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The Abduction

Written by Jonathan Holt

Published by Head of Zeus

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THE ABDUCTION

JONATHAN HOLT



First published in the UK in 2014 by Head of Zeus, Ltd.

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9 7 5 3 1 2 4 6 8

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (HB) 978 1 78185 371 9
ISBN (E) 978 1 78185 370 2
ISBN (XTPB) 978 1 78185 372 6

Printed in Germany

Typeset by Ed Pickford

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Clerkenwell House
45-47 Clerkenwell Green
London EC1R 0HT

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PROLOGUE

IT WAS THEIR biggest night of the year, although you would have been hard pushed to find it advertised anywhere – anywhere, that is, apart from certain obscure internet bulletin boards and special-interest websites, where previous years' efforts were still talked about in the ecstatic tones usually devoted to cup finals or rock festivals. It certainly wasn't listed in the official programme of Venice's annual Carnevale, although it was inextricably linked to that event in spirit as well as timing. Many of the attendees had flown in specially; for them, this night was as close to the official celebrations as they would come.

At midnight, the club's two thousand square feet of interlinked dance floors – and, even more importantly, the warren of dimly lit rooms that lay behind them – were almost deserted. But by half past, the queue of people waiting to use the lockers thoughtfully provided by the management stretched out almost to the parking lot, where security personnel in tuxedos and bow ties were checking names against the list of ticket-holders. By 1 a.m., the main dance floor was full.

To anyone unfamiliar with these occasions, it made an incongruous sight. Every participant wore a carnival mask, ranging from the classic blank white Volto, topped with a tricorne hat, to more elaborate affairs modelled on the rays of

the sun, the birdlike beak of a medieval plague doctor, or the jewelled visage of an eighteenth-century courtesan. But in almost every case, these costumes ended at the shoulders. From the chest down the partygoers were dressed more conventionally; the men in smart trousers and expensive loose shirts, the women in short skirts and tops, in accordance with the club's strict dress code.

By two, the reason for this had become clear. The clothes were starting to be discarded. Women danced topless except for their masks. The men tended to keep more on – at least, until they joined the throng making their way to or from the smaller rooms. There were more bars back there, where you could strike up conversations with other couples before making your choice. But most headed directly to the playrooms, where the dim lighting was colour-coded to signify when a particular room was dedicated to a particular pleasure. In some, knots of bodies joined and re-joined, their masks still in place. In others, the masks themselves were an impediment to the enjoyments being sought, and were discarded.

In every playroom discreet stacks of towels, and bowls of flavoured condoms and mints, fulfilled the promise on the club's website to provide an impeccable standard of hygiene as well as the best music, lighting and atmosphere in Europe.

The slim female figure wearing a gold Columbina mask with grey feathers paused at the entrance of one of the playrooms. Inside, half a dozen couples were making love, the whole scene illuminated only by the jerky flashes of a strobe. Behind the feathered mask, her eyes were wide as she took it all in.

A voice in her ear said, amused, "Shall we join them?"

Without turning round she said, "You can if you want. I'm just going to watch."

The man reached for the hem of her T-shirt. "Let's take this off, at least."

"No," she said, putting her hand on his to stop him. "You have fun if you want. Just not with me. That was the deal, remember?"

Slipping away without a backward glance, she made her way to the next room. In the lemon-coloured light, two women knelt in the middle of a small circle of masked male figures. The girl watched for a while, then moved on.

Another room was completely dark: a notice by the door invited those who entered to take off their clothes and use their sense of touch. Almost regretfully, she turned away. In a small bar she stopped to look at a long-legged blonde who was lying on her back across a low table, a man at either end. Several couples stood around, drinks in hand, watching.

"Hey, beautiful." A man with a thick body-builder's torso, improbably tanned for the time of year, spoke to her in guttural English. "My wife thinks you're hot."

Shaking her head with a quick, regretful smile, she headed back to the dance floor. There was a platform at one end where two professional dancers, one male and one female, performed non-stop, their bodies gleaming with oil and sweat. The male dancer's chest was thin as a rock star's, but rippled with muscle. She watched him for a while, copying his movements, abandoning herself to the pulsing beat.

"Hiya." A masked girl a few years older than her smiled a greeting over the music. "Having a good time?"

"The best."

The girl leaned in closer. "You need anything sorted? Pills, coke, cheap cigarettes…"

"Uh… Maybe some cigarettes."

"Talk to him." The girl pointed to where a young man with

striking blond dreadlocks and a Trifaccia mask stood slightly apart. "Whatever you need. He's cool."

Nodding her thanks, the girl in the feathered Columbina made her way over to the young man. "Hey," she said casually.

Looking round quickly, he pushed open a fire door and motioned for her to step outside. She did so, shivering as the cold, foggy air hit her. "I hear," she began, but the words were hardly out of her mouth before she felt strong arms pinning her from behind. The Carnevale mask was plucked from her face, and some kind of bag made of heavy cloth dropped over her head in its place. More hands fastened round her calves, the two-man team lifting her as effortlessly as if she were a shop mannequin being moved to a different window. She felt herself propelled forwards, then lowered onto a hard surface that gave beneath her assailants' weight as they clambered in after her, rapidly securing her legs and arms with what felt like plastic strips. *I'm in a van*, she thought. *They've put me in a van. It must be the police.* Then, moments later, came the realisation that the Italian police would never hood her like this. "Dad?" she said hesitantly, just before a thick strip of tape was wound round her mouth, hood and all, muffling even the scream that belatedly escaped her. Terror and panic flooded her limbs, but though she bucked and jerked frantically, like a landed fish, she was too tightly secured to free herself.

She heard doors slam, felt the van move off. The whole thing had taken less than thirty seconds.

A hand held her down, and a male voice spoke close to her ear, crooning some words in Italian before switching to heavily accented English.

"Stay still, Mia. Stay still and I promise you'll be all right."

He knows my name, she thought, and the realisation was even more terrifying than anything else that had happened so

far. She felt her bowels clench and unclench, and struggled without success to keep control of her bladder. Then a sweet-smelling liquid soaked the hood around her nose, and the darkness came racing towards her.

DAY ONE

ONE

COLONEL ALDO PIOLA of the Venice Carabinieri woke with a start, unable at first to remember where he was. Nearby in the darkness a white screen flashed, and a tinny speaker played a pop song. He recognised the tune as one his nine-year-old son had been listening to recently, by the American singer Pink, and felt a twinge of annoyance. Claudio must have changed his ringtone as a joke, or – more likely, he thought, his irritation replaced by a sudden surge of tenderness and guilt – in the hope of getting his father's attention at work.

There was no light by the sofa, so he answered by feel. "*Pronto?*"

"Colonel, it's Saito. Apologies for waking you at this unfortunate hour."

Piola had no idea what the hour was, but if something was serious enough to require a call from his *generale di brigata*, the time was hardly relevant. So he said only, "No problem."

"We've been asked to oversee an investigation at Vicenza. Some human remains have been found at that new American military base they're building."

Piola noted the curious use of "human remains" instead of "body". "Who found them?"

"A local boy, engaged in some kind of protest. Hence the ungodly hour. Unfortunately there's no one of your rank available over there – Serti's on a training course, and Lombardo's assigned elsewhere." General Saito hesitated. "There's a sense it should be someone senior, so that it's clear we're taking it seriously."

Ah: so it was a matter of politics. If it involved the US Military, perhaps that was no surprise. "Speaking of commitments, you're probably aware there are some administrative matters taking up my own time just now." Piola crossed to the door and flicked on the light switch as he spoke. The sofa, covered with one of his son's cast-off AC Milan duvets, sprang into view, along with the alarm clock balanced on one of the arms. It was 4.32 a.m. He reached for his trousers, the phone still clamped between his shoulder and ear.

"Indeed. To be frank, Aldo, that's why I thought of you. A quick and professional investigation, tactfully handled by an experienced officer, is all that's required here. It shouldn't be too time-consuming. And it won't hurt with Internal Affairs to have the Americans putting in a good word."

"I understand. Thank you." Through the open door Piola caught a movement across the corridor, a nightgown ducking back behind a doorframe. It was Gilda, his wife, trying to overhear. "Sir," he added, to make it clear that it was work. The nightgown disappeared.

"Thanks. A car's on its way. Keep me informed, won't you?"

By the time Piola had rung off, his wife had gone back to bed, her door shut against him. He knocked softly. "I have to go out," he said through the wood. "I'll see you tonight, shall I?"

There was no reply.

*

So that he wouldn't disturb his family any more than he had to, he went and waited in the street, hoping the driver would have the sense not to use his siren. The *caìgo*, the fog which blanketed Venice and the surrounding Veneto region most nights at this time of year, was especially thick tonight. It had drifted into Venice the day before from the direction of the sea, slipping up the canals and their smaller brethren, the *rii*; sliding over pavements and door sills into cloisters and courtyards, so that what had started around 4 p.m. as nothing more than a faint opacity in the air turned, as dusk fell, into a dense, other-worldly miasma that muffled church bells and gave every streetlamp a hazy aura, like a dandelion-clock. It brought with it a salty, numbing cold, the cold of the lagoon and the Adriatic, and Piola kept his jacket well zipped up. Normally he wore plain clothes for investigations, but since this one involved the US Armed Forces he'd opted for the working Carabinieri uniform of dark, pleated trousers, well-polished black shoes and dark blue windcheater. The lapels of the windcheater bore three silver stars above a three-turreted castle. Not that the Americans would be impressed by his rank, but it would do no harm to remind them that the Carabinieri, like themselves, were a military organisation. He placed his colonel's hat under his arm, making a mental note not to forget it when he put it down, as he usually did.

He was in luck: the car had its blue light on but no siren. The driver, Adelmio, had even thought to bring coffee. Tipping the contents of the tiny carton down his throat, Piola was also pleased to discover that it was laced with a generous *corretto* of grappa.

"Who's there so far?" he asked as they drove.

"Dottore Hapadi, sir. He was the one on call. And a few of our lot – I think they're the local boys."

"Know anything about it?"

Adelmio shrugged. "Not much. A skeleton, I heard. But it was on the construction site, and it was protestors who found it, so…"

Piola nodded his understanding. The new American base being built at the disused Dal Molin airfield, just a few miles from the existing garrison at Caserma Ederle, was one of the biggest building projects in northern Italy, matched only by the flood barriers in the Venetian lagoon. Both projects were controversial, but in the case of Dal Molin the controversy had quickly turned to something more.

Many local people had already been uneasy about the number of US Military installations ringing their city, from underground missile silos to vehicle compounds. Others had been riled by the way the Americans appeared to have been able to bypass the usual planning procedures, their very presence sanctioned by secret agreements dating back to the Second World War. In 2007, a hundred and fifty thousand people had joined hands around the centre of Vicenza – a UNESCO World Heritage site – symbolically forming a wall around their city to show that it would be defended. A proposed referendum on the new base had been mysteriously cancelled at the last minute by the courts; undeterred, the Vicentini vowed to go on protesting, even establishing a permanent "peace camp" adjacent to the construction site. It seemed to make no difference whatsoever to the work, which according to the local papers was due to be completed in record time. But Piola had no doubt that a Carabinieri investigation would be seen as a significant event by both sides.

If it *was* a skeleton – which would certainly explain Saito's

reference to "human remains" – it might of course be an ancient one, in which case no criminal investigation would be required. Such skeletons turned up quite often during construction work in the Veneto, which was densely populated even before the time of the Roman Empire. But Piola also knew that a body buried in the region's damp soil could be reduced to bare bones in months, and building sites had long been favoured by the Mafia as a convenient place to get rid of their victims. It was best to make no assumptions.

The drive took about forty minutes. They left the deserted A4 *autostrada* by the Vicenza Ovest exit, then sped up Viale del Sole.

The fog had thinned a little as they came inland, so Piola was able to get some glimpses of the old airfield as they approached. The perimeter had mostly been boarded off, providing an irresistible temptation for fly-posters and graffitists. Slogans denouncing the Americans – "*Vicenza Libera!*" "*No Dal Molin!*" "*Fuori Dalle Balle!*" – were in turn partially covered by banners depicting smiling men in crisp black suits. There were elections coming up for the regional parliament, and these gameshow-host faces were the candidates. But access gates and stretches of chain link also allowed a glimpse of what lay within. Jagged spills of mud, like frozen waves, were proof of the pace of construction, as were the clusters of metal cranes that climbed into the fog like fairytale beanstalks. What caught the eye most, however, were the great corkscrews of coloured smoke – green, white and red – that fizzed up into the night sky, turning the fog itself into a giant, glowing Italian flag.

"I heard the protestors let off flares," Adelmio said. He pointed to a blue pulse over in the distance. "That'll be us."

Sure enough, by a gap in the boarding marked "Gate G" they found two parked Carabinieri vehicles, one with its light still flashing. A uniformed *appuntato* saluted Piola as he got out of the car, but it was a man in American grey-green combat fatigues who hurried forward, greeting him in passable Italian.

"Colonel Piola? Sergeant Pownall, Military Police. I'll be escorting you to the scene. If you wouldn't mind putting these on." He handed Piola a fluorescent jacket, a hard hat, and a laminated card on a ribbon. On it were the words "VISITOR – TEMPORARY PASS". Piola put it all on without comment, then followed the man to a waiting Jeep.

When they were under way, bumping and sliding over the rough ground, the sergeant spoke again. "Nothing's been moved or disturbed. Your medical people got here around an hour ago."

"When were the remains discovered?"

"Approximately two-thirty. We had a security ingress – protestors cut through the padlocks and forced open a gate. The gates are alarmed, and our cameras have night-vision capability, so we were well prepared for them. They let off these flares you can see, sprayed some graffiti, then split up. Two chained themselves to cranes – those are my biggest headache; we'll have to call in abseilers to cut them loose. My men followed another to a 319D – that is, one of the big excavator trucks. By the time they caught up with him, he was on his phone to the police, saying he'd seen a skeleton in the tipper. One of them went to check, and it turned out he was right. At least, there *was* a skeleton."

Piola noted the implication. "You don't believe the rest of his account?"

"Well, sir, I don't want to pre-empt your investigation. But on the cameras, we could make out that he was carrying a

large holdall when he broke in. It seems possible he brought the skeleton with him, threw it in the truck himself, and then reported it, in the hope of holding up construction." Pownall glanced across at Piola. "No offence, Colonel, but Italian bureaucracy can be notoriously slow, and it wouldn't be the first time the antis have tried to get us tangled up in red tape. That's why we made sure we got the Carabinieri, rather than the State Police, to run this investigation. You people get that this is a military schedule we're dealing with."

Piola chose not to respond directly to that. "Have the protestors broken in before?"

"Negative – this would be the first time since Transformation began."

"*Trasformazione?*" Piola echoed.

Pownall shrugged. "That's what the consortium call it. I guess you'll see why. It's rather more than your typical building project."

In fact, Piola could still see very little. Tattered fronds of fog greyed the Jeep's headlights as they drove. He thought he glimpsed some earthmovers to their left, through a gap in the fog, but appearances were deceptive: it was at least another minute before the Jeep drew up beside them.

As he followed Sergeant Pownall towards the vehicles, stepping gingerly through the mud in an effort to preserve his shoes, he realised why he'd been confused about the distance. The machines were vast – at least twice normal size, the tyres alone the height of a man. On the door of the nearest one, some graffiti had been sprayed – a round circle with an A in it, like the anarchy symbol, except that there were also a smaller D and M nestled between the A's feet. The graffiti was very recent, the black paint still running in the moisture-laden air.

The truck was so big that to see into the tipper he had to

climb a ladder that was placed next to it. Peering over the edge, he saw two white-suited figures crouched amongst a heap of rubble, examining some bones by the glare of a portable arc light. Piola made out a skull, brown with age, and below it the hoops of a ribcage. Nearby, but separate, was a leg, still attached to a foot.

"Good morning, Dottori," he greeted them. One of the figures looked up.

"Ah, Colonel. I was beginning to think we wouldn't see you before breakfast." Hapadi's voice was muffled by his mask.

"I'm not sure why I'm here at all," Piola said. "As opposed to someone more local, I mean. What can you tell me?"

The forensic examiner pulled down his mask and stood, stretching to ease the stiffness in his back. "I'd say it's a man, from the size of the pelvis. DNA will confirm it – we'll have to use mitochondrial, there isn't enough adipose for a conventional assay."

Piola nodded, although he barely understood these technical details. "Any idea when it dates from?"

They both knew this was the crucial question, and Hapadi's voice when he answered was cautious. "Well, I doubt it's pre-medieval. But neither is it fresh – the discoloration's too evenly spread for that. There are some fragments of fibre that might help, probably from a khaki jacket, and he has an interesting distortion of the left wrist that could indicate pre-vaccination poliomyelitis – he'd have had a distinctive withered left hand, by the way. To be honest, dating skeletons is specialist work. I'll have to find someone who's more familiar with the tests than I am."

"Any thoughts on how it got here?"

"It looks as if it was tossed in by someone on the ground – the bones are clearly positioned on top of the spoil, not

amongst it. The force of the impact is what caused the femur and pelvis to separate, I imagine."

"So it could have been thrown in only a couple of hours ago?"

"Possibly. I'm aware that's what's being hypothesised." Piola caught the wariness in the doctor's voice. "But you should be able to prove or disprove it easily enough."

"How, Dottore?"

Hapadi crouched down again. "See here, how earth has filled the pelvic cavity? If it was carried here, some would have fallen out along the way. Your skeleton will have left a trail of crumbs, Colonel. Like Hansel and Gretel."

"Thank you, Dottore. That's very useful."

As Piola started back down the ladder, Hapadi added, "You didn't ask about cause of death."

Piola stopped. "That's because I didn't think you'd be able to tell me."

"Normally, perhaps. But when it's like this it's not difficult." The doctor lifted the skull in white-gloved hands, rotating it so that Piola could see the neat circle just behind where the left ear would have been. "That's how I know it isn't medieval, Colonel. They didn't make holes like this before they had bullets."

TWO

MIA WOKE UP in a warm, comfortable haze that receded abruptly as the memory of what had happened came flooding back. It had been this way for a while now – sleeping from the drugs they'd given her; waking, her panic momentarily surfacing through the fog in her brain, then drifting back into oblivion again. How long exactly, she had no idea.

She vaguely remembered the motion of the van, and sensing when it pulled off a smooth, fast road on to bumpier, more rural ones. From the way her body had rolled from side to side, she'd guessed they must be climbing up into the hills. Eventually they'd turned onto what felt like a farm track, crawling over potholes.

She'd drifted off again, waking only when the van finally stopped. Doors banged, and cold air rushed in around her feet. A male voice spoke, the Italian dialect too thick and fast for her to make out the words.

A second man, close to her head, answered – he must have been in the back with her the whole time. Hands lifted her, the two men sliding her out and carrying her between them. There was some quiet conversation – "*Lentamente*", "*Attenzione alla porta*" – as if they were simply moving furniture or a piece of rolled carpet. Then she was somewhere that felt both small and echoey. The men's boots scuffed on a rough floor as she was lowered onto a mattress.

A sharp sting in her wrist had brought back the panic, only for sleep to claim her once more.

When she woke, it was to discover that the hood had been replaced with goggles – large ones, like skiing goggles, but with the lenses blacked out. She tested her hands. Handcuffed. Bile rose into her mouth.

"Looks like you're awake, princess," a voice said in heavily accented English.

A hand clamped around her wrist – not roughly, but resting there. She flinched at the touch, as light as a caress, but he was simply taking her pulse.

"OK," the same voice said at last. "*Cominciamo*."

She didn't speak much Italian, but she understood that, and her body stiffened in terror.

Let's begin.

THREE

AS HE CLIMBED back down the ladder Piola caught the sound of raised voices. Looking over his shoulder, he saw four people standing under the arc lights. One was a young Carabinieri lieutenant who Piola didn't know. He was flanked by Sergeant Pownall and a big, thickset man wearing a bulging business suit, incongruously topped with a high-visibility jacket and a hard hat several sizes too small. The fourth was a woman.

"… which is why I need to examine the remains *in situ*," she was saying forcibly. "There are clear procedures for moving bones, and the most important one is this: don't move anything at all until it's been sifted and mapped."

"Well, it's in the hands of the Italian police now," the big man said.

"Or rather, the Carabinieri," Piola agreed, joining them. "Good morning. I'm Colonel Piola."

The big man stepped forward, effectively using his bulk to mask the woman, and thrust out a meaty hand. "Sergio Sagese, Transformation Director." Although his Italian was fluent, there was a twang that told Piola he was more used to speaking American. "Do you have what you need? We want to facilitate a speedy resolution for you people any way we can."

"Thank you." Piola looked around Sagese's shoulder to the woman, who now appeared even more furious. "And you are?"

"Dottora Ester Iadanza, forensic archaeologist." Piola noticed her unusual use of the female "-a" ending, as opposed to the more usual "Dottoressa". Some feminists, he had heard, had started avoiding the latter, which had traditionally been used to denote any woman with a university degree, or even a doctor's wife. "I'm attached to this construction project," she added. "Supposedly."

"Only for the preparatory stages," Sagese interjected. "And as it turned out, your involvement was never actually required."

Dr Iadanza spoke directly to Piola. "It was a condition of work going ahead that my team be given access. Not surprisingly, having been given not a shred of cooperation, we've found very little."

"Did you think you might?" Piola asked, curious. "I hadn't realised this area was of particular significance."

"Archaeology doesn't just mean ancient history, Colonel. This airfield was used by both the Italian and German air forces in the Second World War. Anything relating to that might be of great interest to a historian."

"And what is it – exactly – that you want, Dottora?"

"I want to examine the remains, and sift the soil they were found with, metre by cubic metre," she said promptly. "And if there's any evidence that they actually came from a different part of the site, I want to do the same in that location too."

"Surely there's no suggestion—" Sagese began, but Piola cut him off.

"Speak to Dr Hapadi, Dottora. He's already expressed a desire to work with a specialist on this. If he has no objection, neither do I."

"Thank you. I'll get suited up." She turned and headed off into the mist.

Sagese cleared his throat, although the sound that came

from his thick neck sounded more like a growl. "This won't affect construction, Colonel, will it?"

"In what respect?" Piola said.

Sagese jerked out his elbow to inspect the watch strapped to his massive wrist. "In exactly seventy-five minutes, our next shift comes on site. I just want to be certain there'll be no obstacles to them doing a proper day's work." He gave the word "obstacles" a disdainful sneer.

Clearly, Piola thought, any Carabinieri investigation of more than a few minutes would represent just such an impediment in Sagese's eyes. "It will be necessary to stand them down, for the time being," he said politely. "I'll let you know how soon you can expect to resume work when I have a better idea myself."

Sagese shook his head in exasperation. "Let me just explain what we're dealing with here, Colonel. This project involves the construction of over four hundred buildings across a site of one hundred and thirty acres. Structures on the east side are being completed even as groundworks are initiated here in the west. And each day my workers stand idle costs half a million dollars in overheads and penalty clauses – not least to the Italian government, who are co-financiers of the project and receive regular updates at the *very highest level*. Halting work is simply not an option."

Piola felt a flash of irritation at the man's tone, although he tried hard not to let it show. "We'll be as quick as we can."

"What the hell does that mean? An hour? A morning? A *day*?" Sagese demanded, pulling out his phone as threateningly as another man might pull out a knife.

"It's much too early to say. In the meantime, I'd like you, and all your people, to clear this area. Whoever threw that skeleton in the tipper may have left evidence on the ground, and we're trampling it."

As Sagese stamped off, already punching in numbers, Piola turned to the *carabiniere*, who had so far said nothing. "What's your name, Sottotenente?"

"Panicucci, sir."

"Do you know how to establish an investigative perimeter, Panicucci?"

"Yes, sir."

"Then please do so. One-hundred-metre tapes in every direction, with a single entry and exit point. Carabinieri guards front and rear. Every authorised visitor to be logged in and out, and make sure they wear microfibre overalls. Those remains may or may not be recent, but they didn't climb inside that tipper by themselves. And now," he said, turning back to Pownall, "I'd like to speak to the protestor who called this in."

The site guardhouse was like every guardhouse Piola had ever been in – too warm, and smelling of microwaved food. But the interview room where the protestor was being held was well equipped, with a table and chairs bolted to the floor, heavy-duty bars on the window, and a CCTV camera mounted behind a protective grille. Clearly, the US Military Police didn't do things by halves.

"Bring me his bag," Piola instructed. "And anything else he had with him."

The American guard hesitated, then, as Piola had intended, left Piola and the protestor alone.

"Luca Marchesin?" The young man with the straggly goatee sitting across the table nodded. "I'll need to see your ID."

He wrote down the details in his notebook. The date of birth was ridiculously recent – only nine years before his own son's. "Tell me what happened here, Luca."

Luca shrugged, affecting a bravado that Piola suspected he

no longer felt after several hours of being incarcerated by men in American uniform. "Five of us broke in just after two a.m. We all had different tasks – mine was to get right to the centre of the site, to leave a sign we'd been there. I had to move fast – the MPs were after us within seconds. I found a big excavator truck, so I climbed up the steps to spray the door. And that's when I saw it."

"Saw what?"

"A skeleton, lying right there in the tipper. So I called 112."

"You didn't touch the remains, or disturb them in any way?"

It was important to establish whether Luca was admitting any forensic contact with the bones. But the boy was shaking his head emphatically. "I never went near them. Check the film from my GoPro if you like."

The soldier had returned with a black holdall and a tray containing the boy's things: a watch, an iPhone and a small video camera on an elastic strap, like the ones worn by snowboarders. Piola picked the camera up. It was completely wrecked, the housing almost in two pieces and the innards spilling out.

"Your camera seems to be broken," Piola said neutrally.

Luca gave a hollow laugh. "So it is."

Piola unzipped the holdall. Inside were four aerosol cans, but otherwise it was empty. It was also perfectly clean, with no crumbs of earth like the ones Hapadi had said would fall out of the skeleton when it was moved.

"That graffiti you were spraying. 'ADM' – what's that all about?" he asked, turning the lining inside out to check.

"Azione Dal Molin." Luca looked defiant. "Our new group. The only thing the Americans understand is direct action. So that's what we're going to do."

"'Direct action'? Trespass and sabotage, you mean? What's wrong with legal forms of protest?"

Luca snorted. "Marches, petitions, protests – we've had all that. The decision to give this land to the US was made behind closed doors, by Berlusconi and his cronies. Why should we respect the law, when our own government ignores it?"

Piola looked at the young man thoughtfully. "You're making this very difficult for me, Luca. On the one hand, you say you've done nothing wrong. On the other hand, you're telling me you broke into the site with the express intention of breaking the law."

"I told you. Check out the footage."

"And as I told *you*," Piola indicated the broken camera, "that doesn't appear to be possible."

Luca's face cracked into a smile. "That's what the people who smashed it thought. But this isn't a conventional video camera, Colonel. This part *here* connects directly to the internet, via the personal hotspot on my iPhone. As soon as I broke into the site, I was streaming the film to our group's Facebook page."

The technical details meant nothing to Piola, but he understood the gist. "Can you show me? On your phone, for example?"

"Sure." Luca entered a passcode, then placed the phone in front of Piola, turning his head sideways so he could see too. "Ninety views already. Not bad."

The footage was often blurry as Luca, unseen behind the camera, scrabbled over obstacles, but the section by the excavator was clear enough, as was the sudden force with which the boy had been wrestled to the ground. The part where a burly figure – Piola couldn't be sure, but it looked like Sergeant

Pownall – yanked the camera off Luca's head, placed it on the ground, then lifted his booted foot and stamped on it, turning the image into flickering visual porridge, was almost comic. It was, Piola guessed, the kind of thing that would go round the internet like wildfire.

"OK," he said. "Stay here. And for your own sake, try not to antagonise anyone."

He went and found Sagese and Pownall.

"Well? Did the kid confess yet?" Sagese demanded.

"I need to confirm something," Piola said. "In the meantime, can you find me whoever was driving the excavator truck yesterday? And get me his documents, along with a plan of where he was working?"

There was the briefest of pauses before Pownall said, "Of course."

"Good. I'll see you in about twenty minutes."

The peace camp was about five minutes' walk, on a piece of waste ground to the north: half a dozen old Portakabins clustered around three marquees decked with rainbow flags and "No Dal Molin" banners. Going into the largest tent, Piola found the usual detritus of a long-running protest – a makeshift stage, posters, an industrial-sized cooking pot being stirred by a brawny woman with a stud through her nose. But it was also well swept and neat, with bins marked for every imaginable kind of recycling. Tables that looked as if they'd been liberated from a school or college held laptops, printers and tangles of wiring. Despite the earliness of the hour, half a dozen people were gathered around one of the computers.

"Good morning," he said to no one in particular. Faces turned towards him warily. "I'd like to speak to whoever's in charge."

"No one's in charge." The voice belonged to a ponytailed man of about thirty with a girl sitting on his lap.

"Then I'll talk to you," Piola said. "Your name?"

The man scratched his ear, revealing a faded Betty Boop tattoo on his forearm. "First things first. Before I say anything, I need to see *your* ID, Colonel. In case you've forgotten, you work for us, not the other way round." A couple of the onlookers grinned.

Piola doubted the ponytailed man had ever contributed much by way of taxes to the running costs of the Carabinieri, but he inclined his head courteously and took out his wallet. "Certainly."

The man pushed the girl off his lap and carefully copied the details of Piola's ID into a logbook before producing his own. It showed that his name was Ettore Mazzanti, and that he was a student, aged thirty-two.

"Quite old to still be studying," Piola commented.

"I'm writing a PhD. On the erosion of civil liberties by the police."

Piola chose to ignore that. "I take it you were part of last night's protest?"

"I was."

"Would you mind telling me what it was about?"

Mazzanti reached for a folder. "Read it for yourself, Colonel. Our mission statement, timetable, a list of objectives, and statements of intent from all participants. Oh, and photographs of each of us showing that we were sound and unbruised before we went in."

Piola took the folder and looked through it. It was all just as Mazzanti described. There was even a letter from a firm of lawyers arguing that the break-in fell within the category of democratic protest on public land. "May I keep this?" he said,

impressed despite himself. To have documented their action so thoroughly wouldn't give the demonstrators immunity from prosecution, but it would certainly help if they ever found themselves in court. He couldn't remember when he'd come across a protest group as well organised as Azione Dal Molin appeared to be.

"Colonel Piola!"

Piola glanced over his shoulder. A man of about forty with a mop of curly grey hair was advancing towards him. Piola couldn't quite place him, although his manner and use of Piola's name certainly suggested they'd met.

"Raffaele Fallici, Lega della Libertà," the man added.

Piola knew where he'd seen him now. Not as an acquaintance, but on TV. Fallici was a blogger-turned-politician, a self-styled man of the people who'd come to prominence as part of Beppe Grillo's Five Star Movement. Subsequently setting up his own party, he had a reputation as a demagogue who spoke out against vested interests and corruption. On many occasions he'd also criticised the incompetence of the Carabinieri.

"I understand you're investigating the desecration that has occurred here," Fallici continued.

"I'm looking into this situation, yes," Piola said non-committally.

"Do you have enough resources? Are the authorities treating this with the seriousness it deserves? We must ensure that this unfortunate individual receives the same respect in death that any other Italian citizen would be entitled to." Fallici half-turned to the room. "To be frank, no one was surprised to discover that those responsible for Dal Molin have been treating human remains with disdain," he said in a louder voice. "They have been treating all of us, living or dead, with

indifference, ever since the people of Vicenza made clear their democratic opposition to this development."

Faces nodded, and a few fists punched the air.

"What can I do for you, Mr Fallici?" Piola asked wearily. The sofa wasn't the most comfortable of beds, and even before Saito's pre-dawn call he hadn't been sleeping particularly well.

"I just want to be certain due process is being followed," Fallici said emphatically.

"Of course."

"By which I mean," he continued as if Piola hadn't spoken, "that a full survey must be done of the entire site: environmental, archaeological and anthropological, just as was demanded at the outset. Questions that were previously brushed aside by the developers in their indecent haste to get under way will now have to be answered fully."

Piola was beginning to see now why the local Carabinieri hadn't been keen on getting involved, and why Saito had wanted someone experienced on the case – not just to handle the pressure from the Americans, but to take the heat for having done so. The US might have plenty of clout in Rome and Milan, but there were few local votes in appeasing them. The protestors, on the other hand, were clearly a bloc worth courting.

"It's still too early to say what investigations will be appropriate, Mr Fallici," he said. "But rest assured, whatever needs to be done, will be." To his relief he saw Panicucci heading his way, holding a phone. "Yes, Sottotenente?"

"It's General Saito, sir."

Piola took the phone and walked outside.

"Any progress?" Saito's voice said.

"Some," Piola said, wondering what the man expected after

just a few hours. "That is to say, it looks as if the protestors had nothing to do with it."

"Good. Aldo, I've had five calls already about this case, and I haven't even had breakfast yet. One from the base commander in charge of the Vicenza garrison. One from our own *generale di divisione*. One from the mayor, and two from government officials in Rome who are so damn important I have absolutely no idea who they are."

Piola sighed inwardly. "The issue, as you're probably aware, is that the consortium are in a hurry to get their men back to work. But first I need to establish how the remains got into the tipper truck. And that would have happened a lot quicker, frankly, if they'd cooperated from the start, instead of trying to pin it on the boy who called it in." He hesitated. "There's something else you should know. That politician Raffaele Fallici's here, talking about environmental surveys, legal challenges…"

"Oh, that's to be expected. Where there are votes, there are vultures. We're caught in the middle, as usual. Keep me updated, won't you? It would be nice to have some progress to report back to Rome."

As Saito rang off, Piola realised it hadn't been news to him that Fallici would be there. He had the curious feeling that he himself was like an actor at the first rehearsal of a play, being fed his lines one by one, told where to stand and when to move, precisely so that at some later date everyone could point to him and say, "There. See what he did?" But that was often the way of these things – the top brass far more concerned with making sure no one could blame them for some procedural irregularity than actually solving crimes.

As he got into the car, spreading muddy stains over the carpet, he also realised that, sometime over the course of the morning, he'd managed to mislay that damn hat.