

DANIEL

#1 *NEW YORK TIMES*  
BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Silva



Portrait *of an*  
Unknown  
Woman

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Unknown  
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HARPER

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# **Dedication**

For Burt Bacharach  
And, as always, for my wife, Jamie,  
and my children, Lily and Nicholas

# Epigraph

All that glisters is not gold.

—William Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice*

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Part One  
**Craquelure**



# 1

## Mason's Yard

On any other day, Julian would have tossed it straight into the rubbish bin. Or better yet, he would have fed it into Sarah's professional-grade shredder. During the long, bleak winter of the pandemic, when they had sold but a single painting, she had used the contraption to mercilessly cull the gallery's swollen archives. Julian, who was traumatized by the project, feared that when Sarah had no more needless sales records and shipping documents to destroy, it would be his turn in the machine. He would leave this world as a tiny parallelogram of yellowed paper, carted off to the recycler with the rest of the week's debris. In his next life he would return as an environmentally friendly coffee cup. He supposed, not without some justification, there were worse fates.

The letter had arrived at the gallery on a rainy Friday in late March, addressed to *M. JULIAN ISHERWOOD*. Sarah had nevertheless opened it; a former clandestine officer of the Central Intelligence Agency, she had no qualms about reading other people's mail. Intrigued, she had placed it on Julian's desk along with several inconsequential items from the morning's post, the only sort of correspondence she typically allowed him to see. He read it for the first time while still clad in his dripping mackintosh, his plentiful gray locks in windblown disarray. The time was half past eleven, which in itself was noteworthy. These days Julian rarely set foot in the gallery before noon. It gave him just enough time to make a nuisance of himself before embarking on the three-hour period of his day he reserved for his luncheon.

His first impression of the letter was that its author, a certain Madame Valerie Bérangar, had the most exquisite handwriting he had seen in ages. It seemed she had noticed the recent story in *Le Monde* concerning the

multimillion-pound sale by Isherwood Fine Arts of *Portrait of an Unknown Woman*, oil on canvas, 115 by 92 centimeters, by the Flemish Baroque painter Anthony van Dyck. Apparently, Madame Bérangar had concerns about the transaction—concerns she wished to discuss with Julian in person, as they were legal and ethical in nature. She would be waiting at Café Ravel in Bordeaux at four o'clock on Monday afternoon. It was her wish that Julian come alone.

“What do you think?” asked Sarah.

“She’s obviously mad as a hatter.” Julian displayed the handwritten letter, as though it proved his point. “How did it get here? Carrier pigeon?”

“DHL.”

“Was there a return address on the waybill?”

“She used the address of a DHL Express in Saint-Macaire. It’s about fifty kilometers—”

“I know where Saint-Macaire is,” said Julian, and immediately regretted his abrupt tone. “Why do I have this terrible feeling I’m being blackmailed?”

“She doesn’t sound like a blackmailer to me.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, petal. All the blackmailers and extortionists I’ve ever met had impeccable manners.”

“Then perhaps we should ring the Met.”

“Involve the police? Have you taken leave of your senses?”

“At least show it to Ronnie.”

Ronald Sumner-Lloyd was Julian’s pricey Berkeley Square attorney. “I have a better idea,” he said.

It was then, at 11:36 a.m., with Sarah looking on in disapproval, that Julian dangled the letter over his ancient metal dustbin, a relic of the gallery’s glory days, when it was located on stylish New Bond Street—or New Bondstrasse, as it had been known in some quarters of the trade. Try as he might, he couldn’t seem to let the damn thing slip from his fingers. Or perhaps, he thought later, it was Madame Bérangar’s letter that had clung to him.

He set it aside, reviewed the remainder of the morning post, returned a few phone calls, and interrogated Sarah on the details of a pending sale. Then, having nothing else to do, he headed off to the Dorchester for lunch. He was accompanied by an employee of a venerable London auction house, female, of course, recently divorced, no children, far too young but not inappropriately so. Julian astonished her with his knowledge of Italian and Dutch Renaissance painters and regaled her with tales of acquisitional derring-do. It was a character he had been playing to modest acclaim for

longer than he cared to remember. He was the incomparable Julian Isherwood, Julie to his friends, Juicy Julie to his partners in the occasional crime of drink. He was loyal as the day was long, trusting to a fault, and English to the core. English as high tea and bad teeth, as he was fond of saying. And yet, were it not for the war, he would have been someone else entirely.

Returning to the gallery, he found that Sarah had adhered a fuchsia-colored sticky note to Madame Bérangar's letter, advising him to reconsider. He read it a second time, slowly. Its tone was as formal as the linenlike stationery upon which it was written. Even Julian had to admit she sounded entirely reasonable and not at all like an extortionist. Surely, he thought, there would be no harm in merely listening to what she had to say. If nothing else, the journey would provide him with a much-needed respite from his crushing workload at the gallery. Besides, the weather forecast for London called for several days of nearly uninterrupted cold and rain. But in the southwest of France, it was springtime already.

Among the first actions that Sarah had taken after coming to work at the gallery was to inform Ella, Julian's stunning but useless receptionist, that her services were no longer required. Sarah had never bothered to hire a replacement. She was more than capable, she said, of answering the phone, returning the emails, keeping the appointment book, and buzzing visitors upstairs when they presented themselves at the perpetually locked door in Mason's Yard.

She drew a line, however, at making Julian's travel arrangements, though she consented to peer over his shoulder while he performed the chore himself, if only to make certain he didn't mistakenly book passage on the Orient Express to Istanbul rather than the Eurostar to Paris. From there, it was a scant two hours and fourteen minutes by TGV to Bordeaux. He successfully purchased a first-class ticket and then reserved a junior suite at the InterContinental—for two nights, just to be on the safe side.

The task complete, he repaired to the bar at Wiltons for a drink with Oliver Dimbleby and Roddy Hutchinson, widely regarded as London's most disreputable art dealers. One thing led to another, as was usually the case when Oliver and Roddy were involved, and it was after 2:00 a.m. by the time Julian finally toppled into his bed. He spent Saturday tending to his hangover and devoted much of Sunday to packing a bag. Once he would have thought nothing about hopping on the Concorde with only an attaché case and a pretty girl. But suddenly the preparations for a jaunt across the English Channel required all of his powers of concentration. He

supposed it was but another unwanted consequence of growing old, like his alarming absentmindedness, or the strange sounds he emitted, or his seeming inability to cross a room without crashing into something. He kept a list of self-deprecating excuses at the ready to explain his humiliating clumsiness. He had never been the athletic type. It was the bloody lamp's fault. It was the end table that had assaulted *him*.

He slept poorly, as was frequently the case the night before an important journey, and awoke with a nagging sensation that he was about to make yet another in a long series of dreadful mistakes. His spirits lifted, however, as the Eurostar emerged from the Channel Tunnel and surged across the gray-green fields of the Pas-de-Calais toward Paris. He rode the *métro* from the Gare du Nord to the Gare Montparnasse and enjoyed a decent lunch in the buffet car of the TGV as the light beyond his window gradually took on the quality of a Cézanne landscape.

He recalled with startling clarity the instant he had seen it for the first time, this dazzling light of the south. Then, as now, he was riding a train bound from Paris. His father, the German Jewish art dealer Samuel Isakowitz, sat on the opposite side of the compartment. He was reading a day-old newspaper, as though nothing were out of the ordinary. Julian's mother, her hands knotted atop her knees, was staring into space, her face without expression.

Hidden in the luggage above their heads, rolled in protective sheets of paraffin paper, were several paintings. Julian's father had left a few lesser works behind at his gallery on the rue la Boétie, in the elegant Eighth Arrondissement. The bulk of his remaining inventory was already hidden in the château he had rented east of Bordeaux. Julian remained there until the terrible summer of 1942, when a pair of Basque shepherds smuggled him over the Pyrenees to neutral Spain. His parents were arrested in 1943 and deported to the Nazi extermination center at Sobibor, where they were gassed upon arrival.

Bordeaux's Saint-Jean station lay hard against the river Garonne, at the end of the Cours de la Marne. The departure board in the refurbished ticket hall was a modern device—gone was the polite applause of the updates—but the Beaux-Arts exterior, with its two prominent clocks, was as Julian remembered it. So, too, were the honey-colored Louis XV buildings lining the boulevards along which he sped in the back of a taxi. Some of the facades were so bright they seemed to glow with an interior light source. Others were dimmed by grime. It was the porous quality of the local stone, his father had explained. It absorbed soot from the air like a sponge and, like oil paintings, required occasional cleaning.

By some miracle, the hotel hadn't misplaced his reservation. After pressing an overly generous tip into the palm of the immigrant bellman, he hung up his clothes and withdrew to the bathroom to do something about his ragged appearance. It was gone three o'clock when he capitulated. He locked his valuables in the room safe and debated for a moment whether to bring Madame Bérangar's letter to the café. An inner voice—his father's, he supposed—advised him to leave it behind, concealed within his luggage.

The same voice instructed him to bring along his attaché case, as it would confer upon him a wholly unwarranted patina of authority. He carried it along the Cours de l'Intendance, past a parade of exclusive shops. There were no motorcars, only pedestrians and bicyclists and sleek electric trams that slithered along their steel tracks in near silence. Julian proceeded at an unhurried pace, the attaché case in his right hand, his left lodged in his pocket, along with the card key for his hotel room.

He followed a tram around a corner and onto the rue Vital Carles. Directly before him rose the twin Gothic spires of Bordeaux Cathedral. It was surrounded by the scrubbed paving stones of a broad square. Café Ravel occupied the northwest corner. It was not the sort of place frequented by most Bordelais, but it was centrally located and easily found. Julian supposed that was the reason Madame Bérangar had chosen it.

The shadow cast by the Hôtel de Ville darkened most of the café's tables, but the one nearest the cathedral was sunlit and unoccupied. Julian sat down and, placing his attaché case at his feet, took stock of the other patrons. With the possible exception of the man sitting three tables to his right, none appeared to be French. The rest were tourists, primarily of the package variety. Julian was the café's sore thumb; in his flannel trousers and gray sport jacket, he looked like a character from an E. M. Forster novel. At least she would have no difficulty spotting him.

He ordered a café crème before coming to his senses and requesting a half bottle of white Bordeaux instead, brutally cold, two glasses. The waiter delivered it as the bells of the cathedral tolled four o'clock. Julian reflexively smoothed the front of his jacket as his eyes searched the square. But at four thirty, as the lengthening shadows crept across his table, Madame Valerie Bérangar was still nowhere to be found.

**B**y the time Julian finished the last of the wine, it was approaching five o'clock. He paid the bill in cash and, taking up his attaché case, moved from table to table like a beggar, repeating Madame Bérangar's name and

receiving only blank stares in return.

The interior of the café was deserted save the man behind the old zinc-topped bar. He had no recollection of anyone named Valerie Bérangar but suggested Julian leave his name and phone number. “Isherwood,” he said when the barman squinted at the spidery lines scrawled on the back of a napkin. “Julian Isherwood. I’m staying at the InterContinental.”

Outside, the bells of the cathedral were tolling once more. Julian followed an earthbound pigeon across the paving stones of the square, then turned into the rue Vital Carles. He realized after a moment that he was berating himself for having come all the way to Bordeaux for no reason—and for having permitted this woman, this Madame Bérangar, to stir up unwanted memories of the past. “How dare she?” he shouted, startling a poor passerby. It was another unsettling development brought about by his advancing years, his recent propensity to say aloud the private thoughts running through his head.

At last the bells fell silent, and the pleasing low murmur of the ancient city returned. An electric tram glided past, sotto voce. Julian, his anger beginning to subside, paused outside a small art gallery and regarded with professional dismay the Impressionist-inspired paintings in the window. He was aware, vaguely, of the sound of an approaching motorbike. It was no scooter, he thought. Not with an engine note like that. It was one of those low-slung beasts ridden by men who wore special wind-resistant costumes.

The gallery’s owner appeared in the doorway and invited Julian inside for a closer look at his inventory. Declining, he continued along the street in the direction of his hotel, the attaché case, as usual, in his left hand. The volume of the motorcycle’s engine had increased sharply and was a half step higher in register. Suddenly Julian noticed an elderly woman—Madame Bérangar’s doppelgänger, no doubt—pointing at him and shouting something in French he couldn’t make out.

Fearing he had once again uttered something inappropriate, he turned in the opposite direction and saw the motorcycle bearing down on him, a gloved hand reaching toward his attaché case. He drew the bag to his chest and pirouetted out of the machine’s path, directly into the cold metal of a tall, immovable object. As he lay on the pavement, his head swimming, he saw several faces hovering over him, each wearing an expression of pity. Someone suggested calling an ambulance; someone else, the gendarmes. Humiliated, Julian reached for one of his ready-made excuses. It wasn’t his fault, he explained. The bloody lamppost attacked *him*.

## 2

# Venezia

**I**t was Francesco Tiepolo, while standing atop Tintoretto's grave in the church of the Madonna dell'Orto, who had assured Gabriel that one day he would return to Venice. The remark was not idle speculation, as Gabriel discovered a few nights later, during a candlelit dinner with his beautiful young wife on the island of Murano. He offered several considered objections to the scheme, without conviction or success, and in the aftermath of an electrifying conclave in Rome, the deal was concluded. The terms were equitable, everyone was happy. Chiara especially. As far as Gabriel was concerned, nothing else mattered.

Admittedly, it all made a great deal of sense. After all, Gabriel had served his apprenticeship in Venice and had pseudonymously restored many of its greatest masterpieces. Still, the arrangement was not without its potential pitfalls, including the agreed-upon organizational chart of the Tiepolo Restoration Company, the most prominent such enterprise in the city. Under the terms of their arrangement, Francesco would remain at the helm until his retirement, when Chiara, who was Venetian by birth, would assume control. In the meantime she would occupy the position of general manager, with Gabriel serving as the director of the paintings department. Which meant that, for all intents and purposes, he would be working for his wife.

He approved the purchase of a luxurious four-bedroom *piano nobile* overlooking the Grand Canal in San Polo but otherwise left the planning and execution of the pending move in Chiara's capable hands. She oversaw the apartment's renovation and decoration long-distance from Jerusalem while Gabriel served out the remainder of his term at King Saul Boulevard. The final months passed quickly—there always seemed to be

one more meeting to attend, one more crisis to avert—and in late autumn he embarked on what a noted columnist at *Haaretz* described as “the long goodbye.” The events ranged from cocktail receptions and tribute-laden dinners to a blowout at the King David Hotel attended by espiocrats from around the globe, including the powerful chief of the Jordanian Mukhabarat and his counterparts from Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Their presence was proof that Gabriel, who had cultivated security partnerships across the Arab world, had left an indelible mark on a region torn by decades of war. For all its problems, the Middle East had changed for the better on his watch.

Reclusive by nature and uncomfortable in crowded settings, he found all the attention unbearable. Indeed, he much preferred the quiet evenings he passed with the members of his senior staff, the men and women with whom he had carried out some of the most storied operations in the history of a storied service. He begged Uzi Navot for forgiveness. He dispensed career and marital advice to Mikhail Abramov and Natalie Mizrahi. He shed tears of laughter while telling uproarious tales about the three years he had spent living underground in Western Europe with the hypochondriacal Eli Lavon. Dina Sarid, archivist of Palestinian and Islamic terrorism, beseeched Gabriel to sit for a series of exit interviews so that she might record his exploits in an unclassified official history. Not surprisingly, he declined. He had no wish to dwell on the past, he told her. Only the future.

Two officers from his senior staff, Yossi Gavish of Research and Yaakov Rossman of Special Ops, were regarded as his most likely successors. But both were overjoyed to learn that Gabriel had chosen Rimona Stern, the chief of Collections, instead. On a blustery Friday afternoon in mid-December, she became the first female director-general in the history of the Office. And Gabriel, after affixing his signature to a stack of documents regarding his modest pension and the dire consequences he would suffer if he ever divulged any of the secrets lodged in his head, officially became the world’s most famous retired spy. His ritual disrobing complete, he toured King Saul Boulevard from top to bottom, shaking hands, drying tear-streaked cheeks. He assured his heartbroken troops that they had not seen the last of him, that he intended to keep his hand in the game. No one believed him.

That evening he attended one final gathering, this time on the shore of the Sea of Galilee. Unlike its predecessors, the encounter was at times contentious, though in the end a kind of peace was made. Early the next morning he made a pilgrimage to his son’s grave on the Mount of Olives



—and to the psychiatric hospital near the old Arab village of Deir Yassin where the child’s mother resided in a prison of memory and a body ravaged by fire. With Rimona’s blessing, the Allon family flew to Venice aboard the Office’s Gulfstream, and at three that afternoon, after a windblown ride across the *laguna* in a gleaming wooden water taxi, they arrived at their new home.

Gabriel headed directly to the large light-filled room he had claimed as his studio and found an antique Italian easel, two halogen work lamps, and an aluminum trolley filled with Winsor & Newton sable-hair brushes, pigment, medium, and solvent. Absent was his old paint-smudged CD player. In its place was a British-made audio system and a pair of floor-standing speakers. His extensive music collection was organized by genre, composer, and artist.

“What do you think?” asked Chiara from the doorway.

“Bach’s violin concertos are in the Brahms section. Otherwise, it’s absolutely—”

“Amazing, I think.”

“How did you possibly manage all this from Jerusalem?”

She waved a hand dismissively.

“Is there any money left?”

“Not much.”

“I’ll line up a few private commissions after we get settled.”

“I’m afraid that’s out of the question.”

“Why?”

“Because you shall do no work whatsoever until you’ve had a chance to properly rest and recuperate.” She handed him a sheet of paper. “You can start with this.”

“A shopping list?”

“There’s no food in the house.”

“I thought I was supposed to be resting.”

“You are.” She smiled. “Take your time, darling. Enjoy doing something *normal* for a change.”

The closest supermarket was the Carrefour near the Frari church. Gabriel’s stress level seemed to subside a notch with each item he placed in his lime-green basket. Returning home, he watched the latest news from the Middle East with only passing interest while Chiara, singing softly to herself, prepared dinner in the apartment’s showplace of a kitchen. They finished the last of the Barbaresco upstairs on the roof terrace, huddled closely together against the cold December air. Beneath them, gondolas swayed at their moorings. Along the gentle curve of the Grand Canal, the

Rialto Bridge was awash with floodlight.

“And if I were to paint something original?” asked Gabriel. “Would that constitute work?”

“What did you have in mind?”

“A canal scene. Or perhaps a still life.”

“Still life? How boring.”

“In that case, how about a series of nudes?”

Chiara raised an eyebrow. “I suppose you’ll need a model.”

“Yes,” said Gabriel, tugging at the zipper of her coat. “I suppose I will.”

Chiara waited until January before taking up her new position at Tiepolo Restoration. The firm’s warehouse was on the mainland, but its business offices were located on the fashionable Calle Larga XXII Marzo in San Marco, a ten-minute commute by vaporetto. Francesco introduced her to the city’s artistic elite and dropped cryptic hints that a succession plan had been put in place. Someone leaked the news to *Il Gazzettino*, and in late February a brief article appeared in the newspaper’s Cultura section. It referred to Chiara by her maiden name, Zolli, and pointed out that her father was the chief rabbi of Venice’s dwindling Jewish community. With the exception of a few nasty reader comments, mainly from the populist far right, the reception was favorable.

The story contained no mention of a spouse or domestic partner, only two children, twins apparently, of indeterminate age and gender. At Chiara’s insistence, Irene and Raphael were enrolled in the neighborhood *scuola elementare* rather than one of Venice’s many private international schools. Perhaps fittingly, theirs was named for Bernardo Canal, the father of Canaletto. Gabriel deposited them at the entrance at eight o’clock each morning and collected them again at half past three. Along with a daily visit to the Rialto Market, where he fetched the ingredients for the family dinner, the two appointments represented the sum total of his domestic responsibilities.

Forbidden by Chiara to work, or to even set foot in the offices of Tiepolo Restoration, he devised ways of filling his vast reservoir of available time. He read dense books. He listened to his music collection on his new sound system. He painted his nudes—from memory, of course, for his model was no longer available to him. Occasionally she came to the apartment for “lunch,” which was the way they referred to the ravenous sessions of midday lovemaking in their glorious bedroom overlooking the Grand Canal.

Mainly, he walked. Not the punishing clifftop hikes of his Cornish exile,

but aimless Venetian wanderings conducted in the unhurried manner of a flaneur. If he were so inclined, he would drop in on a painting he had once restored, if only to see how his work had held up. Afterward, he might slip into a bar for a coffee and, if it was cold, a small glass of something stronger to warm his bones. More often than not, one of the other patrons would attempt to engage him in conversation about the weather or the news of the day. Where once he would have spurned their overtures, he now reciprocated, in perfect if slightly accented Italian, with a witticism or keen observation of his own.

One by one, his demons took flight, and the violence of his past, the nights of blood and fire, receded from his thoughts and dreams. He laughed more easily. He allowed his hair to grow. He acquired a new wardrobe of elegant handmade trousers and cashmere jackets befitting a man of his position. Before long he scarcely recognized the figure he glimpsed each morning in the mirror of his dressing room. The transformation, he thought, was nearly complete. He was no longer Israel's avenging angel. He was the director of the paintings department of the Tiepolo Restoration Company. Chiara and Francesco had given him a second chance at life. This time, he vowed, he would not make the same mistakes.

In early March, during a bout of drenching rains, he asked Chiara for permission to begin working. And when she once again denied his request, he ordered a twelve-meter Bavaria C42 yacht and spent the next two weeks preparing a detailed itinerary for a summer sailing trip around the Adriatic and Mediterranean. He presented it to Chiara over a particularly satisfying lunch in the bedroom of their apartment.

"I have to say," she murmured approvingly, "that was one of your better performances."

"It must be all the rest I've been getting."

"Have you?"

"I'm so rested I'm on the verge of becoming bored stiff."

"Then perhaps there's something we can do to make your afternoon a bit more interesting."

"I'm not sure that would be possible."

"How about a drink with an old friend?"

"Depends on the friend."

"Julian rang me at the office as I was leaving. He said he was in Venice and was wondering whether you had a minute or two to spare."

"What did you say to him?"

"That you would meet him for a drink after you were finished having

your way with me.”

“Surely you left the last bit out.”

“I don’t believe so, no.”

“What time is he expecting me?”

“Three o’clock.”

“What about the children?”

“Don’t worry, I’ll cover for you.” She glanced at her wristwatch. “The question is, what shall we do until then?”

“Since you’re not wearing any clothing . . .”

“Yes?”

“Why don’t you come to my studio and pose for me?”

“I have a better idea.”

“What’s that?”

Chiara smiled. “Dessert.”