

# DANGEROUS GAMES



MAURIZIO PIANARO

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## **Dangerous Games**

1st edition 2015

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eISBN 978-1-63323-283-9

ISBN 978-1-63323-284-6

**Published by** BooksMango

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Maurizio Pianaro is an Italian writer. His writing style is terse and concise and takes into account the influence that photography and cinema had on the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and the Digital Age.

The outcome is a blend of literature and visual arts, whose input is determined by the people he met, the places he traveled and the current affairs throughout his journeys.

### *Books by Maurizio Pianaro*

#### ***Deadly Forgery:***

FRANCESCO BENETTI is a desperate man who won't give in, even in the face of certain circumstances. He must find the money to save his wife and pay off his gambling debts. The only way he can do that is to try and sell a fake Titian painting for ten million dollars. An adventure that will take him from his antique shop in Venice to the spectacular world of Japan, attracting the attention of the powerful Japanese mafia and the local authorities. An engaging game where his own life will ultimately be at stake.

#### ***A 100-Carat Diamond:***

The world's great financial crisis is ruining Francesco Benetti again. His investments in the Stock Exchange are sinking and he must find a way to recover his losses. From Africa to India, among unscrupulous diamond dealers and jihadists of Al-Qaeda seeking revenge for the killing of Osama bin Laden, and his encounter with the Kidon-Israel's secret service most lethal hit squad, he will bet his life for an extraordinary diamond.

#### ***THE BURMESE GAME:***

Francesco Benetti's poker addiction matches that of a far-away drug warlord. From Bangkok's glittering lifestyle to Burma's Golden Triangle, he will plunge into a perilous world of gambling dens, ethnic rebellions and drug trafficking, unknowingly becoming part of a spy plot aimed at a secret nuclear reactor.

## ***INDOCHINA CHRONICLES (1974-1975)***

Autobiographic

In war-torn Indochina, a mercenary pilot lives to fly. A dramatic picture of a season in hell, where people are both victims and witnesses of catastrophic events. A *mal de vivre* that no one and nothing can cure.

### ***The Blasphemous Manuscript of Timbuktu:***

An unscrupulous veteran American freelance war correspondent arrives in Mali to cover the fanatic spree of the Islamists willing to impose their sharia law. Someone will offer him a scoop regarding an ancient manuscript with an explosive content. He will realize though that he is there neither for the war nor for the scoop.

### ***The Cambodian Plot:***

A political thriller set in the ever-sensuous and treacherous post-Cold War Indochina.

What was supposed to be a *j'accuse* against powerful intelligence agencies supported by material evidence, I had to turn into a piece of fictional work. WWII ended in 1945 and the hunt for the last Nazis is rightly still going on. But why, as for Nazi Germany and many other countries, should it not be the same for Cambodia, where Khmer Rouge's commanders and cadres committed ignominious war crimes and genocide during their dictatorship which was brought to an end in 1979? After all these years and more than \$150 M spent by donor countries, the UN's sponsored Khmer Rouge Tribunal in Phnom Penh is a farce and Cambodian victims of Pol Pot's regime have been denied justice.

As an author interested in South-East Asian Affairs and as a witness of the 1975 conquest of Cambodia by the Khmer Rouge, I hope the theory I describe in this story deserves an independent international investigation.

### ***With the Cross and the Sword:***

Francesco Benetti has no choice but to play high-stakes no-limit Texas Hold'em in the VIP rooms of a Las Vegas casino. He will enjoy the pleasures and luxuries of Sin City,

then in Mexico, he will be involved in a drug war.

The Head of a Muse drawing by Raphael as the actual winning pot, a depraved man with a mysterious past, and an intriguing woman. All in the shadow of a State-run intelligence organization whose existence few dare to mention.

## *DEADLY FORGERY*

### **Main characters:**

*Francesco Benetti* : Venetian dealer in antiques big-time gambler

*Anna Benetti* : Francesco Benetti's wife

*Vincenzo Guerra*: A skilled forger of paintings of the Renaissance

*Federico Olivieri*: professor of History of Art Critique at the University of Venice, a world-renowned expert

*Osamu Ishihara*: director of Kizu, a company that invests in art works

*Mariko Ishihara*: beautiful and fickle daughter of Osamu

*Naoto*: Mariko's fiancé, a punk member of Ichiwakai, a rival faction of the Yamaguchigumi, the most powerful organization of Yakuza, the Japanese mafia

*Tomiichi Kobo*: deputy director of Kizu

*Sousuke Kato*: inspector of the investigative police of the Tokyo's headquarters

*Yoshito Kan*: boss of the Yamaguchigumi

“Les homes se distinguent par ce qu'ils montrent et se ressemblent par ce qu'ils cachent.”

*Paul Valéry*

From the French: “Men stand out for what they show, and are alike by what they hide.”

## VENICE

## AT THE CASINO

“Mr. Benetti, please do not insist. We can’t lend you any more money, not even for a gold-card customer like you. With your poker games and the roulette it’s already four hundred thousand euros.”

“Actually, I would be glad if you could return what you owe. You know the Management ....” The tone of the Chief Officer was serious and final.

Francesco Benetti looked at him with his poker face. He implicitly understood from that moment he was no longer welcome until his debt was settled.

Jesus Christ! What was he supposed to do? He was a Casino man, a professional gambler. To people like him, all that mattered was to be there, to keep playing. Everyone knew in the long run there is no way out. American-style roulette and poker were his favorite games. The roulette was the double’s zero’s fault. There are 38 numbers but the bank only pays 36.

And in the game of poker, strategy plus the fine art of bluffing doesn’t stand a chance without the help of lady luck.

But in this world, he celebrated his survival instinct.

Death and resurrection, much more than the endless sessions of the same old frustrated folks with the analyst.

His wife, Anna, tried hard to stop his insane habit, proposing him *sui generis* readings like Dostoevskij’s *The Gambler*; a portrait of a game-sick man who renounce any kind of values for the roulette. She insisted that he would have become a compulsive player, doomed to play as a drug addict. But he made it clear to her that the Casino was above all and she gave it up for not losing him.

This time was a big deal though. Sure, with his job as a dealer in antiques he would be able to come up with some more money; possibly pass unprepared tourists some paintings of the 1800s, sold as products of famous viewers of the Venetian 1700s. He could even get rid of his old motor boat and gamble the money at the casinos of Porto Rose or

Lipitza. Or even better in Baden Baden and Montecarlo, where Big winnings inspired him, as well as squandered fortunes and ritual suicides.

But he and his wife didn't like leaving Venice.

The city has a spirit that they couldn't live without.

Pure-bred Venetians couldn't have lived anywhere else.

They loved wandering down the alleys, the palaces and *campielli* any time of the year. The brightness of spring or the sunshine of summer; the melancholy of autumn fogs, the winter with its snow games that enhanced details, the allegory of the Carnival masks, the Regatta, the Cinema Festival with its Hollywood stars parade and the artistic avangarde of the Biennale.

And the sounds of Venice with its serenade-singing gondoliers, the voices in cheap places.

They felt purified after riding their motor boat to the Laguna Islands of Torcello, Murano and Burano.

They relived the Venetian era in the Corte Seconda del Milion, among the remains of *Marco Polo's* home while contemplating Palazzo Bragadini, where Giacomo Casanova left on his *gondola* to go pay his favorite ladies a visit.

The Mercerie had a soft spot in Francesco's heart. The 1700s Venier casino was a place for conversation, love and gambling. Over there he lived the Vivaldi, Goldoni and Canaletto times over again.

And what about the canals and *calli* of the magnificent 16<sup>th</sup> century, a time when *dogi* and artists contributed to making Venice an immortal name in the world.

Anna and he appreciated the magic atmosphere of St. Mark's square, a Bellini cocktail and a Risotto Primavera at the Harry's Bar or an exhibit in Palazzo Grassi or Guggenheim. The Casino too was located at Palazzo ca' Vendramin along the majestic Grand Canal.

He looked at his watch. The following day he had to accompany Anna to pick up some test results.

Over the last few months, she had been suffering the consequences of a hepatitis that the best specialists couldn't make out of. Imagine her reaction if she were to find out that

they were pretty much financially ruined.

Four hundred thousand even - and at least two hundred thousand more with the cambisti, the vultures that await desperate losers outside the casino to change a check for pillaging interests.

His wife was all discretion. He had always taken care of the shop's accounts, whereas she was in charge of managing the business. They had met while they were both attending the first year of the language and literature course of the University of Venice and they had never parted. Same tastes and interests, same passion for art and design.

She was originally from a middle-class family. Her father had endured great sacrifices to send her to college. Francesco instead was from a different type of family. Soon after he had graduated, his father – a wealthy architect – as a gift, took over the license of an antiques shop strategically located on the main road that led to the Rialto Bridge.

Upstairs there was a tiny apartment furnished with Louis XIV pieces and some walnut-wood dressers of the first Venetian 1600s.

Their best deals were made from the tourists. Most of them knew little about antiques and especially art. They would begin long negotiations and eventually left with any piece, convinced that they had made a good bargain. Francesco kept the valuable pieces aside for his customers.

All of a sudden, he thought about Aldo, the loan shark. Would Aldo lend him ten thousand more euros? Francesco wouldn't need to touch his meager bank account. With cash in his hands, not even that haughty Casino director could stop him from gambling some more.