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Beyond All Doubt

Written by Paige Elizabeth Turner

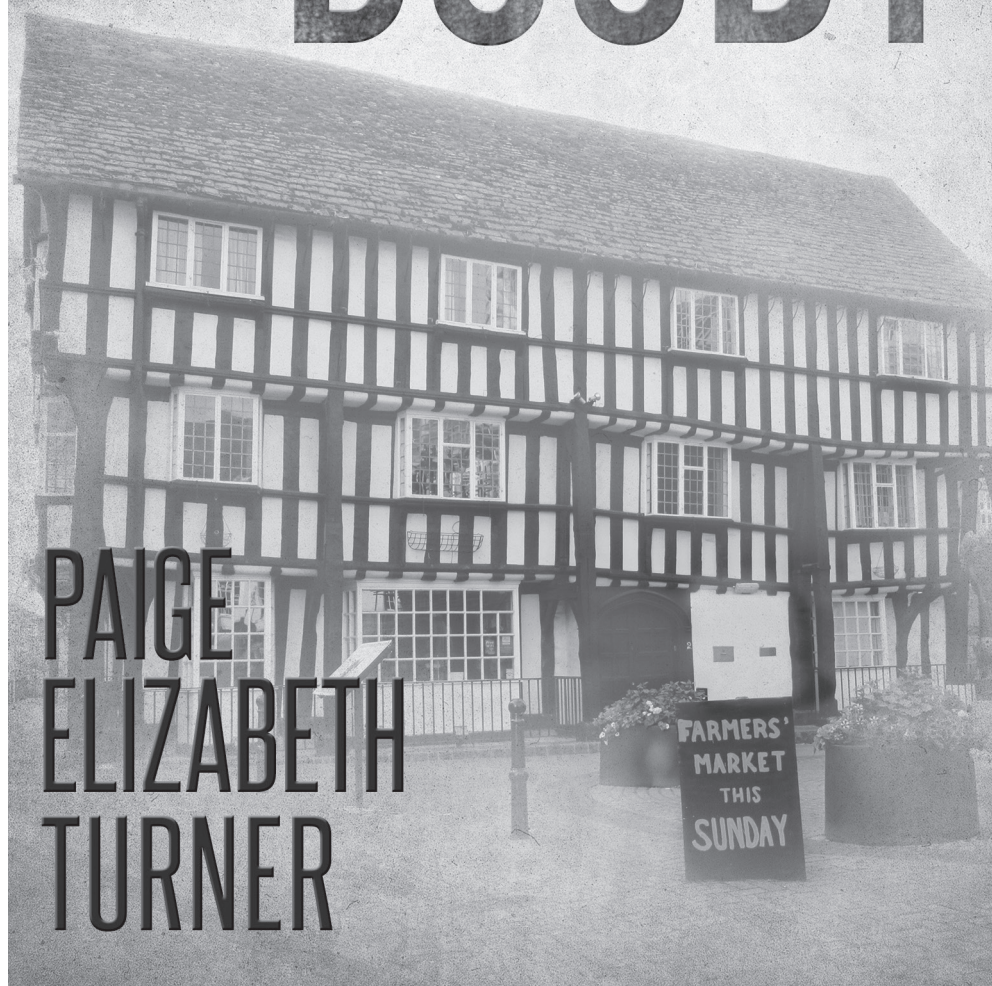
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BEYOND ALL DOUBT

PAIGE
ELIZABETH
TURNER



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Matador
9 Priory Business Park,
Wistow Road, Kibworth Beauchamp,
Leicestershire. LE8 0RX
Tel: 0116 279 2299
Email: books@troubador.co.uk
Web: www.troubador.co.uk/matador
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PART ONE

THE MURDERS

1

AS THE EVENING's dusk draws a translucent grey curtain across the sinking afternoon sun, twenty-two passengers board the late-afternoon river cruise. Patrons jostle for position to view shafts of orange sunlight bounce from the river like fiery sparks escaping a Guy Fawkes bonfire. Those who shun sunsets' romanticism retreat to the sub-deck where they struggle to digest the complimentary Devonshire Teas' crumbling scones. Others exchange the intense gaze of first-time lovers: eyes only for each other – oblivious to their surroundings.

A young couple exit the comfortably heated cabin, climb three steps to the deck and breathe in grey mist rolling across the River Avon in Evesham, Worcestershire.

Legend claims the town's name evolved from a herdsman, Eoves, a farmer for the Bishop of Worcester, who is said to have seen a vision of the Virgin Mary. In 701 AD, Evesham's abbey was built at that very location.

The small town holds its place in history. The Battle of Evesham, in 1265, saw Simon de Montfort, Earl of Leicester, slain with his small army in Greenhill on the northern perimeter of Evesham. Simon de Montfort was recognised as an outstanding English personality, an advocate of a limited monarchy, and an active and outspoken proponent of parliamentary and governance reforms.

Today, rural enterprise and clusters of satellite industries complement Evesham's bustling township. The River Avon flows through its heart and radiates a shimmering backdrop to the vast Crown Meadow. Summer nestles a string of permanently moored barges whose tubs of flowers, deck chairs and tables, television antennas, satellite dishes, and the wafting aroma of culinary delicacies afford domestic convenience to the weekend mariners.

Trevor and Juanita saunter arm in arm along the timber deck, beyond a white bulkhead propped like a lone kiosk on a derelict railway platform, and continue to the rear of the refurbished timber barge. Huddling like conjoined twins, they trail the arrowhead wake chasing across the river's surface. Trevor flops onto a timber-slatted seat whose identity succumbs to stacked layers of red, green and blue paint. The most recent décor – a yellow acrylic – is cracked and bubbled through neglect. He swipes flakes of the puckered paint to the deck, pulls Juanita to his lap and snuggles into her breast like a newborn baby pacified by the comfort and security of its mother.

Juanita embraces the warmth and happiness of newfound romance as she drinks the dew of Trevor's kiss. With limbs intertwined like *convolvulus jacaranda*, they absorb the tranquil evening of August fourteen.

'I love you babe,' Trevor whispers.

'Love you too.'

Trevor combs his fingers through her hair and rests them at the nape of her slender neck. With the flourish of an oriental masseur, he stimulates dense tissue beneath her lithe skin. As he kneads deep into Juanita's neck, he smothers her lips with breathless kisses and rises to the frisson of her electrified tongue.

Juanita closes her eyes and reclines into the emotion and anticipation pulsing through her body. She surrenders to sensuality's whisper, choosing to float above reality while selfishly enjoying the inner heat fuelled by twitches and spasms of hormonal yearnings.

Her stifled groans shrill down Trevor's throat.

Her arms clamp him in a chest-crushing embrace.

Her heart races and body shudders to orgasm's rhapsody.

Her eyes dilute and fix upon his: *Is this a new adventure in foreplay, or a gross act of rejection?*

She will never learn it is the latter. Her soft breath ceases like the exhausted wisp of an autumn breeze.

Trevor lifts Juanita from the seat. Cradles her. Kisses her cheek. Says goodbye. He glances over his shoulder to confirm his concealment from both passengers and occasional anglers chancing their luck from the riverbank. He flips her limp body over the side of the craft, the inboard motor muffling the faint splash. Her white cotton blouse inflates and bobbles atop the wash. Moments later, it collapses and descends, returning the glistening river to swans and ducks feeding on discarded scones.

Trevor dawdles to the cabin, awash with innocence – the look a child presents upon being admonished for teasing his sister: *What? Who, me?* No one sees that look, and no one pays him attention as he enters the foredeck where he will remain until the cruise terminates.

The captain manoeuvres the craft toward the recently restored Evesham pier, now protected by suspended tyres dangling like children's swings. Patrons preserve lasting memories of the cruise onto their digital cameras and smartphones: the soaring St Lawrence's church; Workman Bridge; the historic stone wall

surrounding Evesham's famous abbey; and the meadow from where families pack away memories of the day's picnics and barbecues.

After shutting down the motor, the skipper casts two ropes onto the pier and lashes the boat securely to fore and aft mooring bollards. From the side of the craft he unfolds a rickety ramp and extends a trusting hand to the over-cautious as they disembark.

Trevor merges with the departing passengers. Barely five-feet-seven inches tall, he shuffles along like a child entombed within the surging exodus of a football match. His slate-black hair – greasy and unkempt – is contained by one of his many baseball caps, while his ears flare beyond, straining to capture patrons' chit-chat.

He mimics passengers exchanging cheerios, and waves to awaiting families as if to single out friends in the crowd. No one would know otherwise. He strolls to the riverbank, checks for telltale signs of his indiscretion and smiles as the increasing darkness falls upon his crime. He walks briskly along the footpath, whistling with the felicity of a child having plucked the toy from a McDonald's Happy Meal.

In three hours, he'll enter his front door. Alone.

Twelve months' earlier, at thirty-two years-of-age and twice divorced, Trevor John Taylor had proposed to Juanita Morales. He had detoured around the route to everlasting love, ejecting baggage, lack-lustre memories and promises of 'for better or for worse'. Like many in his position, he had accepted no responsibility for his situation.

His first wife, swept away by the freedom of a singles lifestyle, charged toward nightclubs, dancing and interchangeable

relationships. His second marriage fell two weeks short of four years after his beloved Belinda, so deeply immersed in the Christian faith, found worshipping a fellow church member more soul intensifying than the joys of holy matrimony. Trevor floundered in emotional wilderness, desperately intent on sharing his life with someone. Equally at home with his own peace and solitude, he felt little inclination to re-enter the dating scene, where small talk, failed first dates and stand-ups intersected the journey to the prism of love.

His job as a self-employed electrical contractor afforded him a good income, although he spent little of it, choosing instead a reclusive lifestyle of watching television and playing computer games. One evening, during an internet search for a new computer game, a pop-up advert commanded his attention: *Filipina Joy. Find your life's love with a beautiful Asian woman.* Trevor clicked into the website. He'd heard stories, both good and bad, of internet dating sites, but never had he explored one. His introduction to the site was overwhelming, as was the beauty and eagerness of many women.

He clicked on an appealing portrait. The profile read like a professional's curriculum vitae; a two-page document supplying every conceivable piece of information required to successfully claim the vacancy. But Juanita Morales was not seeking a life-changing career – she was seeking a husband.

A photographic model of Philippine origin, her petite frame reflected God's idea of beauty. High cheekbones accentuated huge brown eyes peering from sculpted dark caves, giving her the appearance of a mystical cat. A snub nose and full lips complemented black satin hair, which meandered below her shoulders. She was twenty-two-years-old, five-feet-four and single.

Her profile was expansive: as a student, she had participated in many athletic pursuits. On leaving school, she obsessed over her trim figure, for it was her body that rewarded her with an envied lifestyle – a lifestyle she intended to renounce.

Juanita was not extravagant. She preferred a simple life to one crammed with the over-exuberance of her profession. She steadfastly refused invitations to parties and head-turning get-togethers, on those nights preferring to stay at home, sulking into her self-enforced isolation. The rigours of modelling, dealing with questionable agents whose sexual propositions would guarantee she'd 'make it to the top', convinced Juanita to withdraw from the artificial glamour. She longed to find a sincere, devoted person who would accept her for her own being – not as a pin-up object of satisfaction upon a men's room wall. Juanita craved a future where she could enjoy life with a home, husband and family.

For many years she had planned to leave the Philippines, a country from where young girls dream of meeting and marrying a foreigner, particularly an American. The Philippines is historically associated with the United States of America, originating from its attack on the Spanish Navy in the Philippines in May 1898. The country remains strongly influenced by the US as evidenced by its American English language education and the plethora of American television shows now enjoyed by most Filipinos. Many young women, and even younger girls, crave the luxury American lifestyle as a means of escaping their depressed life.

After brief consideration, reinforced by her friends' encouragement – *what have you got to lose?* – Juanita Morales joined the *Filipina Joy* website.

The marvels of technology, search engines and scrolling

photographs united Trevor and Juanita. They exchanged emails, quickly stretching to multi-page letters, texts, photos, and from Trevor, parcels of gifts. A strong friendship sprang from their exchanging each other's life and aspirations. Six months' later, Trevor visited Juanita. During intermission at a local cinema, he removed from his pocket a half-carat diamond ring, knelt between the close-knit rows of seats and said: 'Juanita. I love you. Will you marry me?' Two hours' later the pair returned to Juanita's home where Trevor, in keeping with both local and western custom, formalised his proposal as a request to Juanita's father. Within months, Juanita leapt into Trevor's arms at Heathrow Airport.

Initially, life presented many difficulties. Juanita missed her family. She knew no one in Bournemouth where she shared Trevor's home. They fought often, not physically, but with verbal venom enough to poison neighbours either side of Trevor's semi-detached home. Juanita eased slowly into new friendships but remained moody and despondent. It was not long before she confided in one of her new friends the torrid time she was suffering under Trevor. She considered acting on Trevor's taunts to return to the Philippines, but believed that doing so might deny her one of life's key opportunities. Worse still, she could not face the shame of being labelled a 'failure' by her family.

Over time, the emotional bindings of cohabitation frayed. The challenge of winning over Juanita Morales had enthused Trevor far greater than the prospect of living with her – a peculiarity generated by childhood eagerness of waiting for a Christmas or birthday present, only to quickly tire of the Lego bricks and marbles. There would always be more toys. And there would always be more women.

* * *

Two hundred metres upstream of Evesham's pier, Juanita Morales' distorted body lies partly submerged, clutched by riverbed reeds. A slick of matted black hair swirls around her opaque face, concealing the tremor of her final gasps. Resting on the surface an oversize fashion watch encircles her tiny wrist, reflecting a plea of 'help me' from the half-moon's chilling light. Its diffused glow captures the attention of a young couple enjoying the early excitement of courting. Arm in arm they creep to the water's edge, supporting each other's steps lest they slip into the Avon's gloom. They peer inquisitively through the assembled cavalry of reeds, expecting to score a valuable object ditched by a fisherman, or perhaps mislaid by another amorous couple. And then they see her.

Seventeen-year-old Graham Johnston reaches for her arm. Its chilled flesh sends him reeling. Too aghast to check for a pulse, he retreats to the riverbank, fumbles for his phone and with shaking hand calls 999. He stutters the gruesome find to an operator who directs him to remain at the scene until police arrive.

Graham soon tracks the blaze of flashing lights streaking along Abbey Road, their fluorescent haze tinting the stretch of mist compressing Crown Meadow. Two marked police cars enter the park and inch along the potholed access road before stopping at the Evesham Rowing Club. Uniformed officers alight and string crime-scene tape across the road to prevent admission of sightseers and other persons likely to contaminate the area.

Police and emergency service personnel share distaste for loitering 'rubber necks' eager to snatch glimpses of unfolding catastrophes, yet those same time-wasting sightseers are the first to complain when they're stuck at a supermarket checkout for more than thirty seconds.

Beyond the tape, a second pair of headlights bounce like erratic balls along the base of a karaoke screen. A silver Vauxhall Astra emerges from the grey-topped bitumen, its indignant driver waving his police identity to the tape-bearing sentry. Hauling himself from the driver's seat, the rotund Inspector Michael Marchant gazes toward the river. He shuffles beneath a park light, his ruddy face and red hair illuminating like a child's glow-in-the-dark figurine. Nothing else about Marchant glows. He is well into his fifteenth year with Worcester CID – on the outer. He'd commenced his career with youthful enthusiasm, but along the way had exhausted his stamina – akin to progressing beyond the reserves but failing selection into the major league. His abrupt manner and lack of finesse with junior members had prevented his promotional path extending beyond inspector. Marchant's career is now a seven-year flat line.

Conveying an air of authority at odds with his crumpled suit, he shouts to a nearby uniformed officer: 'Constable. Who's in charge here?'

'Er, no one, sir. PC Denning over there was first on the scene.'

'Denning!' Marchant roars. 'Here.'

Denning turns toward Marchant and glares. He curbs his intent to volley: *Who the fuck do you think you are?* before obeying the command.

'Good job containing the scene, Denning. Who found the stiff?'

'A young lad. Graham Johnston, sir. I got him to wait over there.' Denning nods to a moulded aluminium bench fronting the rowing club.

Marchant waddles toward Johnston. 'Detective Inspector Marchant, Worcester CID. You rang 999?'

‘Yes. I can’t believe this. We was just walking along the river when we noticed something shining. We looked down and saw her... the body.’

‘You say “we” saw her. Who was with you?’

‘My girlfriend, Mel.’ Johnston raises his hand, fused to Melanie’s, as an introduction.

‘Did you see anyone else while you were walking?’

‘No. We was talking and I wasn’t paying attention to nothing but Mel.’

‘We logged your call at 8.25 p.m. Is that when you found her?’

‘I think so. I don’t wear a watch, but I can check the time on my phone if you want.’

‘No. Doesn’t matter. All right, Graham, wait here for a moment. By the way, did you recognise her?’

‘No. But I hardly looked. It was so awful.’

Detective Sergeant Olivia Watts signs off from a radio location call, springs from the passenger seat, and proceeds directly to the river’s edge. She glances at the deceased as Marchant unceremoniously drags the body on to the bank. ‘Probably done a few hours ago, sir.’

‘Would’ve been daylight then,’ barks Marchant.

‘I realise that. People *are* killed during the day,’ sneers Watts. ‘I’ve called the Coroner’s office. Groenweld’s on his way.’