

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 16

by Daniel Harris

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Depression had Frank in its craw. In an effort to break its grip, he restarted his lithium regimen, but the side effects drove him crazy. He stood before his easel watching the paintbrush in his hand shaking, spattering paint on the floor and his clothes. It took all his willpower to keep from jumping out the window of his loft. He was so afraid he might actually jump that he took Bouncer and moved into Alex's first floor studio.

Elaine Aster was frantically trying to contact Frank. She sent an assistant to his loft, but it was locked, no one answered the door. Finally one of the other residents in the building saw Frank, who still had his super duties, and asked him why he hadn't put the trash out on the curb for the last three weeks. Frank apologized and sheepishly asked him what day it was. When Frank heard it was Friday, he roused himself and gathered up the stinking and overflowing trashcans and put them on the sidewalk for Saturday collection. Outside, a gale was blowing snow and sleet. Frank stood in a T-shirt in the storm and reveled in the cold on his face. It seemed to rejuvenate him, reminding him of the fierce November storms that battered his parent's farm in Door County, Wisconsin. The thought of those childhood days cleared his head and restored some semblance of normality to his life. The stinging sleet had flipped a switch in his brain.

—Do you know where I can find Francesco Martinelli? asked a young man bundled in a hat, coat and scarf sheltering under an open umbrella.

Who uses an umbrella in the snow? thought Frank. Only wimpy city people.

—Signore Martinelli used to live here, but I think he moved back to Rome, said Frank.

—I was told he lives here. He has a show at the Elaine Aster Gallery that opens next week. I'm from *Art Forum Magazine* and want to interview him. Elaine Aster gave me this address.

—You're talking about the painter Francesco Martinelli?

—Yes.

—He lived on the top floor, but I haven't seen him in weeks.

—Who are you?

—I'm the building super.

The man turned and began to walk up Greene Street toward Prince, but stopped after a few steps

—You're sure Francesco Martinelli doesn't live at this address?

—Positive.

Frank went inside. He went upstairs to his loft. He hadn't been there for three weeks. Inside on the easel was the miserable product of his efforts while taking lithium. The painting looked as unschooled and juvenile as the Preston woman's art he'd seen two months ago at the Aster Gallery. He went into the bathroom and emptied the bottle of lithium in the toilet. He opened a can of beer and chugged it. Soon, he felt like Frank Martin again. He found a can of his gesso mix and painted over the awful painting with gesso. It felt good to be doing art, even if it was only applying gesso.

Suddenly, he was hungry. He realized he hadn't eaten too often in the last three weeks. He also hadn't bathed or combed his hair. In his tiny refrigerator he found three Oscar Meyer hot dogs. He ate them cold dipping them in a mustard jar and then took a long shower. When he was drying off, he heard Bounder crying to get in.

—Poor boy, I've been a lousy friend, said Frank, scratching Bounder's ears.

Frank went downstairs to Alex's loft and retrieved Bounder's food and bowls. He emptied and cleaned the pestiferous litter box and

brought it up to his loft. He gave Bounder a generous helping of food.

—We're done with that temporary home, kitty-cat. I promise I won't fly out the window.

Frank heard the elevator arrive on his floor. He could hear Elaine Aster's voice scolding an assistant.

—Oh My God! She screamed when she saw Frank. What the hell happened to you? You're white as a sheet and emaciated. Were you sick? You should have called me. Have you seen a doctor?

—I've been gone, in another zone.

—Put on a coat. We'll get you fed and then I want your approval of the installation. There are previews tomorrow and Sunday for some of the wealthiest collectors and, more importantly, the art police, as I call the art press.

Elaine ordered Frank a turkey-and-provolone hero and chicken soup from the nearest deli. Frank gulped down the soup and ate the sandwich while walking around the gallery inspecting the installation.

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Michiko found the announcement in her mailbox when she returned to New York from London. It was from Elaine Aster Gallery addressed to F. Martin, c/o Michiko Mita. She carefully peeled off the gold-embossed seal. She was pleased that the gallery thought enough of Frank's work to spend some coin on the invitations.

Included in the envelope was a beautiful reproduction of one of Frank's paintings titled *The Last Duet*. Michiko looked at the painting and began to cry.

—Frank, you are such an amazing artist, she said to her pianos.

Michiko missed Frank terribly, but her manager told her she was not to see Frank Martin again. He was on an NYPD watch list. He would get in trouble if she saw him. She had a concert on the 23rd in Philadelphia. Then she was accompanying a singer in a song recital at Riverside Church in New York City on the afternoon of the 24th. Frank would probably be gone by the time she could arrive at the gallery. She would have to skip Sunday's post-concert party to see Frank's show.

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Frank was not pleased with the installation. He cottoned on to Elaine's plan at once. The paintings were hung spatially and strategically for maximum sales, rather than to display any artistic thread or theme. He kept his mouth shut.

—Francesco, are you pleased? You seem quiet, asked Elaine.

—They did a beautiful job of lighting. They avoided shadows and hot spots, replied Frank. He was still having trouble hearing himself called Francesco.

—We didn't want the best pieces viewable from the front windows. We want to seduce visitors into the gallery.

—I like how you placed *When Blues Becomes Green Dancing with Yellow* next to *Orange Dines On The Spanish Inquisition*. They look well together. I would prefer *Abstract with Yellow* to be in the beginning of the show, but it has a nice solo wall where it is. For me it's the best piece in the show after *The Last Duet*, which seems hidden on a side partition. But, overall, your people did better than the usual installation.

—Thank you. We want you to be pleased, said Elaine. The invitees tomorrow and Sunday are high rollers, so I am sure there will be some sales. There will also be select members of the press. Some of these people you've already met at the preview at Grillo Moving and Storage back in September, but there are others who have come to New York just to see your work.

—Will Oriana Morosini be attending this weekend?

—Oh, no. She has her hands full. She's putting up a show in Venice. You liked her didn't you?

—Well, she *is* a beautiful woman with class in spades. I was hoping to have some of that rub off on me, said Frank laughing.

—You are a rogue, Francesco, but a kind and gentle one.

—If we're done, can I leave? I'm starved. I need to eat.

—You just ate a big sandwich.

—Well, I've missed a few meals and need to get my strength back.

—Where are you going to eat?

—Probably one of the Italian places on Mott Street. It's inexpensive and they serve big portions.

—You can afford better than that, Mr. Martinelli.

—Yes, mom, said Frank facetiously. But I like eating in those places. They treat me well and I usually end up sharing a table with some interesting people, even an occasional celebrity.

—Suit yourself. Make sure you are here by four tomorrow. I won't have staff available to track you down.

To be continued.

