

## CHAPTER 36

### **Transylvania. The house of George Rodrigul in Sibiu. Early November, 1452.**

Dracula and Stephen managed to find shelter in Sibiu. They stayed with the brother of his father's most trusted friend. George Rodrigul was a good man and never one to get involved in the politics of the day. He was happy to allow the young men to stay. No one would bother them while they were with him. He was a wealthy boyar, who had chosen a different career to his brother. A respected financier, both sides of the divide in the country looked upon him as a friend.

The two cousins were aware of the ill feeling towards them in the city. They had to exercise great caution any time they left the safety of his home. The lessons learned in Brasov stayed with them.

They spent much of their time canvassing the support of friendly boyars. But they also found time for recreation. Two beautiful peasant girls in the nearby village of Gioagiu had won their hearts. Every evening they rode there to see them.

Buzan had been in Sibiu for more than a week now. His people went to each of the taverns in the city. It was their task to gather as much information about his target as they could. They bought ale for any man who would talk about Dracula. Buzan wanted to know every last detail of his life there. By the end of that week he knew in depth Dracula's routines.

The agent turned up dead. His body floated in a fountain in Brasov with his throat cut. The tavern on the outskirts of the city burned to the ground. Buzan knew if one man could find him then so could his enemies. For that reason he removed any trace of his ever being there.

Buzan chose the second week of November for the hit. He and his Saxon sidekick tailed their target out of the city. They rode behind at a safe distance when the cousins set off for Gioagiu.

Dracula had no idea they were tailing him. These days his head remained in the clouds. Milia seemed to him like a dream come true. The way he felt when he saw her told him she was the one for him.

"You look like a man in love," Stephen smiled, though not poking fun at him.

"I think you may be right. It is a strange, but wonderful feeling I have inside."

"Have you told her yet?"

"No. I dare not."

"Why? Is that a faint heart that beats inside your breast?"

"I might frighten her away. Then what would I do?"

"I hardly think so, Vlad. Milia adores you. Of that there can be no doubt."

He thought about it a moment. "How I hope you are right."

"Of course I am. Romina told me so."

Dracula's heart missed several beats. His tongue tied, as he tried to speak. "She did?" he blurted. "What else did she say?"

Stephen laughed out loud. "You really are smitten."

Dracula turned red-faced and quiet.

Stephen saw this. "I am sorry, cousin," he said. "I did not mean to poke fun. It is good to see you happy."

"It feels good," came a grunted reply.

"Then let us hope it lasts."

"It will. I am sure of it."

“Then you should tell her how you feel.”

“I shall some time.”

“A faint heart never won a fair maiden. Not that it applies to you.”

“What do you mean?” Dracula asked, puzzled.

“You have already won the maiden.”

They rode on in silence. Dracula’s mind drifted back to the day he met Milia. He and Stephen had come to Gioagiu to visit the swordsmith there. Word had it that he was better than any in Sibiu.

Stephen hoped to buy a new and better sword. Dracula just went along with him. He made it clear nothing in the world could better the Fier Negru. On top of that he doubted he could ever wield another.

They had a good visit. Stephen hired the smith to fashion him a new blade. Dracula purchased a pair of daggers that caught his eye. He had to concede he had never seen any finer.

He tied one to his thigh and the other to his left wrist. Stephen stepped aside to negotiate a price for his new sword. At the same time Dracula practised with the blades to grow familiar with them.

“You do that like a true expert,” the smith pointed out.

“That is because he is,” Stephen grinned.

The smith nodded. “They suit you well, my Lord. I pray you find them a worthy purchase.”

They left soon after.

“I am so hungry I could eat a horse,” Stephen said.

“The market is over there,” Dracula pointed out. His eyes fell on the crowd of people on the piata. “Why not go and buy some bread?”

“That is a good idea,” he agreed. “I think I shall.”

They walked to where the stalls stood in a line. Dracula soon realised that his cousin was not at his side. He turned to see him a little further back. Stephen was peering over the heads of the village folk.

“What are you doing? The bread is on sale this way.”

Stephen did not answer. He looked at his cousin and motioned with his hand for Dracula to join him. He did, keen to see what had caught his eye. “What is it?”

Stephen put a finger to his lips. “Look over there,” he whispered.

Dracula looked, but just saw an array of stalls. “I see honest folk spending the little coin they have.”

“No,” Stephen said, a little annoyed. “Look there.”

Dracula followed the line of his finger. It was then he saw them. He stopped for a moment to eye up the two girls selling their baskets. “Will you ever change?” he sighed.

Stephen looked at him and laughed. “Not while I can still draw breath. Come on! Let us go and say hello.”

“Wait!” Dracula shouted after him, not as keen to go.

Stephen ignored him and barged his way through the crowd. He stopped on the stall of a fruit vendor. His eyes still remained glued to the girls selling the baskets on the next stall.

“Are you looking to buy some fruit?” the vendor asked him.

Stephen gave the man a blank look, his mind on the two girls.

“I have apples, pears and plums fresh in this morning. Two for the price of one.”

“No,” Stephen blurted. “But thank you.”

Dracula stood beside him. When the fruit vendor saw him he offered the same deal. The young prince smiled and bought two of the apples. He then handed one to his cousin and moved away from the stall.

Stephen bit into his apple and stepped aside. He grabbed Dracula by the arm and led him to the stall the girls worked. "Good day," he smiled at the taller of the two.

"Good day, sir," she smiled. "Are you looking to buy a basket?"

"Yes," he nodded. "I am indeed."

The shorter and younger of the two girls laughed. "No you are not."

"Why else would I be here if not to purchase one of your fine creations?"

"I do wonder," she said, trying not to laugh at him.

"How much are they?"

"It depends which you want."

"Well, quote me a figure."

"These ones here are fifty ban. But those there are a whole ducat."

Stephen put a hand to his mouth. "A whole ducat you say?" He turned to his cousin. "What do you think?"

Dracula sighed out loud and looked up to the sky.

"Does your friend have a tongue?"

"He does," Stephen grinned, "the last I knew."

"I have yet to see him speak," she said, eyeing Dracula coyly.

"It would need to be of the finest quality," he mused. "For me to part with a whole ducat."

"We sell the best baskets for many a mile," her sister remarked.

"I must agree," Stephen nodded. "I do not think I have seen any as fine before."

"Who is the master craftsman?" Dracula asked. "I do not see him about."

"You are looking to offend me, sir?" the younger girl said.

Stephen was quick to jump to his defence, but he did not want to lose favour with the girls. "My cousin is a little slow. You must forgive him. He did not realise it was your hand that crafted them."

"You made them?" Dracula asked, raising an eyebrow.

"My sister and I. Yes."

"Where did you learn such a noble trade? And with such fine quality?"

"It was our father's business. He taught us all we know."

"Then he did it well. I must commend him."

"What are your names?" Stephen cut in.

"What sort of a gentleman would ask a girl her name? And so soon on meeting her?" the elder sister asked.

"He is clearly a rogue of sorts," the other said.

"It is not every day a man has such good fortune. To encounter not one, but two, so kind and fair of face."

"Oh, you are quite the charmer."

An old lady stepped between the two cousins. "You have to be careful of those two," she said, pointing to the girls.

"Why is that?" Dracula asked her.

"They make the finest baskets in all the land," she said with a toothless grin. "If you buy one, you will come back for another."

"Surely if the baskets are of such quality then another would not be required?"

"You have much to learn, young sir," the old lady said.

"I thank you for the advice," he bowed.

The old lady hobbled off with a chuckle. She left Dracula and the younger girl gazing at each other.

“Well?” the elder sister asked. “Are you going to buy a basket or not? You are affecting our custom by standing there.”

“If you tell me your name I will buy one,” Stephen grinned.

The sisters looked at each other and laughed. “If you buy one I might tell you my name,” the elder girl teased.

He delved in his pockets for the ducat he needed. His face turned red, as he looked at her, unable to produce one.

She laughed at him again. “You dress like a noble and yet you have no money?”

“Help me here, cousin.”

Dracula reached for his money pouch. “A ducat you say?”

“Yes,” the girl nodded. “One whole ducat.”

He tossed the coin to her, which she caught in both hands. She studied it for a moment. “It bears the head of Vlad Dracul. I have not seen one for some time.”

“They will soon be gone,” her sister commented.

Stephen looked to his cousin. He noticed a slight change in his mood. Quickly, he changed the subject. “So? My basket? And your name?”

The girl handed him one of her finer baskets. “I said I might tell you my name.”

He sighed for her to hear. “Well, you cannot hold it against me for trying.”

“My name is Romina,” she said. “What is yours?”

“I am Stephen,” he grinned. “And this is Vlad.”

Dracula bowed to acknowledge the fact. He looked to the younger sister in the hope that she might offer hers.

The girl’s face turned a light shade of red. “You want my name too?”

He nodded. “It is only fair.”

“Very well. I will make you a promise.”

“And that is?”

“Come again on the morrow and visit me. Then I will tell you my name.”

“The morrow it is then.”

He bowed to the girls and dragged Stephen away. They walked back to the smith’s where they had left their horses in his care.

“What am I going to do with this basket?”

Dracula saw a beggar sat on the corner. He did not like vagrants, but in this moment the old man suited his purpose. “Give it to him. I am sure he has a greater need for it than you.”

Stephen handed it to the old man before they rode off. “I see you took a fancy to the younger sister?”

“I like her, yes.”

“She likes you too.”

“Who knows?”

“Well she has invited you back. Will you return?”

“Of course.”

Stephen laughed out loud. “You are no different than I.”

The cousins returned again the next day. The younger sister gave her name as Milia. She and Dracula grew close in a very short time. At the same time Stephen rode with him each day to see Romina.

Dracula wanted now to tell Milia of his true feelings. He had fallen for her in a big way. Stephen seemed to think it a good idea. They stopped at the house the two

girls owned. It stood apart from the others at the start of the village. With its pretty gardens their home hinted that they enjoyed a good living.

Buzan and his man tailed them there. They arrived in the village a few minutes later. There they saw the horses of the two cousins tied in the usual place. Buzan did not foresee too many problems in getting the job done.

The girls were thrilled to see their lovers. The two couples paired off almost at once.

“Have you missed me?” Milia asked Dracula. She helped him out of his clothes the moment they were alone.

“Oh, let me think,” he teased, a wry grin across his face.

She stood up on her toes and kissed him. He was not the tallest, but stood six inches over her. To her lover she was perfect in every way. Her long black hair flowed all the way down her back. It highlighted her large brown eyes and smooth olive skin. She had Italian blood and it showed.

Milia slid her light dress up over her shoulders. It fell to the floor so that she stood naked before him. His heart skipped several beats. She was the image of beauty, not a blemish on her skin. He thought that God must have made her Himself, a true labour of love. When she flashed her dazzling smile it melted him.

He gazed at her breasts. She may have been slight in stature, but they were perfectly rounded and full. Romina shared the same build. It led him to think they must both take after their mother.

Her brown nipples stood firm and erect. He ached to taste them. His eyes moved down along her slender thighs. He gazed at them and then her tiny feet. She stepped towards him, her arms outstretched.

He kissed her small hands and stroked her arms when she lay down. Her daintiness held such appeal for him. They kissed with real passion, stroking and touching each other. He grew hard in her hands, bringing a smile to her face.

“You have missed me.”

Her smile electrified him. His breath caught again in his throat when he kissed her lightly on the lips. In that moment he knew he was completely in love with her. He had tried to fight it, but could deny his feelings no longer. All that she was consumed his whole being.

“Do you love me?” she whispered.

It was as if she could read his thoughts. He looked deep into her eyes, almost afraid to speak the truth. But with her, there was no way he could avoid it.

He swallowed hard. “Yes,” he managed. “I do love you.”

She rolled onto her back for him to climb on top of her. He parted her thighs with his and touched against her opening. A quiet gasp escaped her mouth. She cradled his face in her hands and kissed him again. Her tongue slowly traced a line across his lips.

One thing worried her. “What will happen if I take with child?”

He had made no secret of who he was. She was only too aware that he was of royal stock and her just the lowly daughter of a weaver.

“Then I will marry you,” he smiled. “And make ten more.”

“You would marry me?”

“Yes, my love. I could never deny my heart.”

“And if I do not take with child? Would you marry me then?”

“Yes, my Milia. I could never be happy without you.”

Her chest heaved with the butterflies in her stomach. They prevented her from drawing a full breath. She wrapped her arms tightly around his neck. “I am in

Heaven,” she said, letting out a happy sigh. “I never believed I would find a love the same as my parents shared.”

“Nor I,” he said.

“I am about to come into season. That is why I ask. I would want to die if I took with child and you left me.”

He stroked her face gently. “Oh, my sweet baby. I will never leave you.”

They made slow and tender love. His feelings were so strong he was afraid he would burst. When they came at the same time, it was intense and powerful.

“Oh, my God,” she sighed when they lay on their backs beside each other. “That was the best it has ever been.”

He did not answer. His body tingled from head to toe. He closed his eyes so that he could savour the moment.

She turned on her side to face him. Her long hair fell down over her breasts. She twirled his between her fingers. From the day they had met she liked that it was almost as long as hers. “I so love long hair in a man,” she whispered. “I love you.”

“Then when I rule again, I shall have every man in the land cut his hair short.”

She laughed. “Yes. You do that. But keep yours as it is. I will only ever have eyes for you anyway.”

“And I you.”

“What? You will have no mistresses?”

“Not a single one,” he vowed. “I can only ever want you.”

“Listen,” she said, putting a finger to his lips.

He moved her hand away. “What?”

“It is raining.”

They looked to the window to see the heavy rain outside. The house was one of the few in the village to have a second floor. He admired the design of the shuttered windows. It told him her father made a very good living before he died.

“I love the smell of the rain,” she said, getting up from the bed.

She tiptoed over to it and opened the shutters wide. The cool night air caused the drapes to flutter. Milia closed her eyes and leaned with both hands against the pane. She loved to feel the cool air against her skin. “Can you smell it?” she asked, closing her mouth to take deep breaths through her nose.

“Turn around,” he asked her softly. “I want to look at you.”

She turned around with hands on hips, swaying coyly from side to side.

“My God, but you are beautiful,” he gasped.

She smiled. “Yes. And all yours.”

“God was surely showing off when he made you.”

He heard a slight snapping sound. She lurched forward, unsteady on her feet. At first, he thought she was fooling with him. “What are you doing?” he asked, with a nervous laugh.

She looked across at him. In an instant he saw the pain etched across her face.

“Milia?” he said, fear in his voice. He crawled across the bed towards her.

She collapsed to the floor, falling on her back. Fear gripped his every nerve. He looked over the edge of the bed. Her eyes stared up into space. From her breast he saw the unmistakable end of a crossbow bolt.

“Nooooooo!” he screamed, falling off the bed to be at her side.

He lifted her up in his arms and held her to him, choking and screaming. Her body was warm, but all the life in her was gone.

Stephen burst into the room naked. Romina did so too and stood at his side. A second bolt thudded into the door just inches from his nose. He froze with fear, but managed to drag Romina to the floor with him.

Dracula broke down in tears, his lover still in his arms. He cried in a way Stephen had never seen a man do before. "We were going to get married," he sobbed. "We were going to get married."

He choked out the words. The other two then realised that Milia was dead. Romina screamed, putting her hands to her face in shock.

"We have to get out of here!" Stephen yelled. "Someone is trying to kill us!"

Dracula barely heard his cousin speak. His grief consumed him.

"Vlad!" Stephen screamed at him. "Come on!"

He grabbed a hold of his cousin and dragged him crying from the room. Romina sat on the floor in anguish. Her whole world had fallen apart too. Stephen did not give her a second thought. He dived past her to retrieve Dracula's sword and clothes. "Get dressed!" he ordered.

Dracula slumped against the frame of the door. He showed no desire to leave his lover's side. Stephen slapped him hard across the face to spur him into action.

"Come on and get dressed! We have to get out of here!"

He finally came to his senses and pulled on his clothes. By the time Stephen joined him again his eyes bulged with rage.

"We have to use care," Stephen said. "There is a crossbow trained on the house."

"I care not," Dracula said with abandon. "If I die, I die."

He descended the stairs and raced out through the front door. Ten minutes had elapsed since Milia's murder. In that time a storm had descended over the area. Lightning flared across the skies. It lit up the countryside all around.

The rain continued to belt down. It drenched him in moments.

"Come on!" he screamed, holding his hands aloft. "If you want me so badly, here I am!"

Stephen stepped out beside him. Unlike his cousin, he had his sword drawn. The Saxon appeared through the rain. He trained his crossbow on Dracula's heart.

Dracula screamed at him like a maniac. "Come on then, you bastard! What are you waiting for!"

Buzan lurked on the roof of the house. He jumped down and landed with a thud just behind Dracula. The lantern that glowed above the front door, swayed from side to side.

The cousins did not have the time to react. Buzan moved in behind his target. He coiled his right arm inside Dracula's to stop him from reaching for his sword. With his left hand he pressed a blade to his throat. He was about to cut it open when a woman appeared before them. She stood there less than ten feet away. Buzan stopped when she raised her hand. He still held Dracula firmly in his grip.

Dracula did not attempt to break free. He saw her too, but waited for his assassin to put him out of his misery. It did not surprise him that it was Lucy.

The other times when she appeared, it was only ever to him. But on this night all four men could see her clearly.

Her long black hair stuck to her head, drenched through. The rain glued the dress she wore to her body in the same manner. It allowed them to see her in her entirety.

She looked straight at Buzan, her eyes glowing red. Stephen sensed the evil in her. He stood frozen to the spot, unable to move. Buzan kept the blade pressed firmly to Dracula's throat. He waited to see who she was and what she wanted.

“Leave him be!” she ordered, in a masculine voice. “As you once were, he is one of mine!”

Buzan pulled the blade away and stepped to the side. “Master?” he said, walking up to her.

He kept going until they stood almost face to face. She put a hand on his forehead and forced him to his knees. The Saxon raised the crossbow to fire. When he did she turned her head sharply and glared at him with her piercing red eyes.

Her action made him turn it around until it pointed at his face. Stephen saw him fighting against it with all his strength. Her will was too strong and he pushed it against the underside of his chin. He pressed the trigger and fired the bolt up into his head.

The bolt ripped through his mouth. It tore parts of his tongue out before slicing clean through his brain. The top of his skull exploded in a shower of crimson. Lucy watched him drop to the ground. She then returned her attention to Buzan.

“It is good to see you again, Master,” Buzan smiled. Her image left him transfixed. “It has been so long.”

The whole scene confused Dracula. *What on earth was he talking about?*

“You would hurt one of my own?” she grimaced, her face full of hate.

“Forgive me, Master,” he pleaded. “I did not know.”

By now her eyes were blazing. “You know the penalty for this.”

“Please, Master!” he begged, to no avail.

She pressed her hand harder against his face. Buzan screamed, as wisps of smoke appeared between her fingers. He clawed at the air with both hands. It did nothing to relieve his pain. Her hand burned through the outer layer of his skin. Soon he grabbed her wrist in an attempt to free himself.

The skin on his forehead melted down into both his eyes. His hair caught fire and his nose dissolved. Still she pressed harder. He screamed louder, as his flesh gave way like butter against a hot knife.

In time she withdrew her hand. He clutched at what was left of his face. The two cousins both saw him and recoiled in horror. All that remained of it was two rows of blackened teeth. He collapsed to the ground, his arms and legs flailing wildly. His struggle for life ceased, his brain smouldering in the pit of his skull.

Lucy paid him no heed. She and Dracula stared hard at each other. He saw that her eyes had returned to their usual black hue.

“Why did you not let him kill me!” he screamed at her.

“You are my special one.”

“Damn you! Why allow me to endure this pain? I wanted him to kill me!”

“No,” she said calmly. “It is not your time. When it is I will come for you.”

She turned away to leave, but he called after her. “Lucy!”

Her head rotated a full one hundred and eighty degrees. She did this although she continued to walk away. “What?”

“Who sent this man after me!”

“Why? What does it matter?”

“Tell me!”

“It was John Hunyadi,” she said, barely above a whisper.

Dracula dropped to his knees and cried. He looked up to the skies and screamed. “Hunyadi! I swear I will kill you!”