

"A convincing novel, beautifully written."—MARY DORIA RUSSELL

# D E T O U R

A NOVEL

ANDROMEDA  
ROMANO-LAX

AUTHOR OF *THE SPANISH BOW*

## Praise for Andromeda Romano-Lax's *The Detour*:

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“As Nazi Germany passes from living memory, novels that allow the reader to travel in an ethical landscape are increasingly important. Andromeda Romano-Lax has a fine feel for the moments of clarity that are recognized only in hindsight, when chance and personal defects—moral and physical—combine to produce heroism, or mediocrity, or cowardice. A convincing novel, beautifully written.”

—Mary Doria Russell, bestselling author of *The Sparrow* and *A Thread of Grace*

“A suspenseful tale of artistic ideals, culture and power, complex family bonds, and redemptive love with one of the most finely crafted narratives I’ve ever read. It’s certain to earn Andromeda Romano-Lax a new level of readership. Vivid and heartbreaking, set against a shameful time in world history, Lax celebrates the resilience of the human condition, and its ability to heal against all odds.”

—Jo-Ann Mapson, author of *Solomon’s Obedience*

“A wonderfully evocative and lyrical novel—a coming-of-age story woven into an adventure of art-smuggling under the Nazis. Romano-Lax brilliantly depicts a triumph over the seductive dangers of passivity when faced by love, art and the moral choices of life. A gemstone of a book!”

—Simon Goldhill, author of *Jerusalem*

“Both a thriller and a poetic journey of a young art specialist and an ancient statue through the deceits and dangers of the Third Reich. Plunging into crazy adventures in a truck on the back roads of Italy and fleeing long-buried memories, Ernst seeks the safe delivery of the statue and in the process discovers loyalty, love, and his own soul. Andromeda Romano-Lax is a unique and wonderfully gifted writer.”

—Stephanie Cowell, author of *Claude & Camille*

“Swept up in the intrigue and humor, adventure and tragedy of *The Detour*, a reader might overlook the deep understanding of history and art imparted by author Andromeda Romano-Lax. Set in 1938 Europe during the rise of Nazi Germany, the novel does what only literature can do, allowing us to experience moral complexity and struggle through a single beating heart. As Ernst Vogler travels across Italy to bring a famous marble sculpture home to Hitler, you will ride along with him through small villages and fields of sunflowers, through violence and love, through history in the making. And when you arrive at the end, you—like Ernst—will have been changed by the journey.”

—Eowyn Ivey, author of *The Snow Child*

“With elegance and an eye for the unexpected, Ms. Romano-Lax distills the often overwhelming anguish of World War II into this elegiac tale of an earnest young art curator on a journey into Italy, where he finds himself caught between his reverence for the past and the horrors of the future. An evocative portrait of one man’s passage into maturity and the

resiliency of the human spirit, even in midst of the unimaginable.”

—C.W. Gortner, author of *The Confessions of Catherine de Medici*

“A marvelous adventure across landscapes both inner and outer, *The Detour* is a moving study in art and memory, history and geography, courage and compassion and every kind of love. Beautifully executed, deeply felt, and crammed with what feels for all the world like reality itself, it’s a rare and valuable book indeed.”

—Jon Clinch, author of *Finn and Kings of the Earth*

“A poignant and important historical drama, as well as part road trip and compelling adventure, *The Detour* defies our expectations on every page. Andromeda Romano-Lax is a powerful and moving storyteller.”

—Jennifer Gilmore, author of *Something Real*

“It’s 1938, and already the Sonderprojekt is at work, bringing the great art of Europe to Germany for the Fuhrer. Young Ernst Vogler, reeling from the news that his mentor has been marched off in the night, is sent to Rome to collect a valuable statue, the *Discus Thrower*. He expects to head straight for the border, but Italian escorts Cosimo and Enzo have other ideas, taking him on a wild ride that sets quirky and lively humanity against the grinding, impersonal forces of war, history, and power.... The book is no (inappropriately) jolly picaresque; Romano-Lax, author of the well-received *The Spanish Bow*, keeps the palette just dark enough to remind us of the terror that is there and the terror that’s to come. Nice paced, brisk with dialogue, and lyric at the right moment, this would be great for book clubs.”

—*Library Journal*

## **Praise for *The Spanish Bow***

“An impressive and richly atmospheric debut.”

—*The New York Times Book Review* (a *New York Times* Editors’ Choice)

“Time and setting, character and plot come together in this exceptionally appealing first novel about a master cellist and his complicated relationship with the country of his birth and the poisoned times in which he performs. Readers will be captivated by this delightful book loosely inspired by the life of the great cellist Pablo Casals.”

—*Library Journal* (starred review)

“This riveting historical page-turner moves inexorably toward a heartrending crescendo.”

—*Booklist*

“For sheer scope and ambition, this is a tough debut to beat.”

—*Publishers Weekly*

“Extraordinary, gripping.... Encounters with actual world players, like Picasso, Adolf Hitler, Franco, Kurt Weill and others, constitute a feature of this many-favored book. Another is the author’s obvious love for Spain and its colorful cities, which are unforgettably detailed.... In the end, *The Spanish Bow* suggests that fighting the manifest evil in the world can be even more damaging than tilting at windmills. And yet, and yet—there always remains the message and nobility of opposition in itself.”

—*BookPage*

“Andromeda Romano-Lax’s powerful first novel, *The Spanish Bow*, is an account of Spain during the years of 1890-1940, as experienced by a Catalan child prodigy who goes on to become court musician and then the country’s most celebrated cellist. Epic in scale it is full of richly detailed tableaux of Catalonian peasant life, bohemian Barcelona, the chaos of the Second Republic, and the rise of Francoist fascism.... [*The Spanish Bow*] excels as a portrait of a country at a painful moment in its evolution.”

—*Times Literary Supplement* (London)

“Can art save us from ourselves? In her elegant debut, Romano-Lax ponders this timeless question through the ambitious tale of Feliu Delargo, a gifted cellist born in turn-of-the-century Spain.... From the hypocrisies of the courts of Madrid to the terror of Nazi-occupied Paris, Romano-Lax weaves the upheavals of the first half of the 20th century into an elegy on the simultaneous power and impotency of art, and the contradictions of the human spirit.”

—*Historical Novels Review*

“Vivid and absorbing.... Romano-Lax’s passion for music is tangible but not daunting. The characters are convincing (Delargo and Al-Cerraz are based on historical figures) and by using Feliu’s voice along with her own narration, the author can point up the shortcomings in her self-understanding. She exposes the tension among the characters with masterly subtlety.”

—*Times* (London)

“Andromeda Romano-Lax’s ambitious and atmospheric debut examines 50 years of Spanish history through the eyes of a fictional Catalan cellist, Feliu Delargo; en route she has much to say on the relationship between music and politics.”

—*Guardian*

“(A) vast, inventive novel.”

—*Telegraph*

“An inspired portrait of the cello virtuoso’s unique career.”

—*Elle* (France)

“Can music transcend politics or must the musician’s only true response to authoritarianism be principled silence? This question is asked throughout Andromeda Romano-Lax’s ambitious debut, *The Spanish Bow*, a sweeping memoir of a fictional Spanish cellist, Feliu Delargo. His life, from his improverished upbringing in rural Catalonia, via apprenticeships in Barcelona

and Madrid, to a glittering career as a European superstar, is the thread that leads us through Spanish political and musical history in the early 20th century.”

—*Observer*

“Expertly woven throughout the book are cameo appearances by Pablo Picasso, Adolf Hitler, Francisco Franco, Bertolt Brecht, and others, but it is the fictional Feliu, Justo, and Avila who will keep you mesmerized to the last page.”

—*Christian Science Monitor*



**ALSO BY THE AUTHOR**

*The Spanish Bow*

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# THE DETOUR

Andromeda Romano-Lax

**SOHO**



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Published by  
Soho Press, Inc.  
853 Broadway  
New York, NY 10003

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data  
Romano-Lax, Andromeda, 1970–  
The detour / Andromeda Romano-Lax.

p. cm.

eISBN: 978-1-61695-050-7

1. Germans—Italy—Fiction. 2. Art—Collectors and collecting—Fiction. 3. Italy—History—1922–1945—Fiction. I. Title.

PS3618.O59D48 2012

813'.6—dc23

2011034072

v3.1



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Chapter 16: 1948

*Author's Note*

To Tziporah, Aryeh, and Brian:

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fellow travelers along old Roman roads,  
with love and gratitude for our time together  
in Italy and Munich

“We are becoming more Greek, from day to day.”

**Friedrich Nietzsche**

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“The day of individual happiness has passed.”

**Adolf Hitler**

1948

## PIEDMONT, NORTHERN ITALY

The russet bloom on the vineyards ahead, the yellow-leafed oaks, a hint of truffle fattening in moldy obscurity underfoot—none of it is truly familiar, because I first came here not only in a different season, but as a different man. Yet the smell of autumn anywhere is for me the smell of memory, and I am preoccupied as my feisty guide leads me through the woods and fields up toward the old Piedmontese villa.

When a salt-and-pepper blur charges out of the grass and stops just in front of me growling, I stand my ground. I resist retreating; I reach out a hand. Foam drips from the dog's black gums onto the damp earth. I am in no hurry, and neither is she.

The sprint seems to have cost the dog most of her remaining energy, though. Her thin ribs heave as she alternately whines and threatens.

“Tartufa?”

The teeth retract and the quivering nose comes forward. Her speckled, shorthaired side moves in and out like a bellows.

“Old hound, is it really you?”

She sniffs my hand, backs away for one more growl, then surrenders her affection. These have been ten long and lonely years. Take a scratch where you can get it.

She guides me, as if I have forgotten, up to the old barn. Through a dirty window, I glimpse the iron bed frame, one dresser. But other items I'd once known by look and touch—the red lantern, the phonograph, any trace of woman's clothing—are gone. A dark stain marks the stone floor, but perhaps it's only moisture or fungus. In the corner, wedged into the frame of an oval mirror, is an old postcard of the Colosseum. I know what is written on the other side. I wrote it.

I consider walking up the hill to the villa's family burial ground to check for any recent additions—but no, even after coming this far, I'm still not ready for that. Tartufa trots ahead toward the side of the main house, toward the figure seated alone at the wooden table, a spiral of blue smoke rising from his thick-knuckled fingers. The door from the terrace into the kitchen hangs crookedly. Everything about the house seems more worn, sloping like the old man's shoulders.

He calls out first. “*Buongiorno.*”

“Adamo?” I try.

Now he sits up straighter, squinting as I approach.

“Zio Adamo?”

It takes a minute for him to recognize me.

“The Bavarian? *Grüss Gott,*” he cackles, using the only German phrase he knows. But still he doesn't seem to believe. “You're coming from the North?”

“No, from Rome. I took the train most of the way. Then a ride, a bit of a walk ...”

“You are living there?”

“Just visiting museums.”

“Holiday?”

“Repatriation of antiquities.” And I explain what that means as he nods slowly, taking the names of new agencies, international agreements, the effort of my own homeland to undo what was done—a history already begging to be forgotten. Wonder of wonders, the old man replies, how the world changes and stays the same. Except for some things.

After he pours me a glass of cloudy plum liqueur, I take a seat at the old oak table and ask him about his sister-in-law, Mamma Digiloramo. He gestures with his chin up to the hill.

“And Gianni and his wife?”

They occupy the main house with their four children, Zio Adamo explains. He lives with them, and though this villa has been in the Digiloramo family for three generations and Gianni is not even a blood relative, it doesn't matter—Adamo himself feels like a houseguest now. Fine, it's less of a headache for him. Fewer worries about the crops, which haven't done so well in the last few years. Surely I noticed the shriveled black grapes on the west side of the road, approaching the main house.

When I empty my glass of liqueur and decline a second, he says, “You haven't asked about *everyone*,” with an emphasis on the last word.

When I don't reply he volunteers, “She moved to town. During the war, everything here went to pieces. Now she works in a café. She lives with her son.”

Stunned, I repeat his last word back to him: “*Figlio?*”

I must appear tongue-tied because he laughs, clapping me on the shoulder. “That's about how her mother looked way back when, discovering the happy news. Not a virgin birth, but close. We celebrated without any questions.”

“*È quasi un miracolo.*”

“Your Italian is much better than last time.”

“I've been practicing.”

“Why?”

“No particular reason. It's a beautiful language.”

He runs his tongue over his teeth, unconvinced. “If you wait, I can find someone to take you into town—if that is where you are going.”

“*Grazie.* I'll walk.”

“It will take you two, three hours.”

“*Va bene.* I could use the time with my thoughts.”

“I don't recommend it.”

“Walking?”

“No, remembering.” He doesn't smile.

Gesturing for me to wait, he pushes to his feet slowly, reaching for the cane leaning against the table's corner, then escorts me back down the path, past the barn, to the track that leads to the dusty road lined with hazelnut bushes. Something is bothering him. At the end, he straightens his back, lifts his whiskered chin, and brushes his dry lips against my cheek. “That's as far as I go, or I won't make it back.”

The dog has followed us, grateful for her master's unhurried pace. I reach down to pat her side and mumble a few final endearments, whispering her name a final time.

“That isn't the original Tartufa, you know,” Zio Adamo says, looking a little embarrassed.

be correcting me. "It's her pup—the last one."

"This, a pup?"

"A very old one."

"They look the same," I say, squatting down to scratch her ears again, patting her ribs, puzzling over the pattern of her coat.

He leans on the cane, face lowered to mine. "Certainly, you remember what happened in Tartufa ..."

"Yes," I say, standing up to brush my hands on my trousers. "That's right."

"It makes me feel better that I'm not the only one who makes mistakes." Zio Adamo smiles. "I'm sorry for not recognizing you right away. Even after you sat down, it was hard to believe."

"No need for apologies—"

"It's not just your Italian."

"I couldn't put two words together back then."

"No," he insists, with sudden vehemence, enough to make me wish I'd accepted that second, courage-bolstering drink. "You were different in other ways."

"Weren't we all?"

But of course, I know what he means.

There is a temptation to say that the long-ago past is a fog, that it is nearly impossible to recall the mindset of an earlier time. But that is a lie. The truth is that more recent events, such as the days leading up to the surrender, are a fog. In and out of the army, where they sent me again once it was clear I had made a mess of things on what might have been a relatively simple professional assignment—all that is a fog. I passed through it in a half-numb state, registering few sensations beyond the taste of watery potato soup and the unsticking of dirty, wet wool from frozen, bleeding feet.

A year or two, or eight, can elapse that way, mercifully, while a fundamental childhood incident or an essential, youthful journey can remain polished by obsessive and dutiful reminiscence. It can remain like marble in one's mind: five days in Italy—harder, brighter, more fixed and more true than anything that has happened before or since.

Except I'd forgotten about the dog, and only now that I am reminded can I hear in my mind the stranger's fatal Luger shot and recall how we all stopped, stunned, watching—and clearly forgetting, *wanting* to forget—even as the sound rang out across the farm, the first shot of several that morning, my last morning in Italy, ten years ago. Of course.

And if I have confused that one detail, have I confused anything else? Am I remembering my final moments at the villa inaccurately—not only the bitter, but also the sweet? Am I imagining a tenderness and a sense of possibility that never were?

But that's too much to ask without time to absorb and reflect on what Adamo has said, what the quiet of this villa and the padlock on the barn suggest. I cannot truly remember *her*, I cannot truly remember *then*, until I can remember the person I was that long decade ago—a difficult portrait of an even more difficult time.

On this afternoon, with acorns crunching beneath my feet, I have several hours and nothing else to do as I walk, inhaling the soft musk of the season, realizing with each footfall that I have little to lose given how much has been forfeited already. Is there also something, perhaps, to gain? No telling. Only the brittle sound of cracking shells, the memory of

different breeze on my face, the recollection of a less pleasant stroll, and all that followed.





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PART



JULY 1938  
MUNICH, GERMANY



## CHAPTER 1

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A light evening rain had started to fall, but it brought no freshness, only the wafting odor of brewhouse mash settling like a brown shroud over the wet cobblestones. There was no question of the month—July—or the date—the eighth. I know that because I'd been counting the days since I'd last seen Gerhard, counting them with mounting unease. On that damp and suffocating night, I took the longest possible route to my mentor's house, through Shirker's Alley, where I passed a man who had clearly gone out of his way to avoid the required salute at the SS-guarded *Feldherrnhalle* monument. And yet as we drew near, we each looked away at unnatural angles, and I told myself I had been stupid and would never take this route again.

For two weeks, Gerhard hadn't appeared at work or answered any of the letters I'd sent to his home. In the absence of formal explanations, no colleague dared make a comment, not even Leonie, one of our department's three secretaries, who—though fond of me—had avoided my every glance for several days, even going so far as to type without a sheet of paper in the roller the last time I'd passed her desk.

Standing now outside Gerhard's darkened door, rapping without expectation, I tried to pretend that he was out at a beer hall, even knowing that wasn't his sort of place. I was turning to go when a tuft of dirty-blond, sleep-mussed hair appeared in the opening gap. The hired girl looked so anxious and eager that I immediately regretted having come.

"He hasn't paid me in a fortnight. I can't stay if he isn't returning."

"Returning from where?"

"*Bitte*, come in."

I stepped back. "Did he pack a suitcase?"

"I started to pack one for him, but he told me not to bother." She said this defensively, as if I might question her competence and fidelity, when that was the furthest thing from my mind. "And *they* agreed when he said it."

"They?"

"Two of them." She looked down at her bare, cold-reddened toes curling over the threshold. The building's heat had been turned down or off. There was no smell of cooking or any food at all coming from the hallway, only the dank, mineral smell of the tomb.

"Perhaps they weren't taking him far?"

This jogged a memory. "Not far—a town twenty or so kilometers from here, they were telling him. He recognized the name." She pronounced the two syllables, which seemed to mean little to her but plenty to me and to any other Munich resident who read the newspapers. *Dachau*. Just a quaint village, but one that had found a profitable new industry in imprisoning behind growing walls the unmentionable domestic elements—everyday criminals and political enemies, initially—that our government had determined must be contained. Gerhard was not a criminal, nor even politically active, I would have argued at the time, not understanding then what I finally know now: that everything is political—even a simple lack of discretion, or an opinion about art or aesthetics. Especially that.

The rain had started to fall harder, plastering my hair to my forehead, while I held my hand

in my hands like someone delivering bad news rather than receiving it.

“But what does it matter, near or far?” the hired girl added, put off by my alarmed expression, standing straighter with her arms wrapped around her thin chest. “Either way he’d be wanting a change of clothes in all that time. And his medicine—his bag of pills—he can’t go more than a few days without them, but they didn’t let him take anything at all. Here, please. You’re getting soaked.”

But she wasn’t offering me true shelter. She had nothing to give, only much to take away, just as I had much to take away from her, by explaining the things she might not wish to understand. We were all alone in this, and all of us waiting.

When I wouldn’t cross the threshold, she withdrew briefly and returned with a book in her hands—a reference guide that I recognized from Gerhard’s desk, the second volume of Luca’s *Sculpture of Ancient Greece and Rome*, inscribed to me personally. It was an unusual parting gift from a man who’d had insufficient time to take care of more basic details. But he’d been a wonderful mentor for this reason precisely: he never forgot his priorities. Art and beauty, beauty and art. No matter what was happening; no matter what would happen.

The first time we’d met was at a small, evening art reception with several dozen mid-level bureaucrats and military officials in attendance. I’d been hired just that week, and I was so nervous entering the floodlit gallery that even the soles of my feet were sweating. A banner on the wall over my head proclaimed: “Art is a noble and fanatical mission.” I squinted at that odd choice of words—*fanatical?*—but thank goodness I was alone and anxious and not the type to make an impromptu wisecrack. If I’d recognized who had authored the statement, which would appear again at future art exhibitions, I wouldn’t have risked an expression at all.

I’d just started heading for the main exhibit when an old man took me by the elbow, pinching it with a shaking, ring-covered hand as he whispered: “*Like it, love it, like it*, and so on for the final painting, an undecided tilt of the head will suffice.”

Wrenching my arm free, I turned to study his drink-flushed face. His jowls sagged above a pale blue cravat, the same shade as his eyes; his pale forehead gleamed, only slightly less shiny than his gaudy cuff links. I resented his pompous manner, but a moment later, when my new boss and the head of *Sonderprojekt*, Herr Mueller, invited me to survey the first wall of the gallery and tell him precisely what I thought, I recited like an obedient schoolboy what the opinionated elbow-pincher had said. From the pleased look on Mueller’s face, I could tell I’d just passed my first test with flying colors.

The next morning, meeting him again in the *Sonderprojekt* basement offices, I thanked the old man and learned his name.

“We wouldn’t want a disagreement of taste casting a pall over your first days here,” Gerhard said, his pale blue irises twitching as they did in the hours before he calmed them with his first midday tonic.

“But what about the truth?”

“The truth is something we savor—usually in private. If you are lucky, Herr Vogler, you will have many private pleasures in your life which shall make up for some public inconveniences, such as saying things you don’t necessarily believe, and purchasing the world’s most valuable art for fools who neither deserve nor appreciate it.”

He wasn’t the most popular man in our office. But *how* unpopular, I did not fully appreciate.

until that starless, inclement night in July, standing outside the domestic threshold he had not crossed in a fortnight with his poor servant girl eyeing me so desperately.

“He told me some people from his office might come by,” she said. “But no one has come. Except for you, finally.”

“I’m sorry,” I said belatedly. “Vogler. Ernst Vogler.”

That introduction seemed to give her no joy. It proved only how small her employer’s world had become. He’d mentioned me perhaps more than the others, and here at long last I stood: an unimpressive figure, young, a little thin, no hint of power or privilege in my manner or dress, one elbow pressed against my rib cage, trying to avoid scratching the mostly-forgotten spot that itched in times of stress. I’m sure she had hoped for more.

“He said that if you came, I should give you this.”

When I hesitated, she asked in a tremulous voice, “Don’t you want it? At least he’s given you something. He didn’t give me anything—not even what he owed.”

“Yes, of course.” I fumbled for some *Reichsmarks* in my pocket and handed them to her before taking the book and sliding it under my jacket, out of the rain.



Our *Sonderprojekt* department, where I had been part of the art curatorial staff for just under two years, was located in the basement at 45 Brienner Strasse. Yes—*that* address; that’s how important art was in those days, to the people at the very top. The Third Reich’s very first architectural project was not a diplomatic building or some other temple of power but the House of German Art, a new museum completed in 1937. *Sonderprojekt* looked beyond the museum and beyond Germany to a larger vision, both artistically and geographically speaking. To what precisely, I did not yet know or need to know. My job was only to catalogue the world’s obtainable art objects and to add more items to the master acquisition list—a list based not on finite resources or some scholarly criteria but only on taste, and symbolic significance, and that least definable thing: desire. Whose desire? Usually our leader’s, of course. But each of us also had objects we personally admired and longed to see or have in hand in collecting, for reasons as difficult to explain as the deepest merits of fine art itself.

The day after visiting Gerhard’s house, I spent as much time as possible in the dark stacks and near the corner filing cabinets, pulling out and replacing one unread catalog card after another, trying to look busy while I puzzled over Gerhard’s predicament—which, in his absence, had become my predicament as well. Section B of the master art acquisition list was researching featured only sculptures; another researcher was assigned to paintings; a third to the special problem of avoiding counterfeits. Anyone watching me closely, as I fumbled in the wrong drawers, might have guessed that I was upset. But that was no crime to be upset.

Neither was it a crime to laugh, and Gerhard had laughed—especially whenever a unimpressive item made its way into our hands: a statuette of a ballerina no more finely crafted or interesting than a child’s music-box figurine, or a muscular male nude with a caveman’s brow, or some other example of questionable art, hastily collected. He was supposed to have expertise in these matters. He was also supposed to find a way to share that expertise without humiliating others whose taste was not as refined as his own, especially others of high rank. But that kind of prudence had never been his strength.

Back at my gunmetal-gray desk, I was surprised to see Leonie waiting with a worn and bulging paper bag in her hands—a peace offering, perhaps, to make up for her recent avoidance of me. When I sat down, she pushed it across the desk blotter.

“Is it a sandwich?”

She laughed nervously. “No, silly. Candles—twelve of them. For you.”

“I nearly forgot,” I said, taking the bag gratefully. “I suppose they’re sold out everywhere.”

The natural blush on her cheeks showed, even from behind the stain of applied rouge. I thought ahead and bought extras a month ago.”

That night marked the start of the second annual German Day of Art, celebrating new displays of all-German art that turned away from modernism and harked back to the great clarity and tradition of the past: images of peasants and working folk, landscapes, cows and horses (but only very strong ones), and the ideal and healthy human form. The art of the post-degenerate era. This focus was the cornerstone of our entire national cultural policy. It meant so much to our leader that he had funded many artistic activities from the profits of his *Mein Kampf* sales. His “struggle” had become the direct sponsor of art in Germany—the two things inextricably intertwined.

On this weekend-long “day of art” there was an exhibition of German works for sale, overseen by the Führer himself, who not only had rejected at the last minute eighty already approved works but would go on to purchase over two hundred works that did please him. These purchases were separate from the more ambitious and distinctly more international *Sonderprojekt* collection that we basement experts were cataloging and beginning to acquire. The Führer’s insatiable appetite for art objects was the reason we called him (always discreetly, for though it was not an insult, it still suggested an inappropriate familiarity) *Der Kunstsammler*—“The Collector.” If we were not aware in 1938, we would soon become aware that *Der Kunstsammler* had the power to collect just about anything—or anyone—of interest to him. And the power to dispose of the same. How could it have been otherwise? But this isn’t the voice of the twenty-four-year-old still learning his place in a new office, in a new profession. That is only middle-aged hindsight, which can be just as dishonest as the blinkered presentism of youth.

During the opening procession of the German Day of Art activities, all residents were required to display three candles in every one of our apartment windows. If anyone was expected to remember and comply, we members of *Sonderprojekt* were. There were dozens of ways to reveal your incompetence or disloyalty, and new ways were being invented all the time.

“Thank you, Leonie,” I said, opening the bag of candles, realizing even as I said it that she had not only anticipated my faltering memory, but had remembered how many windows my lonely apartment had, despite having peered through them only a few times. She might have assumed, over the awkward winter months following our final date, that she had shown me too much, given too much away for free as the saying goes, and that’s why I’d lost interest. But in truth, she hadn’t shown enough. I didn’t need a girlfriend who would change clothes only in the water closet and make love only in the dark, who would pretend not to notice the alarming changes in our departmental staffing just as she pretended not to notice the pimple scar on my rib cage.

Still, one doesn’t like to appear ungrateful.

“Leonie,” I started to say, but she could see the question coming and looked down quickly so that I could see only the impenetrably thick spikes of her painted lashes. “At least look at me, Leonie. Please?”

But she would not. Someday, I would no longer be in that basement office, but she would be there still, typing without a sheet of paper in the roller, cradling the heavy phone to her soft cheek even after the lines had been cut—not because she lacked competence or intelligence, but because she knew walking away was no answer either. Perhaps she was smarter than all of us.

“It’s a lucky day,” she said quickly. “I think Herr Mueller is planning to call you into his office.”

“Lucky? I doubt it.” I tried one last time, my voice lower yet. “Leonie, I know you have a good heart. I know you liked Gerhard well enough ...”

She whispered, “I know he was opinionated.”

“But isn’t that our job here? How can one curate art without having opinions?”

When she didn’t answer, I pleaded, “You see the correspondence that comes through. You must have an idea ...” But she was still looking down, studying her shoes. “Never mind. When I see Herr Mueller, I’ll ask him.”

Mueller was in an effusive mood on that Friday afternoon with a weekend of festivities ahead, including at least one event where he would spend time with topmost officials of the Reich, including *Der Kunstsammler* himself. (The rest of our small staff avoided such anxiety, producing “opportunities” whenever possible, coming and going by our own entrance, often forgotten in our subterranean lair.) Mueller asked me to sit but couldn’t contain his own nervous energy and proceeded to pace in the windowless room. There was small talk about my family, cut short when I reminded him that my own parents had passed away—my father just the previous winter. The awkwardness didn’t seem to bother him.

I was preparing to ask my question—to make a principled stand by asking *the* question—when Mueller sat down and slapped a file onto the desk and opened it, showing me the photograph clipped to the inside corner of the folder. “You know this statue, of course?”

I paused, tongue sticky against the ridged roof of my mouth, admiring the recognizable figure of Myron’s ancient Athenian *Discus Thrower*: an image of the perfect male specimen captured in a sporting posture of dynamic tension. “Yes, of course.”

Mueller turned the file around, looked at the photo again. “*He* wants it. And he will have it, no matter the considerable expense.”

I didn’t say anything at first—not because I was too junior a staff member, or too inexperienced in this particular area to comment. On the contrary, I knew this statue well better than anyone in the department. Gerhard’s taste had favored the Italian Renaissance, especially Bernini. My taste, my self-education, my training, my fixations favored this controlled, classical, iconic excellence.

I fell into a momentary trance, staring at the photo and imagining all that the photo itself could not capture. I loved this object as one always loves the most perfect example of an artistic period, the most realized projection of a cultural virtue. But “love” does not explain the feeling entirely. For what I felt most about the *Discus Thrower* was a driving curiosity: certainty, guided or misguided, that beholding this ancient statue in person, at close range would answer an obsessive question and a personal need that had led me into the study of

classical art in the first place.

I didn't like to see the folder shut, even though I knew exactly where to find a larger and better image: di Luca, vol. 2, p. 227—or any other classical art reference book in the extensive *Sonderprojekt* collection.

Mueller tapped the closed folder: “Herr Vogler ...”

“Yes?”

“You don't have any questions about what we do here, do you?”

Questions? Those had been the specialty of my former mentor. Hard questions as well as soft, teasing ones. Rhetorical questions; questions posed over the smudged tops of wine glasses at parties; questions asked under the stark lighting of modern museums; questions asked with a flourish of Gerhard's blue-veined, aristocratic hands: “What are the foundations of civilized society?” And: “What purpose do these artistic images serve?” And: “Should all these European masterpieces really be gathered up by one people, in just one place?”

He had said the truth was a private matter, but in his own pointed questioning, he forced the truth where it did not fit or easily belong and so he had brought his own problems upon himself. Or so it would have been convenient to think, as one more way to avoid thinking.

Still, until I'd seen the picture of the statue, I'd been ready. Now, I discovered that the question I had prepared carefully and brought to Mueller's office had withered in my dry mouth.

“I don't know what you mean, sir.”

“Do you speak Italian?”

“I am ... moderately capable.”

“What do you think about going to Italy?”

That would have been Gerhard's assignment. He had not explained the particulars, but I recalled the elliptical conversations, beginning when *Der Kunstsammler* had met with Mussolini for the first time, in May. Presuming he'd be tapped to return there at the behest of our culturally acquisitive leadership, my mentor had begun to revive his own memories of that fabled, sunny country: The hill towns and piazzas. The ruins and vistas. The frescoes and fountains. And a certain woman he had met somewhere—I think it was a town called Perugia, or maybe Pisa. The relationship had lasted no more than a few days but had meant the world to him, and I had been bold enough in my naïve youth to ask, “But how can something like that matter if it only lasted a few days?” He had grabbed my hands in his own lilac-scented ones and told me that, in his life, some of the times that stood out the most had been only a matter of hours, not days, and if I had never experienced that, then I needed Italy far more than he did.

At best I could say to Mueller: “I'm not sure I'm the most suited to the task, intellectually and artistically speaking. And—how do I say this?—I'm not much of a traveler.”

Herr Mueller started laughing. I couldn't understand why.

“That's fine,” he said, clapping me on the shoulder. “We don't need an expert traveler. We just need someone who won't screw up.”

## CHAPTER 2

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The train stopped for an unexpectedly long time at Bolzano. It nearly lost head altogether at Chiusi. It gathered for a final burst of effort before it delivered us, grim and gritty from the trip, through the tight pelvis of girdling roads, and finally, with a squall of brakes and a sob of steam, into hectic Rome.

As it turned out, despite what the local Fascisti claimed, the trains didn't run on time, after all.

It was nearly bedtime when I checked into my pensione, where the resident signora invited me to dine, despite the questionable hour, with her other European guests. When I declined, she must have decided I wouldn't need breakfast either because the next morning, following a night of fitful sleep, none was provided.

I made my displeasure as plain as I was able, given some conjugating difficulties, and returned to my room, where I took a position in front of the rust-spotted mirror, distracted by the discovery of a small stain on my shirtfront. Another inconvenience. But given that I planned to be in Italy for such a limited time—a single day in Rome, another long day returning—I assumed my second dress shirt would suffice. Perhaps I would give the signora my first to wash, but perhaps not. I would evaluate her competence only after she delivered a suitable breakfast. Putting her in the position of the one to be tested made me feel momentarily better, as I was out of the pupil's examination chair for a moment myself, on a day when I expected the tests to be challenging and the examiners unforgiving.

It was while I was most vulnerable, half-dressed and fighting the temptation of further ruminations, that the incident occurred. There was a quick knock—no calling out, no request for permission to enter—and the bronze knob turned. In shuffled the bowlegged signora with a small wooden tray in one hand, catching me standing in front of the mirror, unclothed above the waist. My clean shirt was just beyond my reach, laid out on the sagging bed. Our eyes met, her chin dropped, and there—on my bare rib cage—her gaze rested and stubbornly remained.

She lowered the tray onto my nightstand, refusing to look away, chattering insistently without any comprehension of my distress. I reached for the clean shirt and struggled to push each fist through the tight sleeves in an effort to shield myself. But even through the fabric, I continued to feel the heat of her curious gaze on that jagged, pink scar.

Artists are careful with raw materials because they know no amount of technical ability can make up for faulty marble or poorly mixed paint. The raw material of the moment was my own psychic equilibrium, not to be regained.

Of course, how much easier it was to blame a flash of insecurity than anything that had preceded it; how much easier to focus on a stranger's indiscretion, rather than any personal complicity or weakness in days prior. But it was all wrapped into that moment, somehow. And why shouldn't it have been? The question of a body's classic beauty—or its deep flaws—was integral to my artistic training, related to the item I had come to see and transport, and was in all other ways inseparable from why I had come to Rome. In any case, I did not appreciate her staring and reminding me—least of all on that day.



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