

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 24

by Daniel Harris

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When Frank entered Michiko's apartment, Michiko was not there. She arrived shortly after Francesco covered in snow.

—Where were you?

—I took a walk in the snow. It's so beautiful.

—Not when we were driving on I-95 it wasn't beautiful.

—I walked around the block. I saw you talking to someone in the park across the street.

—Yes, a homeless woman asked me for money.

—Did you give her any?

—All I had was big bills. I gave her five bucks.

—Francesco, you are such a sucker.

—Well, I felt sorry for her.

—I need to take a shower, said Michiko. Why don't you make some drinks and shrimp cocktails? I'm starved. We should have stayed for dinner.

—Okay. Then I'll shower.

After Michiko took her shower, Francesco took a long hot shower. He wanted to cleanse the prophecy off his body. When he left the shower, he could hear Michiko on the telephone in the study. Her voice was elevated. She was obviously upset.

—Angelique, she said, I saw the painting in Mr. Whipple's study. Frank was never paid for it. Mr. Whipple told Frank that his wife, Alice, paid \$149,000 for it. Did you get *your* \$7,500 fee? Francesco

never received a penny. Elaine is stealing from him. Is she stealing from you? Why aren't *you* protecting him?

Frank, still rattled from the wretched crone's prediction, could almost hear Angelique's responses from the bathroom. The two women were engaged in a loud verbal battle.

—Well, you're no friend or protector of Francesco. You're a goddamn thief, said Michiko slamming the handset onto the receiver.

Frank rushed from the bathroom, but he was too late.

—Easy Michiko, we don't know all the details. There must be some reasonable explanation.

—FRANK! THOSE WOMEN ARE ROBBING YOU BLIND! Do you know how many paintings are left at the storage company? I checked your accounts, there should be about thirty-seven. How many are still there? How many has Elaine Aster sold for which you haven't received one fucking red cent? Can you even gain access to the storage facility? Angelique says, you don't even have the rights to visit the storage area. What the fuck is *that* all about? And you defend this woman as your lawyer and art councilor? FRANK WAKE UP! YOU ARE BEING SWINDLED!!!

—But sweetheart, said Frank, startled by Michiko's profanity, I took the advice of *your* friend, Carlo Sylvestre and hired Angelique Brody.

—Frank I told you that I didn't trust that Brody woman, or that crook Elaine Aster. I had terrible agents when I started out. As a Tchaikovsky competition finalist, they recognized they had a gold mine in me. They knew I was salad green just like you! But NOW I know! It took me five years to settle on Meyer Management, and then only after talking to dozens of virtuoso musicians and firing two management companies.

Frank didn't know what to say. Four years ago he had no money and was a starving artist in SoHo. Now he was making forty grand a year or more. Yes, he was upset that Elaine was selling his pictures and not paying him, but he was making at least one good picture or more a month and Elaine was selling them for \$10,000-15,000 and

frequently more. The large twenty-foot-square paintings that took him two or three months to paint, Elaine was selling them to corporations for \$25,000 plus. He didn't even want to repeat the state he was in when he painted the pictures in the storage facility. Why should he complain? He decided to change the subject.

—Michiko, how are you going to get to Cleveland if the airports are closed tomorrow? Aren't you worried you will miss rehearsals?

—My first rehearsal with the orchestra is Tuesday morning. Hopefully I can arrive by late Monday night or early Tuesday. I'm playing Beethoven *G Major Piano Concerto* on Wednesday and Thursday, the *E-flat Piano Concerto* on Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Gregoriev is a taskmaster, but the orchestra will be brilliant ... just like me! *Never* question my talent, Frank! They are getting a deal. I'm being paid for one week, but giving five performances playing two different Beethoven concertos.

—See, you are being abused and hornswaggled just like me.

—It's not the same. I can play the Beethoven *Emperor Concerto* for the rest of my life. You can only sell a picture once. Don't you understand! You are being robbed. Stop being Frank and start being Francesco! You're a serious major artist, history book material. Stop acting like a dewy-eyed child!

Michiko stormed into the kitchen and started to refresh her drink.

—Michiko, don't drink that, you have to be at the airport tomorrow and it's going to be difficult with the weather. You may not even be able to leave New York until Tuesday.

—Frank, I am so upset. You are being so abused and you are so fragile. If you go into a black funk, I will be disturbed and have trouble concentrating on my work.

—Let's have a glass of champagne and cuddle in bed.

—Sometimes, Frank, you really have your head screwed on right. Will you have a glass of champagne with me?

—Of course. Michiko, you played so marvelously today. I fell in love with you all over again. Those rich WASP bastards were too embarrassed to admit it.

—Don't forget that the Whipples practically give us this beautiful apartment.

—That's true. We have no reason to complain about our life here.

—Did any of the audience give you a tip?

—No, should they have?

—Bunch of cheap assholes. Most musicians get tips if they play well, and you played great. And on top of that those cheap rich bastards got a free gourmet meal on the Whipples.

—Hey, Mozart ate with the help.

—Mozart probably ate better than the head table. I'm sure the servants appreciated a genius at their table.

—Frank, Francesco, whoever you are, sometimes you are the best.

—Can I cuddle with you? Naked?

—You don't have to ask.

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Monday was a pig-fuck. Flights were cancelled and delayed. Roads were unplowed. Frank traveled to LaGuardia with Michiko at nine in the morning. Michiko was a nervous wreck, but Frank was total business. He checked on flight up-dates, and eventually put her on a flight to Cleveland via Chicago at six that night. It took him four hours to return to the apartment. When he arrived he called Meyer Management who confirmed that she left Chicago and should be in Cleveland before midnight. Someone from the Cleveland Orchestra would meet her and take her to her hotel. Tomorrow he would call Angelique. Maybe tomorrow tempers would have cooled. Or perhaps the collusion between Elaine and Angelique would have come up with some lame explanation why he wasn't paid for the painting at the Whipple's estate. How he hated conflict.

He remembered his mother and father fighting about debts to storage facilities, late payments by brokers and buyers. He and his brother had sleepless nights listening to their parents fight late into the night while they huddled in the same bed in a freezing unheated attic bedroom. His younger brother, Duncan, was a math genius who graduated from the University of Chicago at nineteen and received a

doctorate from MIT at twenty-three. He was hired at Cal Tech, but went crazy after a few years. His mind was several generations of mathematics ahead of the faculty there. Eventually he was institutionalized. Frank knew the same dark matter existed in his own mind. He and his brother knew they were damned, but never spoke of it when their pre-teen farm-hardened bodies clung together in the punishing frost of the Wisconsin winters.

Frank could smell Michiko's scent in their bed. He fell asleep imagining her pillow was her body. Tomorrow was tomorrow, another day.

To be continued.

