

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 54

by Daniel Harris

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* * * **Venice, Italy, December 21, 1976**

Frank shouldered his backpack, grabbed the leather satchel packed with his brushes, palette knives, pens, and pencils, and exited the *vaporetto* at the Rialto Bridge. He had studied a map of Venice before he left Brooklyn. He had concluded that the streets were impossible to memorize, but by concentrating on the canals, *campos* and churches, he could find his way around. There was an x on the map Oriana had sent him at Campo S. Augustino, the location of Galleria Fonte Nuova where she was a curator. Now all he had to do was navigate there. There was a crowd of people coming off the Rialto Bridge that pushed him into the Campo S. Bartholomeo. He could see the central post office off to his left. That was not the good way. He looked for Calle del Stagnari at the right end of the campo. He crossed Rio Flava and turned left on Calle Flava. He followed this calle to the end, even though it changed names a few times. After crossing Ponte Pistor, he knew he was close. He continued straight until the calle ended. He turned right and then a left and entered Campo S. Augustino. There, off to the left, was a large palazzo with banners flying from the façade. It was Galleria Fonte Nuova.

Except for the church of Saint Augustino, the marble Moorish 14th century palazzo was the largest building on the campo. Unlike most of Venice whose buildings had distressed exteriors, this building had been fully restored and gleamed in the thin cloud-filtered sun. Tourists stood in small groups photographing the building and consulting guidebooks. A large group of schoolgirls

exited the gallery chaperoned by four nuns in full habit with large cornettes. Frank held the door for the group.

—*Grazie, senore*, said the senior Sister.

Frank momentarily lost all his Italian, but gave the nun a smile and a nod. He realized he was nervous, more nervous than he could remember. He had freshened up when he arrived at Marco Polo airport from Rome, but still felt funky after a sleepless night of air travel. He had kept his ponytail, but trimmed his beard down to a neat half-inch length before leaving Brooklyn. He still sported his dark skin from working outdoors doing handyman jobs on Cape Cod. He wore Levis, a black-watch Pendleton wool shirt, hiking boots, and his stand-by brown leather bomber jacket. He had stuffed a wool watch cap and knit gloves in his jacket pocket.

Thick glass doors and large picture windows lined the ground floor façade of the palazzo. A display of modernistic toys and gifts were tastefully arranged in secular holiday displays.

Frank hoped Oriana was waiting for him. He had phoned her every night since the call from Maria Monsanto's office at the Whitney. Those calls were worth the \$300 they had cost him. Oriana now seemed to be a real person. Someone he could talk to about art, life, politics, and even exchange jokes. He had discovered that beneath the beautiful face and body was a witty, sophisticated and intelligent woman with good business acumen. She knew how the world worked.

Oriana was strong where he was weak, but she assumed those responsibilities without the overbearing lessons Michiko had used to berate him.

He entered the palazzo's narrow vestibule, which opened onto a large low-ceilinged lobby. A long display counter ran along one wall in the lobby. There was a young woman behind the counter attending some visitors. Frank joined the line.

—*Buon giorno*, said Frank when the woman turned to him.

—*Buon giorno*, replied the woman, a tall slender woman with short blond hair wearing a blue suit with a beautiful green scarf. A

sign advertising that the employees spoke five languages was posted on the wall behind her.

—*Mi chiamo* Frank, Francesco Martinelli, said Frank, correcting himself. Oriana Morosini *mi sta aspettando* [Oriana Morosini is expecting me.]

—I speak English very good, said the woman giving Frank a big smile. Oriana is at lunch with a client. Would you like to visit the gallery?

—Well, yes. Sure, said Frank, ignoring her grammar mistake. Is there an admission charge?

—It is free. Please put this button on your jacket. You can check your bags at the cloak check across the hall. The bathrooms are located there also.

—Thank you. *Grazie. Grazie mille*, said Frank, nervous and confused.

After depositing his backpack and satchel, Frank ascended a grand staircase to the second floor. The gallery was the size of a ballroom. The wall opposite the staircase consisted of Moorish floor-to-ceiling windows. The ceiling, probably thirty feet above the floor, was decorated with frescos depicting the glory days of the Venetian Republic.

The current show consisted of large abstracts, not quite as large as his *Atmosphere* paintings, but works on a heroic scale. There were metal and stone modernistic sculptures on pedestals artfully arranged around the gallery. A Plexiglas display case held contemporary glass and porcelain pieces. Frank was impressed with the quality of the art and the tasteful presentation.

A fashionably dressed slight young man approached Frank. The man identified Frank as an American, and he immediately recognized the visitor as Francesco Martinelli.

—Welcome to Galleria Fonte Nuova. My name is Alfredo Nuova, I'm one of the owners of this gallery, he said in British-inflected English. You must be Francesco Martinelli.

—Hello, said Frank, taken aback after he had memorized what he thought were all the Italian phrases he would need for such an

encounter. Right, Frank continued in English, I am Francesco Martinelli, and I am here to see Oriana Morosini. She is expecting me.

—Francesco Martinelli, we are honored by your visit, said Alfredo with a curt bow. Oriana told us about your grand success at the Whitney Museum in New York. We've heard it is traveling to the Musée National d'Art Moderne in Paris. You must be pleased.

—Why, yes, said Frank, still baffled by a man looking so Italian yet speaking the Queen's English. Another encounter with a stranger who knew more about his life than he did.

—Yes, continued Frank, I was fortunate to receive good reviews and excellent attendance figures.

—Francesco, I trained at the Sorbonne and the Louvre, said Alfredo. I know the French will treat you royally. Signora Morosini is at lunch with a client. We expect her to return at three o'clock, Italian time.

—Italian time?

—Plus or minus thirty minutes.

—Do you know where she is dining?

—No, I do not. She and my business partner, Marcello Fonte, are negotiating a sale.

—Can you recommend a restaurant near here?

—Il Piccolo Polpo is around the corner, replied Alfredo. It means The Little Octopus. It is similar to an American deli, but specializing in seafood and pasta. You choose your meal at the counter, and they serve it to you. Tell Giorgio, *il padrone*, that Alfredo sent you. He's a colorful character who lived in Brooklyn for some years. He speaks very good English. Tell him you live in Brooklyn, he will be a friend for life.

—*Grazie mille*. I shall return after three.

—Please do, Oriana will be excited to know that you have arrived safely in Venice. She is fairly bursting with anticipation.

Frank left the gallery and walked around the corner to Il Piccolo Polpo. Locals filled the restaurant. Giorgio, *il padrone*, recognized Frank as a lost *americano*. Giorgio introduced himself and shook

Frank's hand. Giorgio politely explained the menu items. Frank ordered sautéed octopus with squid ink pasta, sautéed broccoli rabe with pine nuts, a glass of Prosecco. For dessert, he chose a chocolate-pistachio cannoli and espresso.

—So, where in Brooklyn do you live? asked Giorgio, taking a seat across the table from Frank.

—Red Hook, Van Dyke Street, said Frank, savoring his cannoli.

—Ah, I know it well; I lived in Carroll Gardens on Henry Street near Carroll. My uncle owned a dry cleaning business on the first floor. I attended Pratt Institute.

—I'm from Wisconsin and attended the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and then Yale University School of Art. I moved to New York City ten years ago. I've only lived in Red Hook for less than a year. I lived in SoHo before that.

—Chicago. Now that's a great city. My mother is from Chicago. My father is from Venice.

—It's a small world, said Frank. He was anxious to get moving and see some sights.

—How long are you in Venice?

—Two weeks. I'm here to see Oriana Morosini.

—So you're the lucky guy! You must be Francesco Martinelli.

—Good guess.

—She eats here several times a week. Tell her to bring you here, I will treat you both, and I'll show you my drawings of Venice.

—*Grazie*. I will tell her, said Frank, wondering just how many people knew he was visiting Oriana.

—Maybe you know my drawing teacher at Pratt, Albert Pachis, a tall skinny guy who looks like a Giacometti statue.

—Albert's my best friend in New York. I had lunch with him, and he drove me to the airport yesterday. You know he recently signed with Mahler Galleries in New York. He will finally be making some real money.

—I'm so happy for him. He is a prince of a man. Give you the shirt off his back. But, I'm keeping you. Bring Oriana some afternoon for a late lunch. My treat.

It was just after two when Frank left Il Piccolo Polpo.

Wandering the *calles* and *campos*, Frank marveled at the architecture and the color of the canals and sky. What struck him were the faded and distressed walls whose pentimenti revealed layers of history. One saw remnants of fresco, paint, brick, stone, plaster and stucco. The reflections of the buildings on the canals created a world that was simultaneously right side up and upside down. The narrow stone streets and hard surfaced walls had a marvelous acoustic that carried soft whispers around corners. It was a magical place for Frank. He noticed a quality to the light that lent clarity and accented the pathos of the aged buildings. His anxiousness about meeting Oriana slightly dampened his thrill of experiencing this grand faded lady of a city.

Frank crossed a bridge and there on the side of a Gothic-Moorish building was a bas-relief of the head of Tintoretto and a cement plaque. It was the last residence of the great artist. I wonder if there are any vestiges of the man left in this building after nearly four centuries, thought Frank. It looked like the building was occupied as a residential unit. There were no people on the street to ask. Looking at his watch, he saw it was almost three o'clock. He should return to Galleria Fonte Nuova

He realized he had no idea how to return to Campo S. Augustino. He was lost. He looked at addresses on buildings, but they were meaningless to him. His map had few addresses. Finally, several buildings from where he stood in front of Tintoretto's last home, he found Calle Tintoretto. He located it on his map. It was in Cannaregio, the same *sestiere* as the gallery. He carefully worked his way to Campo S. Augustino and Galleria Fonte Nuova.

Frank saw four people standing in the lobby with their eyes on the front door of the gallery. One of them was the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen. It was Oriana. No longer nervous, Francesco Martinelli strode through the front door like a conquering Homeric hero. Oriana ran into his arms. He buried his face in her luxuriant hair and inhaled her scent. Months of anxiety, terror, and confusion slipped from him as he held this wonderful woman. This was the

future. He knew it, and he sensed it like a trapped animal that knows the road to freedom. His tortured darkness of multiple personalities and confused behaviors now lifted, his mind began to clear. Oriana would be his savior and life partner — his center.

To be continued.

