

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 11

by Daniel Harris

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Michiko never telephoned Frank from Washington or Chicago. He was miserable, but he stayed away from whiskey and only drank beer, limiting himself to one bottle an hour and then only a six-pack a night. He didn't want to go to the preview exhibit, but he knew he must. He had no motivation to do anything. Depression had him in its grip.

He dressed in his least worn jeans and a clean work shirt. He wore his hiking boots and a gray plaid Filson wool vest he bought for two dollars at the Salvation Army Store on West Madison Street in Chicago. He took the Broadway subway to 57th Street and walked west on 55th Street.

The preview was held at Grillo Moving and Storage where his paintings were stored. They had a small gallery on the ground floor, which could be used to photograph art works, or have an intimate reception with wall space to display a dozen large paintings. Elaine had hung ten of Frank's best pieces. There was a long table with wines, cheeses, vegetables with dip, and several trays of canapés. A much higher class nosh than the cheap wine and cheese common to most art opening events.

When Frank arrived there were expensive cars parked on 55th Street and thirty people in the exhibition area.

—And here he is, shouted Elaine above the hubbub, the artist himself, Francesco Martinelli.

There was a sustained round of applause. Frank was embarrassed. These people seemed too easily pleased. It was strange to hear himself called Francesco Martinelli. He would have to tell his friends to call him Francesco from now on so that he could get used to hearing that name.

—Francesco, let me introduce you to some of the most discriminating art collectors, said Elaine Aster, taking Francesco's arm and steering him toward a group of people gathered around the painting Sylvestre had purchased.

Most of the people Francesco met were enthusiastic about his work and wanted to know about his training and philosophy of art. He was not prepared to answer those questions, but managed to give most people satisfactory replies. Being naturally shy, he said as little as possible. Francesco noticed that Elaine had priced his paintings from \$8,000 to \$12,000. He thought some of his paintings were overpriced and others underpriced. He kept his mouth shut when he noticed an "In contract to Purchase" sign on the most expensive painting. He wondered if that were true, or one of Elaine's sales ruses.

One of the guests was a stunning woman from *Galleria Fonte Nuova* in Venice, Italy. She radiated beauty and power. She was dressed in the finest Italian couture. Frank could barely take his eyes off her. When he was able to speak with her, he was so nervous that he could utter no more than inane pleasantries. Her English was rudimentary and difficult for him to understand. Eventually, her smiles and light touches on his arm freed up his tongue enough to ask her if she liked his paintings.

—So, good. Exciting, she said pointing to one of his better paintings.

—What is your name? Francesco asked.

—Oriana Morosini, she said smiling at Francesco and pointing to her nametag. I descend from a venerable Venetian family.

—Francesco Martinelli, but you already know that. You can call me Frank if you like. Most of my friends do.

—Frank! Why that is a horrible corruption. *Francesco è un bellissimo nome.*

—Of course. But you know Americans, they have lazy tongues. Frank is easier for them.

Oriana gave Francesco a charming smile and a wink. Francesco blushed. He wanted to hold her in his arms more than anything. Her beauty and bearing mesmerized him. This was a woman you could only dream of meeting, much less possessing.

—I notice you like that painting over there, said Francesco, pointing to a pulsating abstract painting I have similar ones at my loft.

—Loft?

—My atelier. It's not much, but it is a good place to paint. I live there.

—Maybe you can show me your earlier paintings.

—Sure. I must warn you, it is not a very nice place.

Elaine Aster approached. She could sense the electricity between Oriana and Francesco.

—I see you have beguiled the most beautiful woman in the room, Francesco, said Elaine.

—Of course, said Francesco.

—May I take him away for a few minutes to introduce him to a special friend, Oriana?

—If you must, said Oriana. We were just getting to know each other.

—Will I see you again Oriana? Francesco asked. Elaine quickly steered Frank to the other side of the room. He didn't hear her answer.

The special friend was a curator of contemporary painting at the Museum of Modern Art. Her name was Rachel Bergman. The woman was very enthusiastic about Francesco's work and was all business. Her knowledge of painting, painters, and trends was encyclopedic. She took Francesco to each of his paintings and analyzed them for him.

—Francesco, the curator said, this is how you must discuss your paintings. I know you are shy, but you need to express more depth of purpose and involvement in your work. It's obvious you have a painting goal or purpose for these paintings. You must make your objectives clear to the public when they ask about your pictures.

These pictures are wonderful. They show a marvelous sense of form and motion. It is obvious you know your art history. Your paintings force the viewer to react. One can't look at these paintings passively. They demand engagement. You are a major talent.

Francesco was bewildered. He was confused by his multiple names. Why couldn't he be Frank Martin? He knew what he was trying to achieve in his paintings, but now he wasn't sure after listening to Rachel's analyses. He wanted to leave. The depression brought on by Michiko's coolness now weighed heavily on him. He wanted to leave this stuffy crowd and be with Oriana. She was the bright spot of a miserable week. He didn't have a good feeling about Michiko's failure to telephone him. Apparently with Michiko you were one hundred percent with her or she dismissed you. He was sorry he wasn't in Chicago. If nothing else, he loved to watch and hear her perform.

When Francesco finally freed himself from Rachel, he looked for Oriana, but she was not in the room. Maybe she was in the restroom or outside on the sidewalk. He spotted Elaine.

—Elaine, I think I'm ready to leave. Do you have anything for me to do?

—Not at the moment. I would like you to join us for Chinese food. There will be only a few people.

—When and where?

—It's a small place on 51st Street between Fifth and Sixth Avenues called Dragon of the Sea. It's on the second floor, but there is a sign over the sidewalk. Will you meet us there at six?

—I guess. Will Oriana be there?

—I'm afraid not, she had to catch a flight to London. Why don't you bring your pianist friend?

—She's playing with the Chicago Symphony tonight in Chicago.

—She's that good?

—One of the best.

—Will you join us? It would be good for business.

—I need to return home to take my medications. You don't want me going off the tracks tonight.

—Well, please join us, but if you don't feel up to it, I'll understand. I am so pleased you were here this afternoon. Your paintings hit homeruns.

—I hope that translates into sales. I don't want you to be disappointed and wish you hadn't signed me.

—Francesco, you worry too much. You and I are going to do very, very well. Please try to join us tonight.

—I will.

To be continued.

