

# The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

## Chapter 35

*by* Daniel Harris

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Elaine Aster sat in Angelique Brody's office. She had just handed over the last payment. Her debt to Francesco and Angelique was paid.

—So, Angelique, said Elaine, do you think you can stop taking the 10% from my sales that you wrote into the new contract?

—Your lawyer, Sam Berkowicz, replied Angelique, telephoned me this morning. He suggested you only pay 10% on sales of Martinelli paintings. Can you live with that?

—I guess that's the best compromise. But, I can't restore Francesco's retainer of \$1700 a month. The cash flow just isn't there.

—There is no problem about the retainer when my client was getting 10% from all sales. But now that he's not, there's a problem. The retainer covered his rent and some of his expenses. For instance, Aster Place sold a Gringovitch painting for \$26,000. The \$2600 that Francesco received more than compensates for the missing \$1700 retainer. I can't agree ceasing the 10% *and* the retainer. You're squeezing Francesco. He's actually making less now than when he first signed with you. Look how his art has helped your gallery prosper.

—Yes, but as you know, when I sell a Gringovitch painting I also have to give Dan Sarras 30%, and Gringovitch 50%. The 10% left over barely covers my expenses. I don't have any Martinelli paintings left in New York. There are still a few in Paris. Francesco

hasn't delivered a painting to me in months. Between paying back Francesco and giving him 50% for all of his paintings I've sold, I've written him over \$75,000 in checks.

—You signed a contract that stipulated “no new paintings” until you had squared accounts with Francesco and me. Now that you have, Francesco will deliver pictures.

—When?

—Talk to him. I visited his loft last week. There were many exciting new pictures. Francesco was your main money earner before, now he will be again. Trust me.

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Elaine sat in her office in Elaine Aster Gallery in SoHo. She dialed Francesco's studio number.

—Hello?

—Francesco, this is Elaine Aster. Were you sleeping? Your voice sounds strange.

—Michiko's Chinese medicine doctor made me a galenical for my depression. It makes my voice sound different.

—What's a galenical?

—Some herb and plant extracts made into a tincture. I put two drops in a glass of water twice a day.

—Does it work?

—It seems to, I sure hope it does. If I get seriously depressed again, Michiko will throw me out.

—She *threatened* you with that? That doesn't sound very loving.

—When I'm depressed, it adversely affects *her* work. She can't afford that with her busy performance schedule.

—I guess I understand. The reason I called is to tell you that I gave Angelique the last payment for what I owe you. I'd like you to bring over some paintings.

—Yes, Angelique told me. Unfortunately, my friend Albert has his van up in Westchester. If you want to see what I've been doing, why don't you come over here? It's a lot easier.

—Is the elevator working?

—It better be, it's brand new. All part of the renovation Tillinghast is doing. He's sold two floors already. I'm sure he'll sell my floor soon enough. Then I'll really be screwed.

—When can I come over?

—Anytime. Michiko is in Atlanta performing with the Atlanta Symphony. I'm staying at the loft.

—Is four this afternoon all right?

—I'll be here.

—See you then.

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Elaine didn't arrive at Francesco's loft until four-thirty. She was dressed in a long black pencil skirt, a well-tailored white blouse, and Mondrian's *Broadway Boogie Woogie* patterned silk scarf. Being a warm September day, she was coatless and hatless.

—Sorry I'm late, Francesco, said Elaine. I had to finalize a sale.

Elaine leaned in toward Francesco. He gave her two perfunctory air kisses.

—Surely you can do better than that, Francesco. Elaine pulled Francesco's head down to hers and gave Francesco a long kiss on the lips holding his head in her hands. Her tongue flicked his lips.

—So, was it one of my paintings you sold? asked Francesco, wiping Elaine's lipstick off his mouth.

—I have no paintings of yours in New York. They're all sold. That's why I'm here. I came to see what you've been doing.

For the next hour, Francesco took paintings from his storage area and displayed them on his big easel. They were what he called his color-modulation paintings, large canvases five or six feet on a side filled with ever-morphing colors. Elaine studied each painting for a long time. On her cue, Francesco lined up the viewed painting along the wall and put up another painting. Elaine never said a word. When he showed her the last painting, he looked at her. She sat smoking with a strange look on her face.

—What's wrong, Elaine? You don't like my work anymore?

—Did you show me these paintings in chronological order? You know, the oldest ones first.

—Pretty much. Why? You seem disappointed or upset.

—There's a problem.

—A problem? What problem?

Elaine stood and paced the studio looking at the paintings. She had to choose her words carefully otherwise her artist would succumb to depression or worse go into manic mode and destroy his work, possibly even assault her.

—Francesco, you know I love your work and believe in you as an artist. God knows I broke my back to repay you so I wouldn't lose you. I want you in my galleries. I'm building a strong market for your work in Paris. Isabella says Aster Place in Paris is filled with viewers every day. I expect the last four paintings of yours we have in Paris will be sold before Thanksgiving.

—That's a problem?

—Hear me out. The market for your work is based on the style you've been painting for the last four years. I love your new style. It's vibrant, exciting, classy and attractive to a certain connoisseur. The problem is that when an artist changes his style as abruptly as you have, the market for his work can evaporate. If you had come by this change gradually over a period of a few years, there wouldn't be a problem. It would be considered the "normal" progression of a painter's growth. With these paintings you have leapfrogged over Gringovitch ...and a slew of other artists ... and into new territory. The best five or six of the ones in the new style are museum quality. They should sell in the \$40,000 range, but my clientele doesn't have that kind of money, and they don't have the wall space for five and six-foot square paintings. It would take me a few years to build up a client list of people who could buy your work at those prices. Even my corporate clients would balk at the cost.

Elaine took out a new cigarette, lit it with the butt of the old. She violently stubbed out the old cigarette in the overflowing ashtray and collapsed onto the Adirondack chair.

—Basically, what you're telling me, Elaine, is that I'm now too advanced, too expensive, or too good for your gallery. Is that what I'm hearing?

Elaine sat smoking waiting for Francesco to explode. Francesco paced the studio, smoking and flipping the cover open-and-closed on his Zippo lighter.

—You know, Elaine, said Francesco turning to face Elaine, Rothko said abstracts must have scale. Big scale. Large.

—Yes, but I told you only my corporate clients have room for paintings that big. But their interior decorators buy paintings to fit the color schemes of the places they are going to hang in. You know that you've painted a few large corporate paintings on commission. But these color-modulation paintings are so dynamic and vibrant, they would have to decorate the room to fit these paintings, not the usual way. Interior decorators buy paintings to fit a room's environment and ethos. These colors have so much motion and action, no interior decorator could find a suitable color for a room people would live or work in. A museum with large galleries doesn't have that problem, but a workspace or a living space does.

—So you're telling me you can't use my last six months' work?

—Not exactly. I'm telling you I *love* the new work, but I don't think I can attract the clients who have deep enough pockets or the wall space to buy these new paintings.

—Wait one fucking minute. You sold one of my paintings to Alice Whipple. The Whipplés have deep pockets. They also have plenty of modern art in their home, even large canvases. Hell, there's a life-sized standing portrait of Garth Whipple's father in the dining room. That painting has to be ten feet tall!

—That's true. But it was sheer luck that Garth Whipple visited my gallery and saw your work. Do you know how 95% of my sales are made? I find the right buyer for a painting. It's not Garth Whipple coming into the gallery to get out of the rain.

After Elaine left, Francesco knew Dr. Wong's galenical wasn't working. He curled up on his bed and didn't move except to use the toilet.

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Three days later, Michiko found Francesco curled up on his bed in the loft. Michiko roused him by tweaking his toe.

—Francesco, get up. Did you take your medicine?

—No, I'm paralyzed. Elaine came by and told me she couldn't sell my new paintings. I don't want to hurt you. Go away and leave me alone.

Michiko stormed into the studio and telephoned Elaine at Elaine Aster Gallery.

—Hello, Michiko, what can I do for you? asked Elaine, dreading the response.

—Elaine, said Michiko, with the authority she learned from orchestra conductors, what did you do to Francesco? He's comatose.

—Oh my god, cried Elaine. I tried to be gentle.

—Well, you screwed up big-time, said Michiko, her anger rising. Francesco is so deep in depression I don't know what will get him out of it. I may have to call Dr. Jawarski, or worse admit him to Bellevue. If he goes to Bellevue, it'll be electric shock therapy. He could end up a vegetable. Do you hear me?

—Oh, my god, I'm so sorry. His new painting style is so different and so powerful, I can't sell it for what my clients can pay. It's museum quality. History book. But I can't use it.

—So you had to kill him?

—He's not dead is he?

—No, but as good *as*. Look, I don't have the time or the emotional strength to deal with a fragile genius that you've now put into a pathological state. He could jump out the window any minute. If I have any say in this, you will never sell one of his paintings *again*. Do you hear me? **YOU WILL NEVER SELL A MARTENILLI PAINTING AGAIN, DAMN YOU!**

Michiko slammed the phone on the receiver. She immediately dialed Angelique.

—Brody Artists' Management, said Vicky the receptionist.

—Vicky, this is Michiko, Francesco Martinelli's better half.

—Oh, yes. Hi, Michiko, said Vicki. I bought your Rachmaninoff record. I love it.

—Thank you, but I need to speak with Angelique. It's an emergency.

—Unfortunately, Ms Brody is not here, said Vicky in her professional business voice. I will try to contact her and have her call you immediately. Where are you?

—I'm in Francesco's studio. Do you have the number?

—Of course. Can I ask the nature of your call?

—Elaine Aster has effectively killed Francesco Martinelli. Michiko could hear Vicki's scream as she hung up the phone. To be continued.

