

Chapter 1

Charles Cieślak Makes An Extraordinary Discovery

April 1971 — Studio of The Artist Eugene Delacroix, 6 Rue de Furstenberg, Paris.

Just past midnight, Charles Cieślak knelt on the worn floorboards of Delacroix's old studio, determined to finish the job before dawn. The museum's grand opening was only a week away, and every hour counted.

Charles, a skilled woodworker, was hired to replace all the floors. Tonight, he only needed to rip out ten more of the mottled, paint-splattered boards before installing the beautiful new oak flooring he had purchased.

"They could have left the fan on," he grouched to himself as he rolled up the sleeves of his blue denim shirt, which was spotted with perspiration. He mopped his brow and stuffed his handkerchief into the back pocket of his work pants. He pushed a lock of his dark, damp hair away from his forehead and bent over to resume his work, feeling a twinge of pain in his 35-year-old back. He probably should have hired a "dogs-body" to help with the demolition, but he preferred to work alone. He had to admit that he was a perfectionist and that working with others was an annoying distraction.

Charles's transistor radio was his companion. He was listening to his favorite classical music station. The announcer was talking about the next piece. "In a few minutes, we will be re-broadcasting a piano performance by Garrick Ohlsson, the winner of the 8th International Chopin Competition, which was held in Warsaw just a few months ago. This is the first time that an American has won this prestigious award. The piece you're about to hear is Chopin's [Étude Op. 10, No. 1 in C major](#). Let's listen to this impressive performance."

He turned up the volume so that the magnificent sound of the piano filled the room. As the strength and beauty of the music flowed through him, his weariness vanished; he stopped working and moved his fingers over an imaginary piano keyboard in the air.

When the music stopped, the announcer returned with a gentle, respectful tone and said, "What a powerful composition written by the young Chopin; he was 20 years old when he wrote that study. If you liked this piece, you'll be able to hear more at the upcoming gala opening of the Delacroix Museum next week. The opening festivities will feature the art and music of two of the most famous artists of the 19th-century Romantic Era: Delacroix and Chopin. Take my word for it, you won't want to miss this event. The Delacroix Museum, Wednesday, April 25th at 6 PM. Tickets are now on sale at *Le Louvre*."

Charles made a mental note to get tickets for his parents, who lived nearby. He had grown up hearing stories about Chopin. His mother, a concert pianist, and his father, a history professor, had left Poland after World War II, when the Russians took control.

His thoughts were interrupted as he pried up the last two floorboards and spotted something wrapped in a cloth between the joists. He wasn't even certain what it was because it was covered in thick dust. In the back of his mind, he wondered if it could be a sketchbook or a hidden stash of money that Delacroix had forgotten about.

He put on his work gloves, dusted off the object, lifted it, and unwrapped the cloth, revealing a large, worn leather portfolio. His throat went dry. It smelled of age, of smoke, and attic air.

His hands shook as he opened the leather cover. Inside, he found a letter written on yellowed sheets of manuscript paper, typically used for musical scores. The handwriting in faded brown ink trembled across the page, almost as if the writer was in a hurry to jot everything down before something happened or someone discovered it. Behind the manuscript was a small journal with a cracked black leather cover.

He stopped, carefully set the portfolio on a chair, and stepped back to drink water and think. Then he carefully leafed through the manuscript pages to see if he could find the author's signature anywhere. This took a while because there were several pages, and some were stuck together; he knew he might rip one if he was not careful. Finally, on the last page, he found it...

Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin.

There was no way to describe the feelings now rushing through his body as he looked at that signature. Images of the composer appeared in his mind—the child prodigy who had played for kings, the young man on a stage playing a breathtaking sweep of musical notes, a tragic figure lying in bed struggling for his last breath.

He turned back to the first page, which was written in Polish. He had not spoken his native language in some time, but within a few minutes he had translated the first sentence...

To My Family:

Madame Sand broke the trusted bond of our relationship by publishing a novel entitled "Lucrezia Floriani", which is a thinly veiled story of our love affair...

Charles carefully closed the portfolio, re-wrapped it in the muslin cloth, and placed it back between the joists. He replaced the floorboard, quickly packed up his tools, and left.

As he drove home, his thoughts raced. "What should I do about this incredible find? Should I turn it over to the Delacroix museum, or would it be safer to involve the police? Would the newspapers be interested in the discovery and turn it into a feature story? Would the publicity bring me some desperately needed new customers? Would there be a reward?"

The next morning, Charles bumped into someone as he entered the studio carrying a stack of blankets and his toolbox. As he apologized, the man introduced himself: "*Bonjour*, I am Jan Nowak, a member of the board here at the Delacroix Museum."

Charles set down his pile and reached out to shake his hand, “Charles Cieślak, I am renovating the studio flooring.”

Jan, recognizing Charles’s last name and shared nationality, spoke to him in Polish — “*Ah, Jesteśmy rodakami!*”

Charles immediately felt a strong kinship with him and decided to share his discovery. “Jan, I have something to show you.”

He walked over to the floorboard, raised it, and took out the bundle. He carried it to a nearby work table and unwrapped it as he said, “I discovered this last night.”

Jan’s face paled as he leaned over to examine the manuscript. Charles turned the brittle pages until he reached the last one and tapped his finger next to the signature.

“*Mon Dieu!*” Jan whispered, looking up at Charles in amazement. Then he began reading the manuscript...

To My Family:

Madame Sand broke the trusted bond of our relationship by publishing a novel entitled "Lucrezia Floriani", which is a thinly veiled story of our love affair. The story contains many lies and has had a tragic effect on my life. My wish is that my legacy not be tainted by this cruel saga. In this document, I will reveal the truth about our liaison, hoping the world will someday hear it. I have entrusted this document to my close friend and confidante, Eugene Delacroix, and it is to be sent to you after my death.

I am sitting in Chaillot, hoping for Ludwika's arrival. The doctors have told me that I am dying of consumption, and there is nothing they can do. I have accepted this.

The novel has likely been published in Warsaw, and I can only apologize for the gossip you may have had to endure on my behalf. I should have told you about this long ago.

Madame Sand continues to publicly deny that this story is about us. She says, "This story is so little ours! It was the reverse of it. There were between us neither the same raptures nor the same sufferings."

Nothing could be further from the truth.

The story describes a middle-aged actress named Lucrezia Floriani and a young Prince named Karol who meet and fall in love. The Prince becomes deeply attached to Lucrezia and cannot foresee a day when he would ever leave her. He eventually becomes so possessive of Lucrezia that she dies of his suffocating jealousy.

George Sand was not the saint portrayed by Lucrezia, and I was not the sinner represented by Prince Karol. But I get ahead of myself.