



DANIEL Silva

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BESTSELLING AUTHOR

The
Collector

DANIEL
Silva
The
Collector

A NOVEL



HARPER

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Dedication

*As always, for my wife, Jamie,
and my children, Lily and Nicholas*

Epigraph

We all want things we can't have. Being a decent human being is accepting that.

—John Fowles, *The Collector*

And remember: you must never, under any circumstances, despair. To hope and to act, these are our duties in misfortune.

—Boris Pasternak, *Doctor Zhivago*

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Part One
The Concert

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Amalfi

It was possible, Sofia Ravello would tell the Carabinieri later that day, to spend the majority of one's waking hours in another man's home, to prepare his meals and wash his sheets and sweep his floors, and to know absolutely nothing about him. The officer from the Carabinieri, whose name was Caruso, did not take issue with her statement, for the woman who had shared his bed for the last twenty-five years was at times a perfect stranger to him. He also knew a bit more about the victim than he had thus far revealed to the witness. The man was a murder waiting to happen.

Still, Caruso insisted on a detailed statement, which Sofia was all too happy to provide. Her day began as it always did, at the dreadful hour of 5:00 a.m., with the bleating of her old-fashioned digital alarm clock. Having worked late the previous evening—her employer had entertained—she had granted herself fifteen minutes of additional sleep before rising from her bed. She had brewed a pot of espresso with the Bialetti stovetop, then showered and dressed in her black uniform, all the while asking herself how it was that she, an attractive twenty-four-year-old graduate of the esteemed University of Bologna, worked as a domestic servant in the home of a wealthy foreigner rather than in a sleek office tower in Milan.

The answer was that the Italian economy, reputedly the world's eighth largest, was gripped by chronically high unemployment, leaving the young and educated little choice but to go abroad in search of work. Sofia, however, was determined to remain in her native Campania, even if it required taking a job for which she was vastly overeducated. The wealthy

foreigner paid her well—indeed, she earned more than many of her friends from university—and the work itself was hardly backbreaking. Typically, she spent a not insignificant portion of her day staring at the blue-green waters of the Tyrrhenian Sea or at the paintings in her employer’s magnificent art collection.

Her tiny apartment was in a crumbling building on the Via della Cartiere, in the upper reaches of the town of Amalfi. From there, it was a lemon-scented walk of twenty minutes to the grandly named Palazzo Van Damme. Like most seaside estates on the Costiera Amalfitana, it was hidden behind a high wall. Sofia entered the passcode into the keypad, and the gate slid open. There was a second keypad at the entrance of the villa itself, with a separate passcode. Usually, the alarm system emitted a shrill chirp when Sofia opened the door, but on that morning it was silent. She did not think it odd at the time. Signore Van Damme sometimes neglected to activate the alarm before turning in.

Sofia proceeded directly to the kitchen and engaged in the first task of her day, which was the preparation of Signore Van Damme’s breakfast—a pot of coffee, a pitcher of steamed milk, a bowl of sugar, toasted bread with butter and strawberry preserves. She placed it on a tray and at seven o’clock exactly placed the tray outside his bedroom door. No, she explained to the Carabinieri, she did not enter the room. Nor did she knock. She had made that mistake only once. Signore Van Damme was a precise man who demanded precision from his employees. Needless knocks on doors were discouraged, especially the door to his bedroom.

It was just one of the many rules and edicts that he had transmitted to Sofia at the conclusion of the hour-long interrogation, conducted in his magnificent office, that preceded her hiring. He had described himself as a successful businessman, which he had pronounced *beezneezman*. The palazzo, he said, served as both his primary residence and the nerve center of a global enterprise. He therefore required a smooth-functioning household, free of unnecessary noise and interruptions, as well as loyalty and discretion on the part of those who worked for him. Gossiping about his affairs, or about the contents of his home, was grounds for immediate dismissal.

Sofia soon determined that her employer was the owner of a Bahamas-based shipping company called LVD Marine Transport—LVD being the acronym of his full name, which was Lukas van Damme. She also deduced

that he was a citizen of South Africa who had fled his homeland after the fall of apartheid. There was a daughter in London, an ex-wife in Toronto, and a Brazilian woman named Serafina who dropped in on him from time to time. Otherwise, he seemed unencumbered by human attachments. His paintings were all that mattered to him, the paintings that hung in every room and corridor in the villa. Thus the cameras and the motion detectors, and the nerve-jangling weekly test of the alarm, and the strict rules about gossip and unwanted interruptions.

The sanctity of his office was of paramount concern. Sofia was permitted to enter the room only when Signore Van Damme was present. And she was never, *never*, to open the door if it was closed. She had intruded on his privacy only once, through no fault of her own. It had happened six months earlier, when a man from South Africa was staying at the villa. Signore Van Damme had requested a snack of tea and biscuits to be delivered to the office, and when Sofia arrived, the door was ajar. That was when she learned of the existence of the hidden chamber, the one behind the movable bookshelves. The one where Signore Van Damme and his friend from South Africa were at that moment excitedly discussing something in their peculiar native language.

Sofia told no one about what she had seen that day, least of all Signore Van Damme. She did, however, commence a private investigation of her employer, an investigation conducted mainly from within the walls of his seaside citadel. Her evidence, based largely on clandestine observation of her subject, led Sofia to the following conclusions—that Lukas van Damme was not the successful businessman he claimed to be, that his shipping company was less than legitimate, that his money was dirty, that he had links to Italian organized crime, and that he was hiding something in his past.

Sofia harbored no such suspicions about the woman who had come to the villa the previous evening—the attractive raven-haired woman, mid-thirties, whom Signore Van Damme had bumped into one afternoon at the terrace bar of the Santa Catarina Hotel. He had given her a rare guided tour of his art collection. Afterward they had dined by candlelight on the terrace overlooking the sea. They were finishing the last of their wine when Sofia and the rest of the staff departed the villa at half past ten. It was Sofia's assumption that the woman was now upstairs in Signore Van Damme's bed.

They had left the remnants of their dinner—a few soiled dishes, two garnet-stained wineglasses—outside on the terrace. Neither glass bore any trace of lipstick, which Sofia found unusual. There was nothing else out of the ordinary save for the open door on the villa's lowest level. The likely culprit, Sofia suspected, was Signore Van Damme himself.

She washed and dried the dishes carefully—a single water mark on a utensil was grounds for a reprimand—and at eight o'clock exactly headed upstairs to collect the breakfast tray from outside Signore Van Damme's door. Which was when she noticed that it had not been touched. Not his typical routine, she would tell the Carabinieri, but not unprecedented, either.

But when Sofia found the tray undisturbed at nine o'clock, she grew concerned. And when ten o'clock came and went with no sign that Signore Van Damme was awake, her concern turned to alarm. By then two other members of the staff—Marco Mazzetti, the villa's longtime chef, and groundskeeper Gaspare Bianchi—had arrived. Both were in agreement that the attractive young woman who had dined at the villa the previous evening was the most likely explanation for Signore Van Damme's failure to rise at his normal hour. Therefore, as men, it was their solemn advice to wait until noon before taking action.

And so Sofia Ravello, twenty-four years old, a graduate of the University of Bologna, took up her bucket and mop and gave the floors of the villa their daily scrubbing—which in turn provided her with the opportunity to take inventory of the paintings and other objets d'art in Signore Van Damme's remarkable collection. There was nothing out of place, nothing missing, no sign that anything untoward had occurred.

Nothing but the untouched breakfast tray.

It was still there at noon. Sofia's first knock was tepid and received no answer. Her second, several firm blows delivered with the side of her fist, met with the same result. Finally, she placed a hand on the latch and slowly opened the door. A call to the police proved unnecessary. Her screaming, Marco Mazzetti would later say, could be heard from Salerno to Positano.

Cannaregio

“Where are you?”

“If I’m not mistaken, I’m sitting next to my wife in the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo.”

“Not physically, darling.” She placed a finger against his forehead. “Here.”

“I was thinking.”

“About what?”

“Nothing at all.”

“That’s not possible.”

“Wherever did you get an idea like that?”

It was a peculiar skill that Gabriel had honed in his youth, the capacity to silence all thoughts and memories, to create a private universe without sound or light or other inhabitants. It was there, in the empty quarter of his subconscious, that finished paintings had appeared to him, dazzling in their execution, revolutionary in their approach, and entirely absent of his mother’s domineering influence. He had only to awaken from his trance and swiftly copy the images onto canvas before they were lost to him. Lately, he had regained the power to clear his mind of sensory clutter—and with it the ability to produce satisfactory original work. Chiara’s body, with its many shapes and curves, was his favorite subject matter.

At present it was pressed tightly against his. The afternoon had turned cold, and a gusty wind was chasing around the perimeter of the *campo*. He

was wearing a woolen overcoat for the first time in many months. Chiara's stylish suede jacket and chenille scarf were inadequate to the conditions.

"Surely you must have been thinking about something," she insisted.

"I probably shouldn't say it aloud. The old ones might never recover."

The bench upon which they were seated was a few paces from the doorway of the Casa Israelitica di Riposo, a rest home for aged members of Venice's dwindling Jewish community.

"Our future address," remarked Chiara, and dragged the tip of her finger through the platinum-colored hair at Gabriel's temple. It was longer than he had worn it in many years. "Some of us sooner than others."

"Will you visit me?"

"Every day."

"And what about them?"

Gabriel directed his gaze toward the center of the broad square, where Irene and Raphael were engaged in a hard-fought contest of some sort with several other children from the *sestiere*. The apartment buildings behind them, the tallest in Venice, were awash with the sienna light of the declining sun.

"What on earth is the point of the game?" asked Chiara.

"I've been asking myself the same thing."

The competition involved a ball and the *campo's* ancient wellhead, but otherwise its rules and scoring system were, to a nonparticipant, indecipherable. Irene seemed to be clinging to a narrow advantage, though her twin brother had organized a furious counterattack among the other players. The boy had been cursed with Gabriel's face and with his unusually green eyes. He also possessed an aptitude for mathematics and recently had begun working with a private tutor. Irene, a climate alarmist who feared that Venice would soon be swallowed by the sea, had decided that Raphael should use his gifts to save the planet. She had yet to choose a career for herself. For now, she enjoyed nothing more than tormenting her father.

An errant kick sent the ball bounding toward the doorway of the Casa. Gabriel hastened to his feet and with a deft flick of his foot sent the ball back into play. Then, after acknowledging the torpid applause of a heavily armed Carabinieri sentry, he turned to face the seven bas-relief panels of the ghetto's Holocaust memorial. It was dedicated to the 243 Venetian Jews—including twenty-nine residents of the convalescent home—who were arrested in December 1943, interned in concentration camps, and later

deported to Auschwitz. Among them was Adolfo Ottolenghi, the chief rabbi of Venice, who was murdered in September 1944.

The current leader of the Jewish community, Rabbi Jacob Zolli, was a descendant of Sephardic Jews from Andalusia who were expelled from Spain in 1492. His daughter was at that moment seated on a bench in the Campo di Ghetto Nuovo, watching over her two young children. Like the rabbi's famous son-in-law, she was a former officer of Israel's secret intelligence service. She now served as the general manager of the Tiepolo Restoration Company, the most prominent such enterprise in the Veneto. Gabriel, an art conservator of international renown, was the director of the firm's paintings department. Which meant that, for all intents and purposes, he worked for his wife.

"What are you thinking now?" she asked.

He was wondering, not for the first time, whether his mother had noticed the arrival of several thousand Italian Jews at Auschwitz beginning in the terrible autumn of 1943. Like many survivors of the camps, she had refused to talk about the nightmare world into which she had been cast. Instead, she had recorded her testimony on a few pages of onionskin and locked it away in the file rooms of Yad Vashem. Tormented by the past—and by an abiding guilt over having survived—she had been incapable of showing her only child genuine affection for fear he might be taken from her. She had bequeathed to him her ability to paint, her Berlin-accented German, and perhaps a modicum of her physical courage. And then she had left him. With each passing year, Gabriel's memories of her grew more diffuse. She was a distant figure standing before an easel, a bandage on her left forearm, her back forever turned. That was the reason Gabriel had momentarily detached himself from his wife and children. He had been trying, without success, to see his mother's face.

"I was thinking," he answered, glancing at his wristwatch, "that we ought to be leaving soon."

"And miss the end of the game? I wouldn't dream of it. Besides," added Chiara, "your girlfriend's concert doesn't begin until eight."

It was the annual black-tie gala to benefit the Venice Preservation Society, the London-based nonprofit organization dedicated to the care and restoration of the city's fragile art and architecture. Gabriel had prevailed upon the renowned Swiss violinist Anna Rolfe, with whom he had once had a brief romantic entanglement, to appear at the fundraiser. She had dined

the previous evening at the Allon family's luxurious four-bedroom *piano nobile della loggia* overlooking the Grand Canal. Gabriel was only pleased that his wife, who had expertly prepared and served the meal, was once again speaking to him.

She stared straight ahead, a Mona Lisa smile on her face, as he returned to the bench. "Now is the point in the conversation," she said evenly, "when you remind me that the world's most famous violinist is no longer your girlfriend."

"I didn't think it was necessary."

"It is."

"She isn't."

Chiara dug a thumbnail into the back of his hand. "And you were never in love with her."

"Never," vowed Gabriel.

Chiara released the pressure and gently massaged the crescent-shaped indentation in his skin. "She's bewitched your children. Irene informed me this morning that she'd like to begin studying the violin."

"She's a charmer, our Anna."

"She's a train wreck."

"But an extremely talented one." Gabriel had attended Anna's rehearsal earlier that afternoon at Teatro La Fenice, Venice's historic opera house. He had never heard her play so well.

"It's funny," said Chiara, "but she's not as pretty in person as she is on the covers of her CDs. I suppose photographers use special filters when shooting older women."

"That was beneath you."

"I'm allowed." Chiara issued a dramatic sigh. "Has the train wreck settled on her repertoire?"

"Schumann's Violin Sonata No. 1 and the D-minor Brahms."

"You always loved the Brahms, especially the second movement."

"Who doesn't?"

"I suppose she'll make us sit through an encore of the *Devil's Trill*."

"If she doesn't play it, there's likely to be a riot."

Giuseppe Tartini's technically demanding Violin Sonata in G Minor was Anna's signature piece.

"A satanic sonata," said Chiara. "One can only imagine why your girlfriend would be drawn to a piece like that."

“She doesn’t believe in the devil. Nor, for that matter, does she believe Tartini’s silly story about hearing the piece in a dream.”

“But you don’t deny that she’s your girlfriend.”

“I believe I’ve been quite clear on that point.”

“And you were never in love with her?”

“Asked and answered.”

Chiara leaned her head against Gabriel’s shoulder. “And what about the devil?”

“He’s not my type.”

“Do you believe he exists?”

“Why would you ask such a question?”

“It might explain all the evil in this world of ours.”

She was referring, of course, to the war in Ukraine, now in its eighth month. It had been another dreadful day. More missiles directed against civilian targets in Kyiv. Mass graves with hundreds of bodies discovered in the town of Izium.

“Men rape and steal and murder all on their own,” said Gabriel, his eyes fixed on the Holocaust memorial. “And many of the worst atrocities in human history were committed by those who were motivated not by their devotion to the Evil One but by their faith in God.”

“How’s yours?”

“My faith?” Gabriel said nothing more.

“Perhaps you should talk to my father.”

“I talk to your father all the time.”

“About our work and the children and security at the synagogues, but not about God.”

“Next subject.”

“What were you thinking about a few minutes ago?”

“I was dreaming of your fettuccine and mushrooms.”

“Don’t make a joke about it.”

He answered truthfully.

“You really don’t remember how she looked?”

“At the end. But that wasn’t her.”

“Perhaps this will help.”

Rising, Chiara made her way to the center of the *campo* and took Irene by the hand. A moment later the child was sitting on her father’s knee, her

arms around his neck. “What’s wrong?” she asked as he hurriedly wiped a tear from his cheek.

“Nothing,” he told her. “Nothing at all.”