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DRACULA

THE KISS IN THE BLACK CHURCH

Translation from Romanian by Philip Ó Ceallaigh

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PART ONE

THE KISS IN THE BLACK CHURCH



CHAPTER I

Sinaia is a small tourist town on the border between Wallachia and Transylvania, where after the Feast of Saint Parascheva, in the middle of October, you are unlikely to see a woman wearing, with infinite grace, a splendid dress of black lace. It would be an odd sight in a place that records some of the lowest temperatures in Romania. It never crossed my mind that my next mission would suddenly take me there.

I was considered one of the most experienced detectives on the Bucharest Police Force. I had a reputation for being unemotional and solving cases quickly and coolly. Most of my colleagues were amazed at my calm. It was a false impression, and to convey it demanded some effort. But I made the effort, because appearing to be in control mattered to me. In fact, I felt equally harassed at work and at home. The pressure of the complex cases I was working on was sometimes overwhelming, and my life-partner piled on additional pressure. My wife, Corina, teaches at an English-language playschool and we have two daughters: Daria is eight and Ilinca is five. But my wife had decided she wanted a boy too... and that the happiness and harmony of our family depended on this wish being fulfilled. Our sexual relations had

become a burden, an obligation, a source of stress, and I panicked every time Corina announced she was ovulating. I knew how it would go. She'd phone me at work and ask me to come home, and if it happened to be the weekend, she'd send the girls to her mother's and I'd remain under house arrest, obliged to perform several times a day. This had been going on for about a year and I felt like a burned-out gigolo. In my fantasies I'd probably worked my way through all the girls in my old high school and I was getting desperate. I couldn't deal with sex on demand, just for purposes of procreation. My wife was so obsessed with the idea of having a boy that she'd bought entire sets of blue baby clothing and chosen a name for the child: Dante. Made no difference what I wanted. Nobody had asked me if I wanted a third child. My wife had decided everything on her own. She'd even told the girls that they'd have a brother before long, and when they played with their dolls it was all they talked about, what it would be like when Dante arrived and how their wonderful little brother would change their lives. For some time, the girls had cut me out, playing only among themselves and even making fun of me and, imitating their mother I suppose, asked me in an unpleasant tone when they'd have a brother, and told me it had better be soon. With each passing day I seemed to be falling lower in the estimation of my family and I felt that something major was preventing my wife and I from communicating: I have no other way to explain the pressure I'd come to feel in Corina's presence. I'd started feeling awkward, harried, even intimidated – a kind of Anne Boleyn, obliged to produce a male heir, under threat of imminent decapitation.

So it came as a relief that February evening when my boss, Colonel Jitea, entered the office and told me I was leaving town on an urgent mission. I had just finished speaking on the phone with Corina, who informed me bossily that she'd begun ovulating and had sent the kids to her mother's for the weekend, and warned me not to think about playing football with my colleagues. I remained seated while Jitea paced back and forth in front of me, leafing through a file.

– A totally screwed-up case, he rumbled, frowning with consternation. Magdalena Poenaru Boicescu, 18 years old, from Braşov, heart attack the apparent cause of death. Her husband buries her before her father, who's working abroad, can make it back. The father gets home and files a complaint with the Prosecutor's office in Braşov, demanding the exhumation of his daughter's body because he suspects she's been murdered...

– Murdered by whom?

– There's no hard accusation, but he says his daughter didn't have a heart condition, and he'd talked to some of the girl's friends and gathered evidence and had begun to suspect the teacher, who didn't give him time to get to the funeral... By "teacher" I mean the husband of the deceased. It's a bit involved; you'd have to read the file. In any case, after a month of fighting it in court, the girl's father, Constantin Poenaru, was granted his request and the body was to be exhumed in the presence of the Braşov Police and prosecutor, a coroner and the family. But there was no corpse! The sheet in the coffin was as clean as snow, no trace of the girl, not even a strand of hair.

– Christ!

And I thought I'd heard it all.

– That was two, almost three weeks ago, on the 2nd of February, to be exact, continued Jitea. Except that the father, unhappy that the case wasn't being solved, lodged a complaint against the local authorities with the Attorney General's office. And Prosecutor Ghețea has given us the case. Determined guy, this girl's dad! Seems she was an only child. I think I read... Yeah, here we go, in his complaint: "my sole daughter and only child"... Ghețea asked me to put you on the case, and since you're ready to get rolling, bam, it's all yours. The girl was from Brașov and that's where he filed his complaint, though she was buried in Sinaia. This Boicescu, her husband, who's a teacher at the "Andrei Șaguna" high school in Brașov, resides, in fact, in Sinaia... The girl died in Sinaia and was buried there in the Șețu cemetery. So you'll have to go back and forth between Sinaia and Brașov. But maybe it's a better idea if you base yourself in Sinaia.

– Sure, whoever takes the case will have to be breathing down the neck of this Boicescu character. And will need to check out the cemetery.

– Indeed. The girl died at his home, at 14 Alunișului St, in the Cumpătu neighbourhood. The George Enescu Memorial House is in that area. You know Sinaia?

– To tell the truth, boss, I've passed through Sinaia often enough on the way to Poiana Brașov, but never spent time there. I've always skied in Poiană or in Austria. So I only know the main street, the road through to Brașov. My parents took me once, when I was a kid, we slept in Predeal and visited Peleş Castle, but that must have been 20 years ago.

– Well, all the better, this time round you can see the King's summer residence as an adult. There's plenty for you to do in the area. And you were complaining you didn't take a summer

holiday! But you leave on Sunday, by the way, so you can hit the ground running on Monday. You could even leave tomorrow, to familiarize yourself with the area.

– Boss, I don't know if leaving right now is really what I need, after this summer's mission to Amsterdam...

I'd spent the whole summer in the Netherlands, on the trail of a drug-trafficking network. On reflection, perhaps it wasn't a great idea to bail out on Corina exactly when she was ovulating.

– My wife is complaining I don't spend time with her. Says I spend too much time at the office, go off on missions for weeks or months on end, don't help with the kids, that on Sunday, my only free day, I play football or read reports at the office. She says it all points to one thing – that I have a lover.

– And do you? asks Jitea, laughing and giving his moustache-ends a good twist.

– No, I don't, Colonel. But she's threatened to take the kids and go to her mother's if I don't spend more time with the family.

I expected some sympathy from Jitea, who was a good family man, decades married and with grown children.

– Come on, Verbitski. If someone heard us, they'd think you were hen-pecked. I bet you rule with an iron hand when it comes to women!

– Not really, Colonel.

– You think I don't know how the ladies around here tremble and swoon every time you walk down the corridor? 007 – that's what the tarts in Administration call you. When you go to the coffee machine, suddenly there's a queue. You really haven't noticed? So I don't understand, I can't believe... Your wife has you under her thumb? You, the James Bond of the Bucharest Police Force?

– Colonel, as you know, I was away for a long time. The fact is, I’ve been neglecting my family lately, I said decisively, determined not to fall into his trap.

– You were gone, no argument there. But that comes with the job...

– I can’t leave this month, I countered, convinced that if I did my duty with Corina that month, she’d be knocked up with Dante and I’d be a free man again. Why don’t you send Anton? I suggested. He’s from that area – from Câmpina. He must know Sinaia well.

– What, I need someone who knows Sinaia? I need your bloodhound nose! Women – if it was up to them we’d be waiting on them hand and foot. But they like you to bring home the bacon too and have a certain social standing! Relax, your wife will get over it. My hands are tied; you have to go.

– I would, boss, but you’ll see, you’ll hear about it, she’ll divorce me if I go tomorrow... I promised her I’d take the kids to the cinema on Sunday, I lied, too embarrassed to admit the thing about ovulation to anyone.

– Come on, Verbitski, you’ll sort it out in no time, he said, tossing the file onto my desk.

On top of the report was a photograph of a young woman.

– You’re leaving tomorrow morning. I’m certain you’ll be back with us within a week.

I looked at him reprovingly.

– I’m not saying it’s straightforward, he said, frowning. In my 35 years on the job, I’ve never come across anything like it, but I’m sure you’re up to it. You’ve just got to find the body, Verbitski. Somebody desecrated a grave and stole a corpse and we need to find out why. We have to put whoever did it behind bars, and fast,

make them pay their debt to society. If this individual is mentally ill and walking around free, worse still, because this person is liable to strike again. The possibility of some destitute grave-robber can be excluded, because they’d have just gone for the jewellery and not for the corpse. This is some kind of a psycho. If it’s someone with a personal vendetta it still makes them a psycho, if they’re capable of desecrating a grave and bodysnatching. So you tell me, Verbitski, how safe can a woman feel walking down the street in the Prahova Valley or wherever the psycho decides to strike next, while we’re snoozing on the job. As if the Braşov cops haven’t had enough sleep! The girl died on the 1st of January and was buried on the 3rd. It’s February 20th today, so more than six weeks have passed... The exhumation was on February 2nd, so somebody did it between January 3rd and February 1st. That person had all the time in the world and could be anywhere by now. But why the hell would anyone steal a corpse? What are you going to do with a corpse?

Jitea shivered and made the sign of the cross.

– Please Verbitski, get on it as fast as you can! We have to hurry! Like I said, Gheţea wants you. He wrote your name on the file – look!

Indeed, in a top corner of the first page was written: “for Captain M. Verbitski”.

– So there’s no point protesting, said Jitea. He wants a response in an hour. As for your wife, don’t you have a mirror at home? Where would she find another man like you? Come on, talk to Nadia, have her make you a reservation!

Nadia was our secretary. Jitea winked at me and went out. He’d said his piece. Hey, those were the moments I loved my life. A fresh challenge made me feel alive. I lit a cigarette and regarded

the face in the 3x5 colour photograph. It was a full-face snap taken outside, on a veranda, as pale-coloured wood could be seen behind the girl's head. She was looking straight at the camera. A symmetrical face, about 20 years old. A dark-haired young woman, with beautiful arching brows above her brown eyes. Nothing obvious to be read in her expression, neither innocence nor the suggestion of secrets... A well-defined oval face, with a strong but feminine nose. Her lips were neither full nor thin, but were extremely sensual. The longer I beheld that face, the more unsettled I became. You felt she was looking right at you. I was lost in thought for several minutes. Yes, that was it; more than anything, the photograph radiated living energy, pulsed with it. I had certainly never seen a more fascinating portrait.



CHAPTER II

To avoid a sleepless night, I waited until morning to tell Corina I was leaving on a case, and after I'd showered and had a coffee, I packed some warm clothes, kissed her on the cheek and was out the door. She was so surprised, she didn't say a word. Having been threatening to leave me for weeks on end, when she saw me packing my bag she probably thought for a moment that I was leaving her and got a fright. Watching her out the corner of my eye, while I looked for my heaviest pullovers in the wardrobe, I saw the fear rising in her face, contorting her features. I sensed she loved me and I don't know what prevented me from reassuring her that I loved her too. Perhaps it was pride. Perhaps I wanted her to pay for the scenes she'd recently made me endure. Or perhaps I was holding back, as you do when you want to keep yourself for something better. I felt I was betraying my wife in my thoughts; the stirring in my blood, the vital energy that was flowing towards somebody else, towards the unknown young woman in the photo whose mysterious disappearance I had to explain. Strangely, I thought of her as still alive. I felt a sense of urgency, as though she were trapped behind a wall, imploring me to hasten to save her. I took the stairs at a jog – we