

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 25

by Daniel Harris

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It was 6 a.m. when the phone next to the bed awakened Francesco. He was in the middle of a dream about swimming in the ocean in Honolulu with Michiko.

—Hello?

—Francesco, it's me, Michiko in Cleveland.

—Oh, Michiko, I was dreaming of you. How are you?

—I'm Okay. I didn't arrive at my hotel until after midnight, but I want to thank you for being so patient and capable at the airport yesterday. I was a nervous wreck and you were all business. It's amazing that you are so insecure most of the time, yet able to take care of business like you did yesterday.

—Well, I love you, sweetheart, and my first instinct is to protect you.

—I love you too, darling, now wish me luck. I have a rehearsal with the most difficult maestro. He'll probably start instructing me on how to play Beethoven. He has that reputation.

—Nah, I won't believe that. You're too good and too seasoned a pro. So will you call me later?

—Depends. But know I love you, Francesco and always be *Francesco!* You are better as Francesco the artist, than Frank the bipolar farmer from Wisconsin.

—You're right, but it's not always easy. By the way, I'm working on a big painting, so I'll sleep at my studio. You can call me there. I'll

keep the bell on. Anyway, it stopped snowing here, but the city is not plowing the streets or sidewalks. The subway steps are treacherous.

—No snow here in Cleveland. Be careful, Francesco. I know you are not always paying attention when you travel around the city.

—No snow there? But it always snows in Cleveland.

—And Francesco, said Michiko ignoring his chitchat, you must call Angelique today.

—It's on my agenda.

—Listen to me, Francesco. Focus! Focus! You have to ask her how she let Elaine Aster sell a painting of yours and not pay you. Those women are greedy bitches. Angelique is either falling down on the job, or in cahoots with Elaine. I've had a low opinion of those two since the beginning. I think you should find a new agent and a new gallery.

—Easier said than done.

—If some immigrant Jap girl like me can do it, so can you. You are a certifiable genius. I'm just a good piano player.

—Michiko, you are more than a good piano player. You are the *crème de la crème*, a formidable musician ...and a terrific woman.

—You're too much, Francesco, you know how to push my buttons. That's why I love you.

—Now go knock their socks off with your Beethoven. Your last rehearsal at home was thrilling.

—Kisses.

—Love you.

—Bye, my love.

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Later that morning when Francesco called Brody Artist Management from his studio, the receptionist told him Angelique was out of town until Friday. It was the same story at Aster Galley. He was curtly informed that Elaine Aster was in Europe and wouldn't return to New York for two weeks.

Frank worked in his studio all the rest of the week, putting in twelve-to-fourteen-hour days. Wednesday morning, he received a

telephone call from his former painting teacher and mentor at Yale, Garvin Marrak. They agreed to meet the next day for a late lunch at the Oyster Bar at Grand Central. Garvin was giving a talk on contemporary painting to a group of alumni at the Yale Club at four that afternoon.

Francesco's painting teachers were completely opposite types. Morton Slobovian, his painting instructor at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, was a big Czech who dressed and played the part of an eccentric bohemian. He was always attired in used, paint-spattered clothing. His paintings were large abstractions of women. He rented a former machine shop on the North Branch of the Chicago River and maintained a revolving cast of young women whom he bedded and abandoned when they outlived their usefulness as models.

Garvin Marrak was ever the Ivy League professor. Though a short slight man, he dressed impeccably in perfectly tailored J. Press clothing. In social settings he maintained a reserve about his opinions and tastes. Unlike Slobovian, an overbearing boor, Marrak possessed classical manners — always a gentleman. Marrak was superbly competent as a painter, printmaker and sculptor; and he believed an artist should always be well attired, especially when working with live models. He painted in a jacket and tie. Marrak rarely wore a smock, yet he never soiled his clothing with paint, inks or solvents. His style was hyperrealism. Though a genius with the airbrush, he could hold his own with brush and palette knife. His knowledge of art history, as well as the materials and methods of the painter's craft, was encyclopedic.

After Slobovian, Frank ... he was Frank Martin at Yale ... found Marrak to be the perfect teacher and mentor to round out his art education. In the twenty-three years that Marrak was teaching at Yale, Frank was his best and most successful student. Suspecting Frank to be bi-polar, Marrak hoped emphasizing discipline and control in his work, Frank would learn to moderate his mood swings.

The Oyster Bar lunch crowd was thinning when Frank met Marrak. They were shown a corner table. The noise level subsided during the course of their meal.

They split a dozen raw Wellfleet oysters and both ordered clam chowder. Frank also had fish and chips. Marrak chose pan roasted sea scallops. They toasted Frank's success with a fine Sancerre.

After they had caught up on the state of each other's lives, Frank related his current saga of finding paintings he wasn't paid for in rich men's homes.

—I'm in the mood to fire both of them, Aster and Brody, said Frank, wiping his mouth with his napkin.

—Angelique Brody has a first class reputation, said Marrak, but that doesn't mean she might not be slipping, or resting on her laurels. Maybe you should find a new agent, but look for a new gallery first.

—How do I go about that? If I start talking to another gallery, it will get back to Elaine on the gossip grapevine.

—I can't tell you. I'm an academic, not a successful professional like you. I'm sure one of the major galleries would be happy to take you on as a painter. Look how well you've done. Whoever represents you will make good money.

—Elaine Aster has first choice and exclusive rights to my paintings. If she doesn't take a painting, I can sell it on my own or through another gallery.

—How many paintings of yours does Elaine Aster have?

—There should be thirty-seven in her storage facility. There's a dozen in her SoHo gallery. The problem is that Elaine has been selling those paintings without informing me or paying me. Or paying Angelique for that matter, or at least I'd like to *believe* she's also stiffing Angelique.

—It's a common situation for artists: late payments, no payments, incorrect payments. Maybe you should try one of the newer galleries. They may not know all the tricks to cheat you, plus they will be hungry to establish a good reputation. With your record, I

would suspect these young gallerists would leap at the chance to represent you.

—I don't know, Garvin, I thought I made a good decision going with Elaine Aster, but after seeing one of my paintings in Garth Whipple's den that was sold without my knowledge, I suspect she is deliberately cheating me. And I think Angelique Brody is in league with her.

—Beware fallen angles, said Marrak, grinning at his own pun.

—Well, Angelique sure has fallen from my good graces. Michiko is ready to throttle her.

—I wouldn't want to be on the bad side of Michiko — one tough cookie.

—And a hell of a pianist.

—Did you sell that marvelous painting of her practicing as seen through a window?

—Oh, you mean *The Nude Pianist*. No, never, not that one. It's not for sale at any price. I gave it to Michiko. It hangs in her study. Elaine Aster and Angelique Brody don't know it exists. If Elaine found out about it, I'm sure she'd claim rights to it.

—I'd keep mum about it, or it will turn into a court battle. Your pockets aren't deep enough, not yet, to fight that fight. It's all about the money in the snake pit of the art world. Step gently, but step wisely — you have much to lose. Those women could ruin you and then you'd have to start all over again. The art world is crawling with swindlers and thieves. There's more backstabbing and double-dealing in your sandbox than in the hallowed halls of academe. Don't be a hot head, Frank. Proceed with caution, don't jump to conclusions. If not, you'll lose more than your shirt, my friend.

To be continued.

