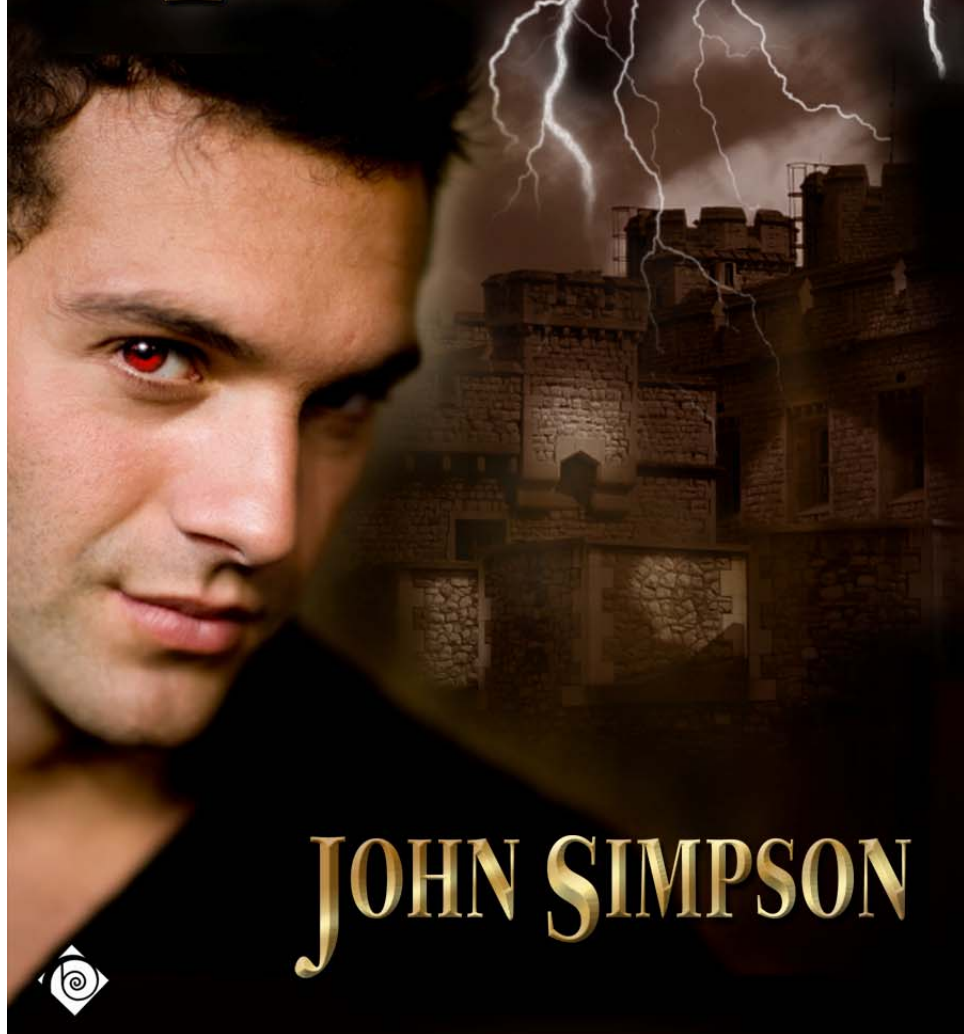


CARPATHIAN INTRIGUE



Chapter One

MY ears popped as the coach climbed up into the steep Carpathian Mountains of Transylvania. I was on my way to Bran Castle to meet with the count who resided there and to study certain volumes said to be contained within the Castle library. I had written to Count Michael from Great Britain over two months ago, requesting permission to visit the fortress his ancestor built in the year 1212 to defend Romania from invading Turks. I tried not to dwell on the fact that the ancestor in question was none other than Vlad Tepes, known as Vlad the Impaler, who had been imprisoned in his own castle for a short period. Vlad's atrocities were legend and 500 years later, his name still struck fear in people, which led to discussion of the dark secrets attributed to his family.

As the carriage rolled along, I distracted myself in marveling at the new-fangled padded seats that greatly eased the hardship of traveling by coach. I also noticed how much cooler the air was getting and drew my cape more closely around my shoulders to try to keep out the ever-present draft. As we passed an inn, a crudely lettered sign indicated we were within five kilometers of our destination. By my estimation, we had about two hours left of daylight and I desperately wanted to get there while I could see well enough to find my way about.

Before long, the coach stopped at the foot of a path leading up to Castle Bran. I got out of the carriage in the dimming light and asked the coachman why we had stopped.

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“Beg your pardon, sir, but this is as far as I can go. It’s too hard on the horses to go up that steep of a road and I’d not be able to control our descent coming down. I am afraid you will have to walk from here.”

“How the devil am I supposed to get my trunk up there?”

“Well, sir, that I cannot say, but I have gone as far as I may.”

With that, he unloaded my trunk and, without saying anything further, he turned the carriage and headed back the way we had come. He would no doubt stay at the inn we had passed, as it was getting too dark to risk the mountain road.

I looked up the incline and as it was obvious that I could not carry my trunk, I began to drag it. By the time I reached the peak, I was out of breath and near collapse. I could go no farther with my burden in the state I was in and therefore pushed the trunk off the path and into the concealment of the underbrush. I then walked the rest of the way to the castle door, very conscious now of the rapidly dropping temperature.

Upon reaching the entrance, I banged the heavy iron knocker three times and awaited a response. I had begun to wonder if anyone would answer when I heard a bolt being drawn back. The massive wooden door swung open, revealing an ancient servant, perhaps a butler of sorts.

“Hello. I am Christopher Landau and I believe Count Michael is expecting me.”

“Yes, sir. Please come in,” the ancient one bade. “Do you have any baggage, sir?”

“Yes, but after dragging it to the top of the hill, I did not have the remaining fortitude to bring it any farther. I concealed it at the side of the trail and will fetch it in the morning.”

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“Nonsense, sir. Your trunk will be retrieved it for you and placed in your room. Please come with me.”

As I followed the servant, I took the opportunity to gaze about the place. The interior was much as I expected from my visits to other old castles. Candles by the hundreds provided light, as well as the large fire in the massive central fireplace. The old one saw me to a sitting area in front of the hearth with couches and soft chairs.

“Please remain here sir. I will inform the count that you have arrived.”

“Yes, thank you.”

The butler left and I looked more closely around the room. Many beautiful works of art hung on the walls and I admired the taste of the old count. Some were of the paintings were portraits of people, who I presumed were ancestors. Others were the sort of landscapes popular at the moment in the Dutch school of art. On the far side of the cavernous room stood an ornate door that I hoped led into the library that all of Europe had heard rumors of. Count Michael was known to have one of the most extensive collections of Balkan history and cultural books in existence. I was taking courses I had hopes would lead to a teaching degree in history, and so I was pleased to receive the count’s positive response to my request. I walked over to the fire and attempted to drive the chill away that had set into my bones climbing up that steep hill.

“Good evening, Christopher. I hope your travel here wasn’t too harsh,” someone said at my back.

I turned to respond, my jaw dropping in surprise. Standing before me with a hand extended in welcome was a man who looked to be no more than 40 years old. He stood well over six feet tall and had glossy black hair that contrasted strikingly with his brilliant blue eyes.

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“I am Count Michael. Is something wrong?”

“Oh, no! I beg your pardon, count, I was simply expecting...”

“A much older man with a cane and a shawl about his shoulders?”
the count finished the sentence.

“Well, actually, yes. I am glad to meet you, Count Michael. I am of course Christopher Landau, and I apologize for my look of surprise.”

“I am quite used to it. I recall from your letter that you are here to wander through my library. Perhaps you would tell me exactly are you looking for?”

“I am working on an advanced degree in history and I wish to write a thesis on the Ottoman Empire’s war with Romania and of course, your ancestor, Prince Vlad Tepes. The depth of your library here at Bran Castle is well known and so I took the chance of asking you for access to it. I am much in your debt for allowing me to intrude on your privacy and I promise I shall make myself scarce. You will hardly know I am here, count.”

“You are most welcome to use the library, but it is not necessary to become as a mouse. Visitors do not come here because of the history of this old castle, and I welcome the diversion of a fresh face and voice. Tell me, how old are you?”

“I celebrated my 22nd birthday last week. Indeed, the money I received as gifts allowed me to travel here.”

“How fortunate. I do not mean to be short, but dinner is in an hour and we can become better acquainted over our meal. I do hope you are hungry, but for now, Rupert will show you to your room where you can freshen up. If you would like to bathe, inform Rupert and he will see to it that a tub and hot water are brought.”

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“Thank you, Count Michael. I look forward to seeing you again at dinner.”

“This way sir,” Rupert said as the count made a slight bow.

We climbed through the gloom of the circular staircase to the second floor and entered a broad corridor awash from many candelabra. The hallway was richly carpeted, the wall hung with more fine paintings and lined with tapestries to ward off the chill of stone walls. Rupert opened one of the carved wooden doors and stood aside to let me enter. I waited as he lit the candles inside and when I could see, I was quite pleased with the size and the furnishings.

In the center of the room, with the headboard against one wall, was a very large canopied bed. Two padded chairs upholstered in green brocade sat in front of the hearth where Rupert was poking at the fire. I walked to one of the three tall windows and peered down upon the castle grounds. The sun was now gone from the sky and darkness closed in like a fog. I could barely see the long path that led down to the main road.

Rupert answered a knock at the door and two footmen brought in my trunk. I thanked them as they left and turned to Rupert.

“Would you like me to unpack for you, sir?”

“Thank you, but I can manage. Shall I dress for dinner?”

“By all means, sir. The count is not overly formal, but he does observe the etiquette of the dining room. There is a clock on the mantle that is kept wound, so you will know what time it is always. Please come down to the main room when you are ready and you will be taken into the dining room from there.”

“Thank you Rupert; I will be down on time.”

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As the elderly servant departed, I dragged my trunk into the sphere of warmth given off by the fire. A very old Persian carpet covered the floor, flecked with the black scars of burn marks where it neared the hearth but a comfort to sore feet. I put my things away in a dresser and armoire, choosing a shirt, pants and jacket that I hoped be suitable for dinner.

As I took stock of myself in the looking glass over the dresser, I remembered how surprised I had been by Count Michael's appearance. He was a very handsome man whose looks had fairly taken my breath away. A young stallion was the last thing I was prepared to find in Bran Castle and I wondered if I would be able to control my reactions to him. Yes, I preferred men in my bed, however, I was very inexperienced. Merely thinking of the count in that way made me blush and I resigned myself to a very frustrating time at Bran Castle.

Chapter Two

AT the appointed hour, I left my chamber and walked down to the large room where I had met the count. Upon arriving, I found a glass of sherry waiting for me on a silver tray. Before I could take the first sip, I heard the rich, deep voice of my host as he entered.

“How smart you look, Christopher. I do hope you found your room to your liking?”

“Yes, sir, the room is beautiful and the fireplace warmed it right up. I really do appreciate your hospitality and I do not know how I will ever repay you.”

“Well, Christopher, one never knows when one might do a kindness in return for something freely given. Shall we eat?”

The count led the way into another room with a long dining room table set with only two places. Down the middle of the expanse of wood marched a forest of metal candelabra blazing with candles and the china and utensils were antiques of the finest quality. A first course of an unfamiliar soup was served from a magnificent tureen and Rupert poured wine to accompany it. Over the course of nearly three quarters of an hour, the count and I enjoyed a delicious meal of roasted pork with several side dishes. When I declared that I could not eat another bite, my host invited me to a small study where we settled before the fire with glasses of brandy.

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“Tell me; are you married?” the count asked.

“No, sir. I do not have a sweetheart, let alone a wife,” I said with a laugh.

“A fine looking, ambitious young man such as you has no prospects? That truly is a shame. You must learn to work less and to live more. There are far greater things in this life than noble Academia. Dusty old tomes will not keep you warm on a cold winter night like this.”

“And what of yourself? Is there a countess here at Bran castle?”

“Once upon a time there was. However, she died in an accident. Her carriage horses bolted, careening over the edge of the road, and the coach tumbled down the side of the mountain.”

“Dear God! I am so sorry, Count Michael; please forgive me for raising such a painful subject!”

“My boy, there is nothing to be forgiven. It was a long time ago, and I have grown accustomed to the loneliness. I find I have no desire to take another bride and so my heart and my bed remain empty.”

“That is so very sad, count.”

“Well, I believe that you only find one great love in this life, and only if you are very lucky. I was privileged to know such a love, and she can never be replaced. Despite what you might think, the business of being a Romanian count keeps me quite busy, and so the periods of loneliness are made bearable by industry. And now, we have you as our guest for a fortnight, and I do not doubt that your presence will bring some life back to the castle.”

“I will try to be as little a burden to your staff as possible. I was thinking of having a bath tonight to wash off the dust of the road, but I

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cannot bear the thought of Rupert hauling hot water up the stairs. He is quite elderly, isn't he?"

"Rupert is 74 and has lived here at Bran Castle for practically all his life. This is as much his home as it is mine. Regardless, he would not be the one to haul the water, as you put it; one of the stable men would perform that task. If you like, I will send them to do so now."

"It is late, count, and I am tired from traveling. I will be happy to have my bath tomorrow if it is not inconvenient."

"Whatever you like will be made convenient. After breakfast, you will find a nice hot tub of water in your room and then you can get started in the library. Will that suit?"

"That would be perfect, count. You have my gratitude."

"Then I shall bid you a good night, and let you go off to bed. Tomorrow you will have the library all to yourself."

"Thank you once again, Count Michael, for your generous hospitality and I bid you a good night as well"

I left the count's company, went back up the staircase to the second level of the large, rambling fortress, and found my bedroom without problem. As I closed the door behind me and locked it, I felt the warm embrace of the fire. The burning wood had done its job while I was at dinner and the room was toasty. I threw on another couple of logs to keep it going into the night and changed into my nightshirt. I sat by the fire for a bit, listening to the lonely wind howl at the windows, before deciding to turn in for the night. Extinguishing all the candles, I left only the glow from the fire to light my way into bed.

As I pulled the covers up around my neck, I thought back to dinner and how attractive the count was. Aside from being a handsome man, he had an air that I can only describe as potent, which was well nigh

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magnetic. I watched surreptitiously all through the evening and more than once fancied that I caught him staring at me in a way that seemed admiring. As I drifted off to sleep to the comforting crackle of the fire, I dreamed of Michael, the sort of dreams that cause nocturnal emissions.

A couple of hours later, I was jolted from my pleasant dreams. A crack of thunder rattled the glass in the windows and the sky was bright with lightning that danced from cloud to cloud, growing ever closer to the castle. I leapt from my warm bed and ran to the windows. A savage storm was thrashing the trees with gusts of wind like hammer blows. Rain was driving against the walls so hard that it was most difficult to see anything. The almost continuous rolls of thunder were so loud that it was impossible to go back to sleep. I threw some more logs on the embers and poked them around, hoping that the new fuel would catch. When it showed no signs of bursting into flame, I decided to take a walk while I waited.

I dressed and took a single candlestick, determined to find the library. As I carefully descended the spiral staircase, I looked over the stone banister and saw that only the embers of the fire in the great hearth still smoldered. Immediately, I went to the ornate door that I had earlier speculated might lead to the room I sought. As I eased it open, a sudden draft of air blew out my candle, leaving me standing in the opening consumed by darkness.

Going to the fireplace, I blew on the embers until an old bit of wood caught fire and lit my candle from the small flame. In turn, I lit a candle on the mantel so that if I lost my light again, I would not have such a difficult task. Returning to the open door, I found myself at the head of a long staircase. This surely did not lead to the library, for the darkness below ground would be damaging to any books. I hesitated on the threshold, wondering if it was wise to wander too far from the main floor. However, the count had seemed the soul of hospitality and would surely

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have warned me of any areas that might be off limits to guests. I therefore felt it was safe enough to venture forth.

I descended staircase slowly, the temperature dropping steadily the lower I went. I began to pass torches affixed to the wall, and occasionally lit one from my candle. Counting the steps out of habit, I noted that there were exactly 98 as I reached the bottom. I stepped through an open doorway and found myself in a central room from which hallways radiated on all sides. The room held only a large table and several chairs, and I decided to follow one of the corridors. The path I chose led even farther into the depths of the castle and at the bottom of the incline, I was met by a sight that froze my heart. In a large room sat various implements of torture, including what appeared to be a rack, and an Iron Maiden. I lit a torch in an iron sconce and the true size of the room was revealed to me. Without question, I had stumbled upon a torture chamber and dungeon. One side of the room was lined with low-ceilinged cells and the stone walls were hung with whips, branding irons, manacles, and various other instruments whose uses I could only guess at.

As I leaned over a large cauldron, someone spoke in a booming voice, and I nearly fainted dead away in fright.

“What are you doing here?”

I whipped around and saw a hulking brute squinting evilly at me with one good eye. He was so menacing that as he walked toward me, I circled around to the other side of the cauldron. “I am a guest of the count’s,” I cried out. “The storm woke me.”

“We do not allow people down here. You must return to your room,” the man snarled.

“Yes, of course. I was merely restless and unable to sleep.”

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“Ahh, Christopher, I see you have met Constantine.” The count’s voice sounded like an angel’s trumpet. “He is responsible for keeping order down here.”

“Count Michael!” I winced at the panic in my tone. “I do apologize. I could not sleep and took a walk, but I did not realize I was not permitted here. ”

“Constantine, you may return to your duties,” the count said firmly.

“Yes, Count Michael,” the brute said, shooting me another nasty look as he turned away.

Not until the hulking servant had gone did I speak again. “He gave me quite a turn. I feared I might end up in one of these things,” I said as I gestured at the torture devices.

Count Michael smiled faintly. “Constantine is relatively harmless ... unless I order him to be otherwise. You really should not have come down here, Christopher. I have no objection to you seeing any of these antiques, but you could have fallen and hurt yourself in the dark.”

“When was the last time the dungeon was used for its intended purpose?” my curiosity compelled me to ask.

“A least fifty years ago. Enemies of one of my ancestors were unlucky enough to have landed here. I understand they never left ... not alive, at least. Shall I show you what these various things were used for?”

Though I was an avid student of history, I had no wish to hear ghoulish tales of torture in the presence of the very instruments used to cause so much suffering. “Perhaps another time? If it is all the same to you, I would be away from this place. It is somewhat ... unnerving.”

“As you wish, although you are quite safe here with me, I assure you.”

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“Where do all these hallways lead to?”

“They lead to other rooms like this one. My ancestor, Prince Vlad, made an art form of torturing and killing his enemies. History books are full of tales relating to this ... hobby of his.”

“Yes, I’ve read quite a bit about him, and hope to discover more in your library. However, for the nonce, let us go up where there is light and warmth.”

As we reached the top of the staircase, I breathed a sigh of relief. The storm still raged outside and a shutter was banging somewhere, but it was a vast improvement over the pit of pain and horror below.

“Perhaps we should both return to our beds and attempt to sleep,” the count suggested.

“That sounds like a very sensible idea. Will I see you at breakfast?”

“If you wish it.”

The count accompanied me up the stairs, turning left at the top as I went to the right. I watched the train of his velvet dressing gown disappear into the darkness of the hallway before into my room. Closing the door, I locked it, put wood on the fire and got back into bed.

It took some time, but I finally drifted off to sleep in spite of the driving rain upon the windows. My dreams this time were filled with images of the torture chamber and the screams of its victims. Red-tinged visions of tormented men plagued me, and I woke more tired than I had been before I slept.

Chapter Three

I WOKE up at around 7 A.M. and turned my gaze to the windows. The rain had stopped, but the sky was still grey with the silvery disc of the sun trying to break through. I rose and quickly donned my dressing gown, as the fire had gone out and the room was chilly. I poured some water into the basin and washed my face and hands. Clad in a somewhat shabby set of clothing I was used to working in, I left my room, unsure if I would find anyone about yet.

I entered the dining room and saw Count Michael waiting to break his fast with me. I took a seat beside him and sipped at an unfamiliar juice.

“I hope you slept better after we parted. The storm was quite severe.”

“I slept a bit, but I dreamt of that chamber below and found no rest. But do not fear that it will stop me from beginning my research today.”

“Would you care for something more substantial than pastry?”

“I thank you, but no. I would prefer to go to the library and begin work.”

The count rose and bade me follow him down the hall. We entered a room behind double door and he smiled at my reaction to the treasures revealed. Before me were shelves, stacks and racks of books, parchments

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and scrolls. There must have been at least five thousand tomes covering all four walls of the room and a goodly portion of the floor.

“Dear God! I knew you had an impressive library, but I had no idea it was this large!”

“On the small table, you will find a listing of the books and where to find them on the shelves. I thought it would make your research easier.”

I could do little more than smile in what I am certain was a foolish manner as I gazed on all those books, but the count took no offense. I noticed that besides the small table, the room contained a long study table with cushioned chairs and candles at convenient locations. A single window placed high on the outside wall provided the main source of light.

“These books represent over two hundred years of collecting. Consider them yours for as long as you need them.”

This was a most generous statement. I turned quickly to thank him once again and fancied I caught him staring at my backside. He smiled pleasantly, the openly hungry stare gone from his face, and I smiled back, not knowing what to think. “I ... I suppose I’ll get started, if you do not mind?”

“Not at all. I will have Rupert bring you something at noon and then I hope I will see you at dinner. Would you still like a bath?”

“What time do you take dinner?”

“Promptly at eight.”

“Then might I have my bath at seven?”

“I will inform Rupert. Good luck with your research.”

The count left the room and I turned to the numerous books before me, making a start by looking at the list the count had kindly provided. I

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sought out books on the historical period that I was studying, and before long I was rapt, absorbed in the wealth of print at my disposal. The entire day was spent locked away in the library, oblivious to the rest of the world. I was so mesmerized that I never ate the lunch that Rupert provided. I was finally brought back to the present when the aged servant entered once more.

“Sir, your bath is being readied.”

“I had no idea it was that late! Thank you, Rupert.”

We went up the stairs to the third floor where a room held a large tub filled with steaming water. A bath sheet and a robe like the one I saw Michael wearing the night before were laid ready on a small table. After I declined his help, Rupert left and I stripped off my clothes, folding them neatly. I had that odd feeling one sometimes gets of being watched by some unseen observer, but I was certain that I was alone in the room. I ignored the mild uneasiness and climbed into the hot water. As I immersed myself, I felt the tension in my muscles ease and let my head rest against the high back of the tub, savoring the luxury.

I was feeling a bit drowsy when the sensation of being watched returned. I sat up and looked about the room, but of course, there was no one. Other than the bathtub and table, there was little else in the room. The walls held some tapestries to ward off the chill of the stone, a pair of portrait paintings, and ironwork sconces for torches. I felt foolish and slid back down into the water to enjoy it as long as possible. When it cooled, I rose and dried myself with the Turkish bath sheet, aided by the warmth of the fire on the hearth. Afraid now that I might be late, I dressed hurriedly and went to the door. When I opened it, I found the count on the threshold.

“Good evening, Christopher. I hope the bath was to your satisfaction?”

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“Yes, sir! I feel much refreshed. I must say though that I was surprised to see you when I opened the door.”

Count Michael chuckled throatily. “I wished to be sure you did not succumb to the pleasures of the bath and fall asleep. I should not like to do without my dinner companion.”

“I will not fail you,” I said. “I need merely to change into proper attire.”

“Excellent.”

Michael walked with me down the hall to my room. “I shall leave you to dress and meet you in the dining room at eight,” the count said with a small bow.

As I doffed my work clothes, I thought of Michael’s smoldering good looks and wondered what he might look like naked. These thoughts aroused me so that I lay down upon the bed and began to fondle myself. Though I hadn’t much time, I couldn’t stop thinking of what it would be like to make love with the count. My hand moved faster on my hard flesh, squeezing and stroking to the imagined sounds of Michael’s groans and sighs. The waves of pleasure were building to a peak when someone knocked upon the door.

Red-faced and panting, I jumped from the bed and threw on my robe as my erection deflated rapidly. “Enter.”

Rupert eased the door open. “Will there be anything else prior to dinner, sir?”

“No, thank you, Rupert. I have everything I need. I will be down shortly.”

I was embarrassed and a little irritated by the untimely intrusion. So much so that I seriously considered returning to my fantasy, but good

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manners won out. I dressed in my finest and went downstairs, my spirits rising conversely as I descended. It had been a good day in the library. I'd enjoyed a restorative bath, and now I had every hope of a fine dinner before me.

I found the count waiting in the dining room with a white-gloved Rupert in full livery standing behind him. As I took my seat, the count returned my warm smile, setting the tone for the meal. A wonderful repast of pheasant and side dishes of local vegetables was served with a different, excellent vintage accompanying each course. As we ate, the count talked of his home and how one nobleman and a few servants were scarcely enough to fill its vast space. I boldly inquired of him concerning his family and he replied sardonically.

"They do not approve of all my appetites."

"I cannot believe you have such faults as would keep your family away from you."

"You misunderstand. It is I who keep them at a distance. Visits are allowed, but I could not have them here to stay. Would you care for more wine?"

"Yes, thank you, but I still do not understand. If you do not mind me asking again, what is it you wish to hide? You are not making use of the dungeon, are you?" I made bold to tease him.

He laughed heartily, his deep blue eyes flaring like last night's lightning. "Why do you wish to know, Christopher? Would you perhaps enjoy being a guest in the torture chamber?"

My blood ran cold and drained from my face at the thought of being strapped to the rack in the castle dungeon and the count laughed again.

"You and I are not well acquainted yet, so you are not familiar with my woefully morbid sense of humor. Many find it difficult to tell when I

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am joking, and I hope I've not offended you. To answer your question, only an order from the King of Romania himself could put that chamber back in operation. I hope and pray that time never comes. This ancient pile of stone has seen more than its share of pain and sorrow."

"I will confess that you had me worried for a moment. I would be quite happy if I were never to see that level of the castle again. I will not pry further into your secrets and I apologize if I was being rude."

"Please, do not let it trouble you. Would you like some more wine?"

"Well, I am starting to feel a little off, so perhaps I had better not."

"Come, enjoy! Where do you have to go tonight? It is raining once again and the wind is rising, a sure sign of an early winter in the mountains. Drink, and be warm tonight!" he said as he poured more wine into my glass.

After he filled his own glass, we rose and went into a small sitting room with comfortable furniture and more paintings of dour-faced ancestors. We chatted for some time of the region's history and then the count said, "Are you still curious as to why I keep my family at a distance?"

"Indeed I am, but I feel that I am intruding into your personal life."

"I choose to share it with you. Come with me, and you will see."

We filled our glasses once again and started up the staircase. I was relieved that we were ascending and not taking a downward path. After walking for a few minutes, we came to a part of the castle that I had not seen. The count stopped before an iron-banded door that he unlocked with a key taken from an inner pocket. The door swung open and he bade me enter ahead of him. I stood in the cool darkness, waiting as he lit several candelabra. As the light grew, I found myself gazing at beautiful paintings

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of nudes. The walls were covered with them and in all these masterful depictions of the naked human form, not one was female.

“Are they not magnificent, Christopher?”

As I looked at each one, I saw that they were all young men such as myself, and all naked. In some paintings, the figures had erections and in others, they were lying on their stomachs exposing well-built buttocks. Each had a small brass plate affixed to the bottom of the frame with the name of the model in the painting.

“They are remarkable in their beauty; the artist was a master of the human form.”

“Oh, I keep them not to admire the artist’s work, although he did a fine job; no, I keep them to remind me of those beautiful young men who have been in my bed on more than one occasion. That is the secret that I must keep from my family or find myself disgraced and disowned.” The count observed me with his head tilted to one side. “Many of these young men remind me of you in many ways. One of them even has a mole right above his tail bone in nearly the same place as yours.”

“But how could you know that I have a birthmark there?”

The count had the grace to blush at my question. “I must beg your forgiveness. When you took your bath, I availed myself of a small view hole in the room. I was privileged to see you in all your naked glory and I swear that you are as beautiful as any of these men. I would give much to possess your body ... even for one night.”

“I felt as though I was being watched while I bathed.” I had consumed so much wine that my natural outrage at being spied upon quickly transmuted to curiosity. “Where is the hole? I did not see one even though I searched the room.”

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“It is in the middle of one of the wall sconces. Again, I apologize for my unseemly behavior, but I did so wish to know what was under your clothing. And now I know that you compare to these beauties immortalized in oil and canvas.”

I tilted my glass and consumed the rest of my wine, looking over the rim at the men in the paintings. I lowered my head and met the count's eyes. “I am sure I can compete with any of these men ... on any level. Would you care to find out?”

“I wish to be certain I understand. Are you saying that you wish to join me in bed?” he asked with a look of surprise on his face.

“In a word ... yes. Shall we go before I fall down from the all of the distinguished wine I have consumed and neither one of us has any joy this night?”

He took my glass away from me and locked the door of the room I already thought of as the altar of beauty. He picked up a candlestick and we walked back in silence, giving me unwanted opportunity for second thoughts. I could not help but wonder if I had made a mistake in revealing my preferences and offering myself up in competition with a collection of paintings.

“What happened to all those young men? Why are they not still with you?”

“For many reasons. I was afraid that they would reveal me publicly for what I am and many were more enamored of gold than of me. Are you that kind of man?”

“I have been intimate with only two men in my life and it is not something I speak readily of. Since I cannot marry you, your title holds little allure as a means to gain status.”

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The count smiled. "I knew there was more to you than your pretty face. You have intelligence to go with your other charming assets. I am pleased."

We reached his room and were enveloped in the warmth radiating from the enormous fireplace. He poured us each a dram of brandy and we sat down on his large canopied bed.

"Please take off your clothes slowly. I would enjoy a gradual unveiling of your beauty."

"But you have already seen it, have you not?" I teased as I removed my shirt and unbuttoned my pants.

"Ah, but this time you *know* you are undressing for my pleasure."

I smiled and continued disrobing at a leisurely pace. I allowed my gaze to roam boldly over the count's body as he undressed, appreciating the tight, lean musculature. His open shirt revealed a well-muscled chest with a light pelt of black hair that made my fingertips itch with anticipation. When I finally stood naked before him, he looked at me approvingly.

"Come here, Christopher."

I moved closer as he let his shirt fall to the floor. My eager cock jutted out, inviting him to taste me. Dropping to his knees, he wrapped his arms around me and pressed his face to my stomach with deep sigh of contentment.

"You truly are beautiful," he murmured. "And the gift of your body is one of untold value. I have been so lonely that I thought I would never smile again."

"How long has it been, count?" I asked gently.

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“Much too long.” Michael kissed my stomach and ran his hands over my ass before he rose and removed his trousers. Pulling off his stockings, he pushed his linen drawers down to his feet and kicked them off like an impatient boy.

At last, I saw his entire form and he was stunning in the firelight. The Grecian perfection of his chiseled body matched the sheer beauty of his classic facial features. He came closer, kissing me gently upon the lips, as he pulled the covers back. Drawing me into the bed with him, he leaned on one elbow, looking down into my eyes, and kissed me again. This kiss was deeper and stronger than the first one and his tongue ran rampant in my mouth. When he finally broke the kiss an eternity later, he said, “I want to make love to you as you have never experienced it before. I want to possess you totally.” I laughed and his face took on an affronted look. “Do you doubt my bedroom skills?”

“Forgive me, Michael, but you said that you wanted to make love to me as I have never experienced it before. You will do that without question, as I am a virgin. The two men I spoke of were merely bedfellows; we slept naked together, but did not touch one another. You will be my first lover!”

The injured look faded from his face to be replaced by wonder. “You look like an angel,” he said with a soft laugh, “and you are a virgin into the bargain? God has smiled upon me this night as He rarely does.”

He began to kiss me again and let his hand run down my body to where my cock lay, rigid and begging for attention. Gently he stroked me and fondled my balls as the kisses continued. He put his arm around me and rolled so that I lay atop his chest, our lips still glued together, his tongue exploring the depths of my mouth.

I reached for his cock and was pleased to find him in the same state of excitement that I was. He kicked the covers off so that we were free of

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the clinging silk sheets, pushed me onto my back and began to lick and suck on my nipples. My toes curled and my back arched off the bed in response to the caresses of my host's expert mouth. As I wriggled with pleasure, he trailed his tongue down my chest, heading toward the place I most wanted to feel his mouth.

Much to my disappointment, he bypassed my dick, detouring to my inner thighs, licking and sucking the sensitive skin. I bucked gently, trying to put my cock in the vicinity of his mouth, but he ignored it. My erection was so taut that it hurt and I felt that if I didn't have release from the pressure soon, I would explode like a boiler. Only after much teasing did he bring his tongue to bear on my balls, licking them one at a time, gently taking one in his mouth and releasing it. He then placed the flat of his tongue to the base of my cock, and slowly licked his way towards the head. When he reached the tip, he rolled his tongue around the ridge without taking it in his mouth. Dragging his tongue up my stomach to my chest once again, he kissed his way up to my lips. Our mouths met passionately, releasing each other only when we were desperate for breath.

The count rolled onto his back and looked at me. "Now, do as I did."

When I had mirrored each of his arousing actions, he took my head between his hands and pushed it back down to his cock. "Take my cock into your mouth and close your lips around it, but take care to keep your teeth away. I will do the rest."

I did as instructed and felt the hot, moist end of his dick slide between my lips and travel to the back of my mouth. Instinctively, I clamped my lips around his dick in an effort to keep it from going down my throat. He rocked in and out of my mouth, sliding his cock over and over my tongue, moaning slightly as he did. I found the sensation both exquisite and odd at the same time. Expecting that a hard dick would be

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rough and taste bad, I found the opposite was true. The count's equipment was covered with skin as silken as rose petals to the touch.

Much too soon, he pulled out of my mouth and drew me back up to lie against to his chest. "That was very good, Christopher. Now I will show you the great pleasure to be had from a man sucking on your cock."

With that, he slid down to my pelvis, took my cock into his mouth, and began to suck. The warm wetness of his mouth was unlike anything I had ever experienced before. He was able to take my entire shaft down his throat, which created sensations I had experienced only in my wettest dreams. As he continued to apply suction, he caressed my balls and did something that I had not expected, but found delightful. He began to play with my lower opening. I had heard whispers that some men used this entrance as they would use the sexual organs of a woman, but it was beyond my experience. The count wet his finger and gently eased the tip into my rectum while he sucked my cock. With this added sensation of the teasing finger, I found the sensations of pleasure mounting much more quickly than ever before. Soon I could no longer hold back my release and warned Michael that I was on the brink.

Instead of pulling away, he sucked harder and deeper, triggering a fierce explosion of bliss as my seed spurted forcefully from the end of my cock. Still the count did not draw back, but greedily swallowed every drop. Only when my cock ceased to twitch did he pull his finger out and let go of my sated shaft. My climax was so strong that it drained me of strength and I let my head fall back onto the pillow as Michael stretched out at my side.

"Did that please you, Christopher?"

"That was incredible, Michael. Is that what sex is really like?" I asked between heaving breaths.

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“Ah, that is but the overture to the symphony,” he smiled. “I will make a prediction for you. Your studies in my library will take a bit longer than you first thought and when you leave, your education will be far greater than anticipated. Now, can you do the same thing to me?”

“With pleasure,” I said, but when I began to move, Michael put his hand on my chest.

“Stay there. I will come to you.”

Michael straddled my chest and told me to open my mouth. When I did, he shoved his cock in, and as before, rocked in and out, controlling the speed of his thrusts. My gag reflex was fully functional, preventing him from going as deep as I’m sure he would have liked, but I vowed I would grow accustomed to it and perform better in the future. I was able to look up into his eyes as he fucked my mouth and I felt myself getting hard again. Before long, he increased his pace and his features tightened in a yearning expression I felt sure heralded the approach of his climax. As I prepared for the taste of seed on my tongue, he abruptly pulled out and spattered my face with his cum. By the time he delivered the last of his load, my chin dripped with the results of our lovemaking and my eyes were glued shut.

I felt the mattress dip as he rose from the bed and heard him tell me to stay just as I was. He returned and wiped my face with a soft cloth so that I could open my eyes. “There,” he said with a smile. “Now you can wake up without a mess on your face. Tell me, Christopher, did you truly enjoy what we did together?”

“How can you ask? It’s very difficult to describe the feelings that developed, but each was marvelous. Is it always like that?”

Michael chuckled. “It gets much better. I proceeded rather simply as I did not wish to frighten you; however, I have many more marvelous things to teach you. Will you stay long enough to learn them?”

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“I enjoyed what we just did very much, but I do not wish to end as another picture on your wall, locked away from the sight of all but you and perhaps a new young man occasionally. That is a very sad thought.”

“Perhaps you will not have such an end. I am weary of being alone, the Count of Bran Castle with no love in his life. Would you consider living in a world that you have only dreamed of before?”

“But what of your family? You told me you live this way out of fear. What has changed since we spoke?”

“Everything, and it is your fault. While I will never be able to introduce you for who you really are, I can say you are my nephew and family historian, but I move too fast. Why don’t we sleep and speak of it again in the morning? I hope very much that we might have something far more than either one of us has ever had before.”

“If I say no, what will happen to me? Will you grow angry and demand that I leave before my research is done?”

“Of course not. You will merely join your predecessors in the dungeon.”

My head snapped around in surprise and he laughed heartily at the expression on my face.

“Now go, clean your face and sleep. We will talk more tomorrow.”

I rose from the bed, smiling down at him as I donned my clothing. “Thank you for making me a man finally,” I said before I left.

When I returned to my room, I poured water into the basin and washed both my face and cock. I got into my bed, savoring the warm, buoyant feeling; I had finally had sex! However, as I fell asleep, the count’s sardonic voice whispered in my ear, “You will merely join your predecessors in the dungeon.”

Chapter Four

I WOKE up the next morning when the sun broke through my windows and warmed my face. I stretched, yawned and smiled, remembering the excitement and sexual release that I had experienced the night before. Count Michael promised that he would teach me more in the art of love and I must admit that I looked forward to my lessons as a very eager student.

I had lost any sense of anxiety over our parting comments and I saw the humor of the remark in the light of day. I came fully awake as my feet hit the cold carpet of my room and hopped over to the fireplace to stir it to life, but to no avail. I quickly dressed in fresh clothes, including thankfully warm wool stockings, before pouring the remainder of the water from the pitcher to wash my face. When I felt ready for whatever the day might hold, I left my room in search of anyone else who might be up and about. When I peeked into the dining room, I found the count sitting there eating some cheese and bread.

“Good morning, Count Michael. How are you today?”

“Good morning, Christopher. I am quite well. I hope your rest was undisturbed after our exercise,” he said with a smile.

“I slept quite soundly, thank you. I wish to thank you again for a wonderful experience and I look forward to more lessons,” I said boldly.

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“Rupert is making you some food with which to break your fast, but I fear I must leave you for a few hours. I have business to attend to at the monastery and the town below. I assume you will find enough to occupy yourself until I return?”

“Count, I could occupy myself in your library for a hundred years,” I said with a laugh.

“Good, then I will leave you with my books. You have only to ask Rupert for anything that you may require. Until later today,” he said as he kissed the top of my head on his way out of the room.

After a very good meal, I went directly to the library and closed myself off to the world, burying myself in the treasure trove of books both ancient and modern. As I scanned the shelves, I noticed the scrolls stored on a rack and I decided to look at those first.

After locating the library ladder, I retrieved the dusty scrolls and brought them to the central table. Carefully unrolling them, I began to translate, thankful now to the monks who had forced me to learn Latin and Greek. The first scroll was all in Latin and appeared to have been written by monks from St. Georges Monastery. Even though I could read and speak Latin, the age of the missive made it difficult to translate, as some of the words had begun to fade. From what I could puzzle out, it was an agreement between the monastery and the count’s ancestors to support one another in the vagaries of life. From my studies, I knew that it was a common practice for monasteries to have a patron, a prominent person to support the inhabitants and goals of the Church. This was usually a member of the nobility who had wealth and a significant position in the community.

In the end, the scroll failed to define exactly what support and assistance would be rendered by Count Michael’s ancestor. The Abbot

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had signed for the monastery and Stephen the Great, Prince of Moldavia, cousin to Vlad, signed for the nobility in the year 1476.

I unrolled two other scrolls hoping to learn what the exact agreement was, but found nothing specific except for an odd phrase. The document spoke of the monks growing crops in the summertime and the amount of product that was to be given to Bran Castle. In exchange, the count who came after Stephen the Great promised to “expurgate the demons that plagued the monastery”. The signature was illegible apart from the title of count. No further mention was made of demons in the document.

I went back to that particular area of the shelves to see if there might be a journal or something similar that might shed some light on this mystery. I pulled down the ten books that surrounded the old scrolls and began to go through them. They spoke of the political tensions of the era between Romania and Turkey and of the ongoing battle between Christians and Muslims, but nothing further concerning demons. I began to wonder if the monks might not have referred to the Muslim invaders as demons.

A knock on the door interrupted my search, and Rupert entered with a tray bearing a bottle of water and a glass. “I brought you some water in case you got thirsty, sir. Is there anything you require?”

“Thank you for the water; the dust irritates my throat somewhat. I’ve no need for anything else just now,” I said.

“Then I will leave you to your reading, sir.”

Rupert walked from the room, closing the door quietly behind him. I found the old retainer a bit odd, but couldn’t pinpoint the reason. It just seemed peculiar that someone of his obviously advanced age would have so little trouble performing his duties at the castle.

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Dismissing Rupert from my mind, I opened the next book, a very ornate volume written by hand before the printing press was invented. In the early 1400's, monks were the only people learned enough to write a book such as I held in my hands. They were highly educated thanks to the Church, and relied upon to copy sacred scripture and anything else related to the Church.

I expected to find that this was a collection of theological treatises deserving of the labor it took to create the copy. Instead, I found a sort of history of the count's family as viewed and recorded by the brothers of St. Georges Monastery. I flipped to the end of the work and found, once again, the signature of the Abbot. Going back to the beginning, I skipped to the year 1478 where the word *diabolus* had caught my eye. The word means devil in Latin and I was understandably curious about what had been written.

"The demons of the Satanic cult are determined to destroy not only St. George's, but all of the Church's holdings in Transylvania. The infernal plots of this unholy group have resulted in the deaths of three of our youngest novices. These unfortunates were found one week ago to this day, impaled upon stakes much in the same manner as practiced by the former master of Bran Castle, Prince Vlad. I have made a personal appeal to Count Michael, the nephew of Vlad, and have requested that he destroy this evil cult. I have told him that he would render a great service to the Church and his eternal soul with this crusade. Thanks be to God, the count has agreed and has assembled an army of one hundred and fifty pious Catholic soldiers to fight this terror that has engulfed the Carpathian Mountains."

This entry ended with the date December 22, 1478, exactly two years after the death of Vlad the Impaler. I poured water into the glass supplied by Rupert and sipped absently as I continued to read.

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“Count Michael has slain a great portion of the warriors of the devil who made life in these mountains unbearable. Those that did not fall to his sword were captured and taken to the dungeons of Bran Castle. I have been invited to observe the interrogation of the evil ones, but must decline. We owe the count a great debt of gratitude which can never be repaid.”

This entry was dated February 18, 1479, two months after the previous one. All of these events had taken place over two hundred and thirty years ago, and yet I felt I was living them as I read. The account of Count Michael’s namesake’s campaign against the devotees of the devil was fascinating, particularly when I considered that the imperiled monastery was probably the same one Michael was visiting today.

I went back to the shelves to see if I could find any records left by the former Count Michael concerning the imprisonment and interrogation of the Satanists. I’d searched for almost an hour, when I noticed a book that had fallen behind the others. It was hidden from sight and appeared to be the exact record I was looking for.

I went back to the table with some trepidation at the thought of what I might find between these pages. I had no wish to read a detailed account of the brutal ends of those who had wreaked havoc in the area, but my thirst for knowledge drove me. I blew the dust from the cover and opened it. A handwritten title page to the slim work read simply *The Curse*. The first few pages contained a list of the prisoners with details written beside each name, including an inventory of the personal possessions found upon each. I skipped ahead until my attention was caught by a passage.

“Today, we begin anew the task of extracting confessions from the prisoners. In total, seventeen of the wretches are locked in the dungeons of Bran Castle for their depredations. Staunch in their wickedness, they resist greatly our attempts to obtain a full account of their foul deeds and so reclaim their souls for the Church. Perhaps the interrogation of the one

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we believe to be the master will yield more results. I will attend to it personally.”

I had a queasy feeling in my stomach, for I knew from my studies the sort of torture that would have been used on Satanists, and it gave me a chill to think these barbarities occurred in the very castle where I slept. I had seen the dungeon, however briefly, and could easily imagine how it had looked to these prisoners. Shaking off the frisson, I turned the page and continued to read.

“Despite being flogged over one hundred lashes, the prisoner refused to answer. I ordered Constantine to remove the devil’s fingernails one at a time and if he still will not speak, he will lose his toenails in turn.”

My queasiness returned and I tried to block out the image that the words produced in my mind as I resumed reading.

“We have met with failure. The leader’s stamina is nothing short of incredible. He refuses to so much as confirm his name. I have ordered the fire lit under the great cauldron. One at a time, each prisoner shall be lowered by inches into the boiling water until we have our answers. I have decided save the leader for last.”

That must have been the very cauldron I was examining when I was surprised by Constantine. “Constantine,” I whispered. What a coincidence that the torturer in the records was also named Constantine. However, I supposed it was a common enough name in the region, and continued to read.

“All prisoners have executed save for the leader. Not a single Satanist made a sound except for their screams. From where do they draw their great strength of will? Can it be that they truly have a pact with the Prince of Darkness that the Scriptures warn us about? We have returned the last man to a cell and will begin again tomorrow. Perhaps a night

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alone in the dungeon with naught but thoughts of his fate for company will loosen his tongue.”

The last entry on that page was signed by Count Michael. Before I could turn the page and continue to read, the library door opened, and the count entered.

“I trust you are finding something worthwhile amongst my books?”

“I have found a few interesting things that I hope we can talk about some time. I have a small favor to ask of you.”

“Yes, of course, what is it?”

“Would you escort me back to the lower levels that I might take a closer look? I am fascinated by the history of this castle, and the dungeons are mentioned in several books from a few hundred years ago.” As I spoke, I surreptitiously slipped the journal under some other books, though there was no reason to hide it.

“It is a very unpleasant place, my friend, but if you wish it, I will take you. Let us go now while it is still nice and bright outside.”

I rose from my chair and impulsively kissed him on the lips as we left the library. As we walked down the many steps to the dungeon, I asked Michael how his business went in the countryside.

“It is always good to see old friends. I spent most of my time at St. George’s where I pray upon occasion. I do it not only for my soul, but because the local people expect it.”

Finally, we reached the bottom level where we encountered Constantine. The count spoke briskly to the hulking servant. “Constantine, please light all of the torches in here and then you may leave us.”

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Once we had light and the brute was gone, I took a closer look at things. In one corner of the large room stood a pillar about seven feet tall with manacles attached to it. There were many marks upon it along with dark stains.

“That is a whipping post,” the count informed me.

I made no response, but thought back to the notebook and realized that this was the very spot where the leader of the Satanists was flogged. Next, I went to the cauldron and noted that the fire pit set into the stone floor. Above the cauldron was a hole in the ceiling.

“What was that for?”

“That was to vent the fire beneath this kettle. Otherwise, the chamber would have filled up with smoke. It vents to the outside through a shaft between two walls.”

I imagined the screams that must have echoed in this huge space as I walked to the rack. I was examining the four ropes that would have stretched prisoner’s limbs beyond all tolerance when Count Michael came up beside me.

“Would you like to see how it works?” the count asked with a wicked smile.

“That will not be necessary,” I said quickly. “The use of the rack is not unknown in England’s past as well.”

There was an iron boot in another corner, which I had not noticed before. The count opened it so I could see inside the cruel device. The prisoner’s feet would be inserted into the boot and it was closed tightly. A crank could then be turned which tightened the boot, eventually crushing the bones of the feet. I have read that it was highly successful as a machine of torture.

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The other items in evidence were obvious in their use, among them branding irons, tongs to rip out tongues, and simple spikes, knives and whips by the dozens. I walked over to the low-ceilinged cells and saw that they were constructed so that a prisoner could neither recline nor stand, but had to crouch uncomfortably, which in itself became a torture.

“These were used only to house those who were condemned. There are more spacious cells in other areas of the dungeon. I pray that they will never be needed again. This chamber weighs on my spirit and I am always glad to leave it. Are you ready?”

“Yes, thank you for taking the time to bring me down here. I am sorry to be the cause of distress for you.”

“It will pass quickly,” the count assured me as we returned to the first floor of the castle.

I noticed that clouds had once again moved in and I heard distant thunder rumble through the valley below. “It looks as though another storm is coming,” I said.

“Yes, you have arrived at the beginning of winter months, and we get a lot of thunder and rain during this time of year. In another month or so, snow will begin to fall.”

The word snow sent a shiver through my body and I walked over to the fireplace. Michael came to stand behind me and said, “Might I suggest you take another bath after dinner, and then come to my bedroom for your next lesson? Or if you prefer, I can have Rupert wipe down your body with wash cloths.”

I turned to look into his deep blue eyes and felt my knees go weak. “I really would prefer not to put Rupert to all that trouble.”

“It would be no trouble at all; he is used to that duty.”

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I smiled and shook my head. "I'll bathe after dinner."

"Very well, my young friend. Why don't you return to your work in the library, while I tour the grounds? It takes a great deal of work to maintain the estate and constant vigilance is required. By the time I have finished my rounds, it should be near time to dress for dinner."

"That sounds very nice. You know where you may find me if you should have need of me before then."

He smiled and left, calling for one of the footmen that had retrieved my trunk upon my arrival. I returned to the library and took my seat at the table. I moved the covering books aside and took up once more the journal of the former Count Michael.

"Just after sunrise, we resumed our questioning of the prisoner. Though Constantine has wielded his whip most fiercely, the heretic steadfastly refuses to speak. I have therefore ordered that he be lowered into the boiling water like his fellows."

There were no further entries on that page or the next. When the writing continued it was in a shaky hand quite unlike the previous confident writing.

"As the demon leader was lowered into the water, he finally spoke. I ordered my servant to halt so that the devil could confess. Instead of admitting his sins, the prisoner screamed that his name was Rica Dracul, a first cousin I had never met.

"You fool, the wretch berated me. I served Vlad as one of his most trusted advisors, keeping secret my pact with Satan, and now you have destroyed this coven of the dark one's servants. I use what power is granted me to curse you in his name! You will be immortal, never to know the sweet release of death. You will watch, as your lovers grow old and die while you live on alone! You will know the pain of life without

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the hope of ending it. To serve you in this sterile eternity, I curse too the servants that do your bidding in this. They will only be set free of this curse when you are! Yes, count, there is a way to break the curse. A man of noble birth, related to a King, must swear his love for you. You must know him as a husband knows his wife and your bond must be a true one!

“Enough, damned monster, I swore at him. If you will not confess your involvement in the deaths of the novices and fully reveal all of your devilment, no mercy will be shown you. You will die in agony.”

Bracing myself, I read on.

“The leader was defiant to the end, shouting that he did not fear death and daring me to do my worst. I ordered him lowered into the boiling water and he died during his immersion without absolution. I regret that his soul could not be saved, but it is done. The cult is destroyed though I failed to learn the fullness of their evil plans. I will make my report to the Abbot and release from service the men who aided in their capture.”

Chapter Five

THE account of the torture and killing of the Satanists ended there. I knew there had to be much more to the story and that I would search for the continuation of the record. I went back to the section of the library where I had uncovered the scrolls and the journal, but found nothing else that related to the incident.

If a Count Michael and a Constantine were then present in the castle, was there also a servant called Rupert? Was it even remotely possible that the curse was real, and that the Count Michael currently residing in the castle was hundreds of years old? Did I dare bring this up for Michael's reaction? He would most likely laugh in my face, but these questions had to be answered. I put back all of the books as they were and walked out of the library deeply troubled.

It was very possible, as I had already conjectured, that the Romanian names of Michael and Constantine were simply common and bound to be repeated. That made far more sense than a two hundred year old curse that held three men suspended in time! However, I could not purge the notion from my thoughts.

When I saw that the light was beginning to fade, I went up to my room. The bed had been made and a fire lit in the fireplace. I went to the windows and looked down upon the grounds, spotting Count Michael and several men returning to the castle. The sky was as dark grey as the

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mountains and a chill was setting in. As I watched, a bolt of lightning screamed across the sky followed by a loud thunderous reverberation.

I lay down and since it was impossible to relax, I went over what I had learned thus far about the history of Bran Castle. It was obvious that the fortress had seen much violence since the day it was built. A knock on the door broke my thoughts and I rose to answer.

“Good evening, sir, do I understand that you will need the tub filled after dinner?”

“If it’s not too much trouble, Rupert. I’m rather a stickler for being clean as much as possible. You won’t have to fill the tub yourself, surely?”

“No, sir, others will tend to that as my duties will keep me in the dining room. Your bath will be ready for you directly after dinner, which will be served in one hour.”

“Thank you, Rupert, I’ll not be late.”

I wished I might ask Rupert how old he was, but that would be forward and I didn’t know what I would do if he admitted that he was over two hundred years old. I began to laugh aloud at how foolish the entire thought was, but still I wondered why the story stopped so abruptly. I felt sure there must be an additional volume.

I dressed and went down to the dining room, finding the count in his usual seat, sipping a wine very dark in hue. He looked as though he was in a far off place, but when I took my seat, he looked up and smiled.

“Well, I trust you had an interesting day in the books?”

“Indeed, I did. I’m curious; does anyone else ever use the library?”

“Not for a few years now. First because I treasure my privacy. Second because there are precious few outside the monastery and the law

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who can actually read. The monks have no interest in the books I possess, and I keep no books on the law. So, the tomes are doomed sit upon their shelves and gather dust, as you have noted.”

“It seems a shame to waste such resources.”

Before the count could reply, Rupert entered and served dinner. We chatted lightly while we ate and at the end of the meal, Michael affirmed our plans for later that night.

“Will you still come to my room after you have bathed?”

“Yes, if the invitation is still open. I must confess that I am very attracted to you, Michael, and look forward to further instruction in the bedroom arts.”

“It is my pleasure, I assure you. You are a remarkable young man in many respects, a quick and astute learner. Would you consent to spend the entire night with me? It will not seem so much as if I am tossing you from bed to wander the halls of the castle when I am finished with you,” he said with a laugh.

“That would be very pleasant, Michael, thank you. I will come to you directly when I have finished my bath.”

The count rang the little bell upon the table and Rupert entered swiftly. “Take a bottle of one of cellar’s finest vintages and two glasses up to my bedroom,” Michael ordered.

“Yes sir, at once.”

Michael smiled at me and downed the rest of his wine. “I will take my bath now, and see you when you have finished yours.”

“I will be there.” I rose and went to my room, removing my clothes and donning on a robe. I kept the warm stockings on my feet for the walk to the bathing chamber, and was happy to find a tub already filled with hot

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water. I dropped my robe unceremoniously on the floor and slid into the steaming water with a sigh. I remembered the peephole, and turned to look at the sconces, but saw nothing to indicate that I was being watched.

My mind wandered to what would happen in Michael's bed in a short time and my dick hardened. The thundering weather outside the castle impinged on my imaginings and I was grateful that I was not out in it. The castle was old, drafty, and in need of certain refinements, but it was far superior to being out of doors at the beginning of winter in the Carpathian Mountains.

The time passed all too quickly and when the water had cooled, I reluctantly got out of the tub, dried off and put on my robe. I felt wonderfully clean and relaxed as I went back to my bedroom. Once there, I pulled on a fresh pair of heavy of wool stockings that would make walking around on stone floors much more bearable. I brushed my hair, feeling terribly vain, and left my room for the one where I would be sleeping tonight.

When I knocked upon Michael's door, he bade me enter. The room was very warm with a roaring fire in the fireplace. Four candelabra stood at each corner of the room, augmenting the red light of the fire with their satiny glow.

"Please, lock the door if you would be so kind," Michael asked.

I did as he asked and went to where he sat in front of the fire. He offered me a glass of wine, which I took, though I had consumed my usual limit at dinner. I was more than a little nervous at what the night held in store, and I hoped the wine would help calm me and make me more pleasant company. I hardly wished to act the part of a virgin on her wedding night.

"Did you find your bath satisfactory?"

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“Very. In fact, I am so relaxed from the hot water that I am quite drowsy.”

“You will not wish to fall asleep yet, as I have many new pleasures for you to experience. Let us sit before the fire and enjoy this fine wine for a few moments.” Michael took a sip, watching my face over the rim of the glass. “You really are a most handsome young man. I can scarcely believe that some accommodating lady, or young man, has not taken your sexual education in hand long before this.”

“I have always been of a shy disposition and I realized at an early age that I was attracted to men, rather than women. I did not know what I should do, or even if I should do anything. I lived as was expected, maintaining appearances, going about in public with beautiful, eligible women who stirred me not one jot. As for other men like me ... you can imagine how difficult it is to find anyone who will admit to being different in the same way as I. Thus it is that I arrived at Bran Castle as a virgin in his early twenties.”

“It is remarkable that such a gem has been waiting so long to be polished. And to have come all the way to Romania for that refinement ... well, it must have been unexpected.”

“As I said last night, I am very fortunate to have met you. You are a very handsome man, cultured, worldly, charming, and with a body that would inspire a sculptor. You have made the wait worth it for me, Michael. In the short time we have been together, I have begun to feel a certain affection for you.” I paused and went on with a chuckle. “But have no fear. I am not after your castle and your fortune.”

“You have certain feelings for me? So quickly? We have only just met.”

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“You are my first,” I said softly. “I think everyone falls for their first lover to some degree, don’t you? Don’t you remember your first lover and how you felt?”

I watched Michael’s eyes glaze over and it seemed his very soul had vacated his body and drifted from the room. He appeared to be deep in meditation and I was hesitant to interrupt, not knowing if he relived a pleasant memory or a painful one.

“Michael, are you all right?”

The count blinked and his head jerked up to look at me. “Forgive me; your question hit me like an archer’s arrow. I remember well my first bed partner. He taught me as I am teaching you now. I fell deeply in love with him and miss him to this day.”

“If I may ask, why are you not still together?”

“We were parted by the trials of life, as I married in an effort to conform to what my family expected.”

“How long ago was that?”

“Very, but let us speak of you. You are handsome, and also blessed with a superb body and if I might be so bold, as well as a charming personality. This is why I asked why you were alone and untaken. You have so much to offer besides your obvious intelligence.”

“I have not yet found the right man.”

Michael drank the rest of his wine, stood, and offered me his hand. He walked with me to the bed where he opened my robe and pushed it off my shoulders, allowing it to drop to the floor. As I stood there naked, he admired me from head to toe, smiling with pleasure. He let his own robe fall so that we both were naked before he embraced me, holding me close. Kissing me deeply, working his tongue in and around my mouth, he stole

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the breath from my lungs. My dick was rock hard in moments as he ran his hands repeatedly over my ass, kneading the flesh of both cheeks. Goose bumps formed over my body as his hands traveled up and down my back and down onto my ass. A low moan escaped my lips and was lost inside Michael's mouth, as he pulled me down onto the bed. He continued to kiss me, letting his hands roam down my front, caressing my dick and fondling my balls. He moved his mouth to my chest and found each nipple, darted his tongue in and out like a snake, teasing each bud until they were as taut as my dick. I moaned at the feelings of pleasure that overwhelmed me at each new sensation as he gradually worked his way down onto my dick. Taking me in his mouth, he moved his head up and down while cupping my balls.

I took some initiative, tugging gently at his hair to bring him back up to me. I kissed him and pushed him onto his back on the mattress so that I could attend to his desires. However, before I could wander far around his body, he seized me by the shoulders and turned me around. I was now on my back with my head hanging over the edge of the bed. When he saw the look of confusion on my face, he simply said, "It is time to continue your education."

I watched as he climbed off the bed and stood over me. I could see everything in the flickering light of the fireplace and candles: his heavy balls swinging directly over my face, his hard on pointing straight out from his bush and the beautiful upward curve of his ass. My mouth began to water.

"Open your mouth, Christopher, and try to relax the muscles of your throat. I will not cut off your air for long, so do not panic."

I happily did as I was told. Count Michael put his dick into my mouth and began to rock back and forth, fucking my face. With each insertion, he proceeded a bit farther until he hit the back of my throat. Remembering what he said, I did not panic, but did my best to get used to

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the feeling of something at the entrance of my throat. After a couple of minutes, he pushed even deeper and I felt the head of his cock enter into my throat. Despite my good intentions, I began to panic. Upon seeing my discomfort, Michael pulled back and I was able to breathe freely.

“Relax,” he said soothingly. “I’ll not hurt you or prevent you from breathing. Just breathe through your nose when I pull back and hold your breath when I push in.”

With a little practice, I began to take his member more easily. He continued to fuck my face, his hands busy tweaking my nipples and rolling them between his thumbs and forefinger. This went through me like a lightning bolt as the feelings generated by his attention heightened my level of arousal even further. He increased the speed and depth of his thrusts until almost all of his cock was sheathed.

“Oh, so good,” he moaned. “I knew once you learned what to do you would be good in bed.”

Since I could not answer in any way, I began to pull on my own arousal. This made my balls tighten and pull up under my dick. I knew the warning signs all too well and so ceased pleasuring myself lest I explode.

Michael pulled out of my mouth and leaned over my body to draw my dick between his lips. I licked the head of his dick, as he went up and down on me. I was already so excited that I feared that it wouldn’t take much sucking to bring me off. I signaled my situation with a tap on the count’s head and he reluctantly stopped.

“I need to slow down for a few minutes, or I will finish well ahead of you. That was most enjoyable, by the way.”

“Let us rest for a few moments and have some more wine and then we will move to the next phase of your education. I am very pleased you

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are so willing to explore your sexuality with me and wish there was some way I could express my pleasure with you.”

“But you are doing that by instructing me! I have been missing a lot by being alone.”

“You do not have to be alone any longer if you do not wish it; but we can talk about that later. Take a sip and let us resume.”

I took a big gulp of my wine, enjoying the slightly dizzy feeling. As I set my glass on the table next to the bed, Michael pulled out a jar of thick liquid. He looked up at me and smiled.

“I would very much like to fuck your ass, if you have no objections to my doing so.”

“No, but no one has been there before you and it scares me a little.”

“I have not forgotten that you are a virgin; it makes it all the more exciting for me to be the first man to take your flower. This may hurt a little at first, but I will take all the time necessary to put you at ease and make the pain go away. Once you get to the point that I can freely fuck your ass, you will enjoy this greatly. However, if you still do not like it, all you have to do is command me to stop, and I shall. Are you ready?”

I answered by rolling onto my stomach. The thought of taking the count’s big dick into my ass was exciting and frightening at the same time. Michael massaged my back and ass in an attempt to ease my tension. I began to relax and then I felt his finger on my opening.

“Relax, and breathe normally, Christopher. Your skin is so smooth; I love touching it. Just listen to me and do as I say and it will become enjoyable for you very soon, I promise.”

Michael applied some of the substance from the jar to my entrance and slid a greased finger inside me. He pulled it back out and then pushed

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it back in, applying more grease as he did so. After smearing the oil liberally on his cock, he crouched over me, a knee on either side of my ass.

“Lift up so I can place this pillow under you and make it easier for me to enter.”

After lining his dick up with my ass, he began to push into me. I felt the pressure of his cock head against my opening and tried to relax, but the pain was almost immediate. I moaned loudly and Michael knew it was not a sound of pleasure.

“Relax and breathe. I will push forward only slightly until I pass beyond the muscle that controls the opening.”

That being said, he pushed and I felt him pop past the opening and into the canal. My quick intake of air warned him to stop. After a few more moments, he moved forward once again and I felt him slide in with greater ease. When I felt his balls against my ass cheeks, I knew he was all the way in. Lowering himself to rest against my back, he kept his dick perfectly still, allowing me to adjust to this unusual intrusion. When the pain faded to a kind of full feeling, I told him to go on.

Very slowly he began to pull out a little and shove back in gently. Instead of the shearing pain of moments before, I now felt an intense pleasure each time his cock passed over a certain point. The pleasure he’d promised began to mount and I urged him on.

“Please, fuck me harder, I like it!”

At my request, Michael began to fuck me faster and deeper. His balls slapped against my ass with each thrust of his cock. My own dick was rubbing back and forth on the pillow that he’d placed under me and the friction was building up my own climax along with his.

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“Ah, I knew you would be good at this,” he said, panting in a manner that told me he was nearing gratification.

“Give it to me, Michael, make me yours!” I urged.

Finally, after a serious bout of pounding strokes, he came. Moaning loudly, he finished with a series of long, hard, thrusts that slowed with each entry. When he collapsed upon my back with a sigh, I knew he had reached his desired end. Slowly he pulled out of my ass, letting his dick fall between my legs and onto my balls. When he rolled off me, he asked me how I wanted to come: by hand or by mouth.

“I am afraid that is a moot point. Your pillow is soiled and will have to be cleaned,” I apologized.

He laughed delightedly. “If you came while I fucked you without even touching yourself, then I know you truly enjoyed it. Throw the pillow onto the floor and do not give it a second thought.”

As I did as he asked, he rose, went naked to the fireplace and poured another glass of wine. “Would you like more?” he offered.

“No, thank you, my head is already swimming.”

“Then let us go to sleep and we can talk in the morning. You are staying in my bed, are you not?”

“I doubt I could go even if I wished it. I am exhausted and still somewhat drunk,” I answered with a laugh. I smiled fondly at him as he got back into bed. He savored his drink, and blew out the candles. The room was bathed in the light from the fireplace as we drew up the covers and listened to the wind howl. Before long, warm and satisfied, we both drifted off to sleep and he held me in his arms all through the night.

Chapter Six

THE call of nature woke me as the sun began its daily climb in the east. Michael was still asleep as I crawled from of bed and used the chamber pot. He woke up when I came back to bed, glad of its warmth now that the fire was out.

“Good morning. I hope you slept well.”

“Very well indeed. Thank you. You have such skill in bed and I am eager to learn what other secrets you possess.” I had spoken the truth to him last night; I had begun to develop a sense of affection for this man. He was charming, sexually appealing, and handsome as the devil. The fact that he was a count with a castle had no influence on my appreciation for his fine qualities as a man. “You said last night that I need not be alone anymore. Did you mean that I could visit you again like this?”

“I meant much more than visit. I am so weary of being alone and you are as well, so why do we not fulfill one another’s needs? I am not displeasing to look upon and, as you have learned, I am not unskilled in the bedroom. What I have not said is that I have become very fond of you. I would go so far as to say I am falling in love with you. Everything about you matches my desires in a companion and lover. What is your answer?”

“What are you saying? Are you suggesting that I move to Transylvania and into Bran Castle?”

“Exactly. Are you shocked?”

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“I am a bit surprised. There is no shortage of young good-looking men in Romania and thanks to the German influence, there are blond and brunette men everywhere the eye happens to fall. I suppose I am wondering why me? Why not choose a countryman?”

“Because it is you that I want, and I want you to become an important part of my life. As for the local men ... they are more interested in this castle and my title than a loving partnership. Would you find it so hard to live here with me?”

“What would I do? You cannot expect me to join your household staff, and share your bed at night. I need a purpose beyond making the one I love feel fulfilled. I need a career.”

“I would train you to run this estate and the other business of the family. You would not be bored, and you would have the respect and, yes, the envy of being a resident here. You would never be household staff.”

“Before we go any further, I must ask you a question. It may sound like sheer lunacy, but I must ask it.”

“Of course.”

“In my research, I came across scrolls and a journal that record events of two hundred years ago. I read an account of the destruction of a devil cult at the request of the local monastery. The count of that time was also called Michael and during an interrogation, he was cursed by the leader of the cult. He had two servants who were also cursed, one of whom bore the name Constantine. Is that not an odd coincidence?”

The count did not answer. Instead, he went to a shelf on the far wall and took down a large, thick book. Bringing it to the bed, he gave it to me and then began building up the fire. In my warm nest of bedding, I opened the book and began to read.

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It was the continuation of the journal that I had read in the library. The first page held the date, February 26, 1479 and read as follows:

“Life has been largely uneventful since the devil worshipers were executed. The abbot and brothers of St. George’s are still most grateful, but I have often been plagued by the memory of the curse put on me by Rica Dracul. I find it difficult to believe that I could be related to the monster that found his end in the dungeon of this castle. The tortured history of my family continues to be a black cloud over the heads of its descendants.”

The next entry wasn’t made until November 12 of the same year. “Today’s doings have been both terrible and confounding. Rupert was seriously injured when he fell off the battlements to the ridge below. His body was terribly broken and blood poured from his mouth. I expected that my faithful Rupert would die at any moment, but I sent for the doctor from the village. When the doctor arrived, he set the broken bones and professed amazement that Rupert yet drew breath. More than once, the physician remarked on my valet’s miraculous condition. He could not explain how a man could fall so far and survive, but the proof was before his eyes. I thank God that he did not see fit to take my servant from me.”

December 20, 1479. “Rupert continues to improve and shows no ill signs of the fall, whatsoever. The abbot is taking credit, claiming that the prayers said in Rupert’s name are what saved his life. The doctor continues to visit and express his amazement at Rupert’s recovery, the more so since it is Rupert’s 79th year of life on earth.”

March 3, 1480. “Rupert is completely healed; the only reminder of the accident being a bad scar on his right arm. He has returned to full duty and voices no complaints.”

There were routine entries in the journal recording the usual small triumphs and disasters of daily life and indicating a continued close

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connection with St. George's Monastery. I searched the pages for anything out of the ordinary, but found nothing until June 13, 1487.

"I am greatly troubled by a situation that is becoming obvious to all who know me. Rupert, Constantine, and I do not seem to be aging. Rupert is as healthy as he was before his terrible fall in 1479. How this is possible, I do not know. My body is maintaining all of its sound structure with no evidence of the softening that one would expect with the passing of years. The curse spat at me by a doomed man seems less like desperate last words with each month that goes by. Perhaps Rica's master bestowed a dark gift in his final hour. I do not wish to believe it, but how else to explain our remarkable condition?"

March 9, 1500. "I no longer have any doubts. None of the three of us has aged at all in twenty years. The curse is real and I dare not consult St. George's for fear they will burn us as witches. Constantine came down with a malady of the lungs that is always fatal, yet, he made a full recovery after a month in bed. We suffer the normal ills, but the effects are much less. Our families change, our friends die, but we remain the same, hidden away in Bran Castle as we dare not show ourselves in the village. We would surely be denounced for wielding the dark powers that we are victim to. We have resigned ourselves to living as prisoners in our home while those around us face the mortal end that should come to all in the fullness of time."

"Am I correct in assuming that you are the Count Michael in the journals, and that Rupert and Constantine are the servants that were cursed along with you?"

"Yes, you assume correctly. We live under this curse day in and day out and can do nothing about it. Does this now frighten you and do you wish to leave Bran Castle at once?" he asked with a shaky voice.

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“Frankly, I do not know what to say to you. This is all so fantastic, but I guessed that this might be the answer after reading the first part of the journal. It all fit together, I just refused to believe it.”

“I will understand if you wish to depart. You would not be the first one to leave here in fear of the unknown. The paintings that you looked at in my gallery were all lovers who began a relationship with me until they found out the truth. Without exception, they all fled. All I am left with are their portraits and memories. With you, I do not even have a painting, just very pleasant memories.”

“I do have feelings for you. Do I love you? No, I can’t say I do. The question for me is whether or not I can accept life with you knowing that one day I will be old, and you will be with another young man.”

“If you will give us a chance, I promise you that you can leave any time you feel you must and that I will do everything I can to make you happy here at Bran Castle. You will want for nothing and I will introduce you in public as my nephew.”

“If the curse truly worked and you three are trapped as you are, what have you done to try to break the curse?”

“There is nothing I can do. Rica said I would have to know a male as a wife, who was of noble birth and related to a King and who loved me.”

“Well, I fit all of those categories except the love part.”

“What do you mean? Are you a nobleman related to a King?”

“Yes, I am! I do not talk about it to people because they tend to act differently towards me when they learn of my birthright. So, I just made it a habit not to tell anyone.”

“Who are you?”

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“My mother’s maiden name is Landau. I chose to use it because my father’s family name is quite well known. It is Tudor. I am a descendant of King Henry the seventh of England, the first Tudor. I am the son of the Duke of Bedford and as such I am the Marquess of Douro. If I remember correctly, I meet all the requirements to lift the curse except being in love with you.”

Michael leapt from bed and danced about as though he had lost his mind. He giggled like a schoolchild and finally jumped back onto the bed and on top of me.

“I knew you were special. You can break the curse that has bound three men to this earth long beyond their time! Please, will you not consent to deliver us?”

“I am very fond of you Michael, but I do not love you and love cannot be forced. We met only a few days ago after a brief correspondence.”

“Does your family know that you prefer men for romance?”

“No, and they must not learn of it. Even in the rarefied circles my family treads, those who love men must be very discreet, and it is hardly encouraged in the king’s family. I would be ostracized without a chance to defend myself.”

“But do you not see, Christopher? You could live here and be honest with yourself. We could make a life together and perhaps we might even be given the chance to grow old together! Please consider it. Or is it that you fancy a life at court in government service?”

“I freely admit that I have considered that possibility for I would be a fool not to do so. My first major goal was to acquire an education and then to pursue a career in historical matters as suitable preparation should I choose to follow that path.”

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“Perhaps you have forgotten my lineage! I am blood relative to the Hapsburgs and I am a count, as you know. If you wish for a life at court, it is within my power to give you. True, it would be the Romanian court, but no less a royal.”

I pondered for several moments. “Perhaps I might petition my father to speak to the king and request that I be appointed as Ambassador to Romania. I could choose to lodge with you and no one would question it, as we are now acquaintances. All of the schemes to betroth me to any girl with the right family will cease when I explain that I must establish myself before I can consider marriage. I think it will take me many, many years to make my reputation and my fortune.” I smiled. “I must leave for England at once before the snows begin to set in. If this mad plan is to have a chance, I must act quickly.”

We bounded from bed like children on Christmas morning, dressed one another, and went down to the dining room. Rupert prepared a feast after the count whispered to him my true station in life. Michael’s servants packed my trunk and loaded it into his carriage as we ate. In less than an hour, I was on the road that took me away from Bran Castle and home to England.

Chapter Seven

AFTER a four-month period, I was finally able to make all the arrangements and return to Romania. My father's influence enabled me to be appointed the Crown's Ambassador to Romania, a post that no one fought over as it added little status to one's reputation.

My father was well pleased that I had taken such an interest in public service and had accepted a position that brought honor to the family name. The Queen was delighted to do a favor for my father and off I went. I arrived in Transylvania on March 1, 1713, and headed straight for Bran Castle. I had continually written to Michael to let him know of my progress on all fronts and his excitement grew each time he received a letter from me. I would present my credentials to the Romanian Crown once I established myself at Bran Castle and rested.

Travel to the castle was slow as the end of winter still held the mountains in its grip. The roads were either ice or mud and it took double the amount of time as my previous journey to Romania. My instructions were to stop at the village inn when I arrived and to send a messenger to the castle. A team of horses would then be sent to fetch my trunks and me so that I would not be faced with dragging my luggage up the hill as before. I arrived at the inn, ordered a pint of the local brew and asked that a message be sent to Bran Castle. Due to the weather, my request was met with some frank incredulity.

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“And who might you be? The King of England?” asked the man behind the bar.

“Good heavens, no! Queen Anne sits upon the throne of Great Britain, and a fine lady she is! I am the Marquess of Douro, the Ambassador to Romania from Great Britain. Now could you do me the favor of letting the count know that I am here? I will be residing at the castle.”

When the publican studied my face and saw that I was not joking with him, he apologized profusely and a lackey was dispatched to the castle at once. As soon as the count’s men arrived, I paid for my beer and left a more than decent tip.

The man behind the bar once again apologized for his mocking question. “Please sir, do not tell the count of my insolence!”

When I arrived at the castle, I was shown in by Rupert and taken immediately to the count. He was waiting impatiently and embraced me upon my entrance.

“Oh, but it is good to see you again! I have missed you more than I can say. How was your journey? You must be frozen. Come, stand here by the fire and warm yourself. Rupert! Bring us some brandy, please.”

“I assure you I am as glad to be done with this trip and in the castle as you are to have me here! The weather is terrible. I am frozen, and I missed you every moment I was away!”

“As soon as we have our brandy, we will go up to the bedroom where a fire is burning and I will you warm up. Ah, here’s the brandy now.”

“Thank you Rupert,” I said with a smile.

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“You’re most welcome, Ambassador,” he said with an answering smile.

When the servant had gone, I turned to Michael and said, “I do believe that’s the first time Rupert has smiled at me!”

“Is it any wonder? He knows that you have the power of breaking the curse and allowing us to resume a normal life. Many a man and many a woman as well, has wished for the blessing of immortality, but it truly is a curse. I would be quite content to age with you and some day die in your arms. That would be the end I would wish most.”

“Let us not speak of death at this joyous time; I have only just arrived and have yet to present myself at court. I must do so within the week and convey my credentials to the King of Romania, but I had to see you first.”

“The king is aware that you are coming, I can assure you. Let us go to the bedroom.”

We walked quickly up the circular staircase and in moments, we were behind the closed door of *our* bedroom. Michael was right, the room was nice and warm and I noticed at least a three day supply of wood laid in.

When I took my jacket off and threw it on the chair, Michael wrapped his arms around me and kissed me deeply.

“Oh, how I have missed you. I had nearly resigned myself to a lonely eternity without a special man in my life, and then you came to me with your history-seeking nose. Now, my life is turned upside down with possibilities and it is all to your credit. If there is anything that you wish brought here to make your life more pleasant, you must let me know.”

“Thank you, Michael, have no fear that I will not. I thought of you frequently while I was in England and in comparison, I saw just how

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stuffy society and court life can be. Everyone insisted on asking me when I would marry, and what on earth would I find to do in Romania, of all places?”

We both laughed. I knew without a doubt what I would be doing here in Romania. If I were fortunate, I would be the career Crown Ambassador to Romania and long time lover of Count Michael of Bran Castle. Such were my lofty ambitions.

SOON it was mid-spring and the flowers were pushing their way up through the ground. The trees were blooming and warmth returned to the Carpathian Mountains in a rush of color. The commission of my office was no great tax on my time. I was expected to do little beyond attending the occasional social event. The fact that Count Michael always attended with me was never commented upon as everyone assumed he was my sponsor at court. I was enjoying life fully, and had fallen deeply in love with Michael. His dark handsome looks had attracted me physically and his love of life made my heart sing.

One day when I went down to eat, I found a man with an easel waiting upon me.

“Mr. Ambassador,” he greeted me. “I have been retained by Count Michael to paint your portrait. When might be a good time?”

“Well, this is a surprise, I must say. I will first have to talk to the count.”

“Of course sir, I will have a seat.”

“Rupert, do you know where the count is?”

“Yes sir, I believe that he is due back from the monastery shortly.”

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“Ah, very well. I’ll take breakfast now, if you would be so kind.”

“Right away, sir.”

Just as I finished, Michael returned and joined me in the dining room.

“There is an artist here to paint me. Is it your intention to have me strip naked for the hungry eyes of this man and then add my likeness to the wall in your private gallery?”

“I am so sorry, Christopher. I meant to tell you about this and I forgot. Yes, I would dearly love to have your portrait on the wall with the others that have been here down through the years.”

“Very well, Michael, but there shall be one difference.”

“What difference?”

“I will keep my clothes on. I will be the only young man in your gallery who isn’t showing his bits and pieces.”

“Agreed,” he said with a loud laugh.

I spent the next week posing for the artist. Finally, the painting was finished and Michael and I looked at it together and were very impressed. We took the painting up to the gallery and opened the door. I felt odd having all of Michael’s past lovers staring down at me.

“Well lads, I will be joining you, but I have my clothes on. Only Michael is privileged to see so much of me,” I said with a laugh.

Oddly enough, there was only enough space on the walls for one portrait. When mine was hung; the room was complete. I took a slow tour of the other portraits and saw how subtly things changed over time, hairstyles and the furniture that they were lying upon or standing next too.

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Michael and I embraced, kissed, and left the room holding hands. The door was once again locked and we went to the library where I was studying a volume on religious freedoms in the 15th century. Of a sudden, we heard screaming from the main room on the first floor. We flew down the stairs to where the servants were gathered.

There we found Rupert lying on the floor with a spilled tray of freshly polished silver. “What happened?” asked Michael sharply.

“He had just finished the silverware and was bringing it back into the dining room to put in the sideboard. I heard the tray crash and turned to find him lying on the floor just as he is now,” answered a footman.

Michael was listening to the old man’s chest. I saw a look of fear wash over him, and I knew what had happened. “He is dead. Rupert is dead!”

To some present, those words merely meant that the count had lost an old and faithful servant, but those who knew, appreciated the far greater significance. The curse had been broken. The three men chained together by the spite of a dying man were no longer immortal. My love for Michael had broken the spell.

THREE days later, Rupert was laid to rest in a small cemetery maintained by Michael’s family. Only a dozen or so people were in attendance, but among those more silent than the others was Constantine. He appeared very weak and ill and Michael and I expected that he would soon join Rupert. The fact that Michael was in his thirties when the curse was placed meant that he would be around for another three to four decades.

As we walked back to the castle, Michael began to reflect on what it meant to be mortal again. “I will have to learn to treasure each day with you and not take life for granted any longer. Once again, I sense a

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purpose in the things that I am to plan for the rest of my life. Together, Christopher, we can leave the world a better place than we found it. I love you so much, and will be eternally grateful that you set me free from a dreary existence.”

“We will live life to the fullest and do what is right. There are many sunrises ahead of us and we will enjoy them all. Let us plan a trip to London so that I might show you the world I came from, and introduce you at the Court of St. James. Together, there is nothing we cannot do.”

“I love you, Christopher.”

“And I want my painting moved out of that room and brought downstairs to hang over the mantel piece.”

“As you wish, my love.”

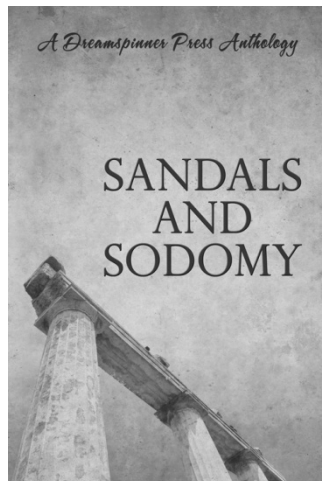
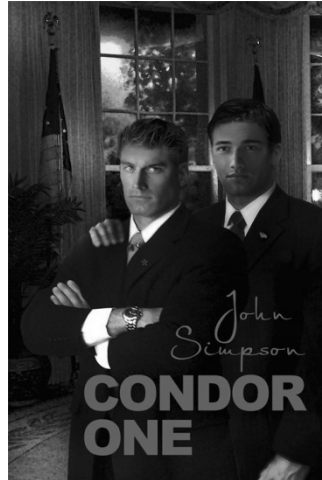
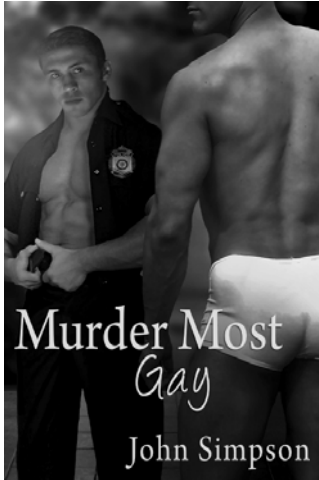
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John Simpson, a Vietnam era Veteran, has been a uniformed Police Officer of the year, a Federal Agent, a Federal Magistrate, an armed bodyguard to royalty and a senior Government executive, with awards from the Vice-President of the United States and the Secretary of the Treasury. John now writes and is the author of *Murder Most Gay*, a full-length novel, with a sequel entitled *Task Force*, both published through Dreamspinner Press, and numerous short stories for Alyson Books. Additionally, he has written articles for various gay and straight magazines. John lives with his partner of 35 years and three wonderful Scott Terriers, all spoiled. John is also involved with the Old Catholic Church and its liberal pastoral positions on the Gay community.

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