. 'Where do I know that name from? Antiques dealer, isn't he?'

'Antiques and fine art. He had a shop in Buckfastleigh, part of a family firm. He specialised in country house sales.'

Dean grinned. 'You mean he sells proper antiques, not like the rubbish you sell.'

I ignored this slur on *Old Nick's*. 'He did. If you remember, Julian Horrell died last year.'

He nodded. 'Accident, wasn't it? Turned over his quad bike. Broke his neck. So, who does the place belong to now?'

'His daughter, Amber. The estate's just been through probate. She didn't want to keep his car.'

'Right. So, when you went to see it, you looked in the boot, did you?'

'Of course I did!' I answered indignantly. 'And under the bonnet and underneath the car. And I took it for a test drive.' Honestly, what did he take me for?

Dean held up his hands in surrender. 'Alright, keep your hair on! And this was on Monday?'

'Yes, and there was no dead body in the boot then.' A horrible thought occurred to me. 'It's not Amber in there, is it?'

He shook his head. 'No. It's a male.'

'Thank God! Sorry,' I corrected myself, 'whoever it is, it's horrible, but I'm glad it's not her.' I'd only met Amber briefly. She seemed a complete nutcase but I'd liked her. 'How did he die?'

'I can't tell you that.' I gave him a cynical look and he added, 'We don't know yet. Not until the doctor arrives. Any road . . .' He cleared his throat as he changed the subject. 'What happened then?'

'I took some photos of the car and phoned the details through to Daniel. He said if I was happy with its condition, we should grab it. He paid for it straight away

by bank transfer. Amber and I sorted out the paperwork. The plan was for me to drive Daniel up to her house later today so he could pick it up. But then . . .'

Dean frowned at my hesitation. 'What?'

'I thought this was odd at the time,' I admitted. 'I got a text on my phone yesterday, from Amber. She said the car had been delivered here at the farmhouse and the keys were under the wheel arch. That was all. I thought the message was a bit abrupt, but I assumed she must have had to go away unexpectedly.' I shrugged. 'She could've just left the car at Langworthy Hall and we could have picked it up from there. She needn't have bothered to deliver it.'

'You didn't see her again?'

I shook my head. 'I tried calling her as soon as I got her text, but her phone was off. I drove up here to rescue the car keys. I checked the handbook and the paperwork were in the glove compartment. I didn't bother to look in the boot again.'

'No.' Dean puffed out his cheeks. 'Pity, really.'

Langworthy Hall was a rambling Devon longhouse with low white walls, a golden thatch and mullioned windows. I'd tried to stifle a groan of envy as I drew Van Blanc to a halt outside the gate on that Monday evening. The garden full of foxgloves, and the roses hanging in clusters of apricot blooms over the roof of the tiny thatched porch, didn't help much either. Amber Horrell had inherited this. All I'd inherited was a run-down antique shop with a grotty flat above it, and I was lucky to get that. But any inclination I might have had

to hate her guts evaporated when she opened the door and greeted me with a warm and radiant smile.

Hers was a lively face set beneath a fringe of short blondish hair. She had the straight nose, wide cheekbones, fine jawline and long, smooth neck that the gods don't give out very often, and large, speaking brown eyes. She was a bit younger than me, late twenties at most. She wore leggings and a silk waistcoat, and, hanging from one ear, a complicated earring composed of what looked like metal clock parts. 'The famous Juno Browne!' she cried, as she flung back the door. 'I've read about you in the *Dartmoor Gazette*.'

There are times when I could cheerfully murder the *Dartmoor Gazette* and all who sail in her. 'Don't believe all you read,' I warned her.

'But I want to,' she insisted with a gurgle of laughter. 'And I love your hair!' Everyone does, except me. 'Is that red natural?' she asked.

'I'm afraid so,' I replied – as was its unruly nature. I decided the sooner we turned our attention to the car, the better. 'Can I take a look?' I could see the Bora parked across the lane. I could also see what looked like another acre or two of garden, just to ramp up the envy stakes. And there was a quaint cottage in that garden, not much bigger than a summerhouse. 'That's sweet,' I said. 'Looks like a gingerbread house.'

'My granny used to live there,' she told me, leading the way to the car. 'But it's been empty for years now.'

After I'd given the vehicle a thorough once-over, Amber let me take it for a test drive. I told her she could keep Van Blanc as a hostage till my return. The Bora

was old but behaved perfectly, and I phoned Daniel as soon as I arrived back at Langworthy Hall. He decided we should go ahead with the deal. I was pleased, and a bit surprised, that he trusted my judgement. Men can be fussy about cars.

Amber invited me in for coffee while we sorted out the paperwork. I didn't refuse the offer. I was longing for a look inside that longhouse and I wasn't disappointed. The walls were crooked and plastered white, faded rugs covered its ancient flagstones. Above my head, the ceiling sloped and sagged with age. Some of the supporting beams had come from a wrecked galleon, Amber told me, which meant the building must have been at least five hundred years old. The evening sun, slanting through mullioned windows, cast fingers of light on the oak wainscot and glowed on copper pans hanging by the inglenook fireplace, an old bread oven built into its wall. In the hall, a grandfather clock ticked away the centuries, giving the whole place an atmosphere of measured calm.

The room Amber showed me into was cheerfully untidy, two bulging carrier bags dumped against a wall spilling quantities of fabric onto the floor, a nearby table scattered with sheaves of paper. She pointed to an elderly drop-end sofa, inviting me to sit, which eventually I did. But first I enjoyed the moments when she was busy in the kitchen to look around.

This had been Julian Horrell's home and he had been an antiques dealer – so I had to assume the heavy silver candlesticks on either end of the mantelpiece were genuinely William III, and the Delftware plate in

the middle of the shelf dated back to the seventeenth century and was worth a lot of money. Thank God I didn't have the responsibility of dusting it. A lacquered Chinese cabinet stood in one corner, its doors inlaid with mother-of-pearl and folded back to show me rows of ingenious little drawers just begging to be teased open and pried into; but I kept my itching fingers to myself.

On the wall above the cabinet, an eighteenth-century lady stared down at me from a heavy gilt frame. She was dressed fashionably in a silk gown with a low-necked bodice and bunches of foaming lace at her elbows, a large ruby glinting at her throat. But the interesting thing about her was that she was obviously not European. Brown-skinned and black-eyed, she stared out from her frame with a kind of wary defiance. Curious, I went for a closer look. It was then I noticed a marble bust sitting in a deep windowsill, the head of a Roman emperor sporting a leather flying-helmet and goggles. I decided this must be Amber's touch.

An elderly brown spaniel appeared in the kitchen doorway, his tail waving slowly, his claws clicking as he plodded across the stone-flagged floor towards me. I was forced to turn away from the emperor to make his acquaintance. He gazed up at me questioningly, his brown eyes ringed with grey-flecked fur. I sat down and smoothed his noble head.

'That's Ben.' Amber came in carrying two coffee mugs and placed them on an iron-bound chest that looked as if it was made for pirate treasure. It was currently doing duty as a table, sheets of paper slewed across the top of it, covered in drawings of people in Victorian costume.

Some had snippets of fabric pinned to one corner.

‘Are you a costume designer?’ I asked as she gathered them up.

‘Fashion is my passion,’ she responded with a self-mocking smile. She gathered up her designs and laid them carefully on a side table. ‘But not my job,’ she carried on cheerfully. ‘I am trapped in the family firm.’ She plumped down beside me on the sofa, kicked off an expensive-looking pair of spike-heeled ankle boots and curled her legs underneath her. Ben collapsed beside her on the rug.

‘I was sorry to hear about your father,’ I said.

She just shrugged her shoulders. I didn’t know what to say then, how to respond to her display of indifference. I sipped coffee. ‘Does Mrs Horrell live here too?’ I asked. I couldn’t believe she lived in this rambling place by herself.

She gave a crack of laughter. ‘No, thank God! Anita ran off with her yoga instructor when I was fourteen. Left us to get on with it.’ She paused suddenly, her thoughts turned inward. ‘Poor Dad, he was devastated. I haven’t spoken to her since. She didn’t even turn up for his funeral. Anyway,’ she announced, brightening, ‘I want to know about you. You took over that old junk shop in Shadow Lane, didn’t you? It used to belong to some foreign man.’ She clicked her fingers, searching for his name.

‘Mr Nikolai,’ I supplied for her. ‘Everyone called him Old Nick.’

She nodded. ‘It was a really creepy, run-down old place. When we were kids, we were frightened to walk

past there. It looks lovely now,' she added hastily.

'It ought to, after what I've spent on it.'

'Dad said he was a crook,' Amber ventured.

'Dad was right.'

She hugged her knees. 'Is it true he was murdered? I was working in London at the time and I missed all the gory details.'

I could have told her she was lucky to have missed them. But then, I'd found his body. He might have been a crook, but I'd been fond of Old Nick. I'd taken him on as a client of Domestic Goddess, my home-help business. When he was killed, I was astonished to discover he'd left the shop to me. Why he'd done so, I've never really worked out. 'Yes, he was murdered.'

'And is that what started you off on all your sleuthing?' she asked enthusiastically.

This kind of conversation makes me uncomfortable. 'It wasn't intentional.'

'Sorry!' she said, picking up on my discomfort. 'I'm being a pain. Of course, it's not just antiques any more, is it?' she went on, going back to the shop. 'You sell all sorts, arts and crafts and stuff.'

'Sophie sells her artwork,' I explained. 'And Pat makes crafts to raise money for Honeysuckle Farm – you know, the animal sanctuary? She runs it with her sister and brother-in-law. I sell antiques, well, mostly junk,' I admitted, 'from the storeroom at the back. I shouldn't describe it as junk really. I do sell some quality items, when I can buy them cheap enough.'

Amber's mobile phone, which up until now had been lying on the chest, began to buzz and vibrate. She

glanced at the display and grimaced in distaste. 'He can wait,' she pronounced, refusing the call.

'And talking of antiques,' I said, patting the iron-bound chest, 'this is an amazing thing. It must take two men to lift it.'

'Actually, it takes four,' she told me laughing. 'It's been in our family for centuries.' The phone rang again and she rolled her eyes. 'Sorry. I'm going to have to take this.' She got up and wandered into the kitchen. 'For God's sake, Peter!' I heard her complain as I sipped my coffee. 'I've told you the answer is no! I don't care. I don't want anybody here . . .' There was a long pause while she listened. 'I'm not selling! I don't care. How many more times do I have to say it? And you don't have to keep checking up on me every five minutes. I'll be there in the morning, okay? First thing . . . no, I haven't . . . Yes, I promise. Look, I've got someone here about Dad's car . . . Tomorrow. Yes. For God's sake . . . Goodbye.'

She wandered back into the room and threw her phone down on the lid of the chest with more force than was probably good for it. 'Treats me like a child,' she muttered. 'Sorry about that.' She smiled bitterly. 'My Uncle Peter is a royal pain in the arse. He's just checking to see I'm going to turn up at work tomorrow.'

'You work for him at *Horrell's Antiques*?'

'For my sins.' She came to sit, running a hand through her short, spiky hair. 'Where were we?'

'You were telling me about this chest.'

'It's quite a story . . .' she began, but stopped suddenly. A noise came from above our heads, a muffled thump

and the creak of floorboards. I looked up in surprise and she followed the direction of my gaze. 'There's no one up there,' she told me, a little too hastily. 'Except for the ghost.'

I laughed. 'Really?'

'No, not really. This house is full of creaks and groans.' She hesitated, and then a moment later, turned our conversation back to the chest. 'It's got four locks,' she pointed out.

There were certainly four chunky lock-plates, but only two of the keyholes had keys in them. 'Why four?' I asked. But before she could reply, the grandfather clock delicately chimed the half hour, and she looked at her watch. This was obviously my cue to depart. The warmth had gone out of our conversation anyway, the mood ruined by the call from Uncle Peter. I left shortly after, promising to return with Daniel on Friday and pick up the car.

As I opened the door of Van Blanc, I turned back to look at Langworthy Hall.

I almost expected to see a ghostly face at an upstairs window, peering at me through the mullioned glass. Amber might have insisted we were alone in the house, but I wasn't sure I believed her. Because when I had looked up at that noise from above, Ben the spaniel had raised his head from the rug and had waved his plummy tail, in recognition.