***Silva D. The Rembrandt Affair***

"Ah, yes, young Master Peel. He was like you. A natural spy, that one. Gave me a devil of a time when I came looking for that painting I'd placed in your care." Isherwood made a show of thought. "Vecellio, wasn't it?"

Gabriel nodded. "*Adoration of the Shepherds*."

"Gorgeous picture," said Isherwood, his eyes glistening. "My business was hanging by the thinnest of threads. That Vecellio was the coup that was going to keep me in clover for a few more years, and you were supposed to be restoring it. But you'd disappeared from the face of the earth, hadn't you? Vanished without a trace." Isherwood frowned. "I was a fool to ever throw in my lot with you and your friends from Tel Aviv. You use people like me. And when you're done, you throw us to the wolves."

Isherwood warmed his hands against the tarnished aluminum teapot. His backbone-of-England surname and English scale concealed the fact that he was not, at least technically, English at all. British by nationality and passport, yes, but German by birth, French by upbringing, and Jewish by religion. Only a handful of trusted friends knew that Isherwood had staggered into London as a child refugee in 1942 after being carried across the snowbound Pyrenees by a pair of Basque shepherds. Or that his father, the renowned Paris art dealer Samuel Isakowitz, had been murdered at the Sobibor death camp along with Isherwood's mother. Though Isherwood had carefully guarded the secrets of his past, the story of his dramatic escape from Nazi-occupied Europe had managed to reach the ears of the legendary Israeli spymaster Ari Shamron. And in the mid-1970s, during a wave of Palestinian terrorist attacks against Israeli targets in Europe, Shamron had recruited Isherwood as a *sayan,* a volunteer helper. Isherwood had but one assignment—to assist in building and maintaining the operational cover of a young art restorer and assassin named Gabriel Allon.

"When did you speak with him?" Gabriel asked.

"Shamron?" Isherwood gave an ambiguous shrug of his shoulders. "I bumped into him in Paris a few weeks ago."

Gabriel, by his expression, made it clear he found Isherwood's account less than credible. No one bumped into Ari Shamron. And those who did rarely lived to recall the experience.

"Where in Paris?"

"We had dinner in his suite at the Ritz. Just the two of us."

"How romantic."

"Actually, we weren't completely alone. His bodyguard was there, too. Poor Shamron. He's as old as the Judean Hills, but even now his enemies are ruthlessly stalking him."

"It comes with the territory, Julian."

"I suppose it does." Isherwood looked at Gabriel and smiled sadly. "He's as stubborn as a mule and about as charming. But a part of me is glad he's still there. And another part lives in fear of the day he finally dies. Israel will never be quite the same. And neither will King Saul Boulevard."

King Saul Boulevard was the address of Israel's foreign intelligence service. It had a long and deliberately misleading name that had very little to do with the true nature of its work. Those who worked there referred to it as the Office and nothing else.