



VILLA COCO

A Novel

ANDREW SEAN GREER

PULITZER PRIZE-WINNING AUTHOR OF *LESS*

ALSO BY ANDREW SEAN GREER

Less Is Lost

Less

The Impossible Lives of Greta Wells

The Story of a Marriage

The Confessions of Max Tivoli

The Path of Minor Planets

How It Was for Me

ANDREW SEAN GREER

villa
COCO

—a novel—

DOUBLEDAY  NEW YORK

FIRST DOUBLEDAY EDITION 2026

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Published by Doubleday, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, 1745 Broadway, New York, NY 10019.

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Book design by Casey Hampton, adapted for ebook

Cover illustration by Ilya Milstein

Cover design by Emily Mahon

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Greer, Andrew Sean, author

Title: Villa Coco : a novel / Andrew Sean Greer.

Description: First Doubleday hardcover edition. | New York: Doubleday, 2026.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025036495 (print) | LCCN 2025036496 (ebook) | ISBN 9780385551977 (hardcover) | ISBN 9798217008124 (trade paperback) | ISBN 9780385551984 (ebook) | ISBN 9780385552783 (open market)

Subjects: LCGFT: Fiction | Novels

Classification: LCC PS3557.R3987 V55 2026 (print) | LCC PS3557.R3987 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025036495>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025036496>

Ebook ISBN 9780385551984

penguinrandomhouse.com | doubleday.com

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's invention or are used imaginatively. Real people and events inspired the composition (as they always do), but the author has fictionalized everything. Don't concern yourself about them. Just enjoy the book.

The author would like to thank Lee Boudreaux, Lynn Nesbit, Claire Conrad, Mina Hamed, Maya Guthrie, Maya Pasic, Laura Cherkas, Aliza Wong, Daniel Handler, Laure Thorel, Doug Hamilton, Michael Field, MacDowell, the American Academy in Rome, and especially everyone at the Santa Maddalena Foundation. In memory of Rosina, Alice, Carlotta, *Giuditta, *Paride, *Giulietta, *Quo, and most of all, Max Rabino.

The authorized representative in the EU for product safety and compliance is Penguin Random House Ireland, Morrison Chambers, 32 Nassau Street, Dublin D02 YH68, Ireland, <https://eu-contact.penguin.ie>.

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For
Enrico Rotelli
and
Beatrice Monti della Corte von Rezzori,
my baronessa

The trick to life is knowing what you want.

—PRINCESS MARIA AUGUSTA

part I

The little Tuscan train station, brown shutters against yellow paint, seemed so fanciful you might unwrap it and find it was chocolate. The departures and arrivals sign had half its bulbs burnt out, so all our young man could discern was a cuneiform description of the current train strike, and while he looked for and could not find a living person, he did find a statue labeled *San Drogo*. The saint wore a floppy hat and seemed overburdened with a crosier, a scythe, and a sleeping lamb, as if he were carrying the shopping for another, more important saint. Our young man himself was overburdened with books, luggage, gin, fish oil, and doubt. He had followed the telegram's nonsensical instructions all the way from the Eastern Seaboard to Florence, whose domes and spires he glimpsed only briefly before boarding a tin-can train into the Tuscan hills, and now stood in the hot wind of a late-September day. For a long time it was only himself, San Drogo, and an olive tree whose roots were breaking through its planter. Though in his later travels, on sea and shore, he would become accustomed to the sensation of foreign air, this first arrival in Italy would be minted forever in his memory.

Here is the telegram:

GIOVEDÌ COME BY 5:15 TRAIN FLORENCE TO S. DROGO GAZELLE
WILL BE WAITING BRING GIN FOR PRINCESS & FISH OIL FOR FAINA

He had made his way to the Florence train station; he had taken the 5:15; he had brought gin for whatever princess might desire it and fish oil for anyone named Faina. He looked around for this "gazelle" supposedly waiting

for him, though, as the range of the gazelle does not extend to Europe, he was dubious.

A car arrived: a beat-up old creature trailing a veil of dust like a warthog bride. It stopped in the middle of the parking lot and for a long time did nothing; Saint Drogo, with all his shopping, seemed more active. The electric sign flashed something in Sumerian. Then the car door opened and out popped a person so lean and small our young man thought it might be an adolescent. But it was an elderly man.

“JOE!” the man shouted, waving. His head was lightly feathered in gray, accompanied by a raptor’s beak and fervid stare; his movements were equally birdlike, jerky, startling.

Our young man’s name was not Joe.

Halting bits of a foreign language were tossed toward him, like gym class balls our young man was unable to catch. “Giovedì” was the one word he picked up: JOE-VE-DEE. From this and the telegram, he realized someone had misunderstood his name for the Italian for “Thursday.” Then again, an American might be called anything. As might a man in a train station.

“Gazelle?” our young man asked.

The man nodded. He did not smile. Gazelle’s name seemed to suit him, as he bounded up to take the bag, threw it into the car as if furious with it, then gestured for our young man to jump in, talking the whole time in guttural dot-dash language that did not at all remind one of the fluid, musical Italian heard in foreign films. The only understandable word was a peculiar one: “MITSU!” he would shout, “BITCHY!” Then he would point at the car and smile proudly. Our young man came to understand it was a Mitsubishi. He clutched his duffel to his chest. The Mitsu-bitchy awakened in surprise. It started, stalled, then started again. A shout from the driver. Then, with a leap over a rock pile, they were off. Our young man sighed to be in a place, at last, where he could take life seriously.

I call him “our young man” because the sight of him—all gangly, double-jointed limbs, waves of filbert hair, and a raised-eyebrow expression of both innocence and arrogance—is so much more like a soulless marionette, an

unenchanting Pinocchio, than a twenty-one-year-old American near the end of the millennium, that I can hardly bring myself to write of him in the first person. I'm sure an elderly toad, if magically presented with his younger tadpole form, would sooner eat it up than recognize the creature as any version of himself. So it goes with time.

Because of course the truth is "our young man" was me.

"There's a place in Italy in need of someone. Why don't you look into that?"

These were the words of my college adviser upon our final meeting and the only actual advice he ever gave; the rest of our meetings, infrequent as they were, consisted of heavy sighs at my choice in major (Archives and Record Management) and at my amorous choice in gender (my own). A dedicated engineer and committed womanizer, he clearly considered both choices personal failures. He wiped his forehead with a handkerchief and looked sadly into my eyes. It is unlikely this "place in Italy" had occurred to him unaided; he must have canvassed his colleagues for some way to save his poor, gay, bookish charge. He produced an ad clipped from the paper, which he tossed to me across the table with the regret of an executor producing a meager inheritance:

ADJUTANT DESIRED for owner of modest country house.
Collection of books, objects, art such as a Picasso to be cataloged
before Christmas. Duties: dictation, pruning, shopping, hunting
martens. Italian desired. Stipend, travel, board, and room.
Tuscany, Italy. Write to: Baronessa.

An address in a town called San Drogo was provided. I looked up at my adviser and asked what an adjutant was.

"It's a military term," he explained, loudly closing a book as a sign that our time was finished. "From adiutor in the Roman army. It means

assistant.”

Looking back at the paper, I asked what a marten was.

“It’s a weasel-like mammal with partially retractile claws,” he told me, “and Picasso is a painter goodbye.” He stood up, offering his hand and wishing me good fortune in all my future endeavors. My time in this college backwater was over; I was being thrown into the vast ocean of the world.

I had not considered Italy; then again, I had not considered anything. My mind in college was, shall we say, elsewhere. Let me try to make a funny story out of something hard: It was a time of pandemonium. Freedom had come for men such as myself—sex and romance released all at once as if by a drag Pandora—and oh, the party it was! Yet I was ill-prepared for a carnival of flesh. Here I was, as inexperienced as the Amish (no teenage stolen kisses, no prom night fumbblings, nothing), suddenly let into the circus tent to join the sword-swallowing, sleight-of-hand, and juggling of partners. The ensuing burlesque lasted for three and a half years, and I ended up the equivalent of the escape artist trapped in his own device (in reality: handcuffed by a boyfriend to a radiator). My roommate (handy with a lock) gave me a note from the school saying I was currently failing two classes for lack of attendance. It was the splash of cold water I needed; I closed down the carnival just in time, sent away the clowns, and managed to graduate. But it had been a narrow escape, and I vowed: No more men for a while. No more chaos. I would cuff myself instead to intellectual pursuits and the neat methodology upon which I had heretofore relied. The bloodless precision of the archivist’s life.

My parents approved; both trained in classical physics, they were glad to see me return to the Newtonian world from that quantum realm of terrifying entanglement and sex. For them, life was an equation, and now that I knew one variable (myself), I could solve for the unknown: my fate. Graduate school? Librarian? Closet specialist, so to speak? They would provide the round-trip ticket with a return at Christmas. Their only expectation of me: “It is time, Son, to take life seriously.”

What could be more serious than Europe?

I wrote to the address on the advertisement, giving my credentials. I did not mention the very many ways in which I was ill-suited. I sent my application off and began my wait.

What was he like, in those days, our young man—me? Charming, inquisitive, organized, focused, and true, loyal to my friends and kind to animals—that's how I would have described myself back then. A Boy Scout of a man; a flower of American youth; a mensch. But that is not what I was at all. Looking back, I see a carefully reared and protected young man, cosseted as a Pekingese, insufferable, officious, a cable-knit sweater over a cable-knit heart, who had managed to surmount all distractions and complete the course readings and ace the last tests—but was in no way prepared for the crucial final exam of Real Life.

I am too harsh on myself. I am certain I was no more or less irritating than any other good American son of the century, unweathered by experience and unwise to the world. Whatever attributes one found in me were simply, as in the Pekingese, part of the breed. I was still young enough for my qualities to change, like a fresco as the artist reconsiders the position of a saint, but the moment was coming when they would be set forever.

As I went to sleep that night in my dormitory sardine tin (what twins have ever slept in a twin bed?), my mind was on the Baronessa, the marten, the Picasso, as strange-sounding as some novel from another time, another language and tradition. I felt as if I were on a boat headed into unknown waters. Was it adventure I craved? To meet a challenge to my very way of being? Something other than the phantomless folklore of suburban boyhood, or the make-believe importance of college rituals, neither of which I could believe in anymore? But, having never had any real challenge or adventure, how did I know I wanted it? Could it really be what my parents advised: to take life seriously? I did not know. As a boy, I used to lie awake and watch the crossed squares of light that would manifest suddenly and glide across my bedroom walls and ceiling. I did the same that night. And, just as they had long ago, they enchanted me, even though I knew they were mere

headlight projections from ordinary cars of my ordinary world, for they seemed like heralds from some unknown destiny.

And, indeed, I later received the telegram with an arrival date and my instructions.

GIOVEDÌ COME BY 5:15 TRAIN FLORENCE TO S. DROGO GAZELLE
WILL BE WAITING BRING GIN FOR PRINCESS & FISH OIL FOR FAINA

The advertisement had mentioned a “modest country house,” and this I took to be the winking language of the very rich, and expected (as one does when one knows nothing) an extravagant mansion perched on a hill. Perhaps I imagined it would be pink. Our journey from the train station, however, was not uphill but down, serpentine beside a river until we crossed it on a stone bridge and entered a dirt lane marked not by the iron gates of a villa but by a cardboard sign with a marker drawing of a boar. Farther along, the lane was met by another, and at this intersection sat an elderly woman in a red chair, shouting at us as we passed. Additional narrow lanes, each more treacherous than the last, and darker, deeper into that oak forest of banished fairies and bitter enchantments that children fear. We plunged through mud, then rose at last between two olive groves with trees arrayed in rows like men-at-arms, their silvery foliage fluttering, tattered, in the early-autumn sun. There was the raw smell of wild mint. An alphabet-block set of hives was stacked beyond, and from it came a muttering of bees. I saw no turrets, no castle walls, no clock towers. But where else would a baronessa live?

I was determined to avoid the clichés Americans expect of Italy—though these turned out, of course, to be the very images that had fed my decision. Stomping grapes for wine, sun-drying tomatoes on a roof, dancing the tarantella; who knows what idiotic fantasies I had picked up? What was certain was that I would not fall for some black-haired, half-shaved stranger leaning on a pitchfork before an olive grove. And so I took my vow, like a

monk's, that for this period, I would enter the cloister of my work, my mind, and tend the garden there. The row of cypresses made me smile; what I needed was not romance and chaos but order.

For the whole journey, this Gazelle man kept up a series of barks in his language. I could not tell if they were directed at me, the road, or perhaps at his private god. He had been spry taking my bag, but up close I could see he was quite old for luggage duty, probably past sixty, though if one could look past his sun-lined skin, his smell of cigarettes and manure, and his one gold tooth, he had the profile of an old-style movie star. He had probably been a lady-killer in his youth, this Gazelle. Perhaps still was.

We met one car along the road coming toward us—a lizard-green Fiat—driven by a man with features blurred by sun reflections, and neither he nor Gazelle could decide how to pass on the narrow road, dodging back and forth as they approached each other, until the lizard decided simply to bolt along the edge, and as it passed I caught the eye of the young driver: blond, bespectacled, bewildered. He seemed to be fleeing the wilderness we now were entering, and his mouth was open as if to give mute warning—but in a cloud of dust, he and his car were gone.

“ECCO!” Gazelle barked, and we came to a sudden stop. The car shivered and died. We were not anywhere different from where we had been before. To our right, the olive trees rose up a sunny hillside. To our left: a two-story, ivy-covered wall. Nothing before us but more road, leading back into that terrible forest. Where was the house? The honk of the horn startled me. But what startled me more was when a portion of the wall began to move, swinging out on hinges to reveal a dark room within, crowded with baskets, and out of this darkness walked a woman...

“You’re Giovedì?” she asked. Her sandals scraped along the dusty path. The late-September day was bright and hot as midsummer, but there was the

scent of burning leaves and a sensation, in the shadows, of the first hint of autumn.

She was older than I was, but what exact age I was too young to guess, for she walked with the slim elegance I associated with a queen or prime minister, yet her style I thought of as youthful: tank top, dark denim overalls, gold hoop earrings. Her face was narrow, with a wide forehead and chin. Her eyes were large and half closed in the bright sunlight. She wore her kinky hair natural, and the light caught the gold in its spirals, lighting it briefly from within like a Venetian chandelier. She seemed aware of the effect and put a hand to her hair, tossing it as she smiled. She seemed like someone who knew many things that I did not.

“Yes,” I said. “No,” I said. “I mean—”

“I’m Estelle.” She held out her hand and I shook it. “You’re here too early.”

My mind scrabbled at her words, looking for a handhold. She spoke with an accent I could not place. “But I...I...the telegram said—”

This Estelle produced an elastic band and, both hands behind her head, began the difficult act of pulling all her loose Afro into it. “Yes yes, you’re fine. But Coco, she sent the telegram without consulting me. You see, the rooms aren’t ready.”

I wondered who this “Coco” was and somehow understood there was no place for me to stay, and my face must have conveyed it because she laughed and put one hand on my arm. “I mean in the villa! For your list. The rooms aren’t ready.”

“Not ready?” Panic twitched within me.

Back to taming her hair. “Don’t worry, she will find things to occupy you.”

I could see that what I had taken for a stone wall was in fact the plain, flat side of a building, studded with windows whose iron bars were equally twined with ivy. Along its length I could now make out three doors: a large double door camouflaged (and presumably made unusable) by greenery, the small door through which Estelle had appeared, and a wooden gate painted

precisely the deep green of the ivy. On that gate hung a dark bronze knocker in the shape of a foot, and poking out above it, one could see the green aigrettes of a bamboo grove. How strange to find bamboo in Italy; I wondered what maniac had planted it. Along the wall also were two stone benches, and I saw, in the shadow of each bench, a number of huddled black kittens, staring bright-eyed up at me. Across the road was another wall, this one built to the height of the olive grove, which it supported. In the wall was a low green door that I assumed led inside the hill to some cool, dark chamber. And above, hanging down over the cliff of the wall: an herb garden fragrant with rosemary, thyme, sage, and others whose leaves I could not yet identify. A basket lay on the road below these with a pair of shears inside. I saw a dog race by on the dark path down the hill, a flash of white fur.

“But...I understand I’m to complete a catalog by Christmas. And I don’t even know what I am cataloging—”

She was finishing with her hair; perhaps she did it automatically, because her hands seemed engaged with the task without involving the rest of her. “You’ll have it done in no time. And don’t worry about this heat wave, things will cool off any day now! That’s how it goes around here.”

“You work here?”

Estelle released her hands to her sides; her hair, compressed, had gone from gold to bronze. “Oh no! I’m a kind of...eh, neighbor. A friend of the house.”

“I’m sorry for asking...you’re French?”

“I’m Italian,” she said, then smiled. “And Algerian. A long story.” She looked behind her to where the door had closed, hiding itself once again within the ivy of the wall. “You’ll stay in the house with her. I live just down the road. I know this all must seem so strange to you, an esteemed archivist. You’re probably used to regularity. Things aren’t exactly like that here.”

“Oh, I’m not...” I was going to say “esteemed,” but something made me stop. Was this some terrible comedy of misunderstandings?

“Let’s get you into the house,” she said. She shouted at Gazelle, who had begun to smoke on the roadside. She said quite a deal in Italian, then turned

to me. "Oh yes! We call it Villa Coco."

Estelle reopened the door and gestured for me to enter the house, and I saw that this "hidden" door led, in fact, to the kitchen. It was of two parts: before us, up a few steps, was the kitchen proper, laid out in a U shape with a sink to the left, an old white-enameled stove in the center, and a cutting board set into the counter at the right. Canisters were crowded on shelves, straw wiskets hung on hooks, tarnished silver platters were mounted one above the other on the walls, books huddled together, painted ceramic bowls overflowed with fruit and vegetables, and as if the decorator imagined this might not be enough, the wall behind the stove was tiled in black-and-white op-art trapezoids. The second part was the dining area, as free of clutter as the first was crammed. A long table of dark, polished wood stood before an enormous fireplace, on whose mantel sat two crudely done brass cupids in an erotic position, and around the table were arranged tall chairs with white linen covers tied over the cushions. At the center of the table sat an ornate blue-and-white-speckled fruit bowl from which rose a similarly mottled candelabra of sculpted cherubs, and above it all hung two great concentric metal rings, each with half a dozen lamps, such as one sees in an Orthodox church. It startled me: this combination of the coarse and the sublime.

"Ah, here they are," said Estelle, picking up a set of keys from the deranged confusion of a countertop. "I've been looking for these for days."

"So...this is the kitchen?"

"The cook's not here right now," Estelle said. "She has a headache." I could well understand why. "Her husband, the handyman, is somewhere. Do you want to meet Coco?"

"Who's Coco?"

"Lisabetta. I call her Coco. She'll be down soon."

"Lisabetta?"

Her eyes brightened with amusement. "The Baronessa!"

I noticed now that beside us, at the entrance and still two steps below the kitchen, was another humble door. Estelle examined my face more carefully,

then lifted the latch. The door opened onto what looked like a dimly lit chapel. I gestured for her to go before me.

She waved her hand. “Oh, I’m not going in. I’m heading home. Don’t worry. If there’s a crisis, I live just up the road, you turn left at Signora Guicciardini. The lady who sits in the chair and yells at cars.”

“She’s always there?”

“You’ll be all right, Giovedì.”

“Oh, there’s been a misunderstanding. My name’s not Giovedì. It’s—”

“Of course,” she interrupted, shaking her head. “Who would be named Giovedì? But Coco thought it was funny. She always has a nickname for people at first. Gazelle’s name isn’t Gazelle.”

“I wondered...”

“It’s CHA-zel,” Estelle said, scraping her throat at the first syllable. “He’s from Lebanon. You’ll know she likes you when she uses your real name.”

“She doesn’t like...Ghazel?”

“She’ll like you! Thank God you’re handsome.”

She let me pass before her into the dimness of the room before closing the door and sealing me in alone, and I wondered if this was all a terrible mistake.

I had entered a realm much cooler than the heat of the kitchen or the dusty road, with a humid, vegetal smell. What I took to be a chapel seemed now to be an entrance hall, and I understood the two ironbound doors to my left were ones I had seen from outside, now long overgrown with ivy. Facing the unused entrance doors and perhaps four strides away was the most striking aspect of the room: a wrought-iron staircase that crossed the wall diagonally, from upper left to lower right like a filigree sash across a bosom, hugging the wall until arriving at the cool stone floor. The space’s only windows flanked the entrance doors and stretched up to the ceiling, but, being also overgrown with ivy and barred with iron, they let in only a fluttering, greenish light, and