

Kirsti Eline Torhaug, *The Anatomy of Desire*

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The novel *The Anatomy of Desire* by Kirsti Eline Torhaug, the second book in the *Amazon Trilogy*, follows the journey of Per, seeking to reunite with his long-lost friend, Helmer, in Mexico City.

Per, having survived the horrors of World War II in which he spent years as a Nacht und Nebel prisoner in Sachsenhausen, embarks on a voyage aboard a cargo ship from Cádiz, Spain, to Veracruz, Mexico. Although inexperienced at sea, he quickly adapts to the harsh work in the ship's galley. Among the fifty-two crew members, he notices Leticia, a striking Argentinian woman who captivates him with her confidence and mysterious aura. Leticia, an antiques dealer suspected of smuggling, has traveled on this route before. Per, haunted by memories of war and loss, is drawn to Leticia's independence and knowledge of the world. A romance develops that will leave them changed forever.

Upon arriving in Mexico, Per and Leticia travel to Mexico City, where Per begins his search for Helmer. The sprawling metropolis overwhelms him, and he quickly realizes that finding Helmer will be more difficult than he imagined. He methodically explores different districts, visiting cafés and bars where foreigners might gather, relying on a photograph of Helmer as his only clue. Leticia, though occupied with her own business dealings, supports Per in his efforts. As Per navigates the city, he is struck by its vibrant culture, from street markets to music-filled nights. He encounters Pedro Hernan, a charismatic Mexican man who befriends him and helps him acclimate to life in Mexico City. Pedro introduces Per to local customs, including drinking tequila with sangrita and the tradition of mariachi music. Mexico City is a vibrant, boiling megacity. Per is overwhelmed.

Per's and Leticia's relationship intensifies in moments of shared vulnerability, as Leticia reveals painful aspects of her own history. She recounts her mother's tragic death after consuming broken glass—a result of severe mental illness. Per, in turn, shares his childhood memories, including an incident where he threw shards of glass into his younger brother's pram. These confessions deepen their bond. Does this relationship have a future? Will there be love and children and a home?

One of the novel's most evocative scenes takes place during a torrential downpour in Mexico City. Per and Leticia navigate flooded streets, where open manholes pose a deadly risk. The chaos of the storm mirrors Per's inner turbulence. Seeking refuge, they stumble into a tango club, where Leticia introduces him to the passionate dance that embodies her Argentinian heritage. The evening is filled with red wine, intimate confessions, and the bittersweet realization that their love is bound by time and circumstance.

As Per continues his search for Helmer, frustration mounts. The heat of the city, combined with the language barrier and the sheer scale of his task, begins to wear on him. Eventually, fate intervenes. While walking near the train station, Per spots a bearded man across the street. Their eyes meet, and time stands still—he has found Helmer. The long-awaited reunion is emotional and wordless as they embrace. The two friends, bound by shared trauma and years of separation, have finally found each other. Helmer didn't grow up in a Christian family, he grew up in a Communist household so it is not a question for Helmer to join the guerilla forces that are preparing the invasion and revolution for a free Cuba. Per is less ideological about the reason for joining. For him not to join will mean to lose Helmer again. Meanwhile, going along means that Per has to let go of Leticia - a decision that will haunt him for the rest of his life. After having said goodbye to her, Per will keep wondering for decades if Leticia had been his chance at finding love and building a life with someone.

As Per and Helmer become more involved in the guerilla troops hiding in Yucatán, the brutal realities of war and discipline start to erode the idealistic vision Per held before he decided to follow Helmer. Per's past, haunted by the trauma of war, shapes his growing disillusionment while Helmer remains a fervent believer in socialism. Per also heavily struggles with the language and is unable to build an authority as training officer while the war mentality fits Helmer like a glove. A distance grows between them and their paths are bound to separate again but the environment becomes growingly hostile against Per: He knows too much about the secret group. Will they let him leave alive? When the Cuban guerillos recognize the growing doubts in Per, they do send him away, away from Helmer who vouched with his life for Per keeping their secrets.

Upon returning to Mexico City, Per discovers that Pedro Hernan is working for the Americans and has been spying on him and Helmer ever since they arrived. He tries to warn the guerilla troops but only at the last minute do they change their point of departure and avoid discovery. Per only learns of their successful invasion of Cuba when he is back in Norway. He has spent feverish weeks in Mexico City after having been poisoned by Inka witchcraft: The daughter of the boarding house where he stayed had intended to put a love spell on Pedro Hernan but the attempt to make him love her accidentally hit Per. The dreamish scenes that haunt Per are excessive and colorful expressions of creativity, sparked by an insanely beautiful yet culturally challenging Mexico.

Once back in Norway, it will take Per years to find his place and to come to peace with himself and the fact that he did not live up to Helmer's plans nor his love for Leticia. He can't look Helmer's parents in the eye for having left their son, again, for what he thought would be his certain death, and Per starts writing letters to Leticia which he will never send. His inner turmoil, his nightmares and sudden anger and anxiety attacks culminate in a growing need to write in order to come to terms with his own life story. He finishes a novel and even gets it published. After years and years of restlessness, Per has found peace. And it is in that moment that Helmer stands before him, again.

US forces have invaded Vietnam and started shooting at Communist troops. Helmer hesitates not one second to join the battle but he has one question to ask: Will Per come, too?

With rich prose and deep introspection, *The Anatomy of Desire* is a meditation on war and violence, the weight of our decisions, the loss they bring with them, and the search for meaning in a world that is often indifferent to individual suffering. Per grapples with his own beliefs and the cost of political struggle. The novel questions whether the ends ever truly justify the means and portrays the psychological and emotional toll of being caught between personal desires and the duty to defend your ideas.

please contact: **Anna Richter, Foreign Rights, anna.richter@nordinringhof.dk**