

# ARRIVAL IN TRANSYLVANIA

KAT MEETS DANIEL

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# PENSIUNEA LA MADĂLINA

## BRAȘOV, ROMÂNIA

We passed through a den that had been outfitted, floor to ceiling, in leather and wood. A pine-colored chandelier, complete with golden, flickering LEDs, hung above us. Metal-studded leather chairs encircled a solid-wood table, and everything else—couch, coffee table, bookshelves—carried on the medieval look.

Well, everything except a menorah, which sat atop a bookshelf. The spines of several books showcased a script that might have been Hebrew.

“The kitchen is there.” Daniel gestured at an open doorway. “It’s small, but we make up for it with our selection of gourmet coffees and teas. Maksim can show you that. Your rooms are upstairs.”

We ascended a wide staircase that curved around to the upper levels. Daniel bypassed the second floor and continued to the third.

“My wife is eager to meet you, Kat.” Daniel’s voice echoed through the stairwell. “She was needed at our other business, but

she'll be returning this evening." He pulled out a key ring and stationed himself in front of a door.



I lingered on the top step, admiring a painting on the wall. There were others, most of them colorful with dreamy landscapes, but this one was darker, more ominous.

Gnarled branches extended from gray tree trunks. Deep shadows had been layered into the scene, but a cluster of flowers in electric purple sprang up along the forest floor.

"My wife painted that." Daniel had been reaching for the door handle, but his attention was now on me. "These are all her original works." He nodded toward the other paintings. "She is a gifted artist."

"There's something special about this one." I reexamined the painting. "I love how the forest is shadowy but the flowers are glowing. Like they've found their own magical life amid the death and decay."

"She will be pleased to know her inspiration conveyed with such clarity." He turned to Maksim. "She painted that when you were with us. Do you remember?"

Maksim held a soft smile. "*Da.*"

Daniel placed a hand on Maksim's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. They seemed to be having an unspoken exchange. Daniel's eyes misted.

He swallowed his emotion and returned to the door. "This will be your room, Kat. I hope you'll find it comfortable. And warm."

The door opened to a cozy room with a twin bed, bedside table, and lamp. An upholstered chair sat in the corner.

"There's one extra blanket." Daniel gestured at a wool blanket folded in the chair. "We have others in case that's not enough. Maksim, you'll be in your old room." Daniel handed him a key.

“The bathroom is there”—he pointed at the end of the hall—“shared between the two of you.”

I wasn’t sure how I felt about sharing a bathroom with Maksim. Even at Brandy’s house, as crowded as it was, we girls had our own bathroom, which we shared with Brandy’s sister. Their little brother had to use the bathroom downstairs.

Maksim’s gaze met mine from across the hall. I ducked inside my room.

“I’m late for an appointment,” Daniel said, “but Madă and I hope to hear more about this scavenger hunt Maksim has mentioned.”

I dropped my stuff in the chair and returned to the doorway. “Madă is your wife?”

“Madălină, actually, like our guesthouse. But you may call her Madă, as we do.” Daniel switched to Romanian, giving Maksim’s shoulder a fatherly pat. They hugged, and then Daniel broke away and plodded down the stairs.

Maksim ambled closer and propped his shoulder against the wall. He folded his arms and crossed one foot in front of the other, relaxed—except that he was fighting a smile the entire time. “You don’t mind sharing a bathroom, do you?”

I gave him side-eye. “Was I that obvious?”

“A bit. You do realize—”

“No, I don’t.” I held up a finger. “And I don’t want to realize or talk about realizing if it involves mutual use of the bathroom.”

“What if it involves a clue I’ve solved?” He bounced both eyebrows.

“You solved a clue?” I perked up. “Already?”

“Possibly.” He plucked the scavenger hunt from his back pocket and unfolded the paper.

