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THE LOVER'S PORTRAIT
AN ART MYSTERY

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Traveling Life Press
Amsterdam

The Lover's Portrait: An Art Mystery
(Adventures of Zelda Richardson Volume 2)

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Traveling Life Press published June 2016

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ISBN-10 number: 1523489170
ISBN-13 number: 978-1523489176

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Author photograph by Fototeam.nl
Cover Design by James, GoOnWrite.com

To Philip and Cherie, for all your love and support

ONE

June 26, 1942

Just two more crates, then our work is finally done, Arjan reminded himself as he bent down to grasp the thick twine handles, his back muscles already yelping in protest. Drops of sweat were burning his eyes, blurring his vision. "You can do this," he said softly, heaving the heavy oak box upwards with an audible grunt.

Philip nodded once then did the same. Together they lugged their loads across the moonlit room, down the metal stairs and into the cool subterranean space below. After hoisting the last two crates onto a stack close to the ladder, Arjan smiled in satisfaction, slapping Philip on the back as he regarded their work. One hundred and fifty-two crates holding his most treasured objects, and those of so many of his friends, were finally safe. Relief briefly overcame the panic and dread he'd been feeling for longer than he could remember. Preparing the space and artwork had taken more time than he'd hoped it would, but they'd done it. Now he could leave Amsterdam knowing he'd stayed true to his word. Arjan glanced over at Philip, glad that he'd trusted him. He stretched out a hand towards the older man, "They fit perfectly."

Philip answered with a hasty handshake and a tight smile before nodding towards the ladder, "Shall we?"

He was right, Arjan thought, *there was still so much to do.* They climbed back up into the small shed and closed the heavy metal lid, careful to cushion its fall. They didn't want to give the neighbors an excuse to call the Gestapo. Not when they were so

close to being finished.

Philip picked up a shovel and scooped sand onto the floor, letting Arjan rake it out evenly before adding more. When the sand was an inch thick, they shifted the first layer of heavy cement tiles into place, careful to fit them snug up against each other.

As they heaved and pushed, Arjan allowed himself to think about the future for the first time in weeks. Hiding the artwork was only the first step; he still had a long road to go before he could stop looking over his shoulder. First, back to his place to collect their suitcases. Then a short walk to Central Station where second-class train tickets to Venlo were waiting. Finally, a taxi ride to the Belgian border where his contact would provide him with falsified travel documents and a chauffeur-driven Mercedes-Benz. The five Rembrandt etchings in his suitcase would guarantee safe passage to Switzerland. From Genève he should be able to make his way through the Demilitarized Zone to Lyon, then down to Marseille. All he had to do was keep a few steps ahead of Oswald Drechsler.

Just thinking about the hawk-nosed Nazi made him work faster. So far he'd been able to clear out his house and storage spaces without Drechsler noticing. Their last load, the canvases stowed in his gallery, was the riskiest, but he'd had no choice. His friends trusted him – no, counted on him – to keep their treasures safe. He couldn't let them down now. Not after all he'd done wrong.

TWO

July 18, 2015

With an acquiescent sigh, Konrad Heider turned on his computer, pushing the power button firmly in with one of his long, manicured fingers. Leaning back into his wingback chair, he wondered – like most nights – why he still bothered after all of these years. Yet his evening search had become part of his bedtime routine, like a glass of warm milk or hot lemon tea to help soothe his soul and lull him into sleep. Without going through the motions of looking for his family’s stolen paintings, he would never be able to drift off to sleep no matter how hard he tried.

So much of his uncle’s artwork had disappeared during the war. The precious few paintings and sketches he’d managed to save now hung above his own desk as a source of inspiration, a constant reminder of why he had to keep searching. Where were the rest? Could they really still be tucked away in someone’s attic or basement, just waiting to be found? Intellectually he knew that was unlikely, given the sheer number and high quality of the lost works. Yet caches of missing art were still being found all over Europe. One never knew. One had to have hope.

In the last ten years, research into the provenance of artwork acquired in the 1930s and 1940s had become routine at most major art museums. No one wanted to be accused of hanging stolen works on their walls. He knew he should be thrilled that so much more information was now available, but the prospect

of scouring through all of those catalogues, publications and collection databases was sometimes overwhelming.

He clicked open a web browser and entered his username and password. Moments later, the latest search results from his many Google alerts appeared on the screen. After scanning the list he closed the browser, almost relieved there was nothing new to sift through.

As he shifted in his chair a sharp pain shot up his leg, taking his breath away. His joints ached; his bones were becoming increasingly sensitive to the changing seasons. And the winters seem to be getting harsher, longer, colder. *Or am I just getting older*, he mused, massaging his knee, then thigh.

If only there were someone else he could share his secrets with. A younger someone who could take on the hunt, as he did for his uncle all those years ago. But no, he'd never married or fathered a child, at least not that he knew of. He'd never fancied long-term relationships; too many questions, prying eyes that wanted to know him intimately, to be privy to all of his secrets. He'd never wanted anyone that close to him. But now, alone in this big house, he understood the need for offspring, for an heir, someone he could trust his secrets to.

Regret would get him nowhere, he told himself, shaking his head as if to force the thought out of his mind. No matter. He would carry on to the bitter end, just as his uncle had, if he had to.

THREE

Zelda Richardson's knees knocked slightly as she waited for the project manager to summon her. Despite that this was an unpaid internship – thus essentially nothing more than volunteering – she was more nervous now than she had ever been for a job interview back home. But then there was more riding on this internship than just a peek into the world of art curation and exhibition design.

She tried to distract herself, tilting her head back so as to better admire the darkly stained rafters of the exposed attic ceiling crisscrossing above. The Amsterdam Museum's reception area was nestled under the rooftop. Seated behind a counter to her left were three women with headsets on, quietly chatting as they waited for something to do. On either side of the small, windowless space were narrow hallways leading to the staff offices which occupied the uppermost floor of the building, leaving the three lowest levels available for the museum's public displays dedicated to different aspects of Amsterdam's expansive history.

Not that the museum's staff had to worry about running out of exhibition space anytime soon; the building was massive. Four galleries, each a city block long, were built around an open courtyard, connecting together at the corners to form a large square. The chronologically arranged exhibitions were spread across the labyrinth of hallways and corridors, joined together by hidden staircases and sky bridges. Just thinking about the museum's varied collection brought a smile to Zelda's lips. It was the only historical museum she'd ever been to which featured

fascinating displays about legalized prostitution, squatters' rights, marijuana use, and gay marriage.

And here she was, about to become one of those lucky few who created exhibitions worthy of this very museum. She wanted to jump out of her chair and dance around in joy, but the receptionists' presence kept her seated and silent. A year ago she never would have dreamed that working for a museum as a curator or exhibition maker was a realistic possibility.

It was thanks to the support and encouragement of Professor Marianne Smit that she'd dared to take the next step in making her dream a reality. As one of the three historians leading the Art History of the Low Lands course at the University of Amsterdam, Professor Smit had spent a lot of time chatting with Zelda during the group's bi-weekly train trips to museums around the Netherlands and Belgium. In the last six months Marianne had become more than a teacher; she was Zelda's mentor and confidante. She knew about her past as a website developer for big corporations, as well as her reasons for wanting to switch careers. Instead of making her feel inferior because of her previous profession, Marianne inspired Zelda to believe she really could do something different with her life.

She knew when she applied for the Museum Studies master's program last month that it was a long shot she'd make it through the first selection round, even with Marianne's support. But landing this internship would change everything. It really didn't matter what her tasks would be, she just had to do her best and prove to both her mentor and the university's selection committee that she was serious about pursuing a career in the cultural sector. Without this master's degree no museum would ever consider hiring her, not with her current qualifications and employment history.

A buzzing sound interrupted her thoughts. One of the receptionists spoke quietly into her headset before clearing her throat and saying in perfect English, "Ms. Dijkstra will see you now." She pointed to the hallway on the right. "It's the fourth door down."

Zelda nodded in acknowledgement, casually wiping her

sweaty palms across her skirt as she rose, leaving wet streaks on both sides of her hips. As she approached the project manager's office, she took another deep breath, telling herself for the hundredth time to relax and focus on her positive attributes. When her blood pressure returned to normal, she knocked three times.

A deep voice called out, "Please come in." As she pushed open the thick wooden door, Bernice Dijkstra smiled up at her from behind her desk. "Zelda Richardson. Marianne said you would be coming by today."

Bernice rose, patting at her tightly cropped afro as she did. Reading glasses dangling from a cord around her neck bounced on her ample bosom as she strode towards the door. She was shorter than Zelda's five-foot ten-inch frame, and rather wide-hipped. Bernice was also the first person of any color other than white that she had met working in a Dutch museum, Zelda realized, as her boss-to-be crossed the room.

Moments before offering her prospective intern a hand, Bernice scratched at her raven-black curls, causing her wig to shift to the left, leaving Zelda tongue-tied and unsure. *Should I say something or pretend not to notice*, she wondered, already nervous enough about their meeting.

She shook Bernice's hand for far too long as she fumbled over her words. "I'm so glad to meet you."

The project manager worked her hand out of Zelda's. "Bernice Dijkstra. It's nice to make your acquaintance, as well. Marianne has told me quite a bit about you. It seems you have a real passion for art history."

Zelda was surprised but pleased to hear that her mentor had spoken so highly of her. Like most Dutch people she had met in Amsterdam, her mentor was quite reserved, her true feelings usually hidden behind a mask of slight bemusement. It was so hard for her to see what Dutch people were really thinking; compared to her overbearing American ways they seemed downright secretive.

"Please sit down," Bernice pointed to one of the two overstuffed chairs in front of her desk. Zelda took in the room for

the first time, unsure of the best way to reach her seat. Bernice's office floor was a maze of portable archive cabinets, rolling bookshelves and open cardboard boxes, all overflowing with paperwork. Stacked up between them were more piles of books and documents waiting to be boxed up.

"Thank you for coming to meet with me on such short notice." Bernice said as she wriggled her way around the desk. "You will have to excuse the mess. Now that the *Stolen Objects* exhibition is about to open, we can begin archiving all the paperwork associated with it."

Zelda looked around wide-eyed. Was so much documentation really necessary for one exhibition?

"How much do you already know about this project? What has Marianne told you?"

Pretty much zilch, she wanted to say but bit her tongue instead and tried to recall the tidbits of information her mentor had emailed her. Marianne had only told her about this internship four days ago, saying her old friend Bernice was in a bind and needed help getting their website online on time; a task Zelda was uniquely qualified to do. And that it would be a fabulous way for her to see firsthand how an exhibition was created. The exhibition's title alone, *Stolen Objects: Unclaimed Paintings and Sculptures in Dutch Museum Depots*, piqued her curiosity so she'd said 'yes' via email immediately. Unfortunately, they hadn't had a chance to meet and discuss the proposed internship in detail, meaning she knew almost nothing about her potential tasks or the exhibition.

"Well, *Mevrouw* Dijkstra," she began, so proud of how she pronounced the Dutch word for 'Mrs.' that she almost forgot what she was going to say.

The project manager interrupted her, "Please call me Bernice."

"Oh, okay. Bernice." Zelda forced herself not to wipe her hands across her lap again. "I know the Amsterdam Museum is about to open an exhibition of paintings and sculptures which were taken from Dutch citizens by the Nazis during World War Two, but have not been returned to their rightful owners. Some objects will be displayed, though most will only be viewable

online via a collection database listing all of the stolen works of art. The Dutch Government initiated this exhibition in the hopes that families will recognize artwork as their own and claim them." She looked to Bernice, expectantly. That was all she knew for certain.

The project manager leaned back in her chair, the wooden frame creaking in protest. "Okay, let's start at the beginning. Approximately thirty-five thousand works of art were entrusted to the Dutch government after the Second World War ended; almost all of which have been returned to their legal owners. Yet ten years ago, there were still three thousand unclaimed paintings and sculptures stored in museum depots across the Netherlands. The Secretary of State for Education, Culture and Science assembled a team of researchers from twelve Dutch museums and research institutions and tasked them with reconstructing the provenance of these remaining unclaimed pieces, in the hopes of finally locating the owners or their heirs."

"The provenance is a record of the changes in ownership of an individual painting or sculpture, correct?" Zelda asked. During the last six months of museum visits and lectures that term had been batted around a lot, she was almost certain she was right.

"Yes, that's correct." Bernice said, seemingly more relieved than impressed that her potential intern recognized the term. "Our researchers have access to databases and archives containing historical documents pertaining to the sale or exchange of artwork all over Europe. It's an arduous, time consuming task, scouring through all of the available records, hoping to find a mention of one of the unclaimed works. Unless the piece was pictured in an exhibition catalogue, sold at a large auction house, or purchased via a reputable art dealer, it can be very difficult to find a clear paper trail which tells us who the owners once were. And even after nine years of searching, our researchers were only able to reconstruct the complete provenance of approximately half of the paintings and a handful of sculptures. The other fifteen-hundred pieces, several of which will be displayed in our upcoming *Stolen Arts* exhibition, remain a mystery." Bernice wrung her hands as she talked, clearly riled

up by the less than fruitful results of the team's efforts.

Zelda could feel her forehead creasing in confusion. "If there is no documentation associated with these orphaned objects –"

Bernice cut her off, continuing in a calmer tone. "We hope that by holding this exhibition, we can generate interest in these objects and hopefully find someone who recognizes a piece as their own. Many of those who fled the Netherlands before or during the war took their purchase contracts and title transfers with them, even if they had to leave the actual artwork behind. There have been several cases in the past of children – and even grandchildren – who have found documents in a forgotten storage space or safety deposit box and successfully claimed their family's artwork. Who knows what this exhibition will stir up; anything is possible. But if no one knows that the artwork is here in the Netherlands then we will never find the owners or their heirs."

Zelda nodded, finally understanding why this exhibition was being held. There was a small chance that someone would recognize their parents' or grandparents' painting or sculpture. It had apparently happened before and could always happen again.

"That's why our marketing department is launching an international media campaign to promote the opening, and why the website's extensive database listing information about all the stolen art is also available in English. In fact, we organized a conference for a number of American and Canadian museum directors last week, to help generate publicity and interest in our project."

"Why North America?" Zelda asked.

"Four *Stolen Objects* exhibitions have been held since the war ended, but they were only publicized in Europe. Because so many Dutch nationals fled to Canada and the United States in the late 1930s and 1940s, we suspect the owners of many of these unclaimed works live in North America. We do realize that some may have already passed on, but hopefully their heirs will recognize paintings taken from their families. That is why this exhibition, the international advertisements, website and

conference are so very important to helping locate the legal owners of these works, before it really is too late.”

Zelda was awed by the enormity of this project. More than a thousand pieces of art still unclaimed after all of these years and even the experts didn’t know where to look for a potential claimant. It seemed more likely that she would win the lottery next week than the museum would find a single owner during the entire exhibition. Even so, she felt privileged to be a part of such a noble project, no matter what her role was. But did Bernice and her team seriously think this exhibition was going to succeed, that someone would actually remember what pieces of art they or their parents once had hanging in their house, seventy-odd years ago? And would they have the documents to prove it?

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