

THE DEMISE OF NICHOLAS BARRETT

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Nicholas Barrett ducked inside an alley and slipped into an alcove. He gripped the package and held his breath, afraid the foggy warmth in the crisp air would give away his location.

Uniformed police officers rushed past, their two-way radios squawking. Had the men seen him? He didn't think so, but he waited until the count of thirty before daring to have a peek.

The men were gone, and he allowed himself a much-needed breath.

The package he'd been carrying since Sibiu had snow on it. He brushed off the flakes and reached inside the padded mailer, ensuring the gold locket hadn't fallen out.

It hadn't, thankfully, and his pulse cooled another degree. The locket was critical. Without it, the scavenger hunt was useless.

A notebook and ballpoint pen were stuffed inside his coat. He pulled them out and squatted, balancing the notebook on his



thigh. Sitting would have been easier, but he didn't dare. The ground was snowy and damp, and a wet spot would draw attention.

He didn't need attention. He needed to disappear. It was his only chance of getting home to his daughter.

Kat. He thought back to his last moments with her—a bland goodbye, an offhanded “see you soon.” Had he known, had he any idea, this was going to happen, he would have cherished the moment so much more.

He staved off tears and composed the list. He considered including an explanation, but he feared what may happen should someone intercept the package. She could die if she became involved in all of this—but she was already involved, simply by being his daughter.

Nicholas hesitated, thinking of what his father had said. *“My grandson will murder her to ensure he has no more loose ends. It will be better if she has the lockbox.”*

Nicholas had agreed. At least then Kat could take steps to protect herself. If nothing else, she would have a bargaining chip. His father abhorred the thought of his grandson—Nicholas's nephew—finding and taking possession of the lockbox, but what truly mattered most was Kat's safety.

Would all of this ensure her protection? Could it?

Nicholas shook off his reluctance and continued working on the list... until the crunch of footsteps on snow drew closer.

Nicholas stuffed everything into his coat pocket and backed into the alcove. He straightened, sucking in his stomach and pressing himself flush with the wall.

The footsteps stopped outside the alley. Silence unfolded, and as Nicholas stood there, willing himself to be a statue, he wondered if he may have imagined things, if perhaps nobody had stopped outside the alley after all.

But someone had. Nicholas could sense the person's presence. If his heart had not been drumming so very loudly, he might have sworn he heard the person breathing.

A man had stopped him earlier, demanding to see Nicholas's passport; and when Nicholas had complied, the man—without identifying himself—said he was under arrest. A policeman stood nearby, but he had ignored Nicholas's plea for help.

Nicholas managed to get away, though barely, and it was in that moment he realized... his father had been right. They were being hunted, like animals, and there was no one to help, not even the police.

No. It was worse than that. For the police were part of this mad conspiracy.

The crunch of a footstep broke the lingering silence. Nicholas pulled in his lips, clamping down on his desire to inhale or exhale or do anything else that might make the tiniest of sounds.

Another crunch reached his ears, and another—but the sound grew fainter. Whoever this person was, he must be continuing on.

Nicholas lowered himself to the ground and peered out from behind a trashcan. He saw no one, but he did spy a bus in the distance. That was the direction he was going—to the main street there and across to the Braşov post office.

He returned to the alcove and reviewed the clues. Kat would have the package in a week, perhaps ten days. He hoped he would make it home, that he would be able to explain everything himself, but mailing the package was essential because—

He shook his head, heat stinging his eyes. The fact was, he might not make it home. It was an unfortunate and very real possibility.

Nicholas folded the paper, slipped it in with the locket, and sealed the mailer. Then he kissed the wooden cross he was wearing, said a silent, heartfelt prayer, and darted out of the alley.

Cobblestones bumped beneath his feet as he raced toward the main street.

"Hei!" The shout came from behind.

Nicholas lowered his head and sprinted past the colorful

merchant houses situated along Strada Republicii. More shouts rang out by the time he reached the crosswalk.

He sent the briefest of glances over his shoulder, and his insides chilled. Blue uniforms charged after him, and they were gaining ground.

Dear God, no.

A horn blared, jerking his attention. A car braked, skidding on the snowy road, and the rear lost traction. The sedan fishtailed.

Nicholas dodged right as the car skidded past him, missing him by mere inches—but then his feet reached the same icy spot.

Nicholas slipped. His shoulder collided with pavement. The package tumbled out of his hands.



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