

# 1

*La mosca*. The fly, evident to my naked eye as a *Calliphora*, or, as it is commonly known, a blowfly, was buzzing loudly and throwing itself angrily against its paper prison, a super-sized soda cup with a snap-on lid.

There I was at the scene of the crime, still in my silk bathrobe, my wavy dark hair loose but minimally under control, tucked behind my ears. Chief Inspector Ballero and I were sitting on the top of the stone steps leading down to the water. He chain-smoked during his interrogation, occasionally casting distracted glances at the noisy drink cup. Three of his team, two in Guardia Civil uniform, and one in an outfit that looked as though he planned on attending Mass instead of a murder scene, were examining Esmeralda and the beach for evidence.

It was Sunday morning and way too early for anyone but a fisherman to be up and moving about—a fisherman or Udo, the German owner of the beach bar Café Sport, that supplied the first coffee of the day. While sweeping the entrance to his bar, Udo had spotted me sitting alone on the steps, waiting for the police.

“It’s Esmeralda,” I told him, “and she’s dead. Someone has killed her.” After walking over for a quick, close look, he kept me company until the authorities arrived. “Fucking unbelievable,” he said, and after that we just sat there together in a comfortable silence.

It was chilly and I clutched the collar of my robe tightly around my throat. The newly risen sun had yet to clear the towering cliffs sheltering the southwestern harbor town. We would remain in shade for at least another half hour before the sun we shared with the African coast dazzled above us. The water was slate blue, reflecting little of the suffused dawn sky.

Udo seemed genuinely upset about Esmeralda, although I knew from previous conversations with him that there had been no love lost between these two neighbors. He rolled a cigarette from a pack of *American Spirit* and I noticed his hands were trembling. I didn’t think it was just from the chill in the air. “Poor, poor girl,” he said finally.

Café Sport was next door to Esmeralda’s nightclub, and on the ground floor of our holiday apartment building. Her mother was Udo’s landlady as well as ours. In Udo’s presence, the shock of my

discovery felt more real. Though we weren't close friends, I was grateful for his company on the stairs next to me: his long arms wrapped around his knees pulled up close to his chest, a cigarette burning into ash between his fingers. I'd never seen him outside of the murky interior of the Café Sport. He looked even paler and more dissipated in the unforgiving daylight. I noticed faint tracks of acne scarring behind his five o'clock shadow. We sat like two birds on a line waiting for something to happen.

After what had seemed forever, a police car pulled up, and parked to deliberately block off the narrow road. Four men got out and hurried passed us down the stairs to the beach and over to the corpse. In a few minutes, the tallest one turned back and came over to speak with us.

I'd never been a witness at a murder scene. I thought about how simple some things remained in the far corners of the world. If we were on a beach in my home state of California, under these circumstances the road would have been cordoned off with a large forensic team swarming around the area, Udo and I might already have been taken down to the police station for questioning.

Instead, Ballero had just plunked himself down on one of the stairs above us and lit a cigarette. He nodded to Udo and then addressed me in Spanish, in a raspy voice: "You are the lady that called the station and reported the body?" I just answered, "*Si*." I was acutely aware of the fly's buzzing growing louder and more insistent.

"*¿Y esto qué, es esto?*" He frowned at the cup.

All I'd thought about earlier, once I'd understood that Esmeralda was dead—and had been for some time—was how to trap the fly crawling on the knife sticking out from her back. The weapon was at an oblique angle, leaving the wound exposed under the tear in her blood stained T-shirt, and not entirely plugged by the hilt. It was this small opening that had attracted the fly. When I caught her, she'd been leisurely examining the wound's perimeter, using her feet to measure the optimum depth and moisture zone in which to deposit her eggs.

I didn't mean to disturb the crime scene, but I don't think it looked that way to the Inspector. I guess in the excitement of the moment, it had escaped my mind that all that garbage could contain evidence. That something tossed in there might link someone to the body sprawled just above the high-water line, where the last tide had left an assorted collection of mostly unnatural gifts from the sea.

*“Por favor perdona mi error.”*

I confessed to him that I’d taken the soda cup from the trash can, pried off the plastic lid, shaken out the remaining drops of liquid, discarded the straw, and then held the cup upside down above the wound. I explained how I maneuvered it to startle the fly into flying up into the interior of the cup while I slid on the lid from below, without grazing the rim of the wound or disturbing the knife. This would have been difficult for the average person, but since my area of expertise is necrophagous scavengers, I’d practiced this countless times on pigs, chickens, and other dead mammals, using specimen vials with much narrower openings than the cup, when it wasn’t possible or desirable to use a net.

I told the Chief Inspector I was shocked at the sight of Esmeralda’s body, and that my thoughts immediately went to her mother, Constanze Therese and Esmeralda’s sweet eleven-year-old daughter, Serenella, who now would have neither father nor mother, as Esmeralda was a single parent. What I didn’t add was that, although I was feeling these sympathetic emotions, a part of my mind was working on the significance of that fly and its mission.

Maybe it was that my Mexican Spanish was not so lovely to Ballero’s ears, or that this was his first murder investigation in over a decade on La Sirena, the smallest Canary Island, a few miles offshore of Western Sahara, but he seemed wary of my account of how I found the corpse. Of course, I knew the fact that I was an American and a *doctora*—a Ph.D in Zoology, not a medical doctor—insulated me somewhat from serious heat. Nevertheless, this paunchy head of local law enforcement was not very happy with me.

He asked twice how I could have recognized from such a distance that it was Esmeralda lying on the beach, when the balcony of our apartment was three stories above the ground, and over forty meters from the black volcanic sand.

I told him that at first she’d simply looked like someone sleeping off a party from the night before, face down, arms overhead. Yet something told me that Esmeralda, my landlady’s daughter and the owner of the town’s disco, was not just stone drunk and passed out. Something told me even at that distance that she was, well, stone dead.

I explained to Ballero that I’d been trained in the subtle nuances of form, line, and proportion in anatomy, and that I have spent years learning to observe fine details in the structures of insects—

mainly flies and beetles—to be able to recognize the differences between species. I find that I can apply these skills to people as well. When talking with someone, my eye is always roving across their composite parts, analyzing the mathematical relationships which make that particular individual exactly who they are.

In many ways, Esmeralda appeared similar to other local young women. Her hair was dark and curly, tipped with gold streaks and tied back with a hair stretchy at the base of her neck. She was wearing a denim mini-skirt and a pale blue Adidas T-shirt. From the balcony her face wasn't visible, but I knew the body on the beach was Esmeralda because of the length of her legs and arms, and how they were just slightly longer than the stockiness of her torso and the ample width of her hips would imply.

“*Entonces, Señorita,*” Ballero addressed me, as he lit his second cigarette and stared intently. “Explain to me exactly what you were doing with that fly.”

“Well,” I answered slowly, calculating just how specific my explanation of forensic entomology should be. From his initial reaction, I could see that this subject was clearly news to Ballero—which was understandable. A colony of flies, beetles, moths, and tiny parasitic wasps moving to and from a decomposing corpse is a carefully orchestrated *pas-de-deux* between chemistry and time. Each new step is cued by temperature changes and subsequent volatile odors. Before television crime lab shows became so popular, not many homicide police had ever heard of, let alone used, this method of resolving an enigmatic death. I knew for a fact that only a few entomologists on mainland Spain were in this line of research.

Though I'm not a medico-legal practitioner, my area of research is directly related. My best friend, Amy Gardiner, became the first forensic entomologist on the homicide squad of the San Jose Police Department. In graduate school, we had spent many hours together collecting from experimental animal corpses planted in the different ecological environments where police records revealed most murder victims were found outdoors in our region of the state.

During those three years we practically lived in our lab on Subway sandwiches, Diet Cokes, and Reese's Peanut Butter Cups, while we curated and identified thousands of flies.

I revised a genus in the family of an aquatic fly, notably found on 'floaters'—bodies retrieved from water. Amy's project established an electronic data bank of our local species and all relevant ecological data, now used by both FBI and state law enforcement in northern and central California.

I was an expert of sorts in the academic field, but I didn't want to alienate Ballero and ruin my chances of possibly helping to solve Esmeralda's murder. So how I presented myself as well as my credentials was very important.

"First of all, let me apologize for the a..." I hesitated searching for the right word, "... *unauthorized* capture of this fly, but it is almost second nature for me, as this is my line of work, *Señor* Ballero. As you know, a dead body becomes a source of food for many insects after a certain number of hours pass."

Ballero nodded his head as if it were very heavy.

"The body temperature must drop and the decay process progress before a fly will become attracted to it. Normally, this type of fly..." I tapped the paper cup for emphasis, "... will be the first to arrive. She'll want to lay her eggs in the moist areas to prevent their desiccation—the mouth, the eyes, the nasal and genital cavities—but an open wound is more enticing to her. She'll walk in the wound..." I demonstrated with two fingers moving across my bare knee, "and she will determine with her feet the best place for her children to develop."

For a moment, I was uncomfortably aware that my mimicry of the fly's dance had drawn both men's attention to my bare legs. I hurried on. "I don't know if this fly deposited her eggs. Sometimes the body has decomposed just long enough to attract her, but not enough to induce her to release her eggs. I can later dissect her abdomen to see," I hesitated again, "and with permission, examine the wound."

There was no immediate response from Ballero, so I continued my explanation, trying not to sound like a National Geographic special, but at the same time getting my main points across.

"Depending on the ambient temperature and climatic conditions of the environment where the body has been situated, and also on the local species that are prevalent during that season, a person trained in their biological requirements can understand pretty clearly the probabilities of what could or could not have occurred."

The Chief Inspector now looked more interested.

Udo wrinkled his forehead in concentration, as he could only catch parts of what I was saying in Spanish.

“Time of death, of course, is most important in a murder investigation, but location of the murder, in some circumstances, can be determined as well. For instance, I cannot say for sure at this moment, as I haven’t had a chance to examine Esmeralda’s body thoroughly, but I already expect there is a good probability that she was not killed here on the beach or in her nightclub, as someone would like you to believe.”

Ballero was now looking at me with increasing curiosity. I was waiting for him to ask me why, but he surprised me by asking something all together different.

“*Dime, Señorita*, you come from *where* in America?”

“I come from California, but I now live in Germany, in Berlin. I am working at the Museum of Natural History in a post-doc position.”

“Your Spanish...”

“My mother was Mexican; I grew up bilingual. Now, I’m trying to learn this awful German language,” I said smiling and gesturing towards Udo. I was deliberately trying to get on Ballero’s good side with a little German-bashing. I figured Udo was used to it, if he even understood.

“And your name?”

“Dr. Epiphany Jerome.” I held out my hand as though we were being formally introduced. He took it politely.