

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 27

by Daniel Harris

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Bounder squirmed out of Francesco's hands and ran into the kitchen. From his loft window Francesco watched Angelique enter her limo. She slammed the car door. The driver maneuvered the big Mercedes around the parked trucks and cars on Greene Street. Francesco wondered if she would drop him as a client.

What did that old crone tell him last weekend in Theodore Roosevelt Park: "The future is bright, but tragic. You will lose everything. Twice." If he severed his ties to Angelique and Elaine would that be the start of a downward spiral? Or would his mental health lead to his ruin? Recalling the argument with Angelique brought on a dark cloud of misgivings.

If Angelique were being truthful, he would be foolish to fire her. She is known as the best artist's agent in America. Why would he doubt her? Michiko planted the seed of doubt about Angelique from the beginning, but Michiko doesn't know the art business. Angelique knows the art business, including how galleries steal from their artists.

Then there was the matter of the getaway house in Sag Harbor that he and Michiko had been thinking of buying. Michiko would use her money to buy and furnish it, and he would use his money to renovate the house. If he got in a legal imbroglio with either Elaine or Angelique, it would jeopardize his savings and the getaway house.

Maybe he should telephone Angelique's office and smooth things over. He dialed Brody Artists' Management.

—Hello, Valerie, this is Francesco Martinelli. Is Angelique there?
—No, Mr. Martinelli, she told me she was going to *your* studio.
—Angelique just left my studio. We had a little dust up and I am calling to apologize for some of my words and to smooth things over.
—I don't think she is returning to the office this afternoon. She is attending a charity ball at the Metropolitan Museum tonight.
—If she calls in, will you tell her I phoned to apologize?
—Yes, Mr. Martinelli. Misunderstandings happen often in the art world. I will give her the message. Is there anything else I can help you with?

—No. Thank you. Have a good weekend, Valerie.

—Thank you Mr. Martinelli. You, too.

Francesco did not have a good weekend. As soon as he hung up after speaking with Valerie, the phone rang.

—Hello.

—Hymen Steinmetzinger here. Frank I'm bringing the new owner of the building over for a last walk-through. Are you available to help me give a tour of the building?

—Of course. You didn't even have to ask. Alex told me appraisers were here a few weeks ago.

—Yes, I'm selling some of my holdings to finance new construction in mid-town. Is four this afternoon too soon?

—No, I'm working in my studio, but I'll meet you in front of the building at four.

As arranged, Frank met Steinmetzinger and the new owner Tim Tillinghast. Tillinghast was all business, and quizzed Frank on all aspect of the building: elevator, roof, electrical and plumbing systems, flood controls, etc.

—I know Hymen calls you Frank, but aren't you the artist Francesco Martinelli?

—That's my Do Business As name. My real name is Frank Martin.

—My wife bought one of your paintings. I have a photo of it in my wallet.

Tillinghast pulled a photo from his wallet.

—Here's a picture of it in our living room. I love this painting.

—Well, thank you, said Frank, looking at another painting for which he wasn't paid.

—Did you purchase it recently?

—Maybe two months ago. It fits perfectly in our living room.

—I'm happy it worked out. Do you know how much your wife paid for it?

—More than I would spend. I think \$11,000.

—That's a good deal. Some of my recent paintings sell for over \$100,000.

—And you are the super of this building?

—Until recently, I lived on less than \$5,000 a year. Being super saved me rent money. I'm a farm boy with practical skills, so the work was easy for me.

—Well, I have a management company that takes care of all my buildings. I'm afraid next month you are out of a job. I won't need a super.

—Does that mean I'll have to pay rent?

—I'm afraid so. I intend to turn this building into upscale residences. There is no room for squatter artists.

—Are you going to evict me?

—Not immediately. But soon you will not be able to afford the rent. I expect to sell each floor for a quarter of a million dollars or more. I'm incorporating this building into a co-op. When the co-op is fully consigned, I will have sold the building for almost \$2,500,000.

—That's out of my price range. How much time until I have to move?

—Probably by the end of the year. Until then, you'll have to pay \$1,500 rent each month as long as you occupy your current apartment. If I don't sell the floor by the end of this year, I will raise your rent to \$2000 a month.

—I could cover that easily, but it's not the rates I'm used to.

—This area is turning around, it will soon become prime. You should have bought the building yourself.

—I'm an artist, not a landlord.

Returning to his studio, Frank took two beers from the refrigerator. He downed the first in a few swallows. He took the second beer and sat in his Adirondack chair. He lit a Camel and studied the painting on the easel. He couldn't concentrate on the painting. The thought that he was going to lose the studio where he worked for the last seven years was heartrending. He needed the comfort of familiar surroundings. Fewer artists and musicians squatted in the ever-diminishing supply of abandoned lofts in SoHo. Real estate was becoming pricy and scarce. He didn't need a living loft, but a working loft. He was living on West 81st Street with Michiko. A sweet deal like he had with Steinmetzinger was difficult to find. It could take him a year to find a new place. He better start looking now.

And then there was the matter that another rich man bought a painting from Elaine for which he wasn't paid. It seemed that Elaine was pulling a fast one on him and Angelique. I wonder if Elaine is stiffing her other artists? I better patch things up with Angelique. She is the only one I know who can get to the bottom of this. There's no way I will get a straight answer from Elaine. Michiko will be furious and demand I fire both of those women, but I can't, I need Angelique. I wouldn't even know whom to engage as a lawyer in a case like this. For sure they would be expensive. Angelique is already my lawyer. She gets paid from her 5% commission each time Elaine sells a painting, that is, *if* Elaine bothers to pay me.

The phone rang. Francesco decided he'd better answer. Maybe it was Angelique. It was before Michiko's Saturday evening performance in Cleveland, so he knew it wouldn't be her.

—Hello.

—Francesco, this is Angelique Brody. Valerie told me you telephoned.

—Yes, I called to offer an apology. I am too upset to think clearly. Obviously, you have no reason to steal from me, but Elaine might be in some financial trouble and not paying on time.

—Apologies accepted. You might be correct. Rumor is that she is opening a gallery in Paris where she plans to sell New York artists.

But I want you to understand this: my contract is with you, Francesco, not Elaine or Michiko. They both have axes to grind with me since I have had battles with Elaine on your behalf as well as with three other artists. I don't think Michiko liked me from day one.

Frank didn't know what to answer. He was not about to confess that Michiko didn't like Angelique, but he did like hearing that Angelique fought for her artists.

—Let's leave Michiko out of this. I agree I'm your client, not Michiko. But another problem has come up.

—What's that?

—A Tim Tillinghast has purchased my building and fired me as super. Starting next month, he is charging me \$1500 a month rent. I can live with that, but he showed me a photograph of one of my paintings in his home. I was never paid for *that painting*. It's one of the ones Elaine has under lock and key at Grillo Moving and Storage. He said his wife purchased it from Elaine Aster Gallery two months ago for \$11,000.

—Something doesn't compute here, Francesco, said Angelique. Why would Elaine sell the Tillinghasts a painting for \$11,000 and the Whipples a similar painting for \$149,000? There must have been some other consideration involved with the Whipple transaction. Painting prices don't jump that much that fast, even a Picasso or a Cezanne.

Frank thought about it. It was discouraging that he was still selling paintings mostly in the \$10,000 to \$12,000 range, except for the large paintings he did for corporations.

—You're probably correct, Angelique, though I was hoping my star had risen high enough for my paintings to command over \$100,000. That would put me in the big leagues.

—Francesco, you *are* a big league painter, but it takes time to build a market and a brand. You are such a tireless painter, that you are flooding the market. Good in the near-term, but not good if you want to increase value. Picasso is alleged to have hundreds of paintings in storage. He sends a trickle on to his dealer.

—Picasso is a genius and a wealthy man. I may never be wealthy, but hopefully comfortable and secure.

—Don't pass up the opportunity to make money, Francesco. There will be long spells where no one will want your paintings. The art market is capricious, a market of vogues. When you fall out of vogue, it's like you never existed. If you keep going as you are, your money will make as much money in a year as your painting sales. That's when you can spoil yourself with houses, and pricy consumer goods.

—That would be something. Not sure I understand wealth, or even want to. My needs are very simple.

—With the inflation rate we're experiencing, your money is devaluing very quickly. I'll continue to invest it wisely. Remember the painting Carlo Sylvestre purchased for \$10,000? Today you would have to charge \$13,000 to have the same buying power with your earnings.

—Look, I trust you to keep me solvent.

—That's what I like to hear, not what I heard this afternoon. I will see Tim Tillinghast this evening at the charity ball for the Metropolitan Museum's Contemporary American Art Collection. The Whipples will probably be there as well. I'll see what I can discover. But I must go, I have to have my hair and make-up done and be dressed by six. Thank you for reassuring me that you still trust me.

—I'm sorry I had my doubts, but I'm being pressured by Michiko to pursue alternative dealers and agents. I will resist, though living at home will be difficult.

—It's always better to stay in the studio and paint. Your studio is your safe house. Good night Francesco.

—Good night, Angeliq. Thank you for returning my call.

To be continued.

