



## TLC SHOWCASE

LYNNE MARIE TAYLOR

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## Introduction to *Death in Valletta* by Lynne Marie Taylor

Death in Valletta is a murder mystery set in the Victorian era, featuring Edinburgh police detective Sam McQueen.

It is the summer of 1880, and Detective Inspector Sam McQueen has been called away from the grey, damp streets of Edinburgh to investigate a case on the oppressively hot Mediterranean island of Malta. The local police chief is distinctly unwelcoming toward the interloper—but has no choice in the matter since Admiral Collingwood’s wealthy widow insists that her husband’s fatal fall from the roof of their villa was no accident.

Fortunately, McQueen gets help from a police physician and the resourceful daughter of a newspaper editor — support he will need as he tangles with local aristocrats, unearths secrets and conspiracies, and is faced with more suspicious deaths that may or may not be connected to the late admiral . . .

*Death in Valletta* grew out of my love for crime fiction and fascination with the Victorian detective. It is set in Malta, the island where I was born. Researching the book was a real joy, finding out about the rich history of this tiny Mediterranean island.

I started the novel as part of my MA in Creative Writing at Bath Spa University. Following graduation, I completed the manuscript and sent it out to prospective agents, without success. I kept working on the manuscript and submitted it for a manuscript report from The Literary Consultancy. I knew about TLC from my day job at Arts Council England, and from having worked with The Reading Agency at Free Word, in the same building as TLC.

My manuscript report from Associate Editor Tom Witcomb was a real turning point for me. He wrote: ‘Death in Valletta is an accomplished historical crime fiction with an original setting which acts as the perfect draw for readers.’ Tom’s enthusiasm for the story gave me faith to carry on.

He also offered excellent advice on areas for improvement, giving me a good focus for the next draft. In addition, I paid for the submission report from TLC, which encouraged me to tighten up the first chapters.

*Death in Valletta* was published by Bloodhound Books in April 2024. There is also an audio book, brilliantly narrated by actor David Monteath.

I have been delighted with the response to *Death in Valletta* from readers, including a 5-star review from Vaseem Khan, author of the Malabar House series and Chair of the Crime Writers' Association, who called it 'an excellent historical crime novel.'

I am currently working on the next Inspector Sam McQueen novel in the series.

## Extract from *Death in Valetta*

### Chapter One

Valletta, Malta. Monday, 5 July 1880

‘The admiral’s body is this way, Doctor.’

Dr Vittorio Bonnici tried to keep pace with young Sergeant Galea, using his cane to help negotiate the dark path through the renowned gardens of Villa Porto. It was close to midnight. The skies were clear, with just a faint light from the pared slice of a new moon. Stone statues loomed up at regular intervals, silently observing their progress. Tall palm trees in raised flower beds appeared aloof, turning away from the night-time intrusion. The cool air throbbed with the chirr of tree crickets.

‘Do we know what happened?’ he asked, as they approached the back of the villa.

‘Only that the admiral fell from the roof terrace. He had gone up to smoke his cigar.’

Villa Porto was an elegant neoclassical building, three storeys high, built around the turn of the century. Lights glowed through the windows on the first floor, revealing faint silhouettes of people inside. The accident had caused an abrupt end to a select gathering – a *soirée*. As he drew near the terrace, Bonnici could just about make out two men, deep in murmured conversation. He gripped the handle of his medical bag tightly. This was the most important task he had ever faced as police physician. Admiral Lord Collingwood, former Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, lay dead and he had been called to determine the cause.

As he approached, the shadowy figures broke apart, revealing themselves to be Captain Borg, superintendent of the Maltese Police, and Lieutenant Carstairs, aide-de-camp to the governor. Captain Borg’s black eyes glowered from under his heavy brows.

‘Ah, Dr Bonnici, at last,’ he said. ‘We have been waiting for you. Where have you been?’

‘I got here as swiftly as I could,’ Bonnici replied. ‘I had work to do, at the hospital.’

‘You should have been here sooner.’

As usual, his tone grated. Bonnici was the most qualified police physician in Malta,

but Borg refused to acknowledge his abilities. Perhaps it was the privilege associated with the Bonnici family name. Or perhaps it was the weakness in his left leg, which caused him to walk with a limp. Whatever the reason, Borg regarded him with sneering disdain. However, Bonnici knew better than to rise to the bait – he would let the excellence of his work speak for him instead.

‘Good to see you, Doctor.’ Carstairs stepped forward to shake his hand; a smart young man, he was always ready to smooth the waters. ‘It’s a terrible situation. Sir Thomas is deeply concerned.’

Bonnici could imagine the consternation with which the governor had received the news. Admiral Lord Collingwood was highly regarded in Malta, much decorated for his role in the Crimean War. The death of such a distinguished resident would cause ripples through the tight-knit community.

He put down his medical bag and approached the body, which lay close to where the men were standing. Three police-issue lanterns had been set nearby, flickering in the slight breeze. They revealed a sight more disturbing than Bonnici had expected. He knew Lord Collingwood by sight: a man who exuded authority; tall, spare and vigorous. Now the admiral lay broken on the stone ground, his left arm pinned underneath him, his right arm reaching forwards as if for support. His neck was bent back at a sickeningly unnatural angle, his eyes wide open and his mouth darkly ajar, as if registering the horror of his last moments. Sticky black blood pooled around him. It was still spreading, millimetre by millimetre, towards the edge of the terrace.

Bonnici took a moment to detach himself and focus on the task ahead of him. Calmly, he knelt down to feel for a pulse. There was none. The admiral’s body was cool to the touch, his skin a bluish-grey, lifeless and eerie in the wavering light.

He called to Galea to bring the lamp closer. The young man sprang forward, lifting the lantern above the body with intense concentration.

Bonnici began a close examination of the body. The back of the admiral’s head appeared to be the source of the haemorrhage, the grey hair matted with thick blood. Carefully, he inspected the wound under the hair, feeling for signs of fracture. He found that the occipital bone at the back of the head had been crushed, broken pieces depressed into the brain cavity.

‘Skull fractured on impact,’ he commented.

He turned Collingwood's face further towards the ground, noticing slight red mottling at the top of the neck.

'Did you note this, Superintendent?' he asked. 'It could be bruising.'

Borg grunted in response, but made no move to view the corpse more closely.

Bonnici felt gently along the limbs, identifying fractures in the collarbone, humerus, hip bone and femur, all of which were on the left side of the body, indicating how it had landed. He looked up at the roof terrace, at least thirty feet high. It would have taken less than two seconds to reach the ground. *Death must have been virtually instantaneous.*

He stood up and pulled out his pocket watch. 'Death confirmed at eleven forty-seven. Cause of death appears to be a fractured skull, with multiple injuries sustained by the fall.'

## About the Writer

Lynne Marie Taylor studied English at the University of York. She also has an MA in Creative Writing from Bath Spa University.

Born in Malta, she has lived in NW London, Cologne, Bristol and Worcester.

Her debut crime novel *Death in Valletta* is set in Malta in 1880 and features Detective Inspector Sam McQueen from the Edinburgh Police.

Vaseem Khan, Chair of the Crime Writers' Association, gave it a five-star review, calling it 'A well written and absorbing historical mystery'.

A long-time crime fiction enthusiast, Lynne is proud to be a member of the Crime Writers' Association.

She lives in Corsham, Wiltshire, UK with her husband and their springer spaniel, Sam.

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