

The Cooking Class in Budapest

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Chapter 1

Bernadette was jolted out of deep sleep into emergency mode alertness by a phone call from her son Henri.

“Wake up! We must talk right now! Papa just called from Paris and he is standing by for a response. You have received mail from Budapest. Papa opened it to see if it was important. The cover letter is from an attorney notifying you that someone died in Budapest and named you the executor and a recipient of the will. It requests you to come to Budapest immediately to settle the estate. The document attached to it is in a language Papa didn’t know. Should he take the document to his office to scan and email it to me?”

Bernadette tried to think of how to get the envelope to her in Seattle with the smallest paper trail and the least amount of people observing the documents. She knew her ex-husband wouldn’t be the one doing the scanning. He had a lackey for that. She didn’t want her ex-husband’s bank or Henri’s bank involved in scans and emails of any personal documents, particularly of unknown content.

Bernadette said, “Henri, please give your father my apologies for the inconvenience and thanks for letting us know. There’s no urgency to respond. It will be fine to put the envelope and its contents in a new envelope and send it to you in Seattle by regular post.”

Henri asked, “Do you know who it could be?”

Bernadette said, “I think so. My mother and I visited him several times when I was a young girl.”

Henri said, “So, the document is in Hungarian?”

“Yes. He spoke several languages beyond Hungarian and French. He taught me some Hungarian. I think I’ll be able to figure it out. If not, there are always those online translation programs.”

“Let me help you with the translation when it comes. Sounds like fun to me.”

After she hung up with Henri, she sank back into the bed linens, shaking her head at the unnecessary uproar her ex-husband could create. If he had dialed her number, she would not have been able to stop herself from saying, “You couldn’t wait until after dinner for this phone call? Since when do you open another person’s mail? You never thought of just forwarding it to Seattle?” That would have started quite a row. She was glad he called Henri. She had no desire to speak to her ex-husband and was relieved that Henri was willing to be the messenger on the few occasions that required a message in the six years since she had moved to Seattle from Paris. After a lifetime in Paris, to live in this remote corner of the United States was delightful in so many ways, including not dealing with Henri’s Papa.

Bernadette only knew one person in Budapest so it had to be that friend of her mother’s, an artist—her natural father—whom she’d seen three times in her whole life and not for 25 years. When Henri was a toddler she took him to Budapest to visit the artist. Upon being given a colored pencil and a pad of paper Henri enthusiastically drew a wild, dense circle in less than a minute. With a flourish he had proudly shown it to his mother and then presented it to the artist as a gift. Bernadette was as amused with Henri’s performance as she was the artist’s response. This scribble was a sign of his innate talent and future in art. She was glad to share her precious son, his grandson, with him once, but saw no reason to encourage any memories in Henri’s head then or later, so she’d never mentioned the artist to Henri.

Bernadette had learned from her mother to be discreet about her *liaisons* and visits to Budapest or any other place so that Bernadette's husband in Paris never knew exactly what the details of her trips were. Her mother had told her, as a young woman about to marry, "Never neglect your husband when you take a lover. That way there's never any hurt feelings or questions." That seemed cynical to Bernadette at the time when she was in love and felt lucky to be making a life with this man, but later, so smart. Most of her mother's tips had worked well for her. Bernadette wished she'd been even more circumspect and less honest with her husband. She might have had more money in her divorce settlement, even though she hadn't done too badly. Her ex-husband was unhappy with the final amount he had to pay to ensure Bernadette and Henri never got another penny from him. All three knew it was worth it overall as it meant he and Henri could be cordial with each other if necessary. The new young wife never had to deal with Henri or Bernadette. And if her ex-husband didn't phone Bernadette, they didn't fight about anything.

She spent some time during the day musing about what her inheritance might be. It would be perfect if it fit in a small envelope and could be mailed to the United States or wired directly to her bank. She sincerely hoped the request to travel was overly dramatic and that she did not have to go to Budapest to get it.

She thought a bit about Drew, who was beginning to be too charming and that was worrisome to her. She liked him more than she knew was prudent. Drew had such a reputation as a lady's man with a long line of women behind him who thought they'd be the one to capture his heart and instead had their heart broken. Bernadette's point of view had shifted from not wanting a man in her life toward it would be a good idea to have an affair with him just for the fun of having sex for the first time in at least six years. She thought she was strong enough to indulge herself without caring enough to be hurt. Isn't that what everyone thought in the beginning? Nevertheless, she did care more about the chance, the *small chance* of heartbreak, than the possibility of losing her part-time job at his art gallery. If the affair didn't go well, the job was history. She could always find a job at another gallery if she wanted to.

Being around Henri and his girlfriend Julia, who seemed so in love with each other, reminded her of the redemptive power of love. They made her chaste resistance to Drew's pursuit feel like she was a dull woman aging too quickly. She was only 55, and still had some looks left and caged *joie de vivre* dying to get out.

Drew was attractive, no question. Not just his handsome face or his striking white hair that seemed so distinguished; it was the leanness of his body that was especially appealing to her. She suspected he had good muscle tone under the impeccably tailored clothes even though she had no idea what or when he might workout. He'd never mentioned it. Maybe he exercised at home as she did every morning. She was curious to see his body and to feel it. So, there it was. She wanted to see him naked, that's how far she had come in her thinking.

Another thing about Drew she found attractive was that his obsession with art and his art gallery didn't leave much room for other interests. He was focused and didn't waste his time with sports or television or the Internet. Bernadette liked to think she didn't waste her time but she read novels now instead of serious art publications. She felt far away from her academic life in Paris where as a professor of art history at the Sorbonne she had stayed up to date on everything in the art world essential to her teaching, writing and curating.

Life in Seattle was uncomplicated with no stress. Teaching French at Alliance Française required little preparation and presented a small stage for her dramatic abilities. It was fun entertaining the mostly middle-aged students who were easily impressed with her wit and knowledge. The art and architecture tours of Seattle she led for European tourists in need of a guide who spoke their language were fun too. She enjoyed the company of Europeans and discussing culture. Speaking French, Spanish, German and Italian, as well as English, made it easy for her to

accommodate people from many countries. Selling art, something she'd never done before, turned out to be a good fit for her skill set. She brought the Europeans to Drew's gallery after the city tours. They were usually charmed by the region and the perspective of the contemporary artists he exhibited. The value of the art from unknown artists far away from Europe was compelling.

Drew had initially hired her to help with sales for a special Basque art exhibit more than a year ago. Her friend Eva had been the mastermind of that sales position to create a job in art for Bernadette. Eva was a resourceful friend. It had been a slightly dishonest proposition, as Eva had suggested Bernadette tell Drew she already had several galleries under contract where she brought European visitors, although Drew's gallery was the first. When she proved to be a success at selling his art, she did sign on with a few other galleries, so the premise was now true. It was also Eva's idea that Bernadette bring Henri with her when she pitched Drew the concept. Eva said Drew's assistant, Julia, was an attractive artist about the same age as Henri and thought there was a possibility of chemistry between them. Eva had been right about that too. Henri was immediately interested and successfully pursued Julia into moving in with him a few months later. Drew was so pleased with Bernadette's sales ability he now called her to work exhibition openings or whenever he thought the gallery would be too busy for him and Julia to handle. Selling art was more lucrative than teaching or touring and her bank account balance reflected her new line of business.

Bernadette and Drew had finished the hand-made gnocchi with pesto sauce at Ristorante Machiavelli on Capitol Hill and most of a bottle of *Nero de Avola*, which was a little more than she usually drank, so she was feeling quite relaxed. He said Eva had told him about this wine she considered a great value and since Eva wasn't value-oriented, that made it special and worth trying. The gnocchi here was her favorite in Seattle. The pesto sauce was bright and spicy with basil and garlic. Bernadette was feeling warm toward Drew after a pleasant evening together and they were closer to her home than they usually were in downtown restaurants. Bernadette considered her options. Should she let him inside for the first time or send him on his way? She had visited several times in his apartment, which was appointed with good furniture and art. He let her know he was interested but had not forced himself on her. She appreciated that style of seduction. It showed respect for her. If she let him inside tonight did that mean she was letting him into her bed as well?

Maybe this was a good night to introduce a new facet into her small world, a virile man who seemed fascinated with her and was intelligent enough not to rush her. She wondered if this was his usual gambit with women or one he created for her? It might be just for her. She smiled at that thought and looked at him across the table.

Drew said, "I'm glad you're enjoying yourself."

"Oh, pardon me if I've been rude."

Drew said, "No, you haven't been rude at all. It's been entertaining watching your face. I honestly thought for a moment you were feeling amorous toward me and then you switched gears." He looked intently into her eyes with a small smile that might be ironic or teasing.

"Well, you are, as you know, an attractive package. One can speculate about unwrapping the package. That's expected by the person who put the package together right? Wouldn't you be disappointed if there was no speculation? I would be."

"To know that you are speculating about me is irresistible. Tell me more."

She rolled her eyes and said, "You already know enough."

"More, please! I want to know a little more." He took her hands in his and held her gaze.

"This is too fascinating to change the subject."

Bernadette made up her mind then. "As a man said to me not too long ago, would you like to see my private collection?" She looked slyly at him.

"Absolutely. Let's not delay another minute."

Drew parked his car in front of the turn of the century three-story house on 18th Avenue East, where she rented the apartment on the first floor, and said, "Thanks for inviting me. It means a lot as you told me you don't let anyone in your house." He was sincere, not glib.

Bernadette just nodded at him and acknowledged to herself she had taken a leap and hoped she made a safe landing.

Drew stepped inside the front door after her and stopped still except for his eyes going left to right and up and down at the art hung gallery style floor to ceiling on one large wall.

He walked forward to look more closely. "Museum quality? These can't be real. Are they?" He turned to look at her for her answer.

She shook her head yes, "They are real." She locked the door and stood by it while he resumed looking. After a few minutes, she sat on the couch and watched him. He methodically looked from a short distance and then approached to try to read the signatures, occasionally gasping and then moving back a few feet. He finally sat down near her on the couch seemingly out of breath and looking at his hands. She said nothing, waiting for him to find his words.

"Manet, Monet, Cezanne, all recognizable as the work of the artists, but these are paintings I've never seen before in books or museums. Others I have no idea who they are. How can it be I've never heard of them? I'm flabbergasted. You've got millions of dollars in art here with no security system. Are you crazy?"

Bernadette smiled at him and nodded her head. "Yes, I know it's a lot to absorb in a few minutes. Millions if I sold it. But I'm not ever selling it and Henri will never sell it. This is a private collection that will always be private. It's existed for generations and it is our job to keep it safe. The big names you recognize and many of the lesser-known were purchased for pennies before the First and Second World Wars by my great grandmother and my grandmother. What you don't recognize, my mother and I bought over time. Those artists aren't so well known, but as you noticed right away, they are high quality."

"Tomorrow, first thing, I'll help you select a security system."

Bernadette said, "If no one knows it's here, I don't need a security system. If signs go up in the window and by the front door advertising a security system, then thieves will get curious about what could be valuable inside this old humble house."

"Is it all documented?"

She said, "Yes. Thoroughly cataloged on paper, computer disc and in film."

"Bernadette, no wonder you don't let anyone in your house. I thought it was to keep all the men at bay who would like to know you better."

"Both are good reasons. I value my privacy. I'm sure you will respect that and not mention my collection to anyone." She looked at him expectantly. He nodded in agreement.

She said, "May I offer you coffee or tea?"

"Do you have anything stronger?" he said.

With a snifter of Armagnac in his hand, Drew relaxed next to her on the couch and seemed to regain his usual affable composure. "Let's get back to the topic that brought me here tonight, your bewitching mind and body. Tell me again about speculating on unwrapping the package."

She looked thoughtful. "Maybe I've revealed enough for one evening."

"Oh, no. I'm in excellent health. I can take another shock."

Bernadette said, "I've enjoyed doing things with you in the last few months. I don't know if I'm ready to change everything. It could ruin what we have."

Drew said, "I highly doubt that. I think it will enhance everything, but I respect your feelings."

"Thank you. That means a lot. Now that you've seen the front gallery, I might as well give you a tour of my back gallery and then you will know about all the art I have."

She led him through the living room down a hall and into a bedroom where she turned on a light by the door that cast a soft glow into the room. The silk quilt on the bed glimmered. Four large square pillows in fancy cases looked inviting for reading in bed with antique lamps on the bedside tables. Canvases large and small covered the walls. He seemed to be taking in the overview of the room and then the details one at a time. She was pleased he was taking it as seriously as she thought he would. He should know about this part of her and her art before anything went any further.

While he looked at the art Bernadette looked at her bedroom. It was luxe and cozy at the same time, spacious with turn-of-the-century proportions and ceiling height. An overstuffed chair and ottoman with a table and a standing reading lamp occupied one corner. She spent a lot of time reading in that chair or the bed. The only other furniture was a low French chest of drawers.

Bernadette leaned against the doorway and watched him absorb the collection. There was a range of styles but the subject of each was a nude woman with dark hair. Sensual to stark, joyous to despair, with a variety of poses, the collection could have been a treatise on love, relationships, or a marriage that hadn't ended well.

Drew studied the large canvases first and then the smaller ones. He stood back to get the impact of the groupings in style and tone. He finally joined her in the doorway and held her hand.

"You are a good model. Were you a professional?"

Bernadette said, "Depends on who you ask. As an *avant-garde* art history student with an enormous ego, I considered it an essential experience in understanding the creative process. I posed for money. I also posed for love. You know how that is," she said.

"Yes, I do. It's sort of unusual though to get to keep the painting."

"A few of these are only studies and were farewell gifts from the artists when they knew I was leaving them. Another didn't sell as quickly as hoped for and I got a discounted price. The best one I purchased myself from the original buyers some years later who were happy to think their acquisition had appreciated so quickly. Whenever I had money to invest, I'd take a look at what was available," she said. "I wasn't trying to remove any traces of my modeling; I was building a special interest collection with a narrative about good choices and bad choices."

"This collection appears to tell the story of your whole life from innocence to cynicism or love to despair. This is a powerful story arc to deal with daily. Why do you choose to display it this way instead of breaking it up into smaller vignettes?"

Bernadette said, "This is what I like about you. You understand exactly what it is. Now you know I love to torture myself with all the mistakes I've made."

Drew said, "The angst on that side of the room seems so recent. Is the artist local?"

"Yes."

He persisted by saying, "Anyone I know?"

Bernadette looked down and contemplated what would be the value in telling the truth compared to withholding it. She was starting to feel naked in this conversation, in an uncomfortable way. Why not be honest? How could it hurt her at this point and with this person that she respected?

"Those are self-portraits."

Drew immediately went back across the room to study the brush strokes and details. He turned around to look at her when he said, "I'm impressed. They are quite good in every way. I never thought about you being an artist. This is very exciting for me."

She said, "It's a hobby that I find equally pleasing and frustrating."

He approached her and took her hand holding it close to his chest. He said, "As your friend who wants to be more than that, I'd like to help you rehang the collection so it's not such a harsh

judgment. Everybody makes mistakes. Let me help you retell the story. Let's make the big, warm and sensuous canvas the centerpiece with these four grouped around it. That's joyful and inspirational. Move that one over here and this one to another room. It could be a stand-alone or tie it into a similar emotion of another subject."

Bernadette appreciated his enthusiasm and admired his typical energy for a new project at this time of night. She said, "Thank you. That's a great idea but you have to go to work tomorrow. It's a good time to say good night."

Drew said, "It's not that late. If you don't want me to stay or rehang the art why don't you come home with me and put another spin on the evening? It's been fascinating. I've learned so much about you and it would be sad to lose the feeling of connection."

She said, "Thank you, but I think it's enough about me for one day."

He kissed her gently but firmly still holding her hand against his chest. He kissed her neck below her ear pausing to inhale her scent and enjoy his lips on her skin. She didn't respond in any way. He raised her hand to his lips and looked earnestly into her eyes.

"Are you sure I can't change your mind?" he said.

Bernadette barely shook her head no.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Okay, you're a complex woman. I will leave you to your torture and hope to speak to you tomorrow."