



BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF *THE FIRST APOSTLE*

JAMES BECKER

THE

NUSFERATU

SCROLL



About the Book

EVIL IS IN THE BLOOD

BOHEMIA, 1741

On the northern banks of the Vltava River an extraordinary event is taking place. Inside a private chapel a high-born Hungarian lady is being laid to rest. But not before her heart is removed from her body and she is buried beneath a layer of heavy stones - lest she rise again to prey upon her victims ...

VENICE, 2010

Holidaying in the world's most beautiful city, Chris Bronson and Angela Lewis discover a desecrated tomb. Inside it is a female skeleton and an arcane diary dating back hundreds of years. Written in Latin, it refers to a lost scroll that will provide an 'answer' to an ancient secret.

Soon corpses of young women, all killed in the same ritualistic manner, start appearing throughout the city. And when Angela disappears, Bronson knows that he must find her before she too is slaughtered.

But his hunt for Angela leads him back to the Island of the Dead, and into a conspiracy more deadly than he could ever have imagined ...

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Also by James Becker

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James Becker



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To Sally.
For always and for everything.

Acknowledgements

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Prologue

10 May 1741

Krumlov Zamek, Český Krumlov, Bohemia

‘Open it.’

The torchlight gave the priest’s face a haunting, almost satanic, quality, an impression reinforced by the chamber in which he was standing. It was a small underground room in the castle, located in the same part of the building as the cages that held the wolves. Four flickering torches were mounted in sconces, one on each wall, but they failed to drive away all the shadows.

A sturdy table stood in the centre of the room, and on it lay a large, ornate, black wooden coffin, the closed lid divided into two parts and hinged on one side, the other edges secured with screws. The coffin had arrived from the Schwarzenberg Palace in Vienna two days earlier and had immediately been carried into St George’s Chapel in the castle. There, the upper section of the coffin had been opened to allow the mere handful of mourners who had appeared in the building to see the thin, white face of the body inside.

The princess had come home for the last time.

Masses for the immortal soul of Princess Eleonora Elisabeth Amalia Magdalena von Schwarzenberg had been held all over Bohemia, but few people made the journey to the vast castle – which wasn’t a single structure at all, but a complex of huge yellow and grey stone buildings roofed

with red tiles - that stood on the north bank of the Vltava River.

It was here that her burial was about to take place, and there were preparations - important preparations - to be made.

Four servants had carried the coffin down from St George's Chapel. Now, one of them moved forward in response to the priest's instruction and removed the handmade iron screws that secured the upper part of the lid. His task done, he stepped back.

'No. Take all of them out,' the priest ordered.

The man looked surprised, but obediently removed the remaining fastenings that held down the lower section of the lid. As he worked, he glanced back at the priest, wondering why the man who'd so publicly shunned the princess while she was alive was now so concerned with her dead body.

The priest's name was Bohdan Řezník, the surname meaning 'butcher', and in truth he looked as though he would be more at home in a bloodstained apron than in the plain, dark brown robes he habitually wore.

When the body of the Princess Eleonora Amalia had been delivered to the castle, one of the escort party had walked down into Krumlov town, found Řezník at his home and handed him a single folded sheet of parchment. The document bore three separate seals, one of them the distinctive double-headed eagle mark of Karel VI, King of Bohemia, the current ruler, and a member of the Habsburg dynasty, which had governed the country since 1526.

The instructions contained on the parchment were unambiguous, and made perfect sense to Řezník. He'd noted with satisfaction that his orders had been prepared by Dr Franz von Gerschstov, Eleonora Amalia's preferred physician, and a man whose other, less well-known, qualities struck a chord with Řezník.

The servant removed the final screw, and stepped back from the coffin once more, awaiting any further instructions the priest might issue.

'Swing back the lid,' the priest said, and watched as two of the servants did so, to reveal the whole interior of the coffin.

'Now leave me with her. You may return in half an hour.'

Only when the door of the small room had closed behind the men did the priest step forward. He walked across the flag-stoned floor to the coffin and looked down with distaste at the slight figure of Eleonora Amalia. Her hands were placed demurely on her breast, the right hand resting on the left, her wasted body clad in a long white dress, her small feet bare.

Řezník felt in the pocket of his habit and pulled out a folding knife with a black wooden handle. He'd spent several minutes the previous evening putting a fine edge on the dark steel blade.

He made the sign of the cross and muttered a prayer - not for the immortal soul of Eleonora, but for himself, asking for forgiveness and divine protection for the actions he now had to take. He lifted the princess's hands and lay her arms at her sides, then snapped open the knife. Řezník inserted the blade under the neckline of the dress and in a single fluid movement ran the knife all the way down to Eleonora's feet, slicing through the layers of material. Then he peeled aside the two cut halves of the dress and looked down at her naked body. The skin that had been so white in life was now mottled and discoloured, with livid brown and purple marks where the initial stages of decay had taken hold.

But that wasn't the most noticeable feature. What held Řezník's attention was the crudely stitched cut that ran from between the princess's small, wrinkled breasts down to her pubis.

Her nakedness offended him, but he had his instructions. His expression of distaste deepened as he again used his blade, this time to slice through each of the rough stitches that held the skin and flesh of her abdomen closed. Then he put down the knife, inserted his fingers into the wide incision and with little difficulty pulled apart the two sections of dead tissue. He was looking for one thing, one single object in the chest cavity, and in seconds he knew it wasn't there - which was as it should be. But Řezník had been ordered to make absolutely sure before the burial took place.

He nodded in satisfaction, wiped his hands on the front of his robe and stepped back from the open coffin. Then he walked across to one corner of the chamber, where another, much smaller and very plain wooden box was propped against the wall. Řezník was a strong man, and he picked up the box with little effort. He carried it across to the table, placed it next to the princess's coffin, and lifted off the lid.

Then he strode back to the wall of the chamber and picked up a leather bag, the contents of which clattered metallically as he carried it over to the table. He placed the bag on the floor, opened it and took out three substantial leather straps, which he positioned under the open box, spacing them equally along its length.

He reached into the larger casket, picked up the mortal remains of Eleonora Amalia and dropped the body unceremoniously into the smaller box. Before he placed the lid in position, he took a small vial of clear liquid from his pocket and sprinkled the contents over the corpse, muttering a prayer as he did so. Then he took a hammer and a handful of nails from his bag, and drove a dozen of them firmly through the box's lid, securely sealing it to the base. To complete the process, he knelt down and tightened each of the leather straps around it.

Řezník took a deep breath and then, grunting with the effort, he lifted up the small wooden box and manoeuvred it into the larger coffin. It would have been easier to wait until the servants returned, but his instructions had been clear – when they returned to the chamber, he was to have sealed the coffin for the last time. Nobody must ever know what he had done. He closed the lid and started replacing the screws.

When the servants knocked at the door a few minutes later, Řezník had finished securing the lid and was standing beside the coffin, waiting for them.

‘We leave the castle at eight,’ he said. ‘Ensure that the carriage is ready and everything has been prepared by then.’

A few minutes before the appointed hour, Řezník strode into the castle courtyard. Night was already falling, and the expansive open space was in deep shadow, the only illumination coming from the fitful flames of the torches mounted along the walls.

A black-painted carriage, its doors bearing the device of the Schwarzenberg dynasty, stood waiting in the centre of the courtyard. Two black mares were already hitched to it and tossing their heads impatiently in black-plumed headdresses. The driver, also dressed in black, stood beside the vehicle. As Řezník had instructed – his absolute authority conferred by the parchment he still carried – all of the castle’s servants, wearing the darkest clothes they possessed, were standing silently on one side of the courtyard to bid their mistress a last farewell.

Řezník walked across to the carriage and looked into the rear section, behind the seats. The coffin was already in place, the gleaming black wood marred in two places by the leather straps that held it *in situ*, a precaution against the jolting the carriage would experience on the rough and unmade road that ran from the castle to the church of St

Vitus, where the princess's body was destined to rest for all eternity. Řezník nodded in satisfaction: all his instructions had been followed to the letter. Finally, he clambered up on to the carriage, the driver joining him a few moments later.

For a couple of minutes nothing else happened, and then the castle clock struck eight. As the first peal of the bell echoed around the courtyard, the servants standing beside the large wooden gates stepped forward, released the bolts, and pulled them open. Only then did the driver tap the reins lightly across the broad backs of the two mares. Obediently, the horses stepped forward, their hooves clattering on the uneven stones of the courtyard, and the carriage began to move, creaking gently as it did so.

The funeral cortège, if that word could accurately be applied to only a single carriage containing two men and one corpse, passed through the wide gateway and out of the castle. The sight that greeted the two men outside the walls was both spectacular and sad: the road that wound away from the castle was lined on both sides by silent and unmoving figures, each holding aloft a flaming brand. Indeed, from the castle gates, it looked as if a thin double ribbon of fire was stretching out in front of the carriage, illuminating the final route that the princess's body would take.

Řezník glanced at the first few figures as the carriage drove slowly past them. Some of the torchbearers had been drawn from the local villagers, but the others, and perhaps the majority, were men and women of the cloth: monks and nuns who had been summoned by Řezník so that their piety and righteousness might lend a certain dignity - and protection - to the proceedings. Each of them bowed his or her head in respectful supplication as the carriage passed, and then made the sign of the cross.

And as the carriage trundled slowly past the silent ranks, the torchbearers extinguished their burning brands in metal water buckets which had been placed beside each

of them specifically for that purpose. The moving end of the ribbon of fire marked the position of the carriage, while behind it darkness again reclaimed the land.

An impartial observer might have wondered at a funeral for a princess of the Schwarzenberg dynasty being conducted in such a manner. It was unusual enough that the presiding clergyman should be just a village priest rather than a bishop or some other high Church official, but even more surprising was the complete absence of a single member of the Schwarzenberg family, or any representatives from the other aristocratic families to which the Schwarzenbergs were linked or related. Even Eleonora Amalia's son Joseph was missing.

It was as if the only people who had any regard or respect or affection for the princess were the peasants and villagers of Krumlov itself, but even that impression was false. The local men and women lining the route and holding the torches aloft had been ordered to do so by Řezník, on pain of punishment.

About twenty minutes after leaving the castle, the carriage drew to a halt outside the open doors of the Church of St Vitus. Řezník climbed down from his seat and issued a series of instructions. The straps holding the coffin in place were released, and the heavy wooden box was hoisted on to the shoulders of six powerfully built monks. They carried the coffin into the church and placed it on a wooden trestle that had been prepared and positioned in front of the altar.

The service was short - about as brief as Řezník could make it - and almost all the pews in front of the pulpit were noticeably empty. The only people sitting in the church were wearing the habits of monks and nuns, summoned like the torchbearers before them. Once his duty was done, Řezník stepped down from the pulpit to supervise the actual burial.

As a Schwarzenberg, it might have been expected that the princess would be laid to rest in the family vault, in St Augustine's church in Vienna, but Eleonora had been denied that privilege. Instead, Řezník led the way into a small side chapel where a large section of the stone-flagged floor had already been removed and a deep grave dug, a grave that had been lined with a clay-based concrete. The six monks lowered the casket to the floor where three substantial ropes had been placed in readiness. Then they each seized the end of one of the ropes and lifted the coffin off the floor, moving awkwardly in the confined space around the grave, and manoeuvred the casket over the hole. Slowly they lowered the coffin into the waiting void.

Řezník murmured a few last prayers, and then ordered the handful of official mourners out of the church. The final rituals were to be witnessed by as small a number of people as possible.

Řezník stepped to one side of the chapel and picked up a crudely fashioned wooden ladder, which he carried over to the side of the grave and then lowered into it. He gestured to the monks, who silently descended into the pit. Řezník held a torch over the void so they could see what they were doing. Stacked along both sides of the grave were a number of heavy flat stones. Working under the priest's direction, the monks picked these up, two men to each stone, and placed them carefully on the flat top of the black wooden coffin, in a double layer.

Řezník inspected their work carefully from the top of the grave, and ordered them to climb out again. Their next task required all the considerable strength the monks possessed. Řezník had already arranged for a rough wooden arch fitted with a heavy-duty pulley to be positioned inside the chapel to allow a single heavy slab to be laid across the top of the open grave to seal it completely. Even with this mechanical device to assist them, it still took almost half an hour before the slab was

positioned to Řezník's satisfaction and, despite the cool evening air, the sweat was pouring off the faces of the six men.

But still they weren't finished. Řezník permitted them a short break to recover their strength, then supervised the disassembly of the wooden arch, the component pieces of which they stacked against the side wall of the chapel. Once that had been completed, he instructed them to drag three heavy sacks containing soil, taken from the cemetery outside the church, across to the slab that now covered the tomb. They upended the sacks and spread the contents into a single even layer over the slab.

Now, finally, the monks' work was almost over. They replaced the flagstones that had been removed to allow the hole to be dug, but left enough space directly over the grave for the gravestone itself, a slab that Řezník had had prepared by a stone mason in the village the previous day. Two of the monks picked up the stone and lowered it carefully into position.

Řezník stepped to the end of the gravestone and lowered his head in prayer for the last time, the six monks who had assisted him kneeling on the flagstone floor beside the tomb.

Moonlight speared in through one of the chapel's side windows and the beam played silently across the freshly cut and very simple inscription in the stone. The words made no mention of Eleonora Amalia's family name or her aristocratic status. It didn't even include the Schwarzenberg coat of arms. On the specific instructions of Řezník, who had himself simply been following the orders he had been given by the men who had prepared the parchment, the inscription simply listed the first name of the princess, and the date of her death:

*Hier liget die arme sunderin Eleonora bittet fur sie.
Obut die 5 Mai A1741.*

With the body of Eleonora now safely consigned to the earth, Řezník had two more tasks to perform. The carriage was standing outside the church, the driver waiting for him. Řezník climbed up on to the vehicle and instructed the man to return to Krumlov Castle.

The gates were still wide open, but the courtyard was now virtually deserted. Only three men waited for Řezník's return and the orders they expected him to issue. The priest stepped down from the carriage and walked across to them.

The men were all wearing tunics that identified them as servants of the Schwarzenberg dynasty, and two of them were armed with short swords, the scabbards buckled to their belts. It was these two men that Řezník approached first.

'It's time,' he said. 'Do it now. Kill them all, and dump the bodies in the forest.'

The men nodded, turned on their heels and vanished inside the building.

Řezník turned to the third man. 'Show me the painting.'

The servant led Řezník into the castle and to a long gallery, at one end of which hung a life-size portrait of Eleonora. The priest stared at the princess's pale face for a few moments, his lip curling in disgust.

'Lift it down,' he ordered.

Once the painting was leaning against the wall, Řezník took his folding knife and opened it. He drove the point of the blade through the canvas to the left of the princess's head and hacked downwards in a vertical line. He repeated the operation on the right-hand side of the image as well, then sliced a horizontal line above the head to join the two cuts. He seized the flap of canvas that now fell forward, and started to cut along the last remaining side.

As his blade began cutting through the painted image of Eleonora's neck, the mournful howl of an animal echoed through the vast old building.

The man beside Řezník glanced round in alarm, but the priest ignored the interruption. He completed the final cut through the canvas and stepped back, holding the painted image of the princess's head in his left hand. He looked around and then stepped across to the nearest sconce in which a torch burned brightly. Taking it down, he held the flames to one corner of the square he'd removed from the painting. The canvas was heavy and the paint thick, and for a few seconds it merely smouldered. Then the fire took hold and it flared suddenly, the flames a kaleidoscopic mix of colours as the pigments in the paint were consumed by the heat. Řezník dropped the final corner of the canvas to the floor and watched as the last of the flames flickered and died.

'Are there any other pictures showing that woman?' he demanded. He couldn't even bring himself to speak her name.

'That was the last one. All the others have been destroyed.'

Řezník nodded in satisfaction. His work was done. The princess was buried in what amounted to an unmarked grave, and he had done his best to expunge all traces of her life, all reminders of her presence, from the castle.

Without a backwards glance, he walked out of the gallery and a few minutes later passed through the double gates that secured the courtyard of Krumlov Zamek. He knew he would never enter that cursed and wretched castle again.

He just hoped that he had done enough to stop the contagion before it took hold in the district.

* * *

But in that regard, Řezník was mistaken. Over the next few years he would officiate at nearly a dozen burials that would require him to use his peculiar and arcane

knowledge, though none of these would involve another member of the aristocracy.

And on his own deathbed, nearly twenty years later, he would finally acknowledge the truth he had shied away from for all those years.

Because what happened in the months and years after the burial of Eleonora Amalia proved to him beyond doubt that she was not the source of the plague, as Řezník had always believed, but simply another victim.



1

Present day

‘This truly is a spectacular place,’ Chris Bronson said, looking back at the city of Venice.

It was the first day of November, and he and Angela were standing side by side in the stern of a crowded *vaporetto* that was ferrying them from the Fondamente Nuove stop on Venice itself across the lagoon to the Isola di San Michele – the island of St Michael – to take part in the celebrations known unofficially as the Festival of the Dead.

There was a stiff breeze blowing from the south-east, sufficiently strong to create dozens of white horses that surged all around the vessel, but the boat carved an arrow-straight wake through the choppy waters. The lights of the city were just starting to pierce the late-afternoon gloom, a gloom made more pronounced by the patches of mist that were forming over the water. Venice looked almost like a huge and improbable cruise ship, floating silently in the cool and shallow waters of the lagoon.

‘I thought you’d like it,’ Angela said, taking his arm to steady herself. ‘I wasn’t expecting this wind though. Is it the sirocco?’

Bronson shook his head. ‘No. It’s the wrong time of year. The sirocco only blows in the spring and summer.’

‘Well, I was hoping for a warm and balmy evening – a kind of last gasp of summer, if you like – but this feels more like the onset of winter.’

‘It is November, you know.’

Angela shivered slightly. She was wearing a pair of black trousers (she’d guessed that a skirt would be much less practical for climbing in and out of *vaporettos* during the evening), a white blouse and a kind of woollen tunic that Bronson had incautiously referred to as a cardigan, only to receive a loud sigh at his manifest lack of fashion sense. Over this, she was wearing a midnight-blue silk coat. Bronson liked it: it brought out the colour of her eyes. He could see now that it couldn’t be very warm.

Bronson had always regarded fashion as an easy way of separating large sums of money from gullible men – and even more gullible women – who were foolish enough to believe the rubbish spouted by the self-appointed fashion ‘experts’. He invariably dressed for comfort and practicality, selecting a shirt by opening a drawer and picking up the one that lay on top of the others. He chose trousers, socks and underwear using the same simple and, to him, foolproof system. His only concessions to fashion were that he normally wore dark colours, usually blues and blacks, and had never owned a pair of white socks. This evening, he had chosen a dark check shirt, slightly faded blue jeans, and a pair of black trainers. And his leather jacket was proof against even the strongest wind the Adriatic could produce.

Angela buttoned her coat, and snuggled closer to Bronson. ‘With your love of Italy, and all things Italian,’ she murmured, ‘I’m really surprised that you’ve never been to Venice before.’

‘I know,’ Bronson replied. ‘For some reason, I’ve spent my time on the west side of the country. So I know Rome, Florence, Pisa and Naples really well, but this is the first

time I've ever visited the Adriatic coast. And it really is stunning.'

It had all been Angela's idea. There had been an unexpected reduction in her workload at the British Museum, and for the first time since the start of her employment there she had found herself with almost nothing to do. She was a ceramics conservator, and spent most of her working day either trying to reassemble ancient pottery shards into something that resembled a recognizable vessel or writing reports and assessments for the benefit of other people who were trying to do pretty much the same thing.

And this lull in her workload had coincided neatly with the dates of Bronson's final week's leave for the year. Her ex-husband had planned to do little more than sit around at his home in Tunbridge Wells, watch a bit of television and, if he could summon the energy and enthusiasm, tackle a handful of DIY jobs that he knew needed doing. When Angela had suggested spending the week exploring Venice instead, Bronson had thought carefully about his choice for nearly a second and a half before agreeing to go with her. It was, he thought now as he put his arm round her, absolutely the right decision.

'OK,' he said, smiling down at her, 'you're the historian. So what, exactly, is the Festival of the Dead?'

Angela rested her head against his shoulder. 'Do you really want a history lesson?' she asked.

'I like hearing you talk, especially when you're talking about something that really interests you. And you know I'm never tired of hearing about Italy.'

'Actually, it's not really *Italian* history,' Angela began, 'because the date - the first of November - comes from a really old pagan festival, and is celebrated over most of Western Europe. Yesterday was, of course, the last day of October, or Halloween, which as everyone knows has always been associated with death and the supernatural.'

But what's less well known is that it's only ever been a kind of taster, a precursor, if you will, for the main event - Allhallows or Hallowmas, which is today.'

'I thought it was a kind of saints' day,' Bronson objected.

Angela nodded. 'If you talk to a Christian, especially an Anglican or Roman Catholic, he or she will tell you that today is All Saints' Day, a day that celebrates God and all his saints, both known and unknown, so the Church can cover all the bases. But it's a little more complicated than that, because the early Christian Church was desperate to try to stamp out all competing religions, especially all pagan rituals and celebrations. They couldn't simply ban pagan festivals because they feared that people would still observe them in secret, so they did the next best thing: they hijacked them.

'Some time in the early seventh century, Christians began celebrating All Saints' Day on the first of November. In 835 AD Pope Gregory IV officially authorized the festival, and it's been celebrated ever since. Allhallows was once one of the four greatest and most important festivals in the pagan calendar, but most Christians today have never heard of it, because the Church has done such a good job of changing the original purpose and meaning of the celebrations.

'And, just to ram home the fact that November the first was a Christian celebration, the Church also created another festival day on the second of the month - All Souls' Day, which is a celebration to help cleanse and purify the spirits of the dead. And you'll find similar crowds out on San Michele tomorrow, because the Venetians celebrate both days.'

'But surely the early Christians weren't celebrating death?'

Angela shook her head. 'No, not death, but the dead themselves. Allhallows was intended to help people remember the dead, and to say prayers for the souls of the

departed. Interestingly, it's not just in Western Europe that you find this kind of celebration. Over in Mexico they have a Day of the Dead, which is also on the second of November, and that's a kind of combination of an ancient Native American tradition and the Catholic All Souls' Day. The people there decorate their homes with fake skeletons, visit cemeteries to clean and tidy the graves of their deceased relatives, and even leave offerings of food and drink for various wandering spirits.'

'And I suppose the Venetian Festival of the Dead is something similar?' Bronson asked.

'Exactly, but over here they don't so much tend the graves as wander about the cemetery carrying lighted candles and chrysanthemums. Those flowers have become firmly associated with burial ceremonies in Italy, and it's a very bad idea to offer a bunch to anyone who's still alive. But, being Italy, it's become a social event, too, especially for locals - and because we're here in Venice, I thought it would be interesting to come along.'

'So we'll be spending the evening in a graveyard. How nice!' Bronson turned his back on the city they had left and looked ahead at the Isola di San Michele, colloquially known as the 'Island of the Dead' because it was simply a huge graveyard.

He'd read that the idea of using one of the islands in the Venetian lagoon as a graveyard dated back to 1807, when Venice was conquered by Napoleon and was suffering under a French occupation that virtually bankrupted the city. Burial on Venice itself was deemed to be unsanitary, so the neighbouring island of San Cristoforo della Pace was selected for the task. When that proved inadequate in size, the narrow canal that separated San Cristoforo della Pace from the larger San Michele was filled in, during 1836, and the combined island became known simply as San Michele. For a very short period the island was also used as a prison, but afterwards reverted to solely being a graveyard, which

still held some very famous corpses. The bodies of the dead were transported across to the island from Venice on special funeral gondolas.

The edge of San Michele lay only a couple of hundred yards from Venice itself, but the *vaporetto* stop was at the most northerly point of the island, right beside the Chiesa di San Michele, one of the earliest Renaissance churches in Venice. Bronson could see it now, its stark white Istrian stone standing out in the gloom, and marking it out from the mellow colours that characterized most Venetian architecture.

A couple of minutes later, the *vaporetto* was stationary alongside the jetty, and the gangway had been opened. The passengers surged off the vessel and started making their way towards the entrance. Bronson and Angela were in no particular hurry to leave the boat, so they waited in the stern until almost all the other passengers had left. Then they too stepped on to the jetty and followed the rest of the crowd who, noisy and gesticulating, seemed to be getting in the mood for the evening ahead.

'The wind's dropped, which is good news, but it's getting a bit murky,' Bronson said to Angela, pointing at the blanket of fog that was descending fast. They had seen patches of mist forming over the water after they'd left Venice, but what lay in front of them was more like a real peasouper. Within minutes, visibility was reduced to just a few yards, and they were glad that the path itself was visible, though the family in front of them were still making enough noise that following them was very easy.

Angela shivered again. 'You're right - it's quite spooky now. And this mist is exactly the right atmosphere for an evening in a graveyard.' She took a map of the island out of her pocket and smoothed it out.

'Well, as long as we can find our way back to the jetty and the boat I'm not bothered,' Bronson said. 'But I certainly wouldn't fancy spending the night out here. Do

you see that kind of yellow glow in the mist over to the left of us? Shall we head towards it?’

Angela looked in that direction as well, and nodded. ‘It’s probably from all the candles people are carrying.’

They were now catching up with the people ahead, who had walked along the semicircular path that curved around in front of the church, and had then turned down another path that seemed to be leading in the opposite direction.

‘Where are they going now?’

Angela looked down at the map. ‘This path takes us over towards the centre of the cemetery, and also towards some of the older areas. One slightly odd thing about this graveyard is that, these days, the bodies are removed after about ten years. They’re buried in the usual way in the ground, with the grave marked by a slab or headstone, but because this graveyard serves the entire population of Venice, space is pretty limited. So once the body has been reduced to bones, it’s exhumed and the skeleton stored in an ossuary, or bone box. Apparently, there’s an exhumation timetable posted near the entrance.’

Most of the more modern graves they were passing displayed photographs of the occupants, and almost all of them had been decorated with fresh flowers, giving the graveyard a strangely colourful appearance despite the gloom.

Even through the fog, Bronson could tell that the cemetery was huge, a vast expanse of ground studded with ancient vaults and individual tombstones, some standing erect, others either deliberately placed flat on the earth or having presumably fallen at some point over the centuries.

Walking through one of the older parts of the cemetery, they paused at intervals to look at some of the inscriptions. These varied from the simple to the flowery: from just a name, date of birth and date of death, to elaborate verses written in Italian or even Latin, to glorify or justify the life that had ended.

Angela had been right about the source of the yellowish glow. Almost every person they passed – and there seemed to be literally hundreds – was carrying a large candle, and the combined mass of tiny flames was giving the heavy mist a distinctly yellow or orange colour.

‘So what do we do now?’ Bronson asked.

‘It’s a shame we didn’t think to bring any refreshments,’ Angela replied, pointing at the people milling around them. Many were carrying bottles or flasks, and a few had even brought wicker picnic baskets with them, others clear plastic boxes containing food.

Angela had been absolutely right: it was obvious that Halloween or the Festival of the Dead was a major social and family event. Men, women and children were wandering around the graveyard, obviously determined to enjoy their evening in the somewhat unusual surroundings.

‘Well, I’ve got a bar of chocolate in my pocket if you want to share that,’ Bronson said, passing it over.

Angela snapped the bar in two and handed back one section. For a few moments they just stood there, enjoying their impromptu snack and soaking up the atmosphere.

‘It’s strange, isn’t it?’ Angela asked, after a minute or two, looking around at the noisy and cheerful crowds.

‘What do you mean?’

‘Here we are in a graveyard, walking above the decaying bones of hundreds or even thousands of long-dead citizens of Venice. This should be a place of sorrow or sombre reflection, but actually we’re in the middle of a huge party.’

Bronson grinned at her. ‘That just goes to show the importance of atmosphere. In those old Hammer films you used to be so fond of, the director would try to get the audience quivering expectantly just by showing them a couple of polystyrene tombstones with some fake mist swirling around them, while some suitably spooky music played in the background. And here we are, surrounded by

the real thing, and everyone's really happy, laughing and joking. The dead aren't bothering them at all.'

But then, in the distance, they both heard a distant howl, the sound so faint that the animal - which Bronson presumed was an Alsatian or some other breed of large dog - clearly wasn't anywhere near the Isola di San Michele.

'What the hell was that?' Angela asked, her face white and strained in the darkness.

'It sounded like a hungry German shepherd,' Bronson suggested. 'But don't worry - it's a long way off and not about to rip out our throats.'

Angela laughed out loud, then stopped as the sound of a solid thump echoed from somewhere nearby, and a scream of pure, undiluted terror cut across the noise of the revelry with the awful finality of the fall of a guillotine blade.