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Opening Extract from...

The Abomination

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Published by Head of Zeus

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One

The party in the dimly lit Venetian *bacaro* had been going on for almost five hours, and the volume level was still rising. The good-looking young man who was trying to get off with Katerina Tapo wasn't so much chatting her up as shouting her up: the two of them had to stand very close and bellow alternately into each other's ears just to be heard, which, while it certainly robbed their flirting of any subtlety, also meant she was left in little doubt of his intentions. That was no bad thing, Kat decided. Only those who really fancied each other would persevere with small talk in such difficult conditions. For her part, she'd already made the decision that Eduardo – or was it Gesualdo? – would be coming back later to her tiny two-room apartment in Mestre.

Eduardo, or possibly Gesualdo, wanted to know what she did for a living. "I'm a travel agent," she yelled back.

He nodded. "Cool. Get to travel much yourself?"

"A bit," she shouted.

She felt her phone buzz against her thigh. It was set to ring, but such was the noise around them she hadn't heard it. Pulling it out, she saw she'd missed three calls already. "*Un momento*," she shouted into it. Indicating to her companion she'd be back in a minute, she struggled down the crowded steps of the bar into the open air.

Mother of Christ, it was cold. Around her a few hardy smokers were braving the chill: her own mouth barked steam almost as thick as their smoke as she turned back to the phone. "*Si? Pronto?*"

"There's a body," Francesco's voice said. "You're on it. I just spoke to Allocation."

"Homicide?" She struggled to keep the excitement out of her voice.

"Could be. Whatever it is, it's going to be a big one."

"Why's that?"

Francesco didn't answer her directly. "I'm texting the address. Near the Salute. You'll meet Colonnello Piola at the scene. Good luck. And remember, you owe me for this." He rang off.

She glanced at the screen. No address yet, but if it was near the church of Santa Maria della Salute she'd need to catch the *vaporetto*. Even so, she was probably twenty minutes away, and that was assuming she didn't go home to change first, which she definitely ought to, given what she was wearing. Damn, she decided, there was no time for that. She'd do her coat up tight and hope Piola didn't wonder too much at her bare legs or her party make-up. It was La Befana, after all – January 6th, the Feast of the Epiphany, but also a celebration in honour of the old witch who brings children sweets or lumps of coal depending on how naughty they've been – and the whole city was out having a good time.

At least she'd brought rubber boots as well as her heels. Everyone had: the combination of winter tides, snow and a full moon had brought *acqua alta* to Venice, the intermittent floods that plagued them almost every year now. Twice a day the city was submerged by a tidal surge several feet higher than Venice had been built to accommodate. Canals expanded over their pavements; St Mark's Square – the lowest point of the city – became a salt-water lake, soupy with cigarette ends and pigeon droppings, and even those who

tried to stick to the raised wooden walkways put out by the authorities sometimes found themselves having to splash. She felt adrenalin sluice her stomach. Ever since she'd been promoted to the detective division she'd been pressing to work on a murder case. And now, with any luck, she had one. Colonel Piola wouldn't have been assigned to this if it was just another drunken tourist drowning in a canal. So that meant a double stroke of luck: her first big investigation would be under the supervision of the senior detective she most admired.
She briefly considered going back into the bar to tell Eduardo/Gesualdo she had to go to work, and maybe get his phone number before she left. Then she decided against it. Travel agents, even busy ones, were rarely called to their offices at ten to midnight, especially on La Befana. It would mean explaining why she didn't tell casual pickups like him she was actually an officer of the Carabinieri, and generally soothing his wounded pride, and she really didn't have time for that. Besides, if this was a murder investigation, she was unlikely to have any time over the next couple of weeks to return his phone calls, let alone see him for sex. Eduardo was just going to have to get lucky with someone else. Her phone pulsed again as Francesco texted her the address, and she felt her heart beat a little faster in response.

Detective-Colonel Aldo Piola stared down at the body. He badly wanted to break his six-day-old New Year's resolution and light a cigarette. Not that he could have smoked here in any case. Preservation of evidence came first.

"A *piovan*?" he said wonderingly, using the Venetian slang for "priest".

Dr Hapadi, the forensic examiner, shrugged. "That's what was called in. But there's a bit more to this one. Want to take a closer look?"

Somewhat reluctantly, Piola stepped off the raised walkway into the foot-deep murk, splashing gingerly towards the circle of light emanating from Hapadi's portable generator. The blue plastic wraparounds the doctor had offered him when he arrived at the scene were immediately flooded with icy seawater, despite being tied around his calves with elastic bands. Another pair of shoes ruined, he thought with an inward sigh. He wouldn't have minded, but he and his wife had been celebrating La Befana with friends at Bistrot de Venise, one of Venice's best restaurants, and as a consequence he was wearing his best new Bruno Maglis. As soon as he could, he jumped up onto the marble steps of the church, one level above the body, pausing to shake each foot dry as if he were stepping out of a bath. You never knew: perhaps they could be salvaged.
The body lay slumped across the steps, half in and half out of the water, almost as though the victim had been trying to crawl up out of the sea into the sanctuary of the church. That would be the effect of the tide, which was already receding a little, back towards the pavement that usually separated the church from the Canale di San Marco. There was no mistaking the black and gold vestments of a Catholic priest dressed for

Mass, nor the two bullet holes in the back of the matted head that left purple-brown stains dripping onto the marble.

"Could this have happened here?" Piola asked. Hapadi shook his head. "I doubt it. At a guess, the high water washed the body in from the lagoon. If it weren't for the acqua alta, it'd be halfway to Croatia by now."
If so, Piola reflected, the corpse was little different from the rest of the rubbish that got washed into the city. The seawater around him had a faint aroma of sewage: not all Venetian cesspits were watertight, and some residents notoriously saw high water as a chance to save themselves the usual emptying fee. "What height was it tonight?"
"One forty, according to the pipes." The electronic sirens that informed Venetians of impending acqua alta also warned them of its extent – ten centimetres above a metre for every note the sirens sounded.

Piola bent down to take a closer look. The priest, whoever he was, had been of slight build. It was tempting to turn him over, but Piola knew that to do so before the forensic team had finished photographing would be to incur their wrath.
"So," he said thoughtfully. "He was shot somewhere to the east or south."
"Possibly. But you're wrong about one thing, at least."
"What?"
"Take a look at the shoes."
Gingerly, Piola hooked a finger under the sodden cassock and lifted it away from the priest's leg. The foot was small, almost dainty, and it was shod in what was unmistakeably a woman's leather shoe.
"He's a tranny?" he said, amazed.
"Not exactly." Hapadi almost looked as if he were enjoying this. "OK, now the head."
Piola had to crouch right down, his buttocks almost touching the eddying water, to do as Hapadi asked. The corpse's eyes were open, the forehead resting against the step as if the priest had died in the very act of drinking from the sea. As Piola looked, a small wave washed over the chin into the open mouth before sucking away again, leaving it drooling.
Then Piola saw. The chin was without stubble, the lips too pink. "Mother of God," he said, surprised. "It's a woman."
Automatically, he crossed himself.
There could be no doubt – the shaped eyebrow and trace of eyeliner around the lifeless eye, the feminine lashes; even, he now saw, the discreet earring half-hidden by a strand of matted hair. She was about forty, with a little middle-aged thickening of the shoulders, which was why he hadn't realized immediately. Recovering himself, he touched the sodden alb.
"Pretty realistic, for fancy dress."
"If it is fancy dress."
Piola looked at the other man curiously. "Why do you say that?"
"What woman would dare to go out dressed as a priest in Italy?" Hapadi said rhetorically. "She wouldn't get ten yards."
He shrugged. "Then again, maybe she didn't. Get ten yards, I mean."
Piola frowned. "Two in the back of the head? Seems a bit extreme."
"Colonnello?"
Piola turned. An attractive young woman, her face heavily made up, wearing a short black coat, galoshes, and apparently very little else, was hailing him from the wooden walkway.
"You can't come through here," he said automatically.
"This is a crime scene."
She dug an ID card out of her pocket and held it up.
"Capitano Tapo, sir. I've been assigned to the case."
"You'd better come across, then."
She hesitated for only a moment, he noticed, before pulling off her boots and wading barefoot towards him. He caught a flash of red paint on her toenails as she put her foot into the murk.
"Last time I saw someone try that in Venice," Hapadi said cheerfully, "they cut their feet to ribbons. Broken glass under the water."
The capitano ignored him. "Any identification on him, sir?" she asked Piola.
"Not yet. And we were just remarking on the fact that our victim is not in fact a him."
Tapo's eyes darted warily to the body, but Piola noticed that she didn't cross herself as he had. These youngsters didn't always have the ingrained Catholicism he'd struggled so hard to shake off. "Could it be some stupid joke?" she said hesitantly. "It's La Befana, after all."
"Perhaps. But it should be the other way round really, shouldn't it?" In Venice, where any excuse for dressing up was always seized on, La Befana was celebrated with fancy

dress; not least by the boatmen and manual workers, who put on women's clothing for the day.

Squatting down beside the body much as Piola had done a few minutes earlier, Kat scrutinised it carefully. "This looks real, though." Gently, she tugged a chain out from under the robes. A silver cross dangled from the end of it. "Perhaps it's not hers," Piola said. "Anyway, first things first, Captain. Establish a perimeter, start a visitor log, and when the dottore here is finished with his photographs, make arrangements for the corpse to be removed to the mortuary. In the meantime I want screens and an evidence shelter – we don't want the good citizens of Venice any more alarmed than absolutely necessary." It went without saying that it would be the fact that the dead woman was defiling a priest's robes that would cause the alarm, not just the fact that she'd been murdered.

"Of course, sir. Shall I call you when the body's at the mortuary?"

"Call me?" Piola seemed surprised. "I'll be going with it. Chain of evidence, Capitano. I was the first officer at the scene, so I stay with the corpse."

If that was impressive – Kat's last supervising officer had usually knocked off for the day not long after the end of his extended lunch break, telling her to "call with any developments" while switching his phone off even before he'd reached the door – it was nothing compared to what happened when the State Police turned up, their launch idling over to where Hapadi was packing up his kit. Kat was blue with cold now, the freezing water eating into her very bones; when she saw the words "Polizia di Stato" her first reaction was one of relief.

An officer stepped out of the boat, immaculately dressed for the occasion in police-blue fishing waders. "Sovrintendente Otalo," he said, introducing himself. "Many thanks, Colonel, we'll take it from here."

Piola barely glanced at him. "Actually, this one's ours."

Otalo shook his head. "It's been decided at a higher level. We've got some spare capacity at the moment."

I bet you have, Kat thought. She stayed quiet, waiting to see how Piola would handle this.

Visitors to Italy are often surprised to discover that there are a number of separate police forces, of which the largest are the Polizia di Stato, answering to the Interior Ministry, and the Carabinieri, answering to the Ministry of Defence.

Effectively they operate in competition, right down to having two different emergency numbers, a system which the Italian government claims keeps both organisations on their toes, and which Italian citizens are aware is actually a recipe for muddle, corruption and bureaucratic incompetence. Even so, it was a source of pride to Kat and her colleagues that most people preferred to dial 112 for the Carabinieri, rather than 113 for their civilian counterparts.

Piola did look at Otalo now, his glance one of barely concealed contempt. "Until my *generale di divisione* says I'm off this case, I'm on it," he said. "Anyone who tries to tell me otherwise is obstructing an investigation, and may well get themselves arrested."

The other man looked equally disdainful. "All right, all right. Keep your precious body, if it's so important to you." He shrugged. "I'll get back to my nice warm station house."

"If you wanted to be helpful, you could lend us your boat," Piola suggested.

"Exactly," the man agreed. "If I wanted to be helpful. *Ciao*, then." He stepped back into the launch, saluting ironically as the boat reversed into the canal.

At about three in the morning it started to snow; fat, wet flakes as big as butterflies that melted as soon as they settled on the salty water. The snow turned to slush in Kat's hair, chilling her still further. Glancing at Piola, she saw that his entire head glittered, from his scalp down to his stubble, as if decked in a carnival mask. Only on the corpse did the snow not melt, gradually covering the dead woman's open eyes and forehead with a white, blank gesso.

Kat shivered yet again. Her first murder, and it was going to be a strange one, she could tell that already. A woman in a priest's robes. A desecration, right here on the steps of Santa Maria of Health. You didn't have to be standing in freezing salt water for that to send a chill right into your soul.

First published in the UK in 2013 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 fromthe British Library.
ISBN (HB) 9781781853665
ISBN (XTPB) 9781781853764
ISBN (E) 9781781853672
Printed in Germany
Head of Zeus Ltd
Clerkenwell House
45-47 Clerkenwell Green
London EC1R 0HT

www.headofzeus.com