

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 20

by Daniel Harris

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Manhattan: March, 1969

Elaine Aster paced her office trailing a cloud of cigarette smoke. In the six months she had been paying Francesco Martinelli a \$1500 monthly stipend, he had not delivered *one painting*. Surely Francesco's girlfriend was at the bottom of this. She decided to call Francesco's agent, Angelique Brody.

—Hello, Elaine, said Angelique, How are you?

—I'm fine, Angelique, but our boy wonder, Francesco Martinelli, has stopped painting. In six months he hasn't given me *one painting*. I blame it on his Jap girlfriend. I've seen this happen before.

—I didn't know that. Francesco has a history of being a consistent hard worker.

Have you talked to him?

—Yes, but he gets sullen and he tells me to stop badgering him and sell the paintings of his I have in storage. Maybe you can talk some sense into him?

—Now that I'm aware that he's not painting, said Angelique, I'll call him into my office. I can't make him paint, but I'll see if I can get him back on track.

—Angelique, wasn't there a police incident a few months ago involving Francesco and that Japanese woman?

—Two actually. The first was when Francesco rescued Michiko, that's her name, from two muggers when she lived across from him on Greene Street. One of the muggers filed a battery complaint

against Francesco, but the mugger's lawyer withdrew it. The other event was when Francesco was put on a watch list after an overzealous cop assumed he was a professional pimp when he took Michiko to the hospital after she was sexually abused.

—Francesco raped the girl? said Elaine in disbelief.

—No, wait! Michiko had performed with the Chicago Symphony and admitted she drank too much at a post-concert reception. She experienced some rough trade bedroom games with a former classmate who is a member of the orchestra.

—Is Francesco still on the NYPD watch list? asked Elaine. It could be big trouble if he is.

—I really don't know. I would assume not, because they have been a public couple. There was a picture of the two of them in the Arts section of *The New York Times* last month, at a reception for a Philharmonic fundraiser.

—I don't think many vice squad cops read the *Times*, said Elaine. There was a photo in the *Village Voice* of the two of them at Francesco's opening. If the police are watching, they're not looking very hard.

—I thought I'd cleared that up when I rescued Francesco from that bully cop at the hospital where Francesco took Michiko. Do you want me to check if he's still on a watch list?

—Thanks, not necessary. I don't want him arrested and spending days or weeks in police custody. He's not painting now and being arrested could trigger a big depression. That's the *last* thing we need.

—I'll talk to Francesco about getting back in the studio and painting.

—Thank you, Angelique. He's a major talent. I hate to see him wasting time. As you know, our contract gives me the right to reduce or cut his monthly stipend if he doesn't produce. You might remind him of that.

—I will. Is there anything else I can help you with?

—No, said Elaine, just light a fire under Francesco. I need more paintings. He is creating quite a stir in the art press and among my

collector clients. All three of us should be making a lot more money.

—Don't worry. I'm sure he'll get back on track after I talk to him.

—I hope so. Thank you Angelique. I have to run to another appointment. Anything you can do will be appreciated.

—I'll call you after I speak with Francesco.

Elaine hung up and immediately called her attorney, Sam Berkowicz.

—Sam, I need a favor.

—So, my favorite dancing partner wants a favor! Dinner and dancing isn't enough?

—This is serious, Sam. I need to know if Francesco Martinelli, one of my artists, is on an NYPD watch list. His sleazy girlfriend got herself raped. When Francesco took her to the hospital some bully cop accused him of pandering and put him on a watch list.

—How soon do you need to know?

—As soon as possible.

—I have a case in Federal Court next week, but I'll put my best assistant on it. I'll call you as soon as we find out.

—Thanks Sam.

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Francesco sat in Angelique Brody's office. Their meeting had been interrupted by a telephone call. Angelique took it in another room. He looked at the furnishings: custom black walnut desk, matching file cabinets, one-of-a kind designer chairs ... all first class, very expensive. How could she afford this expensive furniture on 5% commissions? She must have other accounts and better deals than his.

—So, Francesco, said Angelique when she returned. Tell me where you're living. I call your number and you never answer.

—I live with Michiko on West 81st in Manhattan. The Whipple family owns the building. They rent her an apartment for about a quarter of the market rate. When I'm in my studio working, I don't answer the phone.

—Impressive. The Whipple family is a big donor to music and art organizations. They must consider your friend a major talent.

—She is. She won second prize at the last International Tchaikovsky Competition. She plays two or three concerts a week. Sometimes she's on the road for several weeks at a time. She has a full date book. She makes good money, more than I ever have as an artist.

—You must be proud of her.

—Absolutely, she's a terrific pianist and a special person.

—Francesco, I called you here because there is a problem.

—I'm all ears.

—In the six months since you signed with Elaine Aster, you have not delivered a single painting. Elaine is concerned. She is paying you a monthly retainer of \$1500. She has clients who want your paintings. She needs you to paint more pictures.

—What about the sixty paintings she has in storage?

—She'll sell those, but she wants *new* work. She told me she has contracts for the twenty paintings in your current show. She's received payment for five of the paintings in your show. She wants new paintings to replace them.

—I think she should sell the paintings in storage. I need some time. Except for when I was sick in Bellevue, I work every day.

—Francesco, if Elaine sells the sixty in storage too quickly it will saturate the market. Many of the paintings in storage are too similar to what's in the gallery now. Those can be parceled out later. Elaine needs *new* paintings. Her plan is to increase the value of your paintings, but she needs new paintings to quiet the critics that say you're a one shot painter. According to her, in a year or so your paintings will more than double in price. You're now selling in the \$8,000-10,000 dollar range. By 1970 you could be selling your best work in the \$20,000 range.

—I guess I have a lot to learn about the art market.

—I checked your bank accounts and you have a balance of over \$20,000. Don't you eat? How are you surviving?

—Well, Michiko pays the rent on the apartment on 81st Street. I'm still the super of my building on Greene Street so my studio is rent-free. I live cheaply, like I have all my life. Old habits die hard. When Michiko is traveling, which is often, I retreat to my lonely frugal bachelor life in my loft. I like that zone. It's familiar, and I'm comfortable being alone in my studio.

—Elaine is worried that you have stopped painting.

—Well, I have for a while. I am not in depression mode, but I have not found a new voice. Thanks to Michiko, I'm happy. It's the first time in years I feel normal, not debilitated by depression. The paintings Elaine has rights to are from last year when I was manic. I am trying to find a style that doesn't require me to be crazy. I don't care to do journeyman academy paintings. I'm searching for my voice. Something that is totally mine.

—I can understand that. You are a uniquely talented painter. The reviews you received in the press validated our belief in you. You should be pleased with your notices.

—Oh, I am. Of course my fellow artists sure don't see it that way. They are quite jealous of my sudden success. Except, it isn't sudden. I have been painting and studying art since I was a boy. I'm almost thirty. I can truthfully say I have been making art for twenty-five of those years, *and* I have a strong work ethic.

Angelique looked at Francesco. He was a handsome dark Scotsman, over six feet with chiseled features. He didn't carry excess weight, and he looked healthier than when she first met him. He was a true artist, sincere and dedicated to his craft. It showed in his paintings and drawings. But there was a turbulent side to him, it was there, on his canvases.

—Do you still see Dr. Andrea Jawarski?

—I've given up on her. I asked her: "What do I have to do to be creative without being in manic mode? I can't paint when I'm depressed or neutralized on drugs." Her only answer was to take lithium, but when I take lithium my hands shake, I have to piss all the time and my mind is locked down. So, does manic mode fuel my

creativity? And if so, how do I control it? She has no answers, nor does anyone else.

—Francesco, I think you are making excuses and latching onto an *artiste* stereotype. Surely you can paint without being crazy. You must go into your studio and paint every day. The answers will come with work.

—I know you're right, said Francesco. But the whole process is a tough for me. I go into another persona when I paint my best pictures.

—Well, you *do* look healthier than when I first met you.

—I'm eating better and I limit myself to one or two cold beers a day.

Francesco sensed a lurking cloud of depression. He knew he must paint. He hadn't touched a paintbrush in weeks. Normally he painted most of the day, every day, completing several paintings a month, more when he was in full manic mode. He filled one or two sketchbooks a week with drawings and watercolor sketches.

Frequently, his concentration on his work was so intense he became verbally challenged. It was as if he spoke in colors, lines and values.

—Unless you deliver some paintings to Elaine, she will cut your monthly retainer.

Francesco did not have a warm fuzzy feeling about his contract with Elaine. She seemed to have all the advantages. She had been badgering him to deliver new works. The last time they had lunch together, he could have sworn Elaine was coming on to him. She even hinted she was thinking of commissioning him to do a portrait of her. He didn't think she was serious. Probably it was a ruse to jump-start him painting again.

—Am I really worth twenty grand? he asked Angelique

—Actually more than that. At the end of the month, when Elaine delivers the paintings to the buyers, you'll probably end up with fifty or sixty grand in the bank.

—I could live on that for ten years!

—I don't think so, said Angelique giving Francesco a stern look. The IRS has other plans for a big chunk of your money.

—Shit, I forgot about those sons-o-bitches.

—You wouldn't stop painting would you?

—Never. Now that I think about it, it's the only thing I like to do. I sure as hell don't want to go back to Wisconsin and work for my dad in the apple orchards.

—Francesco, now that we have some idea of what kind of money you can, in fact make, we should probably incorporate you as a Limited Liability Corporation. That will shelter your assets and save you taxes.

—Can we talk about that next time? This is all a mystery to me.

—Sure. We can keep things as Do Business As Francesco Martinelli. I'll check with my tax accountant about the pros and cons of switching you to LLC status.

—Let's not do anything for a while. Sales could drop off, or Elaine could change her strategy.

—As you wish. I have your bank statements here and I've noticed you haven't made a withdrawal this year. You also haven't deposited any of Elaine's monthly checks this year. It's the middle of March. *What money are you living on?* I hope you're not selling paintings on the side.

—No, I never could sell my paintings for what Elaine does. I withdrew two thousand dollars after Christmas and I still have over twelve hundred in my cash drawer. I don't spend much money. I did have to pay Bellevue Hospital \$2800 at the beginning of December.

—Ouch! You don't have health insurance?

—No. Even the high deductible plans were too expensive for me. Now that I've been hospitalized with a mental illness, probably no company will insure me.

—Francesco, you can't live like this! You have plenty of money and there will be more, much more. Trust me. When your show closes on March 30 you're going to have a fat bank account and a big tax bill. You might want to think about investing some of that money to protect it from taxes and inflation.

—Look, that's way too complicated for a painter from Wisconsin. I need a break. We'll talk about it next time.

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Three days later when Elaine Aster returned from lunch, there was a phone message on her desk. It was from Sam Berkowicz. The message was: Yes.

If some eager cop caught Francesco with Michiko, or saw him entering and leaving Michiko's apartment, it could be big trouble. It dawned on Elaine that using the police to separate Francesco from Michiko would backfire. Francesco was too emotionally unstable to tolerate jail or forced separation from Michiko. If Francesco cracked up, Elaine was sure Andrea Jawarski would order electro-shock therapy. Sam had to get Francesco off that list.

If Francesco didn't start painting soon, she would commission him to do a boudoir painting of her in *dishabille*. She doubted Michiko would stand for that. She would throw Francesco out. He would go manic and crank out paintings in his signature style. Her hot new property would be hot again. That would be her plan.

To be continued

