

Claudia Grande
Pornorama



Don't you understand? We want dead people! Whatever remains of our empathy feeds only on corpses. It is the dead who excite us, it is the dead who move us; the only people we are still capable of loving.

This story is a web of broken threads: if you manage to grasp one, the rest slip away. It is the story of a disturbing series of deaths in the world of porn set between Rome, Milan, and Turin, but it's also the story of the investigation conducted by Chief Inspector Vittoria De Feo. It's the story of how a couple in their twenties, Bet and Teo, ended up on the same trail in search of a scoop to relaunch

their blog, and the story of a gossip journalist's attempt to secure the scoop of their life. Surrounding their complicated investigations is a surreal chorus of grotesque characters and dangerous, ridiculous figures: surgeons who get rich by selling sex toys modeled on the anatomy of dead porn stars, Luciferian lawyers who keep their interns on a leash, forensic analysts trying to make it big as YouTubers, disgraced former children's TV actors, psychiatrists who dress up as avocados during sessions with patients to put them at ease, verbose influencers high on cocaine, and sleazy managers of adult-film actresses. All accompanied and seasoned with synthetic drugs and contracts of submission, severed hands and lemon tarts, pet rabbits and trash TV, Ikea warehouses and porn sets. With *Pornorama*, Claudia Grande has written an ambitious novel that combines the atmospheres of Thomas Pynchon and Chuck Palahniuk with true crime, the most unsuspected innocence and the most heinous brutality, private neuroses and major social repressions: an X-rated photograph of our contemporary world, so obsessed with death that it disguises it with sex, and so distorted by money that it no longer recognises its violence.

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1.

The first corpse appeared in November 2023: Amanda Ferrero, given name Mandie, thirty-five, resident of Turin, living in Rome; died while visiting her mother in the peaceful little town of Baldissero Torinese. Mandie's mother, Mrs Ferrero, maiden name Leonetti, assisted by a pair of narcissistic coked-up suits, managed to prevent the cause of death being shared with the press, but Chief Inspector De Feo knew (and still knows) that it was a lethal mix of €90-a-bottle XO Solera Gran Reserva Especial Zacapa rum and the widely available benzodiazepine (Vittoria has an encyclopedic knowledge of all the labels) to kill poor Mandie, condemning her to suffocation in her own vomit just like any respectable rock star. At Mandie's apartment in the Jewish Quarter, one of the hidden gems of the Capital, among other things, a series of empty bottles were recovered, twenty-seven to be exact – the same brand gulped down by Mandie to take her own life under her mother's roof, the same (exorbitant) price. "What was your daughter's profession?" a bewildered Vittoria De Feo had asked Mrs Ferrero, curious about the number and also not exactly paltry cost of the aforementioned bottles, despite Mrs Ferrero having professed herself too shaken to reason or respond. Despite her outcry, that day, as in the days that followed, and the weeks and months and years that would follow, Amanda's profession quickly attracted the attention of the media, monopolising webzines, social media, TV shows, and any other means of mass communication; for the police, in the meantime, a Google search was enough to get to the bottom of the thorny issue, a digital hunt guided by the recommendations of the embarrassed and suspiciously laconic Vice Inspector Martinelli.

"I know we haven't had a lot to do, recently, but I don't think we need to turn to porn," Vittoria had commented disdainfully, choosing to follow a lead that, by wriggling free of moral judgements (and prejudice), would steer the investigation in the right direction, at least on the surface.

"Boss... I don't do it in the office... if you catch my drift."

"Christ, Martinelli! There are some things I'd rather not imagine."

"Hey, at the end of the day, it's culture."

"*Long Live the Seal? Girls Just Wanna Have Cock?*"

"Cinema, to be precise."

"*Heavy Tra(n)sport? One Squirted Over the Cuckoo's Nest?*"

"That's not the point."

"Let's hear it then."

"Mandie was really loved by her audience, and I doubt someone would have had a big enough problem with her to want to kill her."

Vittoria spreads the photos of the corpse on the Vice Inspector's desk. Amanda's close up: violet and swollen face, studded with blotches, dirty with saliva and mascara; detail of the corneas (the body was found with eyes wide open and an expression of terror that, in Vittoria's opinion, could indicate fear of death, even if self-inflicted, as if some unknown tormentor had been wearing the clothes of the Grim Reaper): black coagulated tears around the eyelashes, no lines of expression, burst capillaries; detail of the mouth: filled to the brim with Botox (looking closely, the exact points could be glimpsed where, in all likelihood, the needle had penetrated just a few days before her death), lips disfigured by the imprint of a scream smothered while crying – the last desperate attempt to save herself after realising that destroying her life wouldn't resolve a problem (that perhaps Amanda had to solve? Or was it money problems? Family problems? Depression? Rivalry in love? Blackmail? Vittoria didn't know; there were too many options on the table, but she felt it in

her bones that something, some tiny detail, didn't want to find its place, upsetting the harmony of the picture). Amanda, curled up in the fetal position, arms wrapped around her stomach, legs contorted in one last-ditch effort to not fall into the abyss. Vomit. Splashes on the floor, and some pills that had survived the corrosive power of the gastric acid. The Vice Inspector looks away, and the boss contemplates, in memory of Mandie, the desolation of the end, the plastic pointlessness of that maltreated and violated body, as if it had never even been human.

"Something doesn't quite add up," she says, hoping that Martinelli wants to follow her down the same road, rugged with doubt. Martinelli doesn't need too much coaxing. He responds to his boss's hammering series of questions, but without granting her the relief of knowing he's on the same page as her. He doesn't agree with her and isn't scared to say so, even if contradicting her is tantamount to signing his own death warrant.

"I spoke with the mother of the victim, with her colleagues, with her agent."

"And...?"

"Nothing pertinent."

"Did you check her prescriptions? What about her bank account?"

"Of course."

"The prescription was legitimate?"

"Yes."

"Did you notice any strange bank transfers in the days leading up to her death?"

"No."

"And what can you tell me about her movements?"

"Usual routine: back and forth to the set, a few late-night parties in the company of colleagues, then she went back to her mother's, in Piemonte."

"You must have missed something."

"No jealous ex-boyfriends, no obsessive fans, no blackmail, no extortion."

"You *always* miss something."

"I examined the apartment from top to bottom, and I turned Mrs Ferrero's house upside down, and even the set where Amanda last filmed. Boss, when I say nothing, I mean *nothing*."

"Please don't use that exasperated tone with me. I can't stand it. Thank you."

Vittoria gathers the photos on Martinelli's desk and puts them inside a plastic folder; she does the same with the copies of the legal doctor's medical report and some testimonies of witnesses that Martinelli had judiciously compared; she puts on a big camel-hair coat that looks like it was picked up at the Gran Balon market in Porta Palazzo, and then she gesticulates furiously in front of the Vice Inspector as if to rush him.

"Boss... May I allow myself to make an objection?"

"No. Let's go."

"I don't understand the reason for your... ah-ehm... incandescence."

"Grab your stuff and let's go. Now. We have an appointment with those guys from the RFU, or did you forget?"

The Piedmont Regional Forensic Unit (RFU) isn't exactly like the Miami one: no million-dollar equipment, no competent and considerably well-paid staff; on the other hand, Vittoria De Feo does scarily resemble Horatio Caine: red and disheveled hair, sunglasses glued to her face even when there's no sun; zero friends, zero soul mates to pair up with to alleviate the existential suffering of life (Vittoria had indulged in some secondary interludes to fill these plot holes, but then, whenever the fling in question started to make her uncomfortable, she would take care to burn all bridges and courageously disappear into the void). Children? Don't even think about it. A life philosophy of "shoot first, ask questions later" (the only joke that Vittoria still

remembers from an outlandish black and white film that Vice Inspector Martinelli had invited her to go and watch when he still believed he had a chance with her – result: Vittoria snoring on the sofa while Martinelli finished his smug analysis of the film on his own). The Vice Inspector, meticulous, sensible, level-headed, and faithful to protocol, tends to disappear whenever he is in the proximity of his boss, and not because he's not so sharp or because he's unprepared: Matteo Martinelli is more than qualified for his role, however, his contributions have proven to be void on various occasions. Unfortunately for him, Vittoria isn't looking for a shoulder – but rather a mirror, someone who simply reflects back to her the image that she has unconsciously grown attached to, and will do all they can to make it gleam again whenever the colours become dull, or the reflection blurred, clouded by worries, misinterpretations, and uncertainty.

Vittoria moves along the corridor waving around Mandie's file; the Vice Inspector follows right behind her, trotting after her with his head down in embarrassment: he knows that Vittoria will make a scene, as she does every time they meet the RFU (and their superiors, and the suspects, and anyone else who Vittoria has been called to deal with, regardless of rank and role). The Turin Forensic Investigations Unit, like the four other entities of the Carabinieri Corps, carries out forensic research for the purpose of preliminary investigations. The sister offices of the Turin one are in Rome, Parma, Messina, and Cagliari. Each of these reports directly to the CFG (Carabinieri Forensic Investigations Group) and is supported by the SIB (Scientific Investigations Branch), specialising in the preliminary scenes under their jurisdiction. If already the other RFU departments don't enjoy a good reputation (one example of particular note: according to Vittoria, Amanda Knox and Raffaele Sollecito were released partly thanks to the terrible conduct of the RFU in Parma, reprimanded even by the Court of Appeal in its ruling), the one in Turin finds itself at the bottom of the food chain: no one knows why it was opened, there not being a sufficient number of crimes to justify the financial outlay; no one knows why it continues to exist, since the aforementioned number hadn't grown and the calibre of the matters for which the Piedmont RFU is called into action includes: dog murder (the biggest achievement of the unit was the capture of the notorious "Jack the Chihuahua Ripper," earning the fearless detectives the plaudits of Crocetta's fur-clad bourgeoisie); theft of underwear (Vittoria remembers the incident well, concluding with the arrest of one Giacomo Vettorato, a spotty teenager who was looking for a distraction to assist the draining masturbatory exercises that tyrannical raging hormones had imposed on him); muggings of old women; mysterious disappearances of donations after Easter mass; suspected suicides, such as Amanda Ferrero's; and shoplifting, which punctually increases in proximity to the national holidays. The worst part, according to Vittoria, is not the derisory share of cases, and not even the RFU building's architecture (which, from the outside, with its squared lines and iron paint, looks like a Fascist apartment block, and from the inside, with its sporadic neon lights spraying white light onto narrow, sterile corridors, would be the perfect location for the next chapter of the Resident Evil saga); the worst part, according to Vittoria, are the people who work there.

"Hey, De Feo! Martinelli! What's good?"

The intern has been working at the RIS for four years now. Nobody knows his name. Nobody bothers to ask him. He treats his colleagues as if they were drinking buddies, even if his colleagues are careful not to reciprocate.

"You'll address me properly. I am not your sister."

"Excuse me, Inspector. Sometimes, I get carried away."

"Chief Inspector, thank you. Where are you going with all that stuff?" The intern looks at Martinelli as if searching for help, but the Vice Inspector avoids eye contact so he won't be exposed to his boss's reprimands. Vittoria observes with interest the pile of paperwork that the intern has balanced in his arms: there might be a juicy clue hidden in there, something useful for the investigation.

"Well? Do we need a hand waking up?"

"I... well... I was going to the archive. They asked me to tidy up the files."

"There's nothing concerning a certain Amanda Ferrero?"

"Who?"

"Goes by Mandie," Martinelli adds with a mixture of complicity and embarrassment.

"Ah, yes! The one from *The Thin Red (Hair) Line*. Oh, and *Ravage Me, But First Feed My Ravenous Hunger for Cock*."

"Martinelli has already informed me of the brilliant career of Miss Ferrero. So? Is there something you want to tell me?"

"...about Mandie's films?"

"About the case, Christ!"

"Whi-which case, if I may ask?"

Vittoria bites her tongue: she swore to herself that she would subdue her tone in order to ingratiate herself with those she had to speak to, instead of adding a new entry to her never-ending list of aversions every time she spoke with people. She counts to ten before responding, clears her throat and lays it all out: "Amanda Ferrero, known as Mandie, was found dead in her mother's house, in Baldissero Torinese, the 13th November. It would appear to be suicide, but I was wondering if you might have any information to share with us so we can consider if there are other roads worth exploring."

"Such as?"

"She could have been killed."

"Oh. How macabre."

"You don't know anything about it?"

"Vit—ahem... Inspector De Feo, I hope you don't mind me reminding you, but I'm just an intern."

"You'll have to take that up with your superiors."

"What I mean is that I'm just responsible for the photocopying, throwing out the rubbish, and making coffee; only today they've given me permission, on a very exceptional basis, to access the archive to put the files in alphabetical order. We were using chronological order, but, apparently, it's not really the best for carrying out quick and timely searches, so we thought about—"

"Get to the point."

"I've no knowledge about any information about any case that has ever passed across these desks, although I regret not being able to help."

"Do you at least know who is working on the Ferrero case?"

"Domizio Raimondi."

"And...?"

"That's it."

"You're serious?"

"We're very busy."

"Of course you are. God forbid another chihuahua assassin turns up. One more question: Martinelli, here, has investigated the people who were close to Mandie. It would seem she had no rivalries or hostile relations. Seeing as you seem like a doubly dedicated fan, can you confirm this version, or would you like to share with me another one?"

"I can categorically deny *it*."

Vittoria's face lights up, Martinelli's clouds over: and if he missed something? If a clue had escaped unseen that even a chump like the intern managed to uncover? Vittoria's fury would come upon him with the force of a hurricane, and nothing would remain of his career but smoking rubble.

"Mandie wanted to beat the record set by Boney-Honey, the high priestess of American porn. A few months ago, Boney had a gangbang with six hundred men, and Mandie was aiming to beat her and win the title of world champion. They had a huge fight during an Instagram live. There were like hundreds of thousands of people watching. Boney didn't beat around the bush – she couldn't stand Mandie's arrogance; Mandie, on the other hand, was all smiles and flattery, all "yes, yes, Boney," and "I love your work!" and other compliments that ultimately just irritated Boney. Perhaps Mandie was just trying to calm her down, but she only made the situation worse. Or perhaps she was intentionally making fun of her. Either way, Boney then said she hopes she chokes while sucking off a bull, and Mandie said "thank you" and then ended the stream. It was funny and a little unsettling, to be honest, but I imagine this wasn't what you were looking for, right, Inspector?"

The office of Domizio Raimondi, forensic analyst and ballistics, fingerprint ID, and narcotics expert, is floodlit by an enclosure of LED rings, at the centre of which a desk rises up with a tripod on top holding an iPhone 15 Plus: in his free time, i.e. all of the time, Domizio records videos that he uploads to his YouTube channel and his TikTok, both with lots of followers, according to the intern. *In the Kitchen with Serial Killers* is a registered brand name with hundreds of thousands of followers – Vittoria wanted to verify this, hoping in her heart that the intern was actually lying – it's also a successful podcast, and rumour has it that a very profitable merchandising programme is being launched. Episode after episode, Domizio reveals sins of gluttony, original recipes and pre-execution last suppers of the most famous criminals in Italy and the world; the last episode, "In the Kitchen with Bossetti," in which Domizio explains to housewives how to prepare a cherry tart favoured by the construction worker, cost him a defamation lawsuit, from the moment that, according to Bossetti's defence lawyer, the unexpected inclusion of the beneficiary in a programme dedicated to serial killers fundamentally negated the presumption of innocence, which they intend to appeal by challenging the conviction pursuant to art. 629 c.p.p. (in his opinion, "tangible elements" would stand up to examination that could flip the Supreme Court's decision like an omelette," or at least, "guarantee his client an interview with *Le Lene*"); "In the Kitchen with Bossetti" de facto deemed the Mapello bricklayer as the only one responsible for the murder of Yara Gambirasio before the competent authority, that is, the Court of Appeal, pursuant to ex art. 633 c.p.p, had made a ruling – obviously hoping that the lawyer's request for an appeal was accepted, and that the foodies of Italy would no longer have a say on the matter.

"May I come in?" Martinelli asks after knocking on the open door. The LED light is so strong that he feels like he's found himself in a TV studio.

"Vittoria! Matteo! What a lovely surprise!" says Domizio, pausing the video; he puts his elbows on the table and delicately places his face in between his palms, smiling a plastered smile of the kind measured to the millimetre to look good on camera.

Vittoria pushes past the Vice Inspector, shielding her face with the folder.

"Mother of God, Raimondi... these things'll blind you! Can't you turn them off?"

"I'm getting old. The lights help to hide it."

"Ok, but I don't understand why you have to hide it *from me*." Domizio is sixty-one. He looks at least ten years younger.

As Vittoria says when she wants to belittle Martinelli: doing fuck all helps to stay young.

"I'd like to talk to you about the case."

"Which case?"

Vittoria perches herself on the forensic analyst's desk; her shadow obscures Domizio's face, highlighting the heavy wrinkles that mark his face: from the Vice Inspector's perspective, Domizio looks like a skull with empty eye sockets and Vittoria a raven that's come to banquet on the maggots inside there laying waste to the carcass. Vittoria spreads the photos on the surface lit up by the lamps and awaits feedback. Domizio

strokes his chin, perplexed; he observes the macabre images with an interest that Martinelli wouldn't know whether to define as real or fake; he pauses on some details – the vomit, the pills, the blotches – tapping them with his index finger; once the grim review had concluded, he goes back to cradling his face between his palms.

"Well?"

"What?"

"Are you all terminally idiotic here, or has anyone survived the epidemic?"

"Domizio, you'll have to excuse us... I don't know if you recognise the photos. It regards one Amanda Ferrero," Martinelli says, intervening to temper Vittoria's rudeness.

"Mmmh. Well, on the spot, the name says nothing to me."

"She goes by Mandie."

"Oh, of course! The one from *All the Dicks for Mary* and *An Armchair for Two – Pornhub Casting Edition*."

"Do you also dabble in these little films?"

"It's pop culture, Vittoria; anyway, it was suicide."

"The legal doctor has already said this."

"Then I don't understand how I can be of use to you."

"I was hoping you'd found, what do I know... a partial fingerprint, some additive in the pills, an out-of-place hair, any clue at all that would allow us to ascertain if behind the apparent suicide, there might be hiding something else."

"And what would be hiding, sorry?"

Vittoria picks up the sign with the name and title of the forensic analyst engraved on it, and waves it under his nose: "For fuck sake, Raimondi! *You* should be the one telling me this!"

Domizio fixes his shirt, licks his fingers and tidies up the nonexistent hair on his freckled bald head. He turns on his computer – turned off during work hours – and he invites Vittoria to come over, turning on the printer.

"You see?"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Which would mean?"

"Position of the body, fingerprints, analysis of the vomit, of the contents of the stomach and the Lorazepam (Tavor) pills: all normal, prescription included."

"Does it seem *normal* to you the fact that a girl has died in this way?"

"If it's suicide, yes – and that's exactly what we're dealing with. As you can ascertain from the document, nothing leads us to think that Amanda could have been killed or physically forced to kill herself; and what's more: nothing leads us to think that anyone else frequented that house, beyond Amanda and her mother. I found no trace of any other presence, not even a dog or cat. They must have been very alone, those women. And very sad."

"Anything else?" Vittoria says, taking the sheets from the printer.

"Boss, it seems fairly evident by now that we'll have to archive this case as suicide."

"He's smart, your little buddy."

"I wouldn't go that far."

"You'll go far, dear Matteo: file it and move on, that's how this job works. Dig too much, you risk losing sleep – sometimes, perhaps even your neck. And now, if you'll excuse me, I need to record my next video: "In the Kitchen with Pacciani." She's going to talk about how to take Capricorn men by the throat."

"Pietro Pacciani was a Capricorn? Just like me?"

"Martinelli, shut that filthy mouth of yours, and let's leave immediately."

Conclusion: the case was archived with the click of a finger, to the great humiliation of Vittoria and the maximum satisfaction of the RFU. The slothful have won the battle but not the war: Vittoria doesn't have to wait very long before a new victim ends up on the morgue table; another renowned porn star, whose filmography Vice Inspector Martinelli would, without a doubt, be inappropriately well prepared for.