

Bonus Chapter

After Visiting The Golden Manuscripts : Nathan

Kurt returns to Munich soon after we leave the church museum. Clarissa and I check into a bed-and-breakfast inn where I've reserved rooms. She's tired and needs rest. She goes to her room and I, to mine.

After a bathroom visit, I step out for a walk around the town which Kurt says, is about a thousand years old. It's well-preserved and straight out of a storybook, lucky to have escaped Allied bombs towards the end of the war. Some recent reconstruction is evident, but you have to look closer to see it. A landscape of half-timbered buildings along winding, narrow streets of cobbled stones seems uniquely European. I know nothing like it back home.

In early evening, I meet Clarissa in the spacious reception room furnished with a long sofa and several scattered armchairs. She has changed into a light black sweater and a simple silky blue dress that clings to her body. She has freed her long lush dark hair from the large clasp she often uses to twist it and imprison it in place at the back of her head.

I catch my breath at the sight of her. She seems unaware of her effect on others, especially men. Kurt has always regarded her with admiring eyes.

My hand reaches out to touch her, but I catch myself and draw it back. In my mind's eye, her warm soft skin turns my touch into a long caress before I gather her in my arms, and kiss her.

"Shall we go?" She says, yanking me back to reality.

I nod, speechless, wrenching my gaze away.

We choose a small restaurant about a block from the inn that's not bustling with diners, most of whom are seated at tables outside. At a quarter before 8 pm, it's still bright and pleasantly warm. We ask the waiter for an outside table.

Sitting across from each other awaiting our order, I gaze directly into Clarissa's eyes, hoping she doesn't turn her head sideways like she's habitually done. She returns my gaze. I'm disconcerted for a moment, and mesmerized by eyes that captivated me the first time I met her. Her gaze is unflinching, and it's me who blinks, though I don't avert my eyes. She speaks to me with her eyes, and while I can't decipher what she's saying, I'm seized by an acute sense that something has changed between us.

She leans forward and rests her right hand on the table. I could reach over and grasp it. But again, I control myself. Instead, I say, "What was it like, touching these manuscripts, turning their pages, gazing for as long as you liked at the illuminations, even smelling them?"

She breaks into a smile, face animating and big gray eyes glistening. She gives me a long, thoughtful answer. Perusing the centuries-old illuminated manuscripts has humbled, mystified, and invigorated her. It changed her perspective on her thesis project. And selfishly, I hope she acknowledges and appreciates that it's me who made it possible for her to examine the originals.

Like most men, I'm a sucker for beauty, though I'm always cognizant of a line from Shakespeare "Beauty is bought by judgment of the eye." Clarissa is beautiful but it's not the only reason I fell in love with her. She's smart—that's obvious right away—and has

convictions she won't hesitate to assert when she needs to. To me, those attributes are essential. But a more compelling reason is she intrigues me. I saw a deep inner world in her eyes the first time we met that aroused a desire in me to plumb it, to find out the person she's shielding from other people's gaze.

My previous amorous liaisons have been with three young women attuned to their bodies and their needs. The first one was a French girl I met on a trip to Europe while I was in medical school. She's the woman whose then boyfriend introduced me to kir and absinthe. The next day, she turned up at the hotel where I was staying. We had an affair that lasted six months, two via long-distance and four when she came over to intern at a film studio in Los Angeles. The other two women, I can't remember much of.

After our tour in Europe, I parted ways with both Clarissa and Arthur, and we didn't see each other again. But I never ceased hoping to see her again, and wondering how I could connect with her. Arthur would have been a logical and easy conduit if he had not been angry with me and cut off all communications. Besides, I was in the midst of my own personal crisis about a full-time career in medicine. Then the unexpected came: she called me on that fateful day in November last year.

I've been granted another chance to get to know her better, to plumb that depth I saw in her eyes. It has taken awhile, this adventure that has caught me in a web from which I haven't struggled to extricate myself. Through a closer sharper lens, my Clarissa—the one she tries to guard, but who emerged out of my imaginings as I watched her—is introspective, sensitive, and vulnerable. She's still a bit of a puzzle even to herself. I want to be there as she continues to unfold, and yes, though she might think it's sexist, she awakens in me that primal instinct to protect her.

Clarissa pauses midsentence as the waiter approaches with a tray of dishes and drinks. When we're alone again, she finishes explaining

her plans for her thesis before she picks up her fork and starts to eat. I tear my gaze away from her again.

We say very little as we eat, as if we just want to get over this necessary chore of feeding our bodies. The food is fresh, well-prepared and worth savoring, but there's an air of delicious tension between us. Tension dense with meaning that neither of us can or want to articulate. Not now. Not as we sit among strangers in this very public place. But I can't wait. I'm itching to move on. My mind buzzes with questions demanding answers—what has changed? And what does this electric silence between us mean? I know what I'm hoping for, but Clarissa's wishes are still vague to me.

We're mostly silent, as well, as we stroll back to the inn. It's just past nine, and dusk has begun to descend on the town. At the inn, I follow Clarissa to her room, passed my own. I expected her to point out that I just missed my room. But she doesn't, and I'm relieved.

We stop at the door to her room. She unlocks it and for a few uncertain seconds, she stands still. Slowly, she turns to face me.

She looks up at me, her eyes shining. She's standing so close that I wonder if she can feel my thumping heart. In a voice soft, sweet, and shy, she thanks me for everything I've done for her the past year.

I'm unaccustomed to this side of her. I've often sensed in her an undertone of defiance, an instinctive need to keep her distance. Tonight, I'd like to believe I detected a note of surrender, a yielding to what is there between us. But always circumspect particularly since I'm not sure what this moment holds for me, I say, "I'm your friend, Clarissa. I've been your friend since Paris. I'll be here for you for as long as you want me to be."

She blinks a few times, as if she's trying to hold back tears. She steps closer. What she does next is beyond what I have imagined whenever she invaded my thoughts. She pulls my head towards her, and presses her lips to mine. It's not a casual kiss of gratitude, but one of urgency and desire, splintering my thin armor, and releasing

a flood of emotions, thoughts, and hopes pent up for too long. As it rushes to every inch of me, I enclose her in my arms and kiss her back.

She says, her lips brushing mine, "I love you, Nathan."

I freeze for an instant, raise my face heavenward as my heart soars and shouts "Hallelujah!" I'm not a big believer, but this moment to me is one for exultation, for a song of joy.

I push the door open with my foot, pull her into the room, and slam the door shut.

"I've loved you since Paris." I murmur against her open mouth.

For some minutes, we can't stop kissing. And desire is never far behind love that has struggled to express itself for so long. I whisper, "I want to make love to you."

"I've wanted you to," she murmurs, her voice quivering. She pulls me toward the bed. I drop down to it on top of her.

It surprises me to discover she's a virgin. But my male ego can't help being flattered. I'm also surprised that, as burning as my desire is for her, I take my time, hold myself back until she's ready and eager to receive me.

Making love to Clarissa is ... I'm at a loss for words. But I learn love transforms desire into something transcendent—I can't think of a better way to say it. And we linger, caressing and wallowing in the afterglow before we finally fall asleep.

Hours later, she lies with her back to me, my arms around her. She stirs, rousing me from a sensuous dream. She turns around. Her eyes are closed as she turns her face up to mine. I kiss her and make love to her again.

In the morning, I ask her how many more days she has left on vacation.

"At least a week."

"Let's not go home yet. Let's go to Paris for a few days."

"Are you serious? Don't you have clinic duties?"

“I can call a friend I’ve covered for a couple of times. If he’s free, I’m sure he’ll agree. I’d like us to go back to the place where I first met you. When I so wanted to experience Paris with you, while you went off on your own to paint.”

Clarissa graces my lips with the lightest kiss. “You and Arthur were having so much fun together, and you didn’t need me. But I think I also fell in love with you in Paris.”

This morning before going to the inn dining room for breakfast, I change our flight schedule. We’re going to Paris for five days.

She emails Arthur: she isn’t going home yet, and he doesn’t have to pick her up at the airport today or thereafter. But she doesn’t disclose the reason. To me, she says, “I want us to tell him together.”