

The background is a painting of a landscape. In the foreground, there is a large, multi-story building with a reddish-brown roof and several windows. To the left of the building, there are several tall, slender cypress trees. In the background, there is a hillside with more trees and a small structure. The overall style is impressionistic with visible brushstrokes and a rich color palette.

# Murder in the Parador

the Death of John Donne

Paula Mays

This is a work of fiction. Similarities to real people, places, or events are entirely coincidental.

MURDER IN THE PARADOR

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# Chapter 1

Marco kicked off his shoes and stretched his long legs out over the coffee table. His hairy legs, which were tone and muscular, were partly covered in blue shorts down to his knees. He wore a sleeveless striped red and blue t-shirt. His bare right arm displayed a “Barcelona Futbol” tattoo in Arabic. Marco pulled the tab open on his beer, which made a popping sound. Beer gushed out of the can. He slurped the liquid to stop it from spilling. Bits of beer foam dripped on his unshaven chin. Marco wiped his mouth and put the beer down on the table Belen had just dusted. It left a ring. He knew she’d be mad he didn’t use the coasters she’d continually asked him to use. He looked down at his cell phone as if to get away from the beer dripping. He was getting anxious anyway; Oscar should be calling any minute to tell him what time he’d be over to watch the *futbol* match.

Marco took another sip of beer and scanned the television stations with the remote, searching for the sports channel. He visualized Barcelona and his favorite player, Cesc Fabregas, scoring the winning goal. He settled on a channel. As he put down the remote, he breathed in the smell of Belen’s freshly sprayed perfume, which had drifted into the living room. ‘*Peace at last,*’ he thought. Marco was glad Belen was going out for the evening so he and Oscar could spend some quality time yelling at the TV.

Belen had been sniping at him with the insistence of a tiny Chihuahua all day. Marco needed a break. She was on that kick about moving again. Ever since he’d lost his job as a police officer with the Malaga police, Belen had been nagging him to move to Madrid with her family and getting a fresh start. Marco had no plans on moving. His family was there, in Vivirrambla. He’d started his own detective agency and finally secured some police consulting work. Belen said it wasn’t steady enough; her father could get him a job in Madrid. Then, he’d be beholden to her father, no thanks. They’d fought about it all afternoon. The atmosphere in the house had been tense, a rubber band about to snap.

He loved Belen but, during times as this, Marco questioned whether he’d done the right thing. For several years, he dated a Moroccan girl he’d grown up with in Vivirrambla. His mother wanted him to marry her. She told him numerous times she’d prayed he’d find a nice Muslim woman. Spanish women were too willful, his mother said. They didn’t show enough respect and they never went to church, even their own churches. That’s just

what Marco didn't want, a nice Moroccan girl. Marco had fought all his life against that culture. He'd gone to the mosque a few times with his mom, but he didn't see himself as a devout Muslim. He preferred his father's Catholicism if anything; mostly, he'd rather stay home on Sunday, watch *futbol*, and read *El Pais*. He agreed with his mother about one thing though, Spanish women were willful.

Marco stared blankly at some sports ad on the television and waited for Belen to go out. *What now?* he thought when he heard her voice resonate from the bedroom.

"Get dressed or we'll be late," she said.

He grimaced. "What? Get dressed for what?" Marco asked.

"We're meeting Juan and Maria for dinner this evening? You always do this, act as if you forgot."

Marco rolled his eyes. He made no effort to move at Belen's urging.

"Dios, Belen, not tonight. Oscar's coming over to watch the Barcelona game. It's our chance to be first in *La Liga*. Can't you go without me?"

Belen sashayed out of the bedroom. She looked almost saintly in her knee length white cotton dress. Her long dark, almost coal black tresses, now released from their ubiquitous ponytail, fell below her shoulders. Turquoise earrings made her look even more tanned than her normal olive complexion. He couldn't help but admire her dark beauty, but it wasn't enough to make him want to miss the match.

She tugged on his arm to pull him off the couch. "Come on, Marco. It's too late to cancel now. They're probably already at the restaurant."

Marco's father had instilled in him the importance of Spain's futbol. Some of his early memories were of his father and himself watching matches on their small television set. His father had once told him *futbol*, in Spain, was similar to politics: you were either on one side or the other. There were two types of fans his father had philosophized: the Barcelona fan or the *Real Madrid* supporter. Barcelona people were those liberal, socialist types. His father was the second type—a *Real Madrid* fan, conservative, realistic. Marco, of course, supported Barcelona. Whatever side one took, though, one didn't miss important matches between Spain's two greatest rivals, even for dinner with good friends.

He couldn't think fast enough to get out of it, he said "Oh alright," and got up from the sofa and trudged barefoot to the bathroom. He re-entered the living room fifteen minutes later wearing an azure blue button-down

shirt, which hid his tattoo, as well as black slacks. His dark wavy hair was still wet. Belen had already turned off the television. She impatiently walked about the room. Marco grabbed his watch off the coffee table and the couple ventured out on to the red-bricked streets of the Old Town, *Casca Antigua*, weaving their way through the maze of the *Plaza de los Naranjos*, streets lined with scented orange trees. Marco had to admit, the romantic night air was infectious. Having almost forgiven her for dragging him away from futbol, he pinched her. "Stop it," she said, giggling. He loved when she giggled; it sounded akin to short bursts of laughter. He tightly grabbed her hand as they made their way through the narrow *calles*.

A profusely polite, round-faced waiter with red cheeks, dressed in formal black and white, poured them wine and took their order when they finally joined their friends at the *Restaurante Diego Sanchez*. Despite his best efforts, Marco felt irritated again. He wanted to be at home in front of the television. Juan and Maria's conversation about their newborn baby boy quickly became tedious. How often could he say the kid was cute? At least Belen was enjoying herself and she did look beautiful, a radiant angel in white. He smiled to himself. He turned his attention to the pasta with large sizzling *gambas*, shrimp, until the phone beeping distracted him. He smiled as he retrieved the text from Oscar: Barcelona 2 Madrid 1, Final was all it said.

"*Venga Barcelona*," Marco shouted. He wished Oscar were there so they could high five. The people at the table next to them turned to look. Belen shot him a disapproving look. Marco avoided her gaze. Still smiling, he twirled the pasta on his plate with his fork and pretended to listen to more stories about the baby. Just as he'd gotten the right proportion of pasta to *gambas* and was about to take another bite, the beeping sounded again. He hoped there hadn't been a mistake in Oscar's reporting of the match score. When he looked down, he immediately recognized the number of the *Policía Nacional de Malaga*. "*Dime*," he said.

"We need you to come to Malaga right away, Marco," the voice on the other end said. "There's been an accident at the *Parador de Avila*. A British citizen collapsed and died at a wedding here." It was Detective Flores' gravelly voice.

"I'm on my way," Marco said. "I have to go," he told the group at the table. He stood up, grabbed his mobile, kissed Belen and left.

By the time Marco arrived at the scene, Detective Alberto Flores, an average looking Spaniard with oval eyes, was already gathering forensic evidence. His auburn hair, a remnant of his Celtic origin, framed a pair of large ears likely to jut out even more as he got older, as men's ears continue to grow as they age. Flores and camera crews crowded the Parador, only a few hours before the site of a wedding celebration, now a macabre death scene. What seemed to be half the Malaga police force milled around, talking to nervous hotel staff and dressed up wedding guests. Marco stood in the middle of the room.

"Over here," Flores said, waving at Marco. He opened a box of Altoids and offered one to Marco.

"No, thanks," Marco said.

"It's going to be a long night," Flores said, shaking his head.

Marco had just recently become a consultant with the *Policía Nacional de Malaga*. Before that, he'd been a prized officer on the Malaga Police force until a seemingly routine arrest went wrong and a suspect was shot and killed. Marco and his partner of two years had a tense relationship. His partner hated, Marco. He didn't like the fact Marco was half Spanish and half Muslim, as his father was a Spaniard and his mother was from Tanger. He'd called him a disloyal Muslim, so he set Marco up once he got the chance in hopes of getting him thrown off the force.

Marco's partner testified under oath that Marco had sympathized with an armed suspect during an arrest and, as a result, the suspect had gotten agitated and had pulled out a gun and threatened to kill his partner. The suspect was killed in the shootout. His partner testified that he'd shot the suspect in self-defense. The truth was that his partner had shot the suspect, an African immigrant from Tunisia, without provocation after yelling at him to go back where he came from and repeatedly kicking him. The other officers backed up his partner's story, even though they knew Marco's partner had a tendency to act out of control. Marco's supervisor had no choice but to fire Marco because of political pressure over the suspect's death and current anti-Muslim sentiment in the force.

Marco leaned over and squinted his eyes to get a closer look at the reception table. Traces of un-swabbed saliva rested on the tablecloth. He turned to the medical examiner who stood next to him, writing on a legal pad.

“I’m not sure how he died. The emergency crew detected no sign of heart failure. People at the table with him said he seemed to be having some kind of convulsions and then his head hit the table,” the medical examiner said, pointing to a group of guests huddled in a corner. “That’s consistent with his body being contorted. I can’t tell you anymore until after the autopsy. The body’s on its way to the lab.”

“Make sure to swab the saliva from the table,” Marco said.

“I know my job,” the medical examiner said, tuning up his nose and peering over his glasses.

Marco surveyed the room, a queer combination of beauty and death. He spotted Detective Flores still grilling the hotel staff. Marco stepped out of the room away from the noise. He needed to call Belen. She’d be worried since he’d left dinner so abruptly.

“It’s a mess here. This is going to take some time. I’ll be home late, if at all,” he said.

“OK,” she said. She sounded sad.

There was silence on the line for a time.

“I love you,” Marco said, something which previously had been hard for him to say. .

He hung up the phone and rejoined Detective Flores.

“Let’s talk to those nearest to the deceased while their memories are still fresh,” Flores said.

Flores gave Marco the list of potential witnesses he had gathered so far, all of whom had seen John Donne in the hours before his death.

“See the looker standing by the table over there?” Flores gestured with his head to a table near them. “That’s Terry Evans, the deceased’s girlfriend. Talk to her first and see what she knows.”

A tall, curvaceous woman stood motionless at the opposite side of the room. Her green silk dress hugged her hourglass figure. Marco walked around the yellow tape surrounding the table and over to the woman.

“Ms. Evans?” he said.

She looked up, dazed, through frosty green eyes. “What happened to John?” she asked.

“We don’t know yet, Ms. Evans,” he said.



## Chapter 2

Marco ran his hand through his hair, just as Roger Federer did at the conclusion of a Wimbledon victory, then walked outside onto the balcony. On days such as this on the Mediterranean coast, everything worked in harmony. Not a hint of the dark night past remained. The mountains, the sea and the air curtsied to the dominant sun. Marco would have preferred to sit on the balcony all day, sipping *café con leche*, coffee with sweet creamy milk. Instead, he walked back inside and got dressed. He'd have to drag himself into the office shortly, though he was dogged tired after the long night at the Parador de Avila.

"Is there any coffee?" he asked as soon as he got to the office. His hoarse voice betrayed his fatigue.

Eva looked at him concerned. "I'll get you some."

"Thanks, Eva. I'm really tired today."

"I can tell. Long night, huh?"

Marco shook his head. He took the mug and swallowed a large swig. He needed the jolt before his appointment with John Donne's girlfriend, Terry Evans. He thought of seeing her at the Parador the night before in that tight dress with that scared expression her face.

"I'll be back in a bit," he said to Eva, handing her the now empty mug. Eva had been his personal assistant since he started the agency. He depended on her. She was sharp and knew what she was doing. She also understood him and his, what she called, "moods." Sometimes it annoyed him, though, when she gave him that disapproving look of hers, but he couldn't run his detective business without her help.

Marco walked along the Paseo of Vivirrambla. He looked up at the tall buildings surrounding him, almost pushing their way into the sea. He thought of how the town had changed since he was a child. He missed the small fishing village, the Vivirrambla he'd grown up in, where all the fishermen, *los Pescadores*, as his father was, knew each other. Every restaurant owner in town knew Marco's father because he'd bring them *pescado fresco*, (fresh sea fish) caught just that morning, for the day's menu. The town began to change in the late 1980s, when the mayor sunk a fortune into redevelopment. Vivirrambla was now a European hotspot, full of tourists and ex-patriates. They had more money and resources, as foreigners bought expensive homes and pumped money into the economy.

Services were better, but it was a trade-off, as much of the small town spirit of the old days had been lost. Many of the foreigners didn't even bother to learn Spanish. Some of them treated the locals as servants.

Marco pushed open the entrance gate to a white four story building with blue and white stone tile, three blocks from the sea. By now, the sun had fully risen. Soon, it would be hot. Marco knocked on the door of the apartment number 201. The blond he'd spoken to the night before answered. Dark moon-like circles surrounded her eyes, as if she had been crying for some time. Her cheeks were flushed. Highlighted wisps of hair wandered in varying directions around her face.

"Come in, please," she said, as she stepped aside to let him pass.

"I know it's a bad time, Ms. Evans. I'm sorry again for your loss," Marco said as he walked through the door.

"Thank you." She nodded her head without looking at him.

Terry directed Marco to the sofa in the center of the room. She wore casual clothing: faded jeans with a hole in the knee and a white t-shirt. Remnants of tan lines showed on her visible shoulders. "Would you like some tea?" she asked.

"No thank you. I won't take up much of your time. I just need to ask you a few questions."

She sat in a nearby chair and crossed her legs, which were long and attached to a comparatively short torso. She brushed her wayward bang back with her hand. He noticed her slender hands shook a bit.

"OK. What kind of questions do you want to ask me?"

She gazed at him with too long of a glance and crossed her legs again. Marco took a small notebook he carried out of his pocket and turned to a blank page. Terry Evans reminded him a little of another British woman he'd interviewed a few years earlier when he was still on the police force. The woman had murdered her rich Spanish husband. She intended to run back to England with his money, but she'd been caught when she tried to wire money to her English boyfriend. The woman was blond and attractive, like Terry. Evans. She had that same kind of cool air about her. Marco took out his pen and prepared to take notes.

"We're retracing the events at the Parador before John..." Marco fiddled with his pen. "Had you and John Donne been dating long?"

Terry stared at Marco in disbelief. He felt uncomfortable. Then, oddly, she smiled at him.

“It’s hot in here. Are you hot?” She looked over at the patio door, which was slightly ajar, then fanned herself with her hands. She tugged on the top of her tee shirt, exposing a glimpse of her breast, then looked at him. Marco looked at his notebook.

“I can’t believe John’s dead. One minute, he’s fine; the next, his head’s on the table,” she pointed to the table next to them, “and then they were taking him away in an ambulance.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. Evans. I know this is hard.”

She shook her head. “The police told me they don’t know how John died. I just can’t believe it. I feel as if I’m in a nightmare and can’t wake myself.”

Marco’s British friends had said one could tell what side of town a British person came from by their accent. Terry had a nasal sounding accent; not melodious as the other Brits Marco knew. Terry cut off the end of words, such as “didn’t”, so it sounded as “di int.” He struggled to understand some of the things she said. He decided she’d come from humble beginnings. She tried to present herself as classy, he thought, yet her rough accent betrayed her.

“How long had you been dating John? Did you and John get along well?” Marco asked.

“Yes, of course we did. John asked me to marry him just a few months ago.” After a long pause, she added, “Now I wish I’d said yes. He died thinking I didn’t want to marry him, that I didn’t love him.”

Marco studied her. She didn’t seem to be the type of woman who’d want to settle down with one husband. She appeared to be more of the type of woman who wanted to have a good time.

“Why didn’t you want to marry him if you loved him?” Marco asked.

“I wasn’t ready for marriage. I can barely take care of myself, let alone a husband.” She half snickered and took a sip of the now cold tea.

“Oh, do you recall John being sick the day of the wedding?” Marco asked.

“No, not sick. He’d been in a bad mood all day, but he wasn’t physically ill. I remember I was annoyed with him. I wanted to go out and have some fun before the wedding, as it wasn’t until later in the evening. John just wanted to sit around house, watch TV, and drink beer. We almost didn’t go to the wedding because of it”

“Why was he in such a bad mood?”

She shrugged. "I dunno. Lately, it seemed he was always in a bad mood. He'd been drinking more and acting weird. I kept asking him what was wrong. He said he was just stressed from work."

You said John had been drinking the day of the wedding?"

Terry twirled her fingers.

"Yes, he'd had a few drinks, which is another reason he said he didn't want to go out. My world stopped when John died."

"Was he drunk during the wedding?"

She shook her head, no. "I don't think so. He had a pretty high tolerance for alcohol. He had taken a break from drinking before the reception started. I tried to go to the hospital with him, but people started pushing me away and telling me not to look, so I just sat there staring. I didn't know what to do." She looked around the living room. "I won't be able to afford this apartment on my own, you know. John paid most of the bills."

"I understand. Did John have any heart problems or anything like that?" he asked.

"Not that I know of. He rarely got sick. Last year, I had a bad flu. John didn't catch it at all."

Her hands started to tremble in earnest now. Marco could see she was becoming upset. He stood up to leave.

"OK. That's fine for now, Ms. Evans. I'll let you know if we have any more questions."

"Can you let me know what you find out about his death?" she asked, as she walked him to the door. "Find out what happened to him. Did someone kill him?"

Marco eyed her. "We don't know anyone killed him yet. Why did you say that?"

She resembled a child who'd been caught stealing penny candy. "I don't know," she shrugged. "I just can't figure out how else he could have died just like that."

"I see," Marco said. "I'll be in touch."

Marco stopped on his way back to work for a *cafe con leche* at *Café Alvarez*. He took his usual seat at the counter near the construction workers drinking beer, although it was only ten o'clock in the morning. Alvarez, the owner, worked behind the counter, wiping up spills and serving coffee and

drinks. The top of his balding head gleamed with sweat. When Marco sat down, Alvarez stopped wiping and put two cups under the espresso machine, one for coffee and one to make hot milk. Marco picked up the newspaper left on the counter beside him by the last patron and turned to the story under the front headline, which read, "Death at Parador Wedding." The story, which laid out the events at the Parador Avila, had pictures of Detective Flores and the Malaga police examining evidence and talking to hotel staff.

Marco looked up from the paper when Alvarez appeared in front of him.

"*Cómo estás, Alvarez?*" Marco said, shaking the hand of the cheery pudgy man behind the counter.

Alvarez raised his voice over the buzz of the coffee machine. "*Todo passe bien,*" he said, as he pulled two cups from under the machine. "Did you read about the wedding where the young man died?" Alvarez asked, pointing to the newspaper. "Are you going to investigate it?"

"I'm going to help a bit," Marco said.

"My daughter got married last year. I couldn't imagine something similar to that happening at her wedding. The bride's American, right? That's all we need here, a big international incident."

As Alvarez poured him a *café con leche*, Marco watched the frothy foam form swirl in the deep rich brew. He added three sugars, a habit Belen had tried to get him to break; "one is enough," she constantly said. He stared into the cup and watched the swirling milk, thinking of his interview with the dead man's girlfriend and her odd reactions. He was deep in thought when a drunken short man hopped off a bar stool and approached Marco. He stood three inches from Marco's face.

"What's the terrorist doing in here?" the drunk said to Alvarez.

"Get out of my bar and don't come back," Alvarez said, snapping his rag at the drunken man.

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