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THE GO-BETWEEN

By Bonnie Schroeder



Illustration by Bradford JC Frederick

Nikki Framboise never lost sight of the front door to her art gallery, so she saw the two men come in. She recognized Cliff Cantrell, stock broker by day and art collector wannabe by night, but not his companion. Young, handsome and enthusiastic, Cantrell was a regular at openings, not just hers but the fancier ones as well. Nikki glanced at Tatiana and saw her take notice of the new arrivals. This was not good; distractions were unwelcome tonight.

Quickly abandoned by Cantrell, the other man made his way around the room under Nikki's casual scrutiny. Unlike many of the guests, he was actually trying to look at Tatiana's paintings. Damn it; now when Tatiana moved in for the kill, as she would at any minute, they'd have plenty to talk about. He seemed so interested in the work that for a minute Nikki thought he might be a legitimate collector, but she decided not; he looked neither wealthy nor confident.

He was a good-looking kid (since she'd turned 40, they all seemed like kids). A shade taller than Tatiana, who had to be at least five-foot-eight, with sandy brown hair that kept falling across his forehead. Repeatedly he raked it back with a swift, unconscious sweep of his left hand. A hand that did not bear a wedding ring, Nikki noticed.

He found the refreshments, pursing his lips at the lack of choices. Nikki had personally stocked the table with the best that Costco had to offer, which was all she could do for now. Her paltry divorce settlement just barely covered the lease on the gallery. In Manhattan, she'd run Michael Corbett's gallery, so she knew how it should be done. She just couldn't afford it. Yet.

But a few more artists like Tatiana could put her on the map. Tatiana was hot. Three of her paintings had already sold that evening, one to Stanley and Evelyn DeSantis. A first for Nikki. The DeSantises were serious collectors. Tatiana's painting might hang near Rauschenberg, or at least Ed Ruscha.

Nikki could smell money in the air tonight, and beyond that the even more intoxicating perfume of respect, for which she'd been striving ever since she opened her gallery just over a year ago. She knew her reputation among the better-known artists, the collectors, and the curators: an upstart with scant credentials and an anachronistic tendency to seek out and nurture unknown artists. The major-league gallery owners let the artists come to them; Nikki was still working toward that luxury.

But she knew talent when she saw it. She'd discovered Tatiana in a junior college art exhibit, and right away she knew: this was the real thing.

If only Tatiana were not so unstable. She could be delightfully charming, but she definitely had a dark side, days when she withdrew to her studio and turned off the phone. Or if Nikki succeeded in tracking her down, Tatiana would refuse to make eye contact, would respond in monosyllables or not at all. She'd wear the same tattered, filthy jeans and sweatshirt, her curly blond hair unwashed and uncombed. And then, like a butterfly, she'd emerge days later, freshly groomed, smiling, a new painting under way.

The girl was hungry for acceptance, Nikki could see that, and she'd been almost comically eager to stage this one-woman show, taking a childish delight in seeing her name in the front window, poring over the catalog of her work that Nikki had printed.

And when Tatiana took care of her appearance as she had tonight, she was quite beautiful. People were sometimes drawn to the woman first, then the work. And that hint of Russian ancestry, which Nikki sometimes suspected was fake. For all she knew Tatiana Kaminsky was really Betty Lou Johnson from Dennison, Iowa. But it didn't matter. Her paintings were selling, and Nikki's share of the proceeds would fund a better wine for

the next opening.

Sure enough, Tatiana had homed in on the kid who'd come in with Cantrell. Nikki saw them shake hands, heard her laugh, saw them huddle together in earnest discussion of Tatiana's largest and darkest work: a *mélange* of seemingly random colors clashing for attention on the canvas. However, as any good amateur astronomer knows, the best way to see a distant star through the telescope is not to look directly at it, but to stare into the darkness next to it, to approach the celestial body from the side. If one viewed Tatiana's canvas in that manner, all sorts of things emerged; the brush strokes formed patterns and shapes. Tombstones and dead tree limbs, body parts scattered on the highway. Nikki shuddered and looked away.

Time to mingle, to schmooze and flatter--and to stir up some more sales. Nikki sighed as she saw Trudy Zelnik, grotesquely dressed as usual, wave to her from across the room. Trudy's taste in art was not nearly as questionable as her fashion sense, and she had the money to indulge it, thanks to Ted Zelnik's thriving gastroenterology practice. Nikki waved back.

Just then she felt a hand on her waist and turned in time to keep Cliff Cantrell from kissing her neck. He recovered with a practiced ease and raised his glass in a toast.

"You've done it again, Niks. She's fabulous."

Nikki swallowed and touched Cantrell's arm, as lightly as possible.

"You like her work? Good. Maybe you'll get out your checkbook then. There are still a couple left in your price range."

Unlike Zelnik, who would pay an extravagant amount for a work of art after having whittled a few hundred dollars off the price, Cliff Cantrell was notorious for never having paid more than a thousand dollars. Some people, Nikki included, referred to him as "The Ninety-Nine Cents Store," and if he knew his nickname, he would probably have been pleased.

Cantrell didn't respond, so Nikki tried another tactic. "Who's your friend?" she asked, inclining her head toward the man talking to Tatiana.

"Him? Oh, that's Jack. Jack Morris. Works in our legal department. I told him this was a good place to meet women, and from the looks of it, I was right."

"Is he a collector?"

"Oooh, Niks. Down, girl! Give him time. He has plenty of money. And he just broke up with a woman he's been dating for ages--another securities lawyer. Imagine what their dinner-table talk must have been like! He's ready to kick up his heels a little bit. And he seems quite taken with your artist. Maybe he'll buy one of her paintings just to impress her."

"Very funny."

"I see Trudy summoning you, Niks. Has she picked anything yet?"

Nikki shook her head.

"The evening's young. She will. I can tell--see that little twitch her mouth makes? Get to work, Niks."

He blew her an air kiss and drifted off. Nikki threaded her way through the crowd toward Trudy Zelnik. While the DeSantises bought art out of love, Trudy bought it as an investment, and she was the Warren Buffett of the Los Angeles art world. She never paid full price, and never bought work from anyone hugely famous, but her instincts were infallible. When Zelnik bought an artist's work, it couldn't help but appreciate in value. Nikki sighed. It was going to be a long night.

After her brief conversation with Zelnik, Nikki sought out Tatiana, who was still immersed in conversation with Cantrell's friend. She touched Tatiana's shoulder gently, and leaned in close so she didn't have to raise her voice.

"Tania, can I borrow you for a few minutes? Trudy Zelnik is very interested in 'The Imposition,' she wants to talk to you about it."

Tatiana shook her head, and the merry jingle of her silver earrings contradicted the frown that marred her pretty face.

"I'm busy."

Nikki looked at the young man standing next to Tatiana. She made herself smile and extended her hand.

"Nikki Framboise," she said, drawing out the last name with a gentle French slurring of the last syllable.

"Jack Morris." His handshake was warm and firm, but he had that deer-in-the-headlights expression as he looked from Nikki to Tatiana and back. "I don't want to keep you from business," he said.

Nikki put a proprietary hand on Tatiana's arm. "It'll just take a few minutes. Then you can have her back." She smiled to show she meant it.

He nodded and held up his empty plastic glass. "I'll go get a refill then. Nice talking to you both."

Nikki watched him melt into the crowd as she increased the pressure of her hand. "We agreed that you wouldn't be difficult tonight."

"I'm not being difficult," Tatiana said through gritted teeth as Nikki steered her toward Trudy Zelnik. "Is it out of the question

for me to enjoy myself for a few minutes instead of peddling my work?"

"Make up your mind what you want, Tania. You can't have it both ways."

"Trudy's awful--she makes my skin crawl, the way she looks at me. Like it's *me* she wants to buy."

Nikki bit her lip to keep from smiling. "You're exaggerating. Just say a few pleasant words to her and then go back to flirting with your young man."

Tatiana's shoulders relaxed a little, but she glared at Nikki one last time. "All right. But you stay with us. And don't let her *touch* me."

Nikki released Tatiana and let her approach Trudy Zelnik under her own steam.

As usual, Zelnik carried a chunky clear plastic lunchbox in lieu of a purse. The cheap plastic look was echoed in the frame of her Coke-bottle eyeglasses--her idea of coordinating accessories.

"You have an amazing talent," Trudy said to Tatiana, who bobbed her head and murmured thanks for the praise. Nikki let out the breath she'd been holding.

"I was just telling Tania how captivated you were by 'Imposition'," Nikki said, pointing to a six-foot-high canvas with hard pastel rectangles of blue and yellow fighting for dominance.

Trudy giggled and nodded. "I love it." She clasped Tatiana's hands in hers before the girl could move away, and held them captive. Tatiana's annoyance reluctantly gave way. Nikki recognized the yearning in Tatiana's eyes, and her stomach did a little somersault.

"It would look so wonderful in my entryway," Trudy continued. "If only. . ." She gnawed on her lower lip and hunched her shoulders in a grotesque parody of a schoolgirl with a guilty confidence to share. Nikki tensed. *Don't do it. Not tonight.* Trudy's watery green eyes narrowed. "The colors." She shook her head. "I had my colors done last month, you know, and blue is wrong for me, just wrong. Do you have anything like this with green instead?"

Tatiana's jaw muscles clenched. "No," she replied in a dead-calm voice, "but perhaps I can go home and paint one for you. Would you like that?"

Trudy cocked her head, and to Nikki she bore an uncanny resemblance to the Zelnik's bug-eyed little yapping dog, which tormented people brave, ignorant or desperate enough to visit. "Would you do that? How much would it cost me?"

"Eight million dollars," Tatiana said, prying her hands from

Trudy's clutches. She gave Nikki an iceberg-melting glare, then turned and fled.

Cliff Cantrell's shadow fell across the space between Nikki and Trudy. His hands were on Nikki's shoulders before she could move, which was just as well. She was only just barely restraining the urge to slap the stupid smile from Trudy's face.

"Shitty move, Gertrude," he whispered, wagging his finger at Zelnik before he evaporated into the crowd.

"Well," Trudy whined, "I guess that didn't go over very well."

"Tatiana is very sensitive about her work," Nikki replied, forcing careful neutrality into every syllable.

"Isn't she though! You amaze me, Nikki, the way you're able to put up with these temperamental artists."

"It's my job," Nikki murmured. "I'm just the intermediary, trying to bring the artist and the collector together."

"You take your work very seriously," Trudy clucked. "Do you think she'll forgive us?"

Nikki shrugged and turned away in time to see Tatiana find Jack Morris, saw the heart-breaking pleasure on his face as Tatiana approached and started talking. Her mouth moved rapidly, and she emphasized her words with broad, dramatic swoops of her hands--probably telling him, in highly overstated fashion, the horror story of the cretin who had just insulted her. She saw Morris glance her way, then scowl at Trudy Zelnik before putting a sympathetic arm around Tatiana. They started toward the exit, and Nikki launched herself in their direction, catching up with them a few feet short of escape.

"Tania, don't forget your purse," she called out, as calmly as she could.

Tatiana stopped and turned, aggravation flaring from her like a hot red aura. She'd left her purse in Nikki's office, for safekeeping, although Nikki was certain it didn't contain much of value--except the keys to Tatiana's front door. She lived in a converted loft near downtown, and Nikki knew the double-deadbolted door was the only way in and out of the studio.

With a huge, dramatic sigh, Tatiana looked at Jack. "I'll be right back."

He kept his arm around her. "Maybe I should tag along this time?"

He didn't look quite as unsure of himself now, Nikki noticed. His eyes were a serious, contact-lens blue, aimed right at her. Nikki swallowed and got her voice back.

"I need a couple of minutes alone with Tania," she told him.

Tatiana shrugged, and he let go of her, but his eyes held on to Nikki's for a minute before he blinked.

"Okay," he said. I'll wait here."

Nikki led Tatiana to the back of the gallery and down the narrow passage to her office. Once inside, she shut the door and blocked it with her body.

"You can't leave yet, Tania."

Tatiana sat down at Nikki's desk and ran her long fingers over the papers scattered there. "You can handle things now. I'm tired. My feet hurt."

"I thought there was more to you than this. Running off with the first man who comes on to you."

"He's just giving me a ride home."

"Without your keys?"

Tatiana shrugged. "If I stay around here I'll only get you in trouble anyway."

"Tania, this is part of the deal. You know that."

Tatiana seized a Kleenex and wiped her eyes. "I didn't know how hard it would be."

Nikki suppressed an unexpected urge to put her arms around Tatiana and comfort her the way she would a child who had fallen and scraped her knee. But she held fast to her post. *Do your job, Nikki. Just do your job.*

"What's so hard? Being polite to people who're interested in you?"

"Not in me. In my work."

"Same thing."

"No, it's not."

Nikki felt rather than heard the tapping at the door. Now what? She flung it open and was again surprised by the clear innocence of Jack Morris' face.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

Nikki stood aside and let him in. "Fine. We're just finishing up a little business here. I was trying to persuade Tatiana to stay around a while longer."

Morris looked at Tatiana. "Maybe you should. I mean, isn't it expected?"

He looked uncertainly at Nikki, who nodded agreement.

"This is tough for her," Nikki explained. "Tatiana likes to consider herself above the dirty part of the business. That's where I come in. The go-between."

Morris nodded. He put his hands in his pockets and leaned back on his heels, clearly pondering a difficult decision.

"Look," he said finally, "would it help if I bought something? I could give you a deposit tonight and the rest by the end of--"

"No," Nikki said. "Not yet," she continued. "You're not familiar with Tania's work. It's not good to buy art on impulse."

Nikki dared not look at Tatiana, afraid she'd see triumph, or worse, on the girl's face. This was a dangerous time to be right, for either of them.

Morris laughed. "Why not? Isn't that what it's all about--when a painting makes you feel something?" He looked at Tatiana. "Isn't that what you you're trying for?"

Tatiana stood up and ran her hands through her hair, which shone like gold in the beams from the overhead track light. She picked up her purse. "I'm going home now. Since you clearly have so many offers for my work that you're turning them down, I may as well leave."

Nikki intercepted her. "What about Zelnik? She wants 'Imposition.' Are you still so angry that you won't let me sell it to her?"

That stopped her. "I thought she was joking," Tatiana said. The hunger on her face was implacable.

"It was a stupid joke. Look, she's a tasteless old woman with a lot of money to throw around. Do you want her to throw some your way, or not?"

Tatiana chewed on her thumbnail. "Do I have to talk to her again?"

"I'll try to run interference, but you need to stay here and be polite to everyone else."

"For how long?"

Nikki glanced at the clock. "Another hour. Then you can go."

Tatiana looked at Morris, and he nodded.

Tatiana took hold of his arm. "Protect me from Trudy?"

"You bet."

Nikki opened the door and ushered them out with an airy wave of her hand. She imagined young Mr. Morris was in for quite a night. He seemed like a decent fellow--not your average artist groupie, the kind who just wants proximity to talent in the

pathetic hope that some of it will rub off. He would be a good reality check for Tatiana.

She glanced at her watch and smiled. It was an unpretentious Tiffany timepiece, a gift from the days of being happily married. Long, long ago. Another hour. Two at the most. Good. She'd wring a check out of Trudy Zelnik, maybe rack up one more sale before closing. Tomorrow she'd have a nice breakfast, read the paper while she finished her coffee, and then set off into the morning sunlight to find her next young starving artist.