

The Nude Pianist: A Novel:

Chapter 36

by Daniel Harris

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Vicki's scream echoed in Michiko's ear, an unwelcome earworm. Michiko took a deep breath and looked around the studio. She had never seen any of these paintings, but then she had not visited the loft since last winter. She went into the kitchen and prepared Francesco's Chinese medicine.

—Francesco, please take your tincture. I know it will help you.

—Go away, Michiko. I don't want to hurt you.

—Francesco, you are in serious trouble. This medicine will help you. For my sake, please take it.

Francesco sat up with his bare feet on the floor. He drank the tincture and made a face. Michiko saw the faint hint of a smile. That was encouraging.

—Can I turn on the studio lights and look at your paintings? asked Michiko.

—Sure, it's as much your space as mine, replied Francesco, curling up in a fetal position on the bed.

Michiko flipped on the studio lights at the circuit breaker panel and walked into the studio. She stood very still looking at the paintings. There was a power radiating from them. She thought the pictures were looking at her. That energy created a powerful presence: some were outright jovial, and others emanated an ethereal gloom. It gave her chills. The paintings frightened her for what they told her about Francesco, but they were irresistible, fascinating and magical. The canvases were vibrant, the colors creating energy fields of light as they clashed and harmonized

together. She sat down on the Adirondack chair. Tears of fear, joy and love streamed down her face. Michiko knew she had to save Francesco. She could not leave him now. He was an overwhelming force. His paintings were raw emotion, more than mere paint on canvas. They were as powerful as music.

She jumped when the telephone rang.

—Francesco Martinelli's studio, she said, answering the telephone.

—Michiko, this is Angelique Brody. What's going on over there?

—Francesco is in a dangerous state. I gave him his medicine, which he hasn't taken in three days. I want to take him to our apartment on 81st Street. I'm afraid to leave him here by himself. I have rehearsals at my apartment. I can't stay here.

—What precipitated this?

—Elaine Aster visited him and told him she can't sell his new work. He's devastated and suicidal. I don't want to take him to Bellevue; they'll subject him to electro-shock therapy. It's better he stays with me.

—Christ, what a mess. He didn't do anything stupid like destroying paintings did he?

—I don't think so. He's more likely to kill himself.

—Did you call his shrink?

—No, Francesco doesn't like her; that's why he's using Chinese medicine. It has been working fine the last few months, but after Elaine's visit he fell into a deep depression and didn't take his medicine.

There was a long pause.

—Okay, here's what we do, said Angelique, deciding to take charge. I'll send my car over to the loft. My driver will take you and Francesco to your apartment. When Francesco is well enough, we'll put these paintings in storage.

—I don't want him locked out of his paintings, said Michiko, giving her voice as much menace as she could muster. Elaine stole his paintings. I won't let you do the same thing.

—No, no. He'll have full rights over them. He can even show them there. It's the same warehouse that Elaine uses. They have a small exhibition space for photographing art and showing paintings to a small group. I can take over Elaine's job as his gallerist. I will find buyers. But first we must take care of Francesco. My car will be there in thirty minutes. Can you have him ready to go by then?

—I'll give it my best effort.

—If you have difficulties, or if Francesco doesn't cooperate, call me at this number: 776-2100.

—Okay. Thank you, Angelique. I could kill Elaine. She destroyed Francesco!

—Yes, Elaine stole from all of us and now she's hurt her best artist. Remember; call me if you have difficulty with Francesco. Also, call me when you arrive at your apartment.

—I will. Thank you for your generous assistance.

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Spring 1975, Manhattan

There it was in the Arts Section of The New York Times: "New record price for a Francesco Martinelli painting. Martinelli's large color-modulation abstract, *Crepuscular Dawn* was the big sale of the night at Christie's Tuesday auction of recent American paintings. The young American artist's agent, Angelique Brody, told the assembled crowd that Martinelli is "now hitting his stride."

Elaine Aster threw the paper across her office. That bitch had written the contract so that, while Elaine was not his official gallery, she could sell Francesco Martinelli paintings with the approval of the artist. She had rejected all the color-modulation works and hadn't shown a Martinelli painting since the original contract expired on October 31, 1974.

She dialed her lawyer, Sam Berkowicz. After getting through the bureaucratic barriers, she finally reached Sam.

—Elaine, my dear, what's troubling you. Not the notice in today's Times that Francesco Martinelli's *Crepuscular Dawn* sold for \$65,000 is it?

—Of course. Why the hell would I call my lawyer otherwise?

—I checked the latest contract and amendments; Angelique is five steps ahead of you. Not much I can do. Hate to say it, love, but you made the wrong decision abandoning your artist. The kid is a genius, crazy as a loon, but a genius nonetheless.

—I could kill that bitch.

—I'm sure she thinks the same of you. Angelique is hip to all your gallerist tricks. Greed blinded you, my friend.

—Don't call me a friend if you can't help me.

—Hate to say it, there's not much I can do. You are the one who bailed on your artist.

—Fuck you, Sam. You are no help. I need help.

—No need to get vulgar. You will have to try and get Francesco back into your fold. Didn't he sleep with you once? You might try that tactic.

—I made him crazy. He's afraid of me

—You are not without charms, my dear.

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—Francesco, said Michiko, when are you going to start painting again? You haven't touched a brush in months.

—I've been perfecting my drawing. I'm afraid to paint. Everyone thinks I'm nuts or some William Blake, a crazy man with visions in his head.

—But Angelique just sold one of your paintings for \$65,000. That's major. It should give you confidence.

—Yes, but I only received 45% of the sale price. Angelique gets 50% plus the 5% as part of our original contract.

—Christ, I hate that woman.

—She did rescue me. You were grateful for her assistance when I was immobilized by depression.

—Tell me, Francesco, does your friend Gringovitch have all these problems?

—No, but his dealer, Dan Sarras, has only one artist, Anatoly Gringovitch. There are no conflicts of interest, and Sarras is a tough

bastard. Elaine couldn't show my new paintings in the same gallery with her other artists. Sarras doesn't have that problem.

—So, as much as I hate Elaine, she screwed up royally. Rather than keep high quality and go with you, Elaine bottom fished with her lesser artists.

—Yes, but I make more money with Angelique. She sells to a wealthier clientele. It was dumb luck that Garth Whipple saw my painting in Elaine's gallery. As she said, "He came in out of the rain."

—Can't Angelique find you a gallery that will give you a straight 50% or more?

—Why, she's making a ton off my new paintings and still getting her 5% from the sales in Pairs at Aster Place.

—Francesco, the art world is more crooked than the music world.

—You got that right, sweetheart.

To be continued.

