Trace Elements
Also by Donna Leon

Death at La Fenice
Death in a Strange Country
The Anonymous Venetian
A Venetian Reckoning
Acqua Alta
The Death of Faith
A Noble Radiance
Fatal Remedies
Friends in High Places
A Sea of Troubles
Wilful Behaviour
Uniform Justice
Doctored Evidence
Blood from a Stone
Through a Glass, Darkly
Suffer the Little Children
The Girl of His Dreams
About Face
A Question of Belief
Drawing Conclusions
Beastly Things
The Jewels of Paradise
The Golden Egg
By Its Cover
Falling in Love
The Waters of Eternal Youth
Earthly Remains
The Temptation of Forgiveness
Unto Us a Son Is Given
Donna Leon

Trace Elements
For Ana de Vedia
They loathed to drink of the river.
He turned their waters into blood.

Handel, *Israel in Egypt*
Part the First
A man and a woman deep in conversation approached the steps of Ponte dei Lustraferi, both looking hot and uncomfortable on this late July afternoon. The broad riva gave no quarter to anyone walking along it; the white surface of the stone worked in consort with the sun, flashing back into their faces the same sunlight that hammered down on their backs.

The man had refused to wear his jacket; instead, he carried it over his shoulder, one finger latched in the loop at the collar. The woman, blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail to keep it off her back, wore beige linen trousers and a white linen shirt with long sleeves against the sun. They stopped in their tracks at the foot of the bridge, staring at the enormous boat moored in the Rio della Misericordia, blocking other boats from entering Rio dei Lustraferi, which ran perpendicularly to the right. A wall of interlocking corrugated metal panels stretched from side to side of the smaller canal, creating a dam beyond which the water level had shrunk by half.

The disappearing water had exposed slopes of mud and nasty-looking black matter on both sides of a wide channel of oily black
liquid that extended down the centre of the blocked canal. At the far end, perhaps fifty metres away, another wall of metal panels had been pounded into the mud, sealing off the canal. A boat with a yellow-bodied crane on a platform at the centre floated behind the far barrier, in front of it a hulk into which the crane emptied the sludge it dredged from the canal. A sudden gust of wind coming from the *laguna* dragged the smell of the mud ahead of it without disturbing the surface of the viscous fluid. A diesel motor on the boat whined as it sucked the remaining water through an enormous plastic hose draped over the metal panels and spewed it into the canal on the other side of the barrier.

‘*Oddio,*’ said Commissario Claudia Griffoni. ‘I've never seen this before.’

Guido Brunetti, her friend and colleague, stood motionless, his right foot poised above the first step of the bridge, transfixed, like stout Cortez staring at the Pacific. With wild surmise, he exclaimed, ‘I haven’t seen this for years.’

Griffoni laughed and waved at the sight before them. ‘I had no idea how it was done.’ She walked to the top of the bridge to get a better look at the metal barrier.

Brunetti followed and stood beside her. ‘Where’d they find the money for this?’ he asked, as though speaking to himself. That morning’s *Gazzettino* had printed a long article about the infrastructure projects diminished or cancelled for lack of funding. It listed the usual victims: the old, the young, residents who wanted to live in peace and quiet, students, teachers, even the firemen. Recalling it, Brunetti wondered how the mayor of the city, *deus ex machina*, had found the necessary funds in the city budget to begin the cleaning of the canals.

‘How kind of the mayor to toss the city some table scraps,’ Griffoni observed.

Brunetti ran his eyes down the slopes of the canal, where the mud and detritus of decades had been exposed. The black
slime began just below the high-water mark, growing thicker as it slithered into deeper water. Dark, rotten, its smell strongly unpleasant, slippery and slick, it resembled nothing so much as human waste; it filled Brunetti with disgust almost as strong as horror. ‘How fitting that it would come from him,’ he said.

Despite the smell, they made no attempt to leave. Brunetti remembered how scenes like this had been a part of his youth, when cleaning had been done primarily by hand and with far greater frequency. He recalled the wooden walkways built on both sides of the canals and the cat-like ease of the workers moving about on them with their shovels and buckets.

Thunder pealed beyond them, and they raised their hands to protect their ears. It was the motor of the crane on the boat. A black metal jaw stood in the centre of the deck, neck bent, giant mouth closed and resting.

They saw, inside a glass booth towards the prow, a man in dark blue overalls, a cigarette hanging from one side of his mouth, both hands busy with the knobs and levers before him. Returned to childhood glee, Brunetti stood transfixed by the wonder of it and by the desire for a job like that, so very close to play, but with oh, such power. Griffoni seemed equally rapt, though Brunetti doubted she longed for the job. Besides, it was unlikely that the city would hire a Neapolitan, a far greater handicap than being a woman.

Without speaking, they walked to the other side of the bridge and watched, silent, as the clenched steel teeth of the crane rose from the deck and angled out over the water. They opened, creating a hideous black maw of jagged teeth, then slowly sank to the surface of the water and disappeared below.

The man’s hands moved, and the long steel arm shifted minimally to the right, paused and seemed to shake about under the water, then began to rise. As it broke the greasy surface, Brunetti saw pieces of plastic, rubber, and metal hanging from the teeth:
it looked like a particularly large Rottweiler eating a bowl of
spaghetti. The long arm lifted and held the jaws in the air while
water cascaded back into the canal, then swung to the front of
the boat, already heaped with mud-smeared rubbish. It stopped
just above the pile of trash and sludge. Slowly the jaws pulled
open, and the junk inside crashed and clanged down on to the
pile. A few small motions of the worker’s hands shook the last
fragments free, and then the jaws swung back and sank again
into the water.

They had not noticed a second worker standing on the riva
with a shovel in his hands. As soon as the metal jaws moved
away, he stepped on to a board running across the boat and
smoothed out the pile of debris, shifting rotting plastic bags
filled with bottles to the sides, shoving at a decomposing radio,
the wheel of a bicycle, and some other objects too decayed to be
identifiable.

They watched in companionable silence for a long time, nei-
ther wanting to start walking again, each convinced that only
the other person could understand the joint pleasure to be had
in watching the machine at work. Neither spoke, united in a
strange intimacy.

After ten minutes, the crane operator got to his feet suddenly,
climbed down the short ladder from his chair to the deck, and
hurried to the side of the boat. He leaned over the water and
stared down, then put his hands above his forehead to block the
glare of the sun and moved slightly to the right, still looking
intently into the water. He went back up to the control panel and
touched something that made the hum of the motor diminish.
He called to the man with the shovel, then summoned him with
a wave. Brunetti and Griffoni watched the man with the shovel
jump on to the traverse board, almost immediately to be joined
by the crane operator, who directed his attention to the same
place in the water. The sound of the motor drowned out their
voices; the urgency of what the first one said was evident in his
gestures.

Brunetti was struck by how stiff the two men’s stance and
motions had become. The man running the machine had been
entirely at ease, but when he returned to his seat, he seemed
awkward, and Brunetti had the strong sense that he was reluc-
tant to continue.

Let it not be what I think it might be, Brunetti said to himself,
unwilling to say anything to Griffoni for fear that he would
seem foolish or be proven foolish by whatever the jaws might
pull out of the water. He glanced down at his hands, grasping at
the metal handrail attached to the edge of the bridge, and saw
that his knuckles were white. He looked to his right and saw
that Griffoni’s were, as well. He turned minimally to his friend
and saw her rigid profile, the stiffness in the line of her jaw.

Brunetti looked back at the metal arm of the crane. At a cer-
tain point, the mechanic took his hands from the controls and
jumped down again to the deck to peer over the side of the boat.
He exchanged a look with his colleague, who had returned to
stand on the riva, shrugged and walked back to his place at the
controls.

The noise of the engine deepened, and both Griffoni and
Brunetti shoved themselves away from the railing and stood
straight, waiting for whatever was to rise from those waters.
They turned at the same instant and exchanged a glance, then
turned back to the canal.

They heard the change of gear and the grating of the chain
inside its rigid protection. The arm rose from the water, and then
the jaws at the end of the crane’s arm slipped up into the light.

Brunetti braced himself to look straight at it, whatever it was.
Griffoni was a statue beside him.

The metal head swung away from them for a moment, and as
it turned back it revealed the soiled white body of a refrigerator
emerging from the waters of the canal. It was small, would barely have reached Brunetti’s waist had it been on the floor of a kitchen somewhere. As it was, the door that hung from one hinge gave it the look of something destroyed in battle.

Brunetti and Griffoni turned to look at one another again. It was she who smiled first, then Brunetti, who added a shrug. Not speaking, they turned away and started down the other side of the bridge.
They walked in easy silence for some time until Griffoni finally asked, ‘What did you think it was going to be?’

Feeling not a little foolish, Brunetti said, ‘I was afraid – from the way the men behaved – that it was going to be a body.’

She stopped; Brunetti took two steps before he noticed, paused and turned to look at her.

‘Does that happen often?’ she asked, giving heavy emphasis to the last word.

Brunetti didn’t know whether to smile or not. ‘No, thank heaven. It doesn’t.’

Griffoni raised her chin and stared at nothing for a moment, then asked, ‘That murdered woman they found at Lido, when was it, six, seven years ago?’ Brunetti recalled it, and how it had shocked the city. ‘What were they, Bangladeshi?’ she asked.

‘Indian,’ he corrected her. ‘But that was before you came here.’

She nodded. ‘I read about it. Il Mattino went wild for it, like all the papers. There was a feeding frenzy about the whole thing, remember?’