

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 6

by Daniel Harris

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Frank met Angelique Brody on the street in front of his building. She arrived in a limo, dressed in a tweed suit with mauve scarf and matching beret. A flat leather portfolio was under her left arm. She had gray hair and a youthful face. She wore rimless glasses and earrings with large amethyst stones. She was about five-nine, muscular and moved gracefully, like an athlete.

—Hello. I'm Angelique Brody, she said extending her hand to Frank after exiting the car.

—I'm Frank Martin. Pleased to meet you.

—How long have you known Maestro Sylvestre?

—I met him last night. He told me to contact you after he saw my paintings.

—Yes, he telephoned me this morning. He is very enthusiastic about your painting. Will you show me your work?

—I'm afraid the elevator is not working. It's a six-floor walk-up.

—Don't let my gray hair deceive you. I play racquetball for an hour at five every morning.

Angelique was light on her feet and kept a lively pace up to the sixth floor. Frank had arranged the paintings and organized his studio. The studio was brightly lit with full work lights.

—These are the twenty paintings Elaine Aster wants to exhibit in November, said Frank gesturing to the paintings. She wants options on the remaining sixty paintings in this room. I have maybe another fifty in my storeroom, though they are not like these and she hasn't

optioned them. This one here is the painting Maestro Silvestre wants to buy.

—Did Elaine mention sale prices?

—The only money she mentioned was a monthly \$1500 retainer for me for five years and 50% of the net retail price. I objected to that and wanted 50% of the gross selling price. We settled at 40% of the gross selling price.

—Smart.

—She lectured my class at Yale a few years ago and said only take percentages of the gross selling price. There is no net.

—She knows that better than anyone, said Brody with a wry smile. She was examining the painting Silvestre wished to purchase. This is a spectacular painting, Frank.

—Thank you. There is some pentimento from a false start. I'm not sure where the idea came from, but once I refined the concept the picture almost painted itself.

Brody looked over the other paintings, occasionally stopping to examine one more thoroughly.

—Mr. Martin, you're a very talented man. There is considerable potential money in this room, but you are an *ingénue* in the business of art.

—The most I've ever sold a painting for is \$500. Usually I sell my paintings for \$100 or \$150.

—There's a lot more than \$500 in this room. My first word of advice is to move all these paintings to a secure storage facility. I can give you some names and numbers. As far as Elaine Aster is concerned, she is a master at finding new talent and profiting from *their* work. You could do much better with another gallery, but they won't take you on until you have a track record. So, I would recommend you go with Elaine. I will review the contract. Now you have to remember, she has many up-front expenses: framing, photographing, advertising, storage, schmoozing potential buyers, and her fixed expenses like rent, taxes, payroll, etc. Her offer of 40% of gross is not great, but reasonable. For 5% of gross sale price, I can act as your lawyer, agent and adviser. This way you will not taint

your relationship with Elaine with the animus of financial misunderstandings. I will also have access to the actual gross sale price, which is not always the advertised selling price.

Frank didn't know what to say. Twenty-four hours ago he was released from the nut ward at Bellevue. Should he trust this woman? He would trust Silvestre. He had to believe that if Michiko thought highly of Silvestre and Silvestre recommended this woman, he should accept Brody as his agent.

—Look, all this is new to me. I have to trust you. What's the next step?

—Come with me to my office. We will draw up a contract. I will also prepare a list of bargaining points so you will understand the process. Then we'll go to lunch. I'll have my assistant make a three o'clock appointment with Elaine at the gallery.

—This is all happening so fast. My head is spinning.

—You can wait, but it's better to strike while the iron is hot. Taste and fashion change. Three years from now, you could be a has-been, maybe still a wannabe. But now you have a chance to get more than your foot in the door. If your affairs are managed well, you will finance your life and your art for many years. I wouldn't be surprised if, five years down the road Elaine will have sold all these paintings for an aggregate total of two million.

Frank uttered a low whistle.

—That's a lot of money. I did that?

—No, you painted eighty pictures. *Elaine Aster* will make the money. Her estimate was fifty thousand a year. She's very experienced with the business, but I suspect she is being conservative. You might do better the first couple of years, but then sales may fall off. To keep sales up, Elaine will control the supply-and-demand and how she markets you and your work. She wouldn't want to overexpose you, or have you fall out of the limelight. She is very good at marketing her artists. Her artists are constantly being featured in magazines and newspapers worldwide.

Frank walked to the window and looked over at Michiko's loft. She was practicing. He would call her later. He wanted her input on all this.

Frank was watching two experienced and skilled businesswomen having at it. Elaine and Angelique were gently, but firmly negotiating. It was a serious game with high stakes. All concessions came with consequences. Occasionally, they would ask his opinion. He was too deep into the mystery of how he came to be sitting in Elaine Aster's gallery to do more than utter an "I guess so," or "Whatever Angelique says."

Finally terms were reached, a contract was signed. After confirming the price with Maestro Sylvestre, Elaine generously paid Frank's \$4,000 share of the \$10,000 sale of the painting to Sylvestre from her account. She wrote another check for \$3,000, his monthly retainer for September and October. Elaine paid Angelique her \$500 commission. Frank owed Angelique \$150 for legal expenses. Last year he lived on \$4,500. Today, he felt rich. He hoped Angelique or Michiko could advise him on how to handle this sudden wealth. He was disappointed that he couldn't make the sale directly to Sylvestre, but the gallery was going to ship the painting to Sylvestre's home in Rome after his solo show. The gallery would arrange for storage of all the optioned paintings. That company would come tomorrow and take those paintings away. His children, as he called his paintings, would leave him.

One of the gallery assistants entered Elaine's office and said the conference room adjacent to Elaine's office was ready.

When the two women and Frank entered the conference room, the gallery staff stood and applauded.

After everyone had a glass of champagne, Elaine Aster quieted the room for a toast.

—I propose a toast to Francesco Martinelli and welcome him to our stable of artists. When you see his work, you will be astonished at the power and craftsmanship. We are excited and pleased to plan

a late November opening. Francesco promises to become a star of this gallery and the international art scene.

—Salute, said Frank, raising his glass. Here's to a long and prosperous relationship with Aster Gallery.

Glasses were raised. The crowd broke off into small groups. The younger employees hungrily swooped up the *canapés* and sweets at the table.

—Frank, I have to leave, said Angelique. I hope you will be pleased with your new situation. Remember, if there is anything you don't understand, or are confused about in your dealings with the gallery, you call me.

—May I escort you to your car?

—Sure.

—I can't thank you enough, said Frank. I would have been lost talking to Elaine.

—That's what you pay *me* to do.

—I'm still in a daze, said Frank, holding the gallery door for Angelique. It all seems unreal. I'm not sure how to handle this much money.

—Before you cash those checks, come to my office. We'll set up accounts for you. You are going to feel the long reach of the taxman if you are not careful.

—But I've never filed a tax return, said Frank.

—Oh, boy, said Brody rolling her eyes. Come to my office on Madison Avenue on Friday at noon. We'll create some bank accounts for you. In the meantime, take this as a gift. Celebrate your good fortune with your friends.

She handed him two \$100 bills and slipped into her limo before he could say anything.

Frank returned to the gallery. Elaine approached with a male assistant.

—Francesco, she said, this is my assistant Dennis. The three of us must go to your studio now to inventory the paintings for the storage company. It is already late.

To be continued.

