

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 26

by Daniel Harris

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Friday afternoon. Angelique Brody knocked Francesco's studio door.

—Alex? He was expecting the tenant on the first floor.

—Francesco, it's me, Angelique Brody. Please open.

—Hold on, said Frank, putting his palette and a handful of brushes on his worktable. He opened the door for Angelique and continued wiping his hands on a turpentine-moistened rag.

—My hands are filthy, said Francesco, showing Angelique in paint-splattered hands. Hey, I thought you were out on the coast.

—I returned from L.A. two hours ago, she said, removing her gloves. So you telephoned Tuesday morning?

—Right. There's a big problem.

—I don't know if you know this, Francesco: your girlfriend Michiko spoke with me last Sunday night.

—She must have called you when I was returning a rental car.

Angelique removed her fur coat and hat. Francesco pushed some sketchbooks off the Adirondack chair and motioned for her to sit.

—I would hang up your coat, but my hands are dirty, he said scrubbing his fingers with the rag.

—It's fine in my lap. Why on earth is it so damn cold in this loft! No heat in this building?

—No heat. Welcome to loft life.

—Aren't you cold?

—I dress like an onion, I'm wearing five thin layers, plus I generate a lot of heat when I work. Painting, serious painting, is a physical process ...and mentally strenuous.

—Well, this girlfriend of yours, continued Angelique, accused me of stealing from you. That's a serious accusation, Francesco. If you believe that, it will be the end of our business relationship. Our relationship is built on trust.

—Not so fast, Angelique. Did Michiko mention she and I saw a painting of mine at the Whipple's Greenwich, Connecticut estate? Did she mention that I was not paid for that painting? Garth Whipple told me his wife paid \$149,000. I should have received almost \$60,000 from that sale. Do you understand? A painting of mine sold for almost \$150,000. Christ! I hit major league prices and no one tells me! What the hell is that all about? And to add insult to injury, I wasn't paid!

—Francesco, said Angelique, crossing her legs, cool down. We can sort this out. First, you know Elaine is in Paris. I have no way of questioning her about it. None of her staff has access to her books. I can't confirm the sale.

—In all fairness to Elaine Aster Gallery, I'm not certain the total bill was for my painting, but I didn't see any other Elaine Aster artists on display. Perhaps she bought more than one painting and they are at other residences. Something's not kosher here.

—Look, I'm happy you're being sensible. Your lady friend was a real hothead when she talked to me Sunday night.

—Really? Michiko? She's all business, the prototypical cool Asian. She knows the agent game, and she's looking out for me. So, why aren't *you*? That's *your* job, isn't it?

—Francesco, you have no reason to mistrust me. Look, I've kept good records of your sales, even catching Elaine fudging prices and I also saved you taxes. I've put your money to work for you so that your money *makes* money. Last time I looked at your accounts, you were worth over \$150,000. That's serious money for a painter who's only been selling for four years.

—Come on, Angelique, stop evading the issue. You either dropped the ball on that sale, or you are in league with Elaine. If she's stealing from me, I'll change galleries. I'm making her a ton of money. I'm a gold mine. Why the hell would she steal from me? You just admitted you caught her “fudging prices.”

—Francesco, we don't know for sure that she's stealing from you. If she is, she's also stealing from me. If that's the case, I will take her to court.

—You damn well better. She's selling my paintings, and not paying me my cut: that's theft. I expect remuneration when there's a sale. Mrs. Whipple bought the painting for her husband back in April of last year. My payment is way, way overdue, and Michiko insists that Elaine could only steal from me if *you* were somehow complicit.

—Francesco, be reasonable. It's a piece of cake for Elaine to keep a sale secret from you and me. I'm sure she will be terrified to learn that you know about the Whipple sale.

—Wait one fucking minute. You depend on Elaine to *tell you* when she sells one of my paintings? Who's at the controls here? That's not right. No wonder she can steal from me.

—Francesco, my CPA goes over her books every month with Talmudic scrutiny. All this is in your contract with Elaine Aster Gallery. She can hide a sale for only so long.

—It sounds like Elaine has all the cards.

—Not quite. If it gets around that she's selling paintings and not paying her artists, her career as a gallerist is over.

Exasperated, Francesco picked up his palette and two brushes. He studied a section of the picture on his easel, thought about making a change, but hesitated. Turning from the easel, he flipped his two brushes onto the worktable in frustration. He stood in front of Angelique, glaring into her eyes.

—Angelique, *are* you one hundred percent on my side?

—That hurts, Frank, said Angelique, alarmed at Francesco's intensity. It's just plain hurtful after all I've done for you.

—How the fuck do you think I feel, knowing my gallery is selling my art behind my back and my agent is in cahoots. My art is all I

have. Art is my product; art is my life. If you let people steal from me, what's the use of having you as my agent? This is serious Angelique. For Christ sake, what the hell would you do in my position?

—Well ...

—Goddamit to hell, I should fire both of you bitches and sue you back to the Stone Age. I do the work and you two take the money. That's fucked up. Really fucked up.

—Firing me would be stupid, and you know it. You are as green today as you were when I met you. Elaine's lawyers will eat you alive in court. If you fire me, what lawyer would you hire? I'm the best in this business. I'm the one who drops clients, my clients don't fire me. If I drop you, every agent in New York will assume you did something really underhanded. You'll be untouchable. A pariah.

—Don't threaten me, Angelique. You're the one who fucked up here, not me.

Francesco could feel heat in his veins. He walked over to the window and surveyed the melting snow on Green Street. Suddenly he pivoted and viciously kicked an empty display easel across the studio. It crashed against the wall, breaking one of the legs.

—Damn it, Angelique, am I supposed to do nothing and just assume I'll lose a certain percentage of my work to fraud? My father, a Wisconsin apple farmer, would expect rats to eat five percent of his apples. Am I dealing with rats!

Frank spat out the word rats and slammed his fist down on the worktable. Bounder, now a regular lodger at Frank's loft, came running into the studio.

—It's okay Bounder, said Francesco, you're too small to deal with *these* rats. He picked up the cat and soothed him.

—Francesco, you banked over \$50,000 after taxes last year. Do you know how many painters make that much money? Let me tell you, probably not a dozen.

—Don't change the subject. Now that I know you two are selling behind my back, I probably should be worth \$100,000 a year. Michiko takes home over \$75,000 a year, every year. As she says,

she can play the *Emperor Concerto* forever. But *when I sell a painting, that's it*. What I get is what I get. Michiko can make money from Beethoven until she dies. *And* she receives royalties from recordings. My paintings can be resold for ten times what I received for the painting, yet I don't see any of that money.

—Come on, Francesco. Michiko's in a different business. She sells her performances; you sell a physical product. You're making an apples and oranges comparison.

Frank hated arguments. He could tell Angelique was trying to keep in his good graces, but he wasn't certain she was serving his interests. The fact that she came to his studio to discuss this was important. If she won him over here, on his own turf, she won. If she lost, she would retreat to her office, wait for him to cool down, and reopen the discussion later.

—So, Angelique, asked Francesco, how could Elaine Aster dupe us both, if that's what happened?

—I don't know, but I'll find out. We must trust each other Francesco, or we can't do business together.

—Fuck the Francesco bullshit. I'm Frank Martin. Francesco Martenelli is an Elaine Aster fiction and you know it. Elaine couldn't rob me without your complicity.

—Damn it, Frank, stop accusing me of stealing from you. It's hurtful and just plain wrong. It is *not* in my interest to steal from you. You are one of my top four or five artists. I want to be your agent as long as you paint. I love your work.

—*Love* my work? Really? You mean I'm so green, as you say, that you and Elaine love to *steal* from me.

—This is going nowhere, said Angelique, donning her hat. I can see Michiko has brainwashed you into thinking I'm a thief. I'll talk to you next week. Maybe you will have come to your senses. In the meantime, I'm still your agent. I will get to the bottom of the Whipple sale. We are on the same side in this, Francesco.

—Angelique, I appreciate all you've done for me, but seeing a painting of mine hanging in the den of one of America's richest men,

a painting for which I was never paid, is goddamn devastating. Wouldn't *you* be more than a little suspicious?

—Yes, of course, but I wouldn't attack the people who are trying to help me.

—At least we agree on something. I must ask you again: How did this sale escape you? Elaine is selling my paintings out the back door, pocketing the money and you claim you don't know it's happening.

—Frank, Francesco, whoever you are, I will try to get to the bottom of this. I want to continue our relationship. I came today hoping to reassure you of my loyalty. Don't terminate our relationship. Believe me, if you do, you will suffer. You will lose all your money. And, listen, listen *carefully*: Once you leave my protection we are finished. I will *not* take you back as a client. *Never!*

—If you are threatening me, you can leave now. No one can take my talent from me. And if you *are* stealing from me, I will fire you and sue you.

—I'm *not* stealing from you. Firing me would be a big mistake. Suing will make you poor again. On your own, you don't have the horses to win these kinds of battles.

—Funny, that's what Garvin Marrak told me.

—Listen to Marrak, not your high and mighty pianist friend.

Angelique threw her coat over her shoulders, turned and stormed out of the studio mumbling “Fucking crazy-ass artist.” Frank heard her high heels stomping on the stairs all the way down to the front door. She slammed the door ...twice.

To be continued.

