

# The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

## Chapter 32

*by* Daniel Harris

*Click on my name above. It will take you to my home page where you will find links to more stories and previous chapters of "The Nude Pianist."*

\* \* \*

—You know, Angelique, said Elaine Aster, dabbing her lips with a napkin, I've opened a new gallery in Paris. It specializes in art by New York City artists.

—Yes, when I spoke to your assistant, he mentioned that you were in Paris supervising the opening of a new gallery. Quite an expensive undertaking, given the price of real estate in Paris.

The two women were power-dressed. Elaine wore a Chanel suit and Angelique, who was older, wore an expensive blue and white dress. Elaine wore pearls; Angelique, a blue sapphire necklace. Their hair and make-up were done professionally.

The two women were seated at a center table in the famous Pool Room of the Four Seasons restaurant. Angelique invited Elaine to this traditional setting of power lunches to intimidate Elaine. She generally found the food excellent but too heavy for her tastes.

—That was the most difficult part of the operation, continued Elaine, finding a space of the correct size and price. I found a corner storefront on rue Saint Croix in The Marais, fourth arrondissement. It's a bohemian area and encompasses the Jewish Quarter. They're a few other urban pioneer galleries, clubs and boutiques opening in the neighborhood. I have great hopes.

—Sounds like an expensive and risky undertaking, said Angelique, taking a sip of wine. So, who is managing this new gallery?

—You're not going to believe this. I met with Dan Saras, you know the infamous forger who acts as Anatoly Gringovitch's agent, and asked if I could represent Gringovitch in Paris. Sarras was his usual

testy self, he acted insulted and effectively told me to go screw myself. But he did give me the name of an American woman who lives in France and speaks perfect French, Italian and English. She has an art history degree from the Sorbonne and is a knockout. She was managing a small gallery in Nice and is a curator at Foundation Maeght in Saint-Paul-de-Vance. She's the perfect person to manage my Paris gallery.

—Do I know her?

—*You* might. You *do* know just about everybody in the art world. Her name is Isabella Sanitizzare. She was thrilled to accept my offer.

—I've heard the name, but I don't know the face.

—She's a stunner. Every *flâneur* stopped by the gallery after spotting her picture in articles about the gallery in *Libération* and *Le Monde*. We ... I should say, Isabella ... sold two paintings the first week, which was fortuitous, as my funds were running low. I used all my own money on this venture; no bank loans, no backers. Probably not the best idea, but I couldn't find any backers with serious money.

Angelique gave Elaine a cynical eye over her wine glass.

—Why do you look at me like that? asked Elaine.

Angelique shrugged, dismissing the question.

—So, tell me, said Angelique, diffusing the tension, which artists are you representing at this new Paris gallery?

—My stable of New York City artists, of course. Francesco Martinelli is still my star. I was hoping to sign Anatoly Gringovitch, I met with him in a trendy bar in my new Paris neighborhood, but he turned me down flat. Sarras has an exclusive on him. Gringovitch was charming but adamant.

—Gringovitch is so confident in his work and place in history, said Angelique, that he makes everyone feel relaxed in his presence. He has an ego, but he doesn't parade it around like some artists.

—I wish Francesco had a bigger ego. It would help with his depressions.

—I wouldn't worry about Francesco, said Angelique. I saw him at the Art Students League while you were in Paris. He gave a painting critique and demonstration. He took a lot of heat from the students

for not being more *au courant*. He more than held his own. The students watched in awe as he painted a small op-art self-portrait right there in about fifteen minutes. He told them: "I chose to paint the way I do, because it's what I like. If I wanted to play games with my eyeballs, I would."

—Good, good, said Elaine. That's the kind of thing I like to hear.

—Ladies, may I suggest a dessert? asked the waiter.

—Just coffee for me, said Angelique.

—I'll have green tea with lemon, said Elaine.

—Would you care for a brandy? asked the waiter.

—Not for me, said Elaine. Angelique?

—Oh, no I have a busy schedule this afternoon.

—Very well, said the waiter, a green tea with lemon and a coffee.

Elaine excused herself to use the ladies room. Angelique pulled a notebook from her purse. Tucked under the cover was the information she had received from her contact at Grillo Moving and Storage:

A-

*There are only five Francesco Martinelli paintings in storage here.  
Lezard*

Elaine returned to the table.

—This restaurant has the finest Women's room in New York.

—Yes, it's one of the reasons I bring woman guests here.

The waiter served the two women.

—Elaine, I may be able to help you with Dan Sarras. Sandra Steinberg, from the law office across the hall from my office, was the divorce attorney for Dan's wife. Sarras asked me to intercede on his behalf and have Claudia, his wife, drop the divorce suit, which she ultimately did. He owes me a favor or two.

—Are you kidding me?

—Serious, Elaine. I'm sure Sarras will take a big slice of any sales. But it would be a major coup for you to be selling Gringovitch and Martinelli in your gallery.

Angelique could almost see the wheels turning in Elaine's head. This is one greedy, hungry woman, thought Angelique.

—Do you think you can pull this off? asked Elaine.  
—I'm going to need some cooperation from you.  
—How can I help?  
—Tell me where Francesco Martinelli's paintings are.  
Elaine's face dropped and her eyes darted around the room.  
—Why, they're in storage, replied Elaine, a slight quiver in her voice. I took some to Paris.  
Elaine dabbed her lips with her napkin.  
—Elaine, we need a big problem to go away.  
—What's that?  
Elaine could sense danger. Angelique was setting her up.  
—I think you know, said Angelique, looking Elaine directly in the eyes. Think Whipple. Think Tillinghast. Think thirty missing paintings.  
Angelique's eyes bore in on Elaine's. Elaine's eyes were making small darting movements like she was receiving tiny electric shocks.  
—How did you find out? asked Elaine, gathering herself and sitting erect in her chair.  
—Francesco saw the painting at the Whipple's estate in Greenwich, Connecticut. Tim Tillinghast showed Francesco a photo of the painting his wife bought.  
—How the hell did Francesco get into the Whipple estate?  
—The Whipple's subsidize Michiko's apartment for which she gives a yearly recital at their estate. Francesco drove Michiko to the Whipple's estate in Greenwich because of a pending snowstorm. Whipple proudly showed the painting to Francesco. Tillinghast bought the building Francesco's studio is in from Hymen Steinmetzinger. Tim showed Francesco a photo of the painting hanging in the Tillinghast living room.  
Elaine closed her eyes and put her face in her hands.  
—Don't go Sarah Bernhardt on me, Elaine.  
Seizing the moment, Angelique asked the killer question.  
—Elaine, you owe Francesco and me serious money. How many other paintings have you sold and not paid the artist?

Elaine, suddenly realizing she was holding her breath promptly exhaled. She then calmly lit a fresh cigarette.

—Well ...those two and the two Isabella sold in Paris last week.

—Where are the others?

—In Paris. Except for five still in storage here in New York City.

—So *when* is my client going to be *paid*? When will *I* be paid?

—I can't pay any of you, just yet. I needed the money to keep the new gallery running. Angelique, I'm as good as broke.

—Except you have a gold mine in Francesco and a few of your other artists. Francesco's contract is up in November 1973. Do you want to lose him?

—Of course not. Why do you think during all this financial strain I never missed paying his monthly retainer? He's the only artist I *was* paying. Now you're trying to strong-arm me. I'll pay everyone in good time, when I have the funds.

—So, what you're telling me is that Francesco Martinelli is an unsuspecting partner in your Paris Gallery venture.

—I guess you could say that, said Elaine, stubbing out her cigarette. I should be able to pay everyone by the end of the year. Maybe before. If you can convince Sarras to let me represent Gringovitch in Paris, it will be sooner.

—It doesn't work that way, Elaine. My clients come first. Francesco no longer has free rent on his studio. His rent will be \$2000 a month at the end of the year. What's he suppose to live on?

—He lives with that Jap on the upper west side. He only needs a workspace, not a place to live. There are plenty of cheap places in New York City where he can paint.

—That's not the point, nor your decision. You know he's a fragile man. He wants to keep the studio where he's been for seven years and feels comfortable.

—He must have a bundle in the bank.

—It won't last long if he wants to keep his loft. It will disappear faster if Michiko decides she's had enough of his mood swings and throws him out.

—Has she threatened that? asked Elaine.

—Not that I've heard, but when Francesco's depressed he lives in his loft. She doesn't want him around when he's down or when he's manic and off the rails.

Elaine lit another cigarette.

—So how do we resolve this mess? asked Elaine, exhaling a cloud of smoke. You're the big shot lawyer.

—I'll have to think about it. When do you think you can start paying Francesco what you owe him?

—Probably not until this summer. I may have to stop paying his retainer. If Hymen Steinmetzinger sells my building, I could be in worse shape than Francesco.

—That's not good.

—I owe Francesco about \$35,000 for the paintings I've sold and not paid him. If Isabella keeps selling his paintings in Paris, I might be able to pay my debts to you and Francesco by June or July.

—We need something *in writing*, Elaine. Monday we'll meet in my office and work out a new contract.

—I need to talk to Sam Berkowicz, my lawyer, said Elaine.  
Lighting another cigarette.

—Elaine, you already have a cigarette going, said Angelique, pointing to the ashtray. I'll send a proposal over to Sam Berkowicz on Monday.

—Very well, boss lady, I'll meet with Sam Monday and go over it with him.

—Fair enough, said Angelique ignoring the condescending remark. By the way what's the name of your gallery in Paris?

—Aster Place.

To be continued.

