

Romania, December 16<sup>th</sup>

Nicholas Barrett ducked into an alley and hid behind a garbage bin. The smell of rotten waste was pungent. Gripping the package he'd been carrying since Sibiu, he held his breath to keep from gagging.

Two police officers raced past. Had they seen him go into the alley? He didn't think so, but he wasn't taking the chance and waited to the count of fifty before finally standing up. The package had ice on it. He dusted off the flakes and reached inside, ensuring the gold locket hadn't fallen out.

It hadn't. A thin notebook he'd swiped from a gift shop was still stuffed in his trench coat, too, as was a pen. He pulled them out, once again squatting, though not daring to sit all the way to the ground. Not only was the snow-layered ground freezing, but a wet spot would draw attention.

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

His daughter. The thought of her brought on sadness like he'd never felt. Nicholas recalled the night of the fire two years prior, the way she had cried for the firemen to put out the flames. In the end, nothing was salvaged. The fire had disintegrated their belongings, everything

they owned, and left them with ashes for memories.

An only child, his daughter was strong, independent, and yet she had crumbled under the weight of that loss. So then how would she deal with *this*? Would she be okay if Nicholas didn't make it back to her?

He had to hope she would be, and swiftly he composed the letter. Upon reading it, he shredded it and started again. He needed to be more cryptic in his explanation. The Romania postal service could be in on the plot, and the package could be intercepted.

Paranoid as the idea may have seemed, he couldn't discount it. He'd returned to Romania because of his father's illness. He was now fleeing for his life because of an inheritance, one he'd never expected to receive after cutting ties to his family so long ago.

*Madness*, Nicholas thought, squeezing his hand. The knuckles were sore. A man had stopped him at the railway station, demanding to see his passport; and then, for no apparent reason, he said Nicholas was to come with him.

Nicholas knew better. He'd managed to escape, though barely, and made it safely to his current location: across the street from Braşov's main post office.

He recomposed the letter, selecting his words more carefully. His daughter would have it in a week, two weeks tops. Should he actually make it home—a feat he was beginning to doubt—he could explain everything to her himself. But mailing the package as a precaution was not extreme. It was essential.

Thinking one last thought before exiting the alley, Nicholas added a postscript to the bottom of the letter. Then he shoved it in with the locket, checked both directions, and darted across the street.

Georgia, USA

## 1. Delivery

My head shot up at the sound of metal chinking against wood. The hell was that?

I blinked, expecting gray daylight to flood my vision.

No light.

I looked at the window. The blinds, which I vaguely recalled destroying earlier, hung halfway off their hinges. Nighttime filtered into the apartment.

Took me a second to remember what happened, how I ended up crumpled by the couch. As I unfolded from the fetal position, sharp tingles rushed down my legs. How long had I been like this?

A knock at the door rattled the unlatched chain lock, causing the links to bounce against the doorframe. That must have been knock number two. I used the couch to pull myself up and then reached for the lamp. My hand slammed into the stumpy base, and the whole thing crashed to the floor.

Whoever was at the door knocked again, this time adding two rings of the doorbell.

“Just a sec!” I fumbled for the lamp. “Where—?”

I tripped on the lampshade. The light bulb popped, and shards of paper fine glass crunched under my shoe. “Ugh. Idiot.”

The Christmas tree was within arm's reach. I hit the switch on the power strip, flinching as thousands of LED mini-lights scorched red, white, and blue into my retinas. It'd been my idea to do an American flag theme for Christmas. My dad was the one who'd gone overboard, adding a gazillion light strands and buying arts-n-crafts supplies so we could make our own flag ornaments. "Lady Liberty," he'd proudly called the tree after we decorated it.

More ringing.

I stumbled to the door and swung it open. A frigid gust blasted me, whipping my hair into curly black chaos. I yanked a rubber band off my wrist and eyed the woman on my doorstep. She was wearing a thick coat with gloves and a wool hat, but she was still shivering.

"Katherine"—she peeked at a manila file—"Barrett?"

"It's Kat," I said, wrapping my chaos in a bun.

A fake smile strained her lips. "I'm sorry to stop by so late, Kat. Well. I suppose it's not *too* too late, but it sure does seem that way this time of year, doesn't it? And I did stop by earlier. You weren't home."

She said "weren't" prim and proper: *were-ent*. And, what was she talking about? I'd been home all day.

No, wait. That was yesterday. Today I'd gone to the service. Memorial. Whatever it was called. The pastor from Trinity Anglican called it a funeral when he'd first arrived—then he realized there wasn't a casket.

The woman strummed her nails over the file, as if bored. When she looked past me, her eyes lit up. "Oh! Still have the tree up, I see. My husband and I took ours down—"

She hesitated, forehead creasing. I glanced over my shoulder and realized she was staring at the blinds.

"On the first," she finished.

I stepped outside and jerked the door shut. "Who are you and what do you want?"

“Sylvia Martin, DHS.”

“DHS?”

“Department of Human Services.”

My shoulders fell. “You mean social services.”

Another fake smile, then she stuffed the file under her arm. “May I come in?”

“No.”

That made her frown. “I need to speak with you about your father.”

“I’m busy.”

“Miss Barrett—”

“Can you come back next week? Really, this isn’t a good time.”

She gruffed up her tone, posture rigid. “Miss Barrett, I must insist on speaking to you *now*.”

“Next week. Monday. I’ll be home from school by five.” School started Monday, right? I wasn’t a hundred percent on that, or if I’d be going, but she didn’t need to know that.

“Miss Barrett, I simply cannot leave you like this.”

“Look, it’s only a few days—”

“You are aware apartments won’t lease to minors, aren’t you?” She did a thing with her eyebrows—one raised, the other crooked—and it took every ounce of self-control to keep from lashing her with a nuclear hot response.

Instead, I took a breath. “All I need is a few days to get some things worked out. *A few days*.” I nudged open the door. “Please?”

I didn’t wait for her reply before spewing a thanks, slamming the door, and snapping the lock.

Shit.

I flew into the kitchen and checked the calendar. Brandy was supposed to be back in

town Saturday, and I was pretty sure her mom could help with this slight problem of me being a minor. If not, her older brother might. Maybe Seth could put the apartment in his name. Then I'd just have to avoid social services until May.

A rapid knock interrupted my thoughts. I checked the peephole and saw a blue uniform racing away from the door.

"Hey!" I poked my head outside. The guy was already to the stairs.

"Delivery. No need to sign." He waved, bounding down the last two steps, and continued across the apartment lawn. I heard him say "Happy New Year" as I scooped up a small brown package.

Someone approached from the other direction. The steps were light, clicky—a woman wearing heels. The social worker must have heard me yell at the delivery guy.

I ducked back inside and pressed one ear to the door, biting a ragged cuticle as the high-heels rolled this way. But then I heard a scrape, like they'd changed direction, and they faded down the sidewalk.

Tears swelling, I ripped out my rubber band and gripped a fistful of hair. The pain grounded me, kept my sanity from crumbling. Ever since that cop showed up the other day, I'd felt like a zombie: numb, going through the motions of things. I hadn't slept much, and my first outburst happened when I came home from the cemetery.

"It's this apartment," I said, rubbing my eyes. "I've gotta get out of here."

I dropped the package on the dining room table and grabbed my mailbox key. Hadn't checked the mail in a week, and now that I thought about it—now that I was thinking, period—I realized it would be stupid to let the box fill up. The postman would start delivering to the front office then, and I didn't need the apartment staff butting into my business like social services.

I ambled downstairs and cut across the parking lot. Dad's car was parked in its usual spot. My feet lagged as I recalled last April Fools' Day. He'd bought his beloved hunk of junk

the day before; it was a beat-up, ragged-out '72 Chevy Nova riddled with rust, but it might as well have been a brand new Porsche the way he obsessed over it.

And it'd been the perfect setup for a prank.

Five in the morning on April Fools' Day, I'd raced into his bedroom hollering that someone crashed into the car. "Hurry, Dad! The guy's gonna take off!"

He leapt out of bed like an Olympic pole vaulter and sprinted out the front door, right into a lovely Georgia-in-springtime downpour. He was barefoot, still wearing his boxers and undershirt. That made the prank even funnier. I busted up laughing when he walked back into the apartment sopping wet.

He got his revenge later that day. When I arrived home from school, he said my teacher called to report me for ditching class. Last time I did that my dad grounded me for a month. The sledgehammer of all groundings. No way was I ever ditching class again. I started crying when he refused to believe I was innocent this time around.

He concluded his performance with the slyest of smirks and a reminder that I'd never outdo the master. "April Fools' Day, my Kat," he'd said in his sing-songy accent.

The distant sound of a door closing wrenched me out of the memory. I was in the parking lot, no jacket, and I shivered as the arctic wind sliced through me.

Why had I come out here again?

Oh yeah. Mailbox.

Footsteps treaded the pavement. Before I could turn, my dad brushed past and clipped my shoulder. His spicy cologne, something he always splashed on after taking a shower, wafted over me.

"Do you have the key?" he asked, glancing back.

I opened my palm. The spare Nova key was dangling next to the mailbox key.

"Yeah," I whispered. "Got it."

“Then, what are you waiting for? It’s cold out here.”

I looked up. He was standing by the driver-side door, brown eyes shining from the glare of a security light. I sprinted to the car, climbed in, and reached over to unlock his side.

He plopped down in the seat and inhaled. “Mmm, nothing like the smell of leather and pure ox power. Right, my Kat?”

I laughed. “It’s horse power, Dad.”

“Yes, but in Romania—”

“I know, I know. Some of your farmer friends had ox-drawn carriages.”

He twisted up a lopsided grin. “The most powerful means of tediously slow transportation, and so much more stylish than mules.”

“All right, wise guy, so where are we going?”

“My computer is fritzing again.”

“*On the fritz,*” I corrected for the six millionth time. He never could get that American expression right.

“Mike said to stop by his shop and he would discount some parts for me.”

Puzzled, I held up my watch. “It’s almost seven. Isn’t the computer store closed?”

He didn’t answer.

Just then, the security lights flickered and went out, dousing the parking lot in blackness. I peered out the window. Low-lying winter clouds blanketed the night sky, hiding the moon and stars. Atlanta’s downtown skyline was the only glow to be seen, but it was partially blocked by the apartment buildings.

Chills etched a trail up my spine. Silence wrapped itself around me, so loud it made my ears ring. I don’t know how long I sat there before I finally looked at the driver’s side.

He was gone.

“Guess we’re not going anywhere, huh?” My words sounded hollow in the dark. “I

haven't—" The tears that had been rolling around in my head all day spilled over, shedding my cheeks like two rivers. "I haven't told anyone about what happened. Dad, I can't—" A snuffle. "It's like I keep waiting for you to call. I know the phone's gonna ring, and all those people, the cops, everyone—they'll be wrong. They *are* wrong." I slammed my hand on the dashboard. "They're wrong! You're not dead! Tată, you're not! I KNOW YOU'RE NOT! PLEASE!"

Doubling over, I hugged myself. The rivers rushed until I was sobbing, heaving, choking on snot and tears.

"Tată, *please*." I pinched my eyes shut, tightly, hoping that when I opened them he'd be sitting next to me. Like I could will it to happen by simply wanting it bad enough.

But when my eyes opened, all I found was a bright light blasting my face.

"Hey. You all right?" It was the officer who patrolled the complex. He tapped his flashlight on the window. "You live here?"

I nodded.

"Cold front knocked out the lights. Georgia Power's workin' on the lines—" He paused as the lights in the complex came on with a sharp hum. "Ah." He nodded. "Must be done. You, uh, need anything?"

I looked at the driver's side. The seat was empty, and my chest squeezed until it felt like I had a boulder on top of me.

*My dad*, I thought as a final tear slipped through. I needed him more than anything else, and he was gone forever.

#

*I'm terribly sorry for your loss, ma'am.*

*I am sorry to report this, but his body is unrecoverable.*

*Know how deeply sorry our office is, Miss Barrett.*

Sorry. I was so sick of hearing that word I could puke.

Red, white, and blue lit up the living room as I sat on the couch, staring at Tatã's coin collection. The glass case was nestled in my lap. Trying hard to forget the conversations I'd had with officials the past few days—their empathy, all those condolences—I set my focus on the coins.

Each one had its own tale of adventure from my dad's travels—mostly through Europe, but also a few countries in Africa. He even went to India once. “The original homeland of Gypsies before we migrated to Europe during ancient times,” he used to say.

My fingers bumped along the felt rows until I reached the empty slot. It was for his Romanian coin. He'd never shared any stories about that one, but since I didn't know how else to deal with the pseudo-funeral, I'd taken the coin earlier today, intent on burying it.

Ultimately, I hadn't been able to go through with it. It seemed ridiculous now—burying a coin in place of an actual body—but that's not the reason I'd forgone the plan.

His family: I knew zilch about them.

His former home: Aside from remarks about farmers and medieval villages, I didn't have a clue about Romania.

But I did have a heritage through him, and his coin collection was part of it.

The Romanian coin was lying on the coffee table, where it'd been since this afternoon. The round piece was cold when I picked it up. I'd turned off the heater earlier, afraid, just like I always was during the winter, of falling asleep with it on. The chilly metal gradually warmed the longer I held it.

After returning the coin to its rightful home, next to a shiny Croatian kuna, I shifted my attention to the dining room table. A stack of mail was piled up there, and I wondered if the letter I'd spotted from Georgia Tech was an acceptance or rejection. Not that it mattered. I didn't even know if I was going to school Monday, let alone if I'd be going to college in the fall.

My gaze wandered to the package. I hadn't opened it yet, hadn't even looked at it.

Might've been from Mom. My dad was the only Nicholas Barrett in the Atlanta white pages, and it's possible his worse-half grew a conscience, looked us up, and mailed a belated Christmas present. I didn't feel like dealing with that.

Then again, maybe it was from Ty. He'd forgotten to give me my Christmas present before leaving town—Lake Tahoe, visiting his grandparents—but we had this strange connection: forever finishing each others' sentences, thinking of the same thing at the same time. He didn't know what happened to Tatã, but maybe he felt something was wrong and decided to mail the gift.

A tiny remnant of happiness glimmered inside me. I went to the dining room table and picked up the package. The Christmas tree threw a mix of lights and shadows across the apartment, so I reached for the light in the kitchen.

But then I stopped. What would I do after I opened it? I couldn't call Ty and thank him. He'd ask the standard pleasantries if I did: How are you doing? What's going on? How was your Christmas?

My answers: Shitty. My dad died. Shitty.

I wouldn't be able to talk to him without extreme meltdown. That's why I hadn't told him—or anyone, even Brandy—what happened. I could still open his gift, though. Then I could call him later, once I'd gotten some sleep and my mental state wasn't so cracked and fragile.

I hit the light switch, expecting to see "Ty Daniels" in the return address.

But the package didn't have a return address. My eyes zipped back and forth before falling on the postmark in the top-right corner.

*Braşov, Romania*

"WHAT?" I flipped the package. A red stamp reading *POŞTA TRANSILVANIA* was

plastered across the backside.

Tată had gone to—

Dread washed over me and settled, like cement, in my gut. A man at the US Embassy in Romania emailed some paperwork three days ago. He hadn't said to expect anything by regular mail, but I had a feeling this package wasn't from the US Embassy.

I inspected the handwriting on the address label. The package slipped from my hands and hit the floor. A scream tore through the kitchen, loud, vicious—the scream of a maniac, and it was coming from me.

I silenced my panic, my rage, and snatched up the package, double-checking the familiar chicken scratch. This was a sick joke, it had to be. My dad was dead, yet he mailed me a package?

No. He couldn't have. Someone else sent it and copied his handwriting. But why? And who? And—*why*?

I ripped at the tape, fingers shaking, teeth digging into my lower lip. I caught another glimpse of the curly K in “Kat”—just the way my dad would write it.

Before I could stop myself, I screamed again and hurled the package at the Christmas tree.