

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 33

by Daniel Harris

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When Angelique arrived at Francesco's loft, she was breathless. She had jogged up to Francesco's sixth floor loft to burn off some of the rich food she'd eaten with Elaine at the Four Seasons. Angelique had successfully gotten a confession from Elaine and had proposed a 10% commission on all paintings sold until Elaine's debt to Francesco and herself were repaid. Elaine's deception upset her more than the money. If she had known what she now knew about Elaine, she would have signed Francesco with another gallery. She knocked on Francesco's door.

—Fuck, said Francesco, who was in deep concentration at his easel. Angelique's knock had startled him and caused an errant brush stroke.

Angelique took a pocket mirror from her purse and checked her make-up. She patted some perspiration from her upper lip with a tissue

—Who is it?

—Angelique.

—Give me a minute, Angelique.

Francesco opened the door and motioned Angelique inside with a head nod. He was wiping his hands on a turpentine-dampened towel

—What a surprise, said Francesco. I would shake your hand, but as you can see, my hands are not clean.

—I'm here with news and to restore your confidence in me,

—Well, let's see, said Francesco, motioning her to the Adirondack chair. Did you talk to Elaine?

—I just came from having lunch with her. What I learned is not good. She opened a new gallery in Paris and now is almost broke. She owes you about \$35,000. Since she can't pay you, I've proposed that you receive 10% of all the sales in that gallery since you are an unwitting partner and a victim of her fraud.

—But what about the \$35,000?

Angelique could see Francesco was about to turn on her.

—Before you go ballistic, she has to pay you everything she owes you.

—Has she agreed to that?

—She has no choice. The new contract with her two galleries stipulates that until she pays all back fees and commissions, you will not deliver any more paintings to Elaine Aster Gallery in New York or Aster Place in Paris.

—What a bitch. She told me she would never cheat me.

—Francesco, get a grip: *everyone lies in this business*.

—Does that mean she's going to come here and try to seduce me?

—Has she done that?

—Not exactly, but four years ago ... what would you say ... I succumbed to her charms.

—You mean you slept with her?

—She can be difficult to resist. She *is* a good-looking intelligent, and cultured woman.

—What did Michiko say?

—I didn't tell her. Michiko hates Elaine.

—So do I. She's a greedy selfish bitch. Hypocrisy incarnate. Frank kept mum. Michiko also hated Angelique.

—Elaine has her charms.

—That's true of all crooks and swindlers. She's robbing you Francesco. I want her to suffer. I want you to get your money.

Francesco walked around behind Angelique and stared long and hard at the painting in progress. Something in the picture caught his eye. He selected paintbrushes, his palette and resumed painting.

—This is a terrific painting, Francesco, said Angelique, motioning to the painting on the easel.

Francesco continued painting without replying.

—So what are you going to do? asked Francesco after a longish spell at the easel. What if Elaine doesn't agree to the changes in the contract?

—We'll find you a new gallery.

—Sounds too easy. What's current is pop and op art. Silk screens of Marilyn Monroe and Jackie Kennedy, or eyeball popping optical art. Much as I hate to say it, Elaine has an eye for *real painters*, no matter what they paint.

—Yes, but you're her class act. If you leave her, she loses her best source of income.

Francesco put down his brushes. His spirits were flagging. He could lose his gallery and income. He liked Elaine, but she was defrauding him. Francesco could tell Angelique was on the warpath from the set of her jaw. Angelique wanted to destroy Elaine.

—Elaine told me, said Angelique, she couldn't afford to continue to pay you your monthly retainer. It's more than she can afford. She needs that \$1500 a month to keep the gallery afloat. Remember, if the galleries close, she'll never pay you.

—What the hell did she say about my *30 missing paintings*?

—Those paintings are in Paris. I have no way of taking them from her. As of last week, her Paris gallery has sold two of your paintings. If she sells more, she can pay you what she owes you.

—Christ, I'm fucked. I work my ass off in the studio everyday, and my dealer steals from me. I'm a fucking indentured servant.

—Not with me on your side, Francesco.

—Elaine has the paintings and she gets the money. We have to trust her to pay us and we know that we can't trust her. Who's winning here Angelique?

—I'm not powerless, said Angelique, rising from the chair and walking to the window. Michiko lived across the street on the top floor?

—Yes, but she moved to 81st Street after she was mugged.

Angelique walked toward Francesco.

—How well do you know Anatoly Gringovitch?

—We're pretty good friends. Not close friends, but *simpatico*.

—Elaine needs Gringovitch's paintings for her Paris gallery. Can you help?

—I spoke with Gringovitch when he visited my loft a couple of weeks ago. Gringovitch said he thought Elaine was pretty ballsy, asking first his dealer, Dan Sarras, and then him for permission to display and sell his work in Paris. No way would Gringovitch trust her.

—Did he bed her? He has that reputation.

—I don't know. He didn't say so. The way the conversation went, he would have told me if he had.

—She uses sex as a tool.

—She plays at being a loving wholesome girl.

—Girl?

—Well, woman. She's a gourmet cook who can fake a great orgasm.

—Well you stay out of her pants. Sleeping with her will only complicate matters for you and for me.

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Sam Berkowicz, Elaine Aster's lawyer, dancing partner and sometime lover, studied Elaine's face. He didn't know which he detested in a woman more, crying or mindless blither. He watched tears streak Elaine's make-up. Reaching into his desk drawer, he withdrew a box of tissues and handed it to Elaine.

—Try to control yourself, Elaine, said Berkowicz, working to keep his annoyance with the crying woman out of his voice. You are not going to lose your gallery. Angelique is tough, but she's not mean. She's playing hardball. Giving Martinelli ten percent of your Paris sales is good business. But I asked Angelique that ten percent only apply to Martinelli's paintings, not all the paintings sold at Aster Place in Paris, or at Elaine Aster Gallery here in New York.

—Did she agree to that? asked Elaine, blowing her nose.

—She's considering it. Look you've had the kid on 40% for almost five years. Giving him an extra 10% for the last six months of his contract won't hurt your bottom line all that much. At the moment he commands high prices. With his contract coming up it will give him a taste of the kind of money to expect in the future. Is he a good producer?

—Too good. There are six of his paintings hanging here in SoHo with another five in the warehouse. There are still twenty-eight canvases at Aster Place in Paris. Isabella Sanitizzare said she would sell two more of his paintings this week. We've priced them between 60,000FF and 75,000FF.

—That's about \$12,000 to \$15,000. Is that the same as New York?

—Absolutely. I can't price him differently in Paris than here. People who buy art at those prices are very savvy. The key to those sales is Isabella. She has a lot of charisma. Men drool over her.

—You're not so bad, yourself. I'm sure sales in SoHo are better when you're in the gallery.

—I can't look too good just now, she said taking a compact from her purse. Oh my god! I look like some tragic heroine. I'm so sorry Sam. I know how it upsets you when a woman weeps.

—Why don't you fix your makeup in the woman's room? You'll feel better. Meanwhile, I'll call Angelique and do some negotiating.

When Elaine returned she saw Sam dictating to his secretary. She wandered into a conference room and looked at the paintings hanging on the walls. She had sold Sam's firm all those paintings. Those sales had bailed her out more than once. She wondered if she could sell Sam more art. He had plenty of money. His offices now occupied two floors at 14 Wall Street. There were no Martinelli paintings here. She still had five of Francesco's large five-by-five foot abstracts in the warehouse. If she sold one to Sam for \$40,000, she could pay off Francesco and Angelique. Then she wouldn't have to agree to give Francesco the additional 10%.

Sam was her date for the arts ball at MOMA this Thursday. She would have to bed him after the ball. Sam was between marriages,

or maybe finished with marriage. He would be an easy target. One thing she knew she did well: give a man a memorable experience.

—Miss Aster, you may join Mr. Berkowicz in his office. We're finished, said the matronly secretary who had been taking the dictation.

—Thank you.

—Sorry, said Sam, standing and holding the chair for Elaine. I had to send off a quick memo to our Washington office. I may have found a solution to your problem.

To be continued.

