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NICE WORK,  
NORA  
NOVEMBER



*Nice Work,*  
Nora November

.....

JULIA LONDON



HARPER MUSE

*Nice Work, Nora November*

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*Who looks outside, dreams; who looks inside, awakes.*

—CARL JUNG

HARPER  
MUSE



## Chapter 1



**L**ater, people would ask her what it was like.

“Death?” Nora would ask casually, as if she were a frequent traveler to this other realm with a return ticket. “Nothing like you could ever imagine.” Which she knew wasn’t terribly illuminating, but it was the best she could do. It was beyond her ability to account for her near-death experience. How could she adequately describe finding herself wedged into the frayed seam between life and death, neither alive nor dead, like some philosophical riddle on a college entrance exam?

Her response was inevitably followed by a pause in which the listener would politely wait for her to imagine for them. But that was all she had the words for. “You kind of had to be there,” she’d say.

She hated when people said that.

She didn’t want to be coy, but that extraordinary event was too precious, and too complicated, to try to put into words. It separated her new, improved life from the life she’d had in the Before, and it was deeply personal. Dying, then coming back to life, had altered her at the cellular level. She felt reimagined and reinvigorated, capable of things she’d never even contemplated, like rock climbing and trigonometry. Not that she intended to tackle either of those things—at least she didn’t think so; it was simply knowing that she could. How hard could anything be af-

ter surviving death? Her optimism was high as if she'd been shot through with vats of B12 and Pacific sunsets.

She had no idea how she'd shown up at death's door or how she'd died. And yet, the facts were irrefutable—she'd been clinically dead, having spent several minutes under water.

The November family was not particularly religious except when it served a purpose . . . like when an important client invited them to Easter church services and her father made them all attend. Still, Nora was familiar with the traditional symbols and had expected pearly gates and cherubs with lutes flitting around her. At the very least, Angel Gabriel checking in newcomers. Or Lucifer ushering the ones who'd found themselves at the wrong entrance into the fiery pits of hell. But when she died, there was nothing to suggest that she'd entered another realm.

Early in her legal career, she'd represented a family whose car had been hit by a casket. A truck was carrying several of the company's best sellers when the chain holding them on the back of a flatbed broke. The caskets bounced off and onto the highway, piling up like a giant version of the game Jenga. In preparation for that case, Nora had seen so many caskets that it was inevitable she would think about being stuck in one and planted six feet deep in the ground for all eternity. Not unreasonably, given the dimensions of your average casket, she'd imagined cold and lonely, dark and cramped.

It was a great surprise, therefore, to discover that death was, in fact, deliciously warm, like the first spring day after a long winter or the warmth she remembered feeling in her grandmother's kitchen.

It wasn't dark either—she'd found herself lying in a field bathed in soft gold light, the color of dusk on an autumn evening. Not the light of the sun, exactly, but something richer, soaking into her like cream on cake.

Nor had she anticipated beautiful, ethereal birdsong. It reminded her of childhood summers she'd spent at the family ranch in the Hill Country, where she'd wake every morning to the chirping and singing of mockingbirds. She'd loved their chatter.

Her father had not. "What is making all that racket?" he'd bellow. Then, one morning, a man in a blue work shirt and stained trucker hat pulled up in a pickup truck hauling a strange-looking cylindrical thing. "This will get rid of the birds, the neighbors, and anything else you don't want," he'd said and patted it like it was a dog. It turned out to be a cannon, which he and Dad gleefully fired, the massive boom reverberating through the hills like a Revolutionary cavalry. In the kitchen, two empty glasses shimmied right off the edge of the counter and shattered on the tile floor.

The mockingbirds didn't come back. Neither did the squirrels.

On the day she died, Nora thought maybe the mockingbirds were in that golden field with her. They sounded better than a symphony, the only thing she knew to compare it to . . . but even that description trivialized what she heard.

The sensations—the warmth, the light, the sound—had put her in a state of perfect tranquility, and while she'd understood she was most likely dead, she couldn't grasp *why* she was dead.

She'd sat up, feeling certain that the precipitating event to one's death would stick out in memory, right up there with weddings and births and heartbreak. Or, at the very least, there would be a clue nearby. Like the twisted metal of a car. Or a gun.

There was nothing.

She noticed she was wearing her favorite dress, the one she'd worn to her she-passed-the-bar-exam party her parents had thrown for her at the Headliners Club in Austin. It was pale blue with off-the-shoulder straps and a sparkling skirt over tulle.



That night was the one time in her life she'd felt like a princess—beautiful and enchanting and proud and unreachable.

If she had to be dead, she was happy that at least she was stylish about it.

Her joy—and it *was* joy—felt like champagne bubbling in her veins. She glittered in the same way she had when she fell in love for the first time with dreamy Ramon Toledo in the ninth grade, but on a supernova level. She felt pure and unfiltered, free of every single burden she'd ever felt in her entire life, floating away from all the worries that had been her constant companions through thirty-one years of living. It was an extraordinary amalgam of orgasm and Christmas morning and a baby's laugh all rolled into one.

She marveled at the spectacular view around her—the field of gold, the deep green of a distant tree line. And just ahead, a lush, verdant garden where the light seemed a little brighter, beckoning her.

She began to move, but a dog's bark stopped her—and not just any bark. She turned to see a shaggy black and white dog racing toward her, and her heart immediately swelled. "Roxie?" The word was more of a croak because something was lodged in her throat. She tried again, but nothing would come. She was overcome with happiness—this was the dog she'd raised from a pup, her constant companion, her best friend during those periods in her life when no one else would be, who'd crossed the rainbow bridge when she was in college. Roxie leapt into her arms and began to lick her face. Nora could feel the solid weight of Roxie's body against her, could feel the wet slurp of her tongue against her cheek. She buried her face in Roxie's fur. She smelled like flowers.

Death was fantastic! Everything around her was bursting with



color, the air was crisp and clean, she was beautiful, and Roxie was here. When had she ever felt such peace?

She looked toward the garden again and felt an urgent need to get there. The mechanics of movement required no effort—she glided along. Roxie led the way, trotting ahead, then circling back to make sure Nora was coming.

When they reached the garden, her dog disappeared into one of the deep rows, her snout to the ground. Nora could barely absorb all the beauty in that garden. The shrubs were kaleidoscope shades of green, the fruit trees as tall as buildings. A patch of peonies as big as dinner plates intruded onto the path, bursting with colors she'd never seen in life. She wanted to feel every velvety vine and silky petal. She wanted to drink the heady scent of floral and clover. She wanted to bathe in the petals of perfect flowers and eat the fruits that hung ripe for the plucking.

A contented hum filtered into her conscience. She glided deeper into the garden in search of the source and spotted a being standing amid tomato plants that grew like trees. Roxie trotted right up to the being, and it said, "Hello, Roxie, hello, old girl. I wondered where you'd got off to."

Nora's heart immediately climbed to her throat. "Grandpa?"

Grandpa turned and smiled. It really was him, her beloved grandfather, gone from her life too soon. "Well, hello, Nora," he said cheerfully. "I wasn't expecting you yet."

A swift and deep rush of love washed over her—she'd always loved her maternal grandfather best of all, had missed him so much it hurt. But she'd forgotten until that moment what it felt like to love him. Safe. Weightless and free to be exactly who she was. He'd always protected her, advised her, listened to her. No one had ever made her feel quite so loved as he had.

Grandpa looked good. Ageless. A perfect specimen of a

grandfather. He was wearing his typical spacious denims with the cavernous pockets. He'd always kept surprises in those pockets for Nora and her younger sister, Lacey: A robin's egg. Seeds. Hard candy. He had his familiar red wagon by his side, his ratty sun hat atop his head. Once, she'd gifted him with a new sun hat. He'd hung it proudly in the mudroom, but he never wore it—he preferred his old sun hat for working in the garden.

Nora tried again to speak and croaked, "Grandpa! I'm dead!" She must be, if she was here with Grandpa. But she wasn't certain if he understood what was happening and felt it was important to explain why she was here.

"Well, you look beautiful. Come over here and give me a hand, will you?"

Paradise. That's where she was. She was with Grandpa and Roxie in a stunning garden, and it was absolute paradise.

Grandpa turned back to the tomato plants and cut a tomato as big as a volleyball from the vine and placed it in his wagon. He cut another one and bit into it, juice dripping down his chin. "That's good." He held up the tomato for her to take a bite. The burst of flavor in her mouth was so shockingly delicious that she never wanted to eat anything else ever again.

"I've got an excellent crop," Grandpa said proudly. He cut two more from the vine and put them in his red wagon. "It's the compost. You get some great compost here." He moved down the path.

She grabbed the wagon handle, trailing behind him like she always had during those summers spent with her grandparents at the ranch. She'd follow him for hours, pulling the red wagon and saying aloud every thought that popped into her mind, no matter how trivial. He never tired of her. When she asked if she could be in the rodeo when she grew up (because her sister said she couldn't), Grandpa said she could be anything she wanted to

be in the whole entire world. When she pondered if she wanted to be Mandy Grant's friend anymore because Mandy had told Kelly, who told Sariah, who told Nora that Mandy thought Nora's hair was cut like a boy's, Grandpa said she could be friends with whomever she pleased, but that he didn't think a haircut was something to end a friendship over. The point being, he listened.

As she followed him now, Nora noticed the light near the back of the garden seemed to be expanding into the path they were on. It was getting brighter, turning from gold to pale yellow to almost white. It reminded her of a veil—something shimmering and beautiful was behind that bright light. "Is that a lake?"

"Don't look back there, kid. Look at this squash." Grandpa held up a yellow squash the size and shape of a baseball bat like he was the Lion King holding his cub. He put it in the wagon. "You like salad, Nora?"

"I *love* salad." She stated this with an enthusiasm she'd never felt about salad.

"You know what the secret is to a good salad?"

The secret to a good salad was the dessert that came after, but she gave it her best guess. "Dressing?"

"Nah, dressing is superficial—you pour it on top to make it look good. A good salad is about the ingredients underneath the dressing. You gotta have the right mix of flavors. Too much of one thing throws the whole salad off. Not enough of another thing, it's boring. Do you understand?"

She understood the words, but they seemed to be dripping with meaning she couldn't grasp.

Grandpa produced a perfect watermelon crescent. He bit into it, then handed it to her to taste. "Do you remember what I told you makes for a good watermelon?"

"Lots of water," she said automatically.

Grandpa smiled proudly.

It was weird that she could remember some things with vivid clarity, but other things were murkier. Like how she'd gotten here.

A movement caught her eye—a stately Black gentleman dressed in a lab coat was standing beneath some orange trees. Jesus? But that didn't seem right because Nora was pretty sure Jesus wouldn't be there for her. He'd have nuns and other devout people he needed to greet. Still, she had a feeling she knew who the man was, but his identity slipped out of reach.

She turned back to the man who had shaped her life. The surge of love she felt for him was so great that she could barely physically contain it. But then something hard clamped down on her chest, making it difficult to breathe. She sensed her grandfather was about to slip away. Her euphoria began to sink under the weight of fear he wouldn't take her with him. "Grandpa, I'm so sorry—"

"Earthly concerns have no place here, Nora. They go in the compost bin. Come on, bring the wagon."

She tried to swallow, but the fear of losing him was stuck in her throat, choking her. She followed Grandpa, glancing over her shoulder at the shimmering white light again. She was desperate to stay here with him, where she was safe and loved.

"Don't look there, sweetie. Now, what are you growing in your garden? Did you tend my plot?"

When Grandma died, Grandpa sold the ranch and moved into senior living in Austin, where he got himself a plot in a community garden. Nora had solemnly promised that if anything ever happened to him, she'd take care of it.

A different sensation flooded her, hot and potent. Oh, she knew that feeling—it was shame, and it stung like the devil. She looked around for Roxie, needing her support. Roxie was gone.

“I never went, Grandpa.” Her voice had grown shaky and coarse. She tried to clear her throat again, but that *thing*. It tasted bitter, like a big ball of regret.

The man in the lab coat was suddenly beside her. He put a hand on her arm and smiled kindly. “Just breathe.”

Nora ignored him. “I didn’t go, Grandpa. I didn’t—”

“That’s okay, Nora.” Grandpa’s smile sent a shock of warmth and forgiveness through her. “Look at these.” They’d come upon a rosebush in full bloom, each flower at peak. “See how each petal is perfectly shaped and placed? And yet each one is unique. Magnificent, aren’t they? Reminds me of the exhibit we talked about seeing at the Laguna Gloria art museum. Did you get to see it?”

“No.” She felt small and plodding. Images and thoughts flew at her, scenes from her life, bits and pieces of the mundane mixed with terrible upheaval. Her thoughts were racing through all the things she’d meant to do but never had. The list of things left undone sailed past her like a flock of swallows. There were so many.

Grandpa gave her a reassuring smile. “You’re a good girl, Nora. But you must believe in yourself.” Love radiated from him, wrapping around her and holding her close, banishing her shame. She turned, trying to see the bright light, but she couldn’t turn her head enough—something was blocking her.

“Just breathe,” the man in the lab coat whispered.

Everything started to go all Alice in Wonderland. The bright light was fading away, sucking up all the warmth as it went. Grandpa’s love was fading. Everything was turning cold.

“Nora? Listen to me now.”

She felt heavier. Distressed. She looked down—her beautiful dress had turned to gray cotton. She was slowly slipping into a dark hole that felt like the death she would have expected. Was

she going to *really* die now? “Grandpa?” She tried to reach for him, but her arms were useless. She was desperate to hang on to the one person she felt had truly loved her. To the only person in her life who seemed to understand who she was.

“It will be all right, kid. This is the season to grow your garden. Plant what you need to make a good salad. Throw some nuts in there! Have a little fun!”

Nora couldn’t breathe. She didn’t want to go back to whatever had been before. “I want to stay!”

“Not now, sweetie.” Grandpa’s voice was even farther away. “You left too many things undone.”

She tried to ask what, but her throat felt clogged. Grandpa was moving down the path with surprising speed. He whistled, and Roxie trotted out from between two bushes to join him. Nora was still gripping the wagon. “Wait!” she screamed.

But it was too late—everything had faded, and she had the sensation of falling into a dark, inky nothing. Hell, probably—what else could it be?

She fell and she fell and she fell for what seemed a very long time.

And then she woke up.

## Chapter 2



**N**ora! *Can you hear me?*"

The voice sounded like it was underwater. Nora tried to respond, but it felt as if someone had shoved a fiery poker down her gullet.

"Oh my God, oh my God! Nora! Can you hear me?"

She recognized her sister's voice and turned her head slightly. It took a great effort to open her eyes, and when she did, Lacey was looming over her. She was wearing a dark suit with a white shirt buttoned to the very top. Her shoulder-length blonde hair looked uncombed, and there were shadows under her eyes. Nora knew instinctively she was the cause, and sadness began to throb at her temples. She felt alone in her grief, even though it was evident there were others nearby.

"It's going to take a minute for the medicine to kick in. Her throat will be raw," said a male voice.

"Blink if you can hear me," Lacey loudly commanded.

Nora blinked. Everything about her hurt. She tried to lift her head to see where she was, but it was excruciatingly painful. Something was beeping nearby, each ding a stabbing pain in her brain. *Beep. Beep. Beep.*

"Hey, kiddo."

She felt a big hand on her arm. Gus! Good ol' Cousin Gus. What was he doing here? Where *was* here?



“Are you okay?” All six foot three of him tried to smile, but it was a lopsided attempt, like he couldn’t decide whether to commit to it fully. A thought whispered through Nora’s head that it was hard for Gus to smile, and her sorrow ratcheted up.

“Do you remember what happened?” Lacey asked. “Blink once for yes, twice for no.”

“Lacey, for God’s sake, give her a minute.”

*That* voice was unmistakably her mother. Nora couldn’t see her, but she felt the touch of cold fingers on her forehead. Did she have a fever? Was she sick? Was that what happened? She had a jagged recollection of some new virus going around.

“Nora.” Her father’s face was suddenly looming over her, his brow wrinkled with concern. She had to be on the cusp of dying, because her father never took time off from work. His salt-and-pepper hair was neatly combed, his face clean-shaven, his suit impeccable. Was *this* her real death? How was she to know? Death was so disorganized!

“I’ve got it all under control,” her father said. But he looked slightly annoyed, and Nora could only surmise that she wasn’t dying properly.

Lacey nudged Dad out of the way. “How do you feel?”

Confused. Detached from herself, like an astronaut untethered and weightless in space. Different in ways she couldn’t make sense of. She didn’t feel like she was in the right body. Her thoughts were racing in an endless loop, cleaving to straggling bits of euphoria while a new well of sadness slowly filled her chest.

What had happened to her? Was she dying or not, and who did she see about that? “Where am I?” Her bed suddenly lurched into motion, her head and torso rising. She squeezed her eyes shut and hoped she wouldn’t vomit. When the bed stopped moving, she drew a shaky breath, forced a swallow against the

burn in her throat, and slowly opened her eyes.

Her family was gathered around the bed. Dad, arms folded. Mom, a compact in her hand, as if she was doing a little touch-up while she waited for Nora to wake up. Lacey. Gus.

It felt like there was something or someone in that room with them. Not a person, exactly, but a presence. Grandpa? Tears immediately filled her eyes. She'd lost him once, had found his lifeless body on his kitchen floor. But she'd found him again, in the garden, his old self radiating love, filling her with indescribable joy. She couldn't bear to lose him again.

"Nora, honey, you're in Austin, in a hospital," her mother said carefully. Her hair looked redder since the last time Nora had seen her. When was that? She was too thin, her cheekbones so sharp that Nora had once told Lacey they ought to come with a warning. "We had you transported from the coast."

The coast. The Texas coast? "What happened?"

"A miracle, Nora. A miracle happened." Lacey's voice was full of relief. "If that couple hadn't been there—"

"Lacey." Her father's tone was curt. He put a hand on Lacey's shoulder. "Let her recover before you give her all the gory details."

Gory? Maybe a car wreck? No wonder it felt like something was terribly wrong with her body.

"You had a bad accident, honey." Her mother leaned over to stroke her brow and tuck some of her hair behind her ear. "It was a terrible surfing accident. They say you were underwater for a long time."

A surfing accident? That would not have been Nora's first guess. Flotsam of memory floated back to her. Lots of very cold water. Goose bumps on her skin. A glimpse of a gray sky being swallowed by water. Raw, icy fear.

"You never should have been on that beach," her father said.

His disapproving tone put her squarely back in her childhood.

“The beach was closed. The hotel staff never should have taken you out there.” He was pacing at the foot of her bed now, impatiently or angrily. It was hard to know with him.

“You’ve been through hell,” Gus said. “Do you want to talk about it? Because I—”

“Thank you, Gus,” her father said crisply. “Can we all take a breath here? Nora is fine. She’s come out of it. You heard the doctor—she’s young and healthy and should recover, so let’s stop acting like she’s about to kick the bucket.”

Ah, so she wasn’t on her way out, but on her way back in, complete with a gaping hole in her memory about what had happened to her. Her brain felt full of debris, which was a bit overwhelming, and explained why panic was chainsawing its way through her jumble of emotions. She needed to tell them that she’d been with Grandpa, but she couldn’t gather the words. At least she thought she had been with him, but . . . Wait. Was it possible she’d dreamed everything? No! It had been so real. She could still taste the tomato. How high was her fever? Didn’t people hallucinate with high fevers?

The door swung open, and a smiling nurse walked in. “Welcome back, Nora,” she said, as if Nora had just hopped off a train that had pulled into the depot. “Dr. Umaru will be right back.” She pressed two fingers to Nora’s wrist.

“How long?” Nora asked hoarsely. “How long have I—”

“You’ve been on a ventilator,” Lacey said. “Do you know the odds of getting off a ventilator?”

She did not.

“A week,” her mother said. “The longest week of my life. Oh, Nora, you had us so frightened. I am so glad you’re with us.”

The door opened and a Black man wearing a lab coat, thick glasses, and a stethoscope sailed into the room. “There you are!”

he said cheerily.

A jolt of recognition tore through her. “You were there,” Nora managed. “In the garden.”

“What’s that?” He leaned over and studied her face. “I’m Dr. Umaru. I’m going to check a few things if that’s okay.” He put his stethoscope to her chest. “Those lungs are sounding a lot better. Can you wiggle your toes for me?”

She tried, but her feet were wooden. Any feeling of weightlessness had evaporated—she was like an immovable, heavy bag of sand sinking into the mattress.

“Is she going to be brain damaged?” her mother asked anxiously. “Can you tell?”

“Let’s give your daughter some time to fully wake up,” Dr. Umaru said. He smiled at Nora and patted her arm. “You’re going to have a lot of questions, I’m sure, Ms. November, but for now, just know that you were underwater for several minutes and were clinically dead when you were rescued. Your heart had stopped. But you’re a fighter, Ms. November, and with the efforts of the first responders who got your heart going again, here you are. You’re pretty banged up and you’re going to require some physical rehabilitation, which is normal in these circumstances. Our social worker will be by later today to help—”

“We’ve got it taken care of, thanks,” her father said dismissively.

Dr. Umaru glanced impatiently at her dad but turned a smile to Nora. “First things first, however. Let’s get your strength back and make sure you don’t develop pneumonia. If you keep progressing, we’ll have you out of here before long. Follow this pen with your eyes, please,” he said and held up an ink pen. As he moved it back and forth, he shone a light in her eyes. “All right. You get some rest, and we’ll talk a little later. Good to have you back.” He wished everyone a good day and went out of the

room.

When the door swung shut behind him, her family started talking at once. They were laughing, making remarks Nora didn't quite get. But she understood they were relieved she was alive, and she wanted to laugh too. Only she feared her laugh would lean more to the hysterical, what with the panic slipping under the covers with her. Something had happened to her that went well beyond this hospital room. She'd drowned? It was clear that drowning had broken her physically, but it was more than that. Much bigger than that. She couldn't explain this painful resurrection she was having, other than oddly, it was a good painful resurrection. Panic notwithstanding.

She felt something wet on her cheeks, sliding into her hair. Tears. For Grandpa, for Roxie. For all the things she'd left undone. For herself. Tears of happiness. Of elation at being alive. Tears of sorrow. She would have wiped them away, but she didn't have the energy to lift her arm.

"Are you okay?" Lacey wiped away the tears for her.

"I miss Grandpa so much."

Lacey gave her a funny look. "I miss him too."

"Lace . . . I *died*," she whispered. "I died, and Grandpa was there, and so was Roxie."

"Roxie? Our dog? Where?"

"Good Lord." Her mother sounded tense. "Nora, that was a dream. It's the drugs they give you. When my sister had cancer, they gave her so many drugs that half the time she thought she was in Houston getting ready to play golf. You remember that, don't you, Gus?"

Gus's face darkened. His mother had died of that cancer.

"Roxie's been gone for years. I don't know why you'd dream about her," her mother continued, sounding exasperated and alarmed at the same time. "But that's all it was, honey, just a

dumb dream.”

Dumb? “No, it was amazing, Mom. I don’t know how to even describe it. Grandpa was there. We talked.” Nora’s heart constricted painfully. There’d been so much more she’d needed to say to him. “He wants me to grow a garden.”

“This is beginning to sound a little Wizard of Oz-y,” Lacey said. “You didn’t happen to see a tin man and a lion, did you?” She chuckled at her joke.

Didn’t they understand what she was saying? “The doctor was there too. The one who was just here.”

“Oh my God, it *is* brain damage,” her mother whispered loudly to her dad.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” her father said. “Hallucinations are a common side effect of heavy sedation.”

“I think it’s kind of cool,” Gus said.

Nora felt an odd sensation, like she was cleaving in two—the weight of her family and who she’d been before she died was separating from the extraordinary moments she’d spent with Grandpa. Everything about her felt out of place. She belonged in that garden. Not here.

“I’m going to step out and call Cynthia and let her know you’re okay,” her mother said with a thin smile.

“Mom!” Lacey said, but her mother was walking out the door, already on the phone to her best friend, Nora’s father hanging over her shoulder, probably asking how long he had to stay.

Exhaustion began to weigh Nora down. Her regrets and vague anxieties of things left undone continued to flit through her fluffy clouds of exuberance.

Inexplicably, one memory popped into her head, front and center. Of a man she’d met months ago in a corner store. They’d been caught up in an attempted robbery. She couldn’t remember his name, but she could still see his face so clearly, and the scarf

he wore around his neck. She remembered how she'd made him laugh. The connection had been instant, a preternatural tether between them. Like he was the first beam of sunshine to break a cloudy sky, pulling her attention to warmth and light.

What happened to him? She'd meant to call him, had written his phone number on the back of her hand at the time, but she never did. Why hadn't she? Why hadn't she done anything she'd meant to do?

Her head was throbbing now, making it hard to see. The beeping seemed louder. "My head," she moaned. "That beeping is killing me."

"I'll call the nurse," Lacey said.

"Is there anything I can get you?" Gus asked, looking worried.

"A tomato." It wasn't a joke—she wanted to taste that tomato again. She wanted to go back to the safety of the garden.

But first things first, the doctor had said. What was first?

*"Grow your garden, kid."*

The words floated back to her on a whisper, instantly soothing.

Also, maybe she should get a dog.



## Chapter 3



**N**ora's recovery, both physical and mental, was disjointed and progressed slowly. Nothing in the After—as in, after the accident—felt the same as it had in the Before. Not her body, not her thoughts, not even the world around her. She felt fundamentally changed, which was both exhilarating and urgent—like she was speeding down a highway to something new and exciting, but the engine was on fire and she had to get there before her car exploded.

Some things were more vivid than before, like the feel of sunshine on her skin and the smell of the bouquets of flowers that arrived from friends of the family and office staff to wish her well. She'd been moved to a physical rehabilitation facility, secured for her at a high cost, her father made sure she understood. The patients were mostly geriatric, and no matter how much room freshener they sprayed, the smell of Bengay and bleach lingered. Dad said it was the best facility for “this kind of thing” in Central Texas. Lacey said it was the best facility because it was out of sight of family friends and clients.

Nora didn't care. The only thing she cared about was discovering how different everything seemed on this side of death. Some things felt much duller than they had in the Before. Such as time—she never knew what time it was and couldn't make herself care. At first, her sense of which world she was inhab-

iting had needed constant readjusting. Her dreams were filled with magic carpet rides and strangers and big tomatoes and crazy cloud art that was hard to distinguish from reality. Sometimes she thought she was in Grandpa's garden, only to wake up and realize she was in a rehab center.

But mostly, steadily, assuredly, she felt increasingly cheerful. Shiny and new. Her experience had rubbed off all the tarnish to reveal the real her, and she was gleaming, just like she gleamed as a girl when she'd been full of life and wonder and dreams of being a pirate or a pop star, because anything had seemed possible. Before she knew that people judged you for the way you looked, or where you came from, or for your dreams. Before life had begun to chip away at her.

She had a psychiatrist now; her parents had assumed Nora would need help with the emotional trauma she'd suffered from dying and coming back to life, so they'd retained Dr. Beth Cass, a middle-aged woman with long silvery blonde hair and lots of bangle bracelets.

Dr. Cass was unabashedly thrilled about treating a client who'd had a near-death experience. According to her, having wonky senses was to be expected. "Your entire perspective on life and death has shifted dramatically while everyone else's has stayed the same. You're a butterfly, emerging from a cocoon."

Nora loved that description and imagined herself in full bright-winged glory, emerging.

Dr. Cass said it was so interesting to work with someone who had experienced a different dimension. Nora said she would not recommend near-death as a dimension, as it left a lot of questions in its wake. Dr. Cass said sure, but wasn't it more interesting to answer those questions than knowing everything there was to know? And wasn't Nora lucky?

That's what everyone said—she was *so lucky* for having sur-

vived death. She was certainly lucky. But it was more than that—it was rejuvenating. *Lucky* sounded like she'd won a few rounds of bingo, whereas *rejuvenated* sounded like true transformation. She woke up every day bursting with an eagerness to be released from rehab so that she could sort out the new life she was determined to have, buoyed by her newfound optimism. She wasn't quite sure what that would look like, as she couldn't fully recall her life in the Before, but she knew she wanted to be a better person. She would read more books. Volunteer somewhere. Tap into herself to make . . . something!

What did she want to do with her life? She had to think about that. The Before was like a blanket of fog that covered part of her brain. Dr. Cass said that the fog would lift eventually as they did a little digging underneath that fog and delved deeper into her past. She said Nora had arrived at rehab pretty beat up, and it wasn't every day a person drowned and came back to life, and *whoo-boy*, wouldn't it be strange if Nora *didn't* need time to recover from her near-death experience?

The physical therapists had reassembled her piece by piece, Humpty-Dumpty style. Now all that was left of her to finish healing was a slowly fading bruise on her face and her busted ankle. "Water has the force of a sledgehammer," said one of the therapists. "Get hit by one good wave and—*boom*, broken ankle." The orthopedist said it was probably the safety cord on the surfboard that had twisted her up. He said it would be easy to figure out by looking at the surfboard, but no one ever found it.

In the mornings, after breakfast, she would hobble to the small inner courtyard where patients came to smoke. She liked to sit and listen to the birdsong and remember Grandpa's awesome garden and let the sun sink into her skin. She'd never been much of a garden sitter in the Before. Frankly, she wasn't sure what she'd been, other than a little boring and lacking motivation. She

didn't want to be that anymore. She wanted to be the woman who went to museum meet-ups and met friends for drinks and ran along the Lady Bird Lake trail so she could say hi to all the dogs. But she didn't know where to start.

Once, she'd asked an elderly woman sitting on a bench next to her if she would do anything differently if she had a chance to start over.

"You bet. I would have divorced my husband long before he died."

"Oh," Nora had said. She was thinking that maybe she'd wanted to be an astronaut or a librarian or something.

Nora was not bothered by the fractured memories of her life that had begun to come back, popping up like champagne corks, usually apropos of nothing, reminding her that the Before hadn't always been easy. She'd been a little melancholy at times. Dr. Cass was right, and she was a little curious as to why. But for the time being, she tucked those fragments of memories away and carried on with the general sense of *joie de vivre* she'd felt since she'd come to in the hospital.

Like, one morning, when she was still in the hospital, a nurse was changing the dressing on a wound in Nora's side that she had no idea how she got, and she had the philosophically startling thought that if you find yourself trying to justify the life you'd lived in the Before, maybe take a hard look at that sooner rather than later. This, from someone whose most recent deep thoughts had more to do with what they would serve for dinner and why her left wrist itched.

Lately, her most cogent thinking was about Grandpa's garden. How did he get that tomato to taste so perfect? She missed him so much that her bones ached. Which was only slightly better pain than the searing blame she leveled at herself every time she remembered she hadn't gone to see him when she said she

would, and he'd ended up dead and alone on a cold tile floor. Despite her shiny new feelings, she still loathed herself for that.

At long last, her body was deemed well enough to release her back into the wild. She was excited to be going home after weeks in this place.

Her mother was sending a car for her. "The traffic to Georgetown is ridiculous," she'd said.

"Mom! Really?" Nora's disappointment had been swift and deep.

"What? You don't want me to drive in that mess, I hope."

"I thought . . . I was hoping we could talk about . . . everything."

"Like what?" her mother had asked.

Like what? Epiphanies galore. About her path going forward. About how an NDE felt.

"Whatever it is, you can tell me later," her mother added before Nora could respond.

"Right. Sure," Nora had said brightly. "It's just that it's been a long recovery—"

"Please don't lay a guilt trip on me, Nora."

Nora recoiled. "No, no, that's not what I meant. I don't want to do that."

But she did want to do that. It hurt that her mother wouldn't brave traffic to be here on what Nora considered to be a momentous day. Alas, Nora remembered that she was used to disappointment. Unfortunately, it was typical of Roberta November to pretend that mothering was an abstract construct and not something she needed to actively participate in. Even when Nora and Lacey were kids, she'd used nannies as a proxy for motherly love.

Nora collected her few things from the bathroom. It was a little jarring to look at herself in the mirror these days. She looked

different. Thinner. Her jumbled emotions made her feel like she was looking into a mirror with a crack in it—it felt like the halves of her didn't quite match up.

She stared at the powder pink ensemble her mother had brought her—a track suit made of indestructible velour that hung loosely on her frame. It was cut with a wide leg that sported jaunty baby blue stripes down the sides. Her mother had purchased a size large, because it was better to “err on the side of caution.”

“But I’ve lost so much weight,” Nora had pointed out.

“Really?” Her rail-thin mother had casually studied her frame as if to confirm that.

*Yes, really.* A sudden surge of anger had caught Nora off guard. As much attention as her mother had paid to her weight over the years, how could she miss that Nora’s stomach had hollowed out? That it had taken a drowning for her daughter to end up with the body her mother had always wanted her to have? It was enraging to be considerably smaller than she had been before the accident, and yet her mother still couldn’t seem to really *see* her.

As for herself? She felt surprisingly blah about a flat stomach. She was realizing that skinny had never been her goal. Why, then, was it her mother’s goal for her? Nora had just blindly accepted that she ought to be smaller because her mother said so, which, in retrospect, seemed a little passive on her part. But the new her had more important things to think about—like the haze lingering over her memory.

An ad suddenly blared out from the TV in her room, startling her. Nora had turned it on for the weather, which thus far the station had refused to give. “*If you’ve been hurt in an accident, call 444-4444. At November and Sons, Austin’s premiere personal injury firm, we treat you like family.*”

The timing of that ad could not have been worse. It happened that *she* was a November, blood-bound to the esteemed November and Sons law firm, a practicing personal injury attorney. Not the son, obviously. That had been Nathan, her twin brother who'd died of SIDS when they were nine months old. Her father, who had started the family law firm with his father, never changed the name. Hope springs eternal, she guessed.

During her time here, Nora had managed to avoid thinking about how much she hated her job, but a memory hauled off and punched her, startling her. *Wake up!* She didn't just hate her job; she hated the whole practice of law. At the thought of going back to that sterile, air-chilled abyss, bile rose in the back of her throat. She didn't belong in that job any more than she belonged in this track suit—it was not her. She was, at least on the inside, more free spirit than lawyer, more guppy than shark.

Still, she was not going to let that ad ruin her happiness. She had survived death and rehab and was finally going home. She would worry about what else she had to survive later.

She finished packing and checked the bathroom once more. The paper bag with her prescription medicines, some new to her, some not, was sitting on the edge of the sink. Anti-inflammatories, antidepressants, antibiotics, antianxiety, anti-toxin. *Anti, anti, anti.* It had always struck her as ironic that the drugs that actually helped her feel better could sound so negative.

She leaned over to pick it up and had to brace herself against the sink. Another side effect of her NDE was a buzzy sensation in her head from time to time. It reminded her of the white snow that occasionally rippled across her grandparents' TV. This fuzziness came and went without any discernible pattern, showing up to muddy her thoughts when she least expected it. Dr. Cass said it would “probably clear up on its own” the stronger she got.



Her phone pinged; she dug it out of her jacket pocket. Your driver is approaching your location, the screen said.

Nora picked up the paper bag and shoved it into her larger bag, then slung that over her shoulder. She was getting the hell out of here.

On her way out, she said goodbye to the attendants at the desk, then clomped down the long hallway in her new therapeutic boot.

The suited driver standing next to the town car at the curb opened the car door for her. “Ms. November?”

“That’s me!” Or rather, a facsimile of the Ms. November she’d once been. The new Nora, so to speak. But she figured it was probably best not to attempt to explain it all to this guy.

When they were on the road, Nora asked, “We’re headed for the Grant apartments on east Riverside, right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Nora didn’t trust her mother. “I wish you’d agree to come stay with your father and me,” her mother had complained this week over video chat, her preferred method of communication now.

Nora would rather be a troll living under a bridge than stay as much as a night at her parents’ house in the swanky neighborhood of Rob Roy. All she wanted to do was lie on her couch and flip channels and eat something that wasn’t half-baked chicken and mixed vegetables from a can. She needed time in her own space to regroup, to piece together what everything that had happened meant for her now. Once she figured that out, she would reenter the family sphere and resume her role as a November and Sons dutiful daughter at work and in society.

A sharp stab of pain in her head punctuated that thought, like her body was telling her it was dead set against that. Well, so was her heart. She’d signed a lease on a new life, and she didn’t want the old one. But what, exactly, was her new life? She felt so new

and different, but was still struggling to figure out how to *be* new and different. She needed time to think.

They had reached the river when Nora's mother called. "How close are you?" she asked impatiently. "We're waiting."

Nora's antenna popped up. "Who is we?"

"Your sister and me, of course."

"Is that all?" Nora asked. "I don't want any surprises, Mom."

"Who else could you possibly expect? You live like a monk. Why do you always assume the worst?"

"Because I always assume the worst?" Nora asked as more of a point of clarification.

"Oh, Nora," her mother had said with a heavy sigh, as if the disappointments were already starting to pile up again. "No one is here. And besides, your place is so small. You should have accepted your father's offer to buy you that loft near Zilker Park. I don't know anyone on this side of town, and there are all those homeless people."

Nora glanced heavenward, seeking strength from a nebulous god who never granted it. "I'll be there in a few minutes," she said, ending the conversation.

The driver deposited her at her apartment building, and Nora Frankensteined her way to her apartment, a hard slog in her therapeutic boot. At her door, she knocked twice before opening it.

"Surprise!" shouted a single voice, and Nora's heart was suddenly beating out of her chest. She wasn't ready. She looked like she'd been roaming the wilderness—her skin was blotchy; there was a patch on her neck that itched something awful; she was wearing one old Ugg to match her boot. There ought to be a checkout manual for families, things you should not do for your loved one straight out of rehab, starting with: no surprises. She felt wildly irritated that she was about to be pushed into something she didn't ask for or want and her immediate instinct was

to flee, to pogo right on out of there—

But it was only Lacey looking back at her. “What?” her sister asked.

Nora tried to see past her. “Anyone else?”

Her mother’s head popped into view in the narrow entry. “I told you, me and Lacey.”

“And me, Mrs. November.”

“And James,” her mother added.

James? Her legal assistant? Nora shared an office suite with him, but his presence here did not compute.

“You’re acting weird,” Lacey said disapprovingly.

The remark snapped like a rubber band against Nora’s wrist. Funny how ingrained habits filled in the holes in her brain at the drop of a hat. She immediately understood that she was not acting like a November, a family in which you learned early on to be happy no matter how you felt. She forced a smile. “Sorry. Just . . . ready to be home.”

Lacey grinned, pleased that Nora was playing her part, and pulled her inside.

Whoa. Talk about stepping into an alternate universe. One foot into her apartment and she was immediately thrust back into the Before. Her head felt foggy as she tried to fit herself back into the world that existed inside these walls. It was definitely her apartment, with its view of the parking lot, two bedrooms, two baths. The same exterior brick wall, the same small galley kitchen she rarely used. The sofa and two armchairs that looked like they ought to be in a museum, selected by a friend of the family who was famous for designing houses in West Lake Hills. Near the windows, an expensive dining table where Nora sometimes worked from home and on which she occasionally ironed a piece of clothing.

She took another cautious step into the Before like she was

stepping into a dark back alley. “James is here?”

“He came by to drop off some paperwork for you, and I asked him to stay.”

“No rush on the paperwork,” James added magnanimously from the living room.

“What about Hannah?” Nora asked, referring to Lacey’s girlfriend.

“She’s at work.”

“Dad?”

“He’s tied up in court,” Mom said and toyed with her earring.

Mom was covering for him. Dad couldn’t be bothered to call her, much less be here when she came home. “Gus?”

“Couldn’t make it.”

Something felt off, in her, around her—she didn’t like the way any of this felt. It was not the cheerful *I’m so shiny and new!* she’d felt in rehab. This felt heavier. Colorless. This wasn’t her; this was someone else’s life that she adamantly did not want. “But he was invited, right?”

“For heaven’s sake, Nora.” Her mother took her firmly by the elbow and forced her into her apartment. “Can you just enjoy the effort that went into welcoming you home?”

She would really like to do that, but the puzzle pieces of her brain weren’t fitting together properly.

“We’re all really glad you’re back,” James said, appearing before her. He adjusted his trendy eyeglasses and swept a thick lock of hair that always fell over one eye, exciting both male and female staff alike. “I am, for sure.”

“Let me take your bag.” Lacey grabbed it off Nora’s shoulder and disappeared down the hall.

“You really don’t look too bad,” James said. “I mean, considering. I was expecting much worse. Your dad said you were pretty messed up, but you’ve only got the one bruise that I can see.”

He gestured at the faint mural of yellow and green across her cheekbone and temple.

He leaned closer and whispered, “You’re coming back to the office, right? Because Candice has been a bitch. I have so much to tell you.”

Nora felt a world away from her job as an attorney, and as much as she enjoyed office gossip, that too. An actual world away. A galaxy. A solar system. She tried to imagine herself walking into the office and the buzz started up, vibrating unpleasantly against her inner ear.

“Earth to Nora,” James said.

“Present. Sort of.” She smiled. She could not possibly convey how surreal her Before life felt to her now—as if someone had rearranged all the furniture of her memory. Except that everything was exactly where she’d left it. It was an unnerving dichotomy—she couldn’t see how she fit into this picture. Was it even possible? It didn’t *feel* possible.

“Look!” Lacey threw her arm around Nora’s shoulder and pulled her to the dining table. “Recognize anything?” She pointed to the food on the table.

Beef cubes and tiny potatoes, chicken skewers, little cups of shrimp cocktail. And there, in the middle, a sheet cake with something written on it. Nora leaned forward to have a closer look. “Does that say . . . ‘turn around, don’t drown?’”

“Oh my God,” James muttered under his breath.

“What?” Lacey asked. “It’s a joke. Too soon?” She genuinely seemed unsure.

But Nora wasn’t looking at the cake—she remembered what had been on this table, the things she’d left here. Important things. Her case files, bills that needed to be paid, her checkbook. And more. “Where are my things?”

“What things?”

The buzz in her head was making it hard for her to think. “The things I’d left on the table. Right here.” She pointed at the cake. Her stomach was suddenly doing some uncomfortable flips—she had to put a hand on the table to steady herself. What was it about her things that seemed so urgent? “I had everything organized.”

“I didn’t un-organize. I tidied up, that’s all. Your apartment was a mess. Honestly, I don’t know how you lived like that. Anyway, I boxed it all up and put it in your closet.”

Lacey’s response provoked a surprising burst of anxiety. That was something Lacey would have done in the Before, taking care of everything whether Nora wanted her to or not. But Nora wasn’t that woman anymore, and it was starting to panic her a little that she didn’t know who she was, exactly. But she didn’t belong here. Where did she belong, then? *Grow your garden*, Grandpa had said. But grow what?

“Come on, do you recognize any of the food?” Lacey was beaming again. “It’s from Chef Borgia’s restaurant. Your favorite place!”

Chef Borgia. At an End SIDS fundraiser last year, for the charity her father had founded in memory of her twin, Nathan, Nora had bid three thousand dollars during the auction for a private lesson from the popular TV chef. But she’d never arranged for the lesson. She suddenly realized that was one of the regrets that had flown at her in Grandpa’s garden. She’d forever wanted to learn to cook, to be able to make something other than box macaroni, and that had been the perfect opportunity to learn from the best. Why had she let it slip through her fingers?

The disorienting buzz in her head was tinny now, ringing in her ears.

“The teriyaki chicken is to die for,” Lacey was saying, but she sounded far away.

Whatever had kept Nora from taking that lesson was hovering just there, right beyond the veil, but she couldn't quite see it.

"Aren't you going to try it?"

Like a robot, Nora picked up a skewer of chicken. Apparently she was still a people pleaser—good to know. She took a bite. "Delicious!"

"This might be the best chicken I ever had," James said. He leaned over to take another skewer, and when he did, Nora caught sight of a shadow behind him. *Grandpa?*

She hadn't told anyone about the Grandpa shadows. She'd first noticed them in rehab, just fleeting shadows that felt like Grandpa was near. No one would believe her, and besides, she was a little worried she was seeing things. Was it normal that she liked it? It made her feel close to Grandpa and reminded her of how amazing she'd felt in his garden, how an eddy of love had swirled around her. She'd felt so safe and protected. She'd *fit* there.

She remembered once that Grandpa had taken her and Gus fishing. Nora had been about six years old. Grandpa had shown them how to put worms on their hooks and how to throw the line. But Nora couldn't hook the worms—she hated the thought of touching them, much less spearing them. "I'm sorry," she'd said to Grandpa as he'd baited her hook.

"For what?" he'd asked with an easy smile. "For being a girl who cares about living things? Be proud of that, kiddo."

*Grandpa.* That was where Nora fit. With him. In his garden. Where she could be proud of who she was, no matter what.

"Don't let me eat it all," James said. "Aren't you going to try some, Mrs. November?"

"No, thank you," her mother said, stabbing a single bite of pineapple with a toothpick and carrying it to the window.

The shadow passed Nora's vision again, and when she looked,



she saw the small corpse of a plant on her sill. It looked so dry that if someone touched a leaf, it would crumble into ash. Her *modus operandi* when it came to plants had been to put them in her window with grand plans for nourishing them. But then she'd forget to water, or she'd overfeed or something, and they would die.

But after being in Grandpa's heavenly garden, seeing the dead plant made her feel nostalgic and unsteady. And a terrible, deep shame for having failed to look after his garden here. "My plant died."

Mom shrugged. "Get another one."

Grief thickened in Nora's throat. A familiar sensation she didn't like crept along her spine—emotions hovering just below the surface, ready and eager to fully consume her on a trigger's notice. All that time in rehab, Nora had felt mostly really good. Hopeful. Excited. But then—*bam*, along came her old apartment and a dead plant to knock her on her ass.

"When will you be back in the office?" James asked. He'd heaped a plate with more of Chef Borgia's food.

She rubbed her forehead and swallowed against a swell of nausea. "I'm not sure." She put down her plate. "I've been thinking . . . I want to make some changes."

Lacey looked at her blankly. Her mother glanced at her watch.

"Like what?" James asked.

"I . . . I don't know," she said uncertainly. "But I had this really profound experience, and I want to start over."

"Really?" Lacey sounded a bit skeptical, and Nora couldn't blame her. She wasn't exactly known for her follow-through. She had a vague memory of canceling on Lacey at the last minute a few times. Once, when she'd promised to lend a hand with a fundraiser for Lacey's school, leaving Lacey in the lurch.

"What does that mean, start over?" James asked.

“Good question. I don’t actually know. Yet,” Nora said. She must sound like a lunatic to them. “But I have a second chance, and I want to take advantage of it. I want to do better. I want to be my authentic self.”

“You’re authentic, Nora,” her mother said impatiently, missing the point. “Now, I’m sorry, but I have to run.” She leaned in to kiss Nora’s cheek.

“Now?” Nora asked. “I want to explain—”

“You don’t need to explain anything to me, sweetheart. I’m just so glad you’re home and everything can get back to normal.”

“Have you tried the potatoes?” Lacey asked. “They are so good.”

Her family wasn’t listening. And James, who had seemed somewhat interested, was now trying the potatoes.

So Nora tried more of the food, tried to be part of the party, but she began to get a headache, which was a common occurrence since her NDE. Lacey cut the cake and put a thick slab on a plate. “I’ll clean up,” she said. “You should go rest.”

The sun had begun its slide from the city sky when Nora walked into her room. No one had tidied up here. Her clothes were still tossed on a chair and the bed. Two drawers of the bureau stood open, like she’d been searching for something. There were papers and shoes scattered across the floor, and there, through the open door to her very messy closet, on a shelf, she could see her box of things from the dining room with her name scrawled across the side in Lacey’s handwriting.

She turned her back on the box and walked across the room. She slid down onto the floor and rested her back against the bed. She just needed a minute. To settle into reality.

“Nora? Can I come in?”

Her eyes flew open. How long had she been sitting here?  
“Sure, James.”

He came down on the floor next to her and handed her a piece of cake with the letters *OW* on it.

“Cake, my favorite food group.”

“I had to grab a piece before Lacey ate it all,” James said.

Nora took a bite. She expected to sink into chocolate ecstasy because, heaven knew, she liked a good piece of cake. But that dark, gooey goodness tasted like paper. She tried another bite. Still tasted like paper.

James drew up his knees and wrapped his arms around them. “Don’t hate me, but I have to ask—how’s your head?”

“My head?” She touched her hair. It felt like straw. “What do you mean?”

James pressed his lips together.

“Wait . . . are you asking if I have brain damage?” she asked incredulously.

“I’m not! I mean, I’m only sort of asking. Okay, yes, I’m asking. But only because there’s a betting pool in the office.”

Nora gaped at him. “People are betting if I have brain damage?”

“Of course not, Nora,” he said, sounding offended. “Everyone already assumes it. The bet is how many days you’ll last before your dad fires you because of it.”

Nora gasped. And then she laughed. “That is abhorrent.” And yet it sounded like something that would definitely happen at November and Sons. Sharks, all of them. She shoved the cake back at James.

He took the plate. “I agree. But really, how are you?”

She narrowed her gaze on him. “How much money have you got riding on my brain?”

He clucked his tongue at her. “I was not allowed to bet because I work with you every day. And besides, you’re my best work friend and I’ve missed you.” He pressed his hand to his

heart.

James was her only friend at work. Or pretty much anywhere else. Another piece of the puzzle clicked in. “It feels like someone took a leaf blower and blasted it inside my head, but my brain is fine for the most part. My memory is still missing some chunks. Like, I remember taking the week off and going out of town . . . but I can’t remember the accident.”

“That doesn’t sound good.”

“Right? Sometimes it’s weird, because I feel like my old self, but I also feel like I’m living in an alternate universe. And I keep thinking about my grandpa.” The pang of sorrow hit her again, squarely in the chest. Missing him hurt. “I saw him, you know.”

“No way,” James said.

“I swear it.” She shifted around to face him. “He was so real, James. I could *feel* him. He talked to me. He reminded me of things I never did. Like . . . a cooking lesson,” she said. “I won a private cooking lesson from Chef Borgia at the End SIDS silent auction, and I never scheduled it. I’d love to learn to cook. And I never went to see the art exhibit Grandpa told me about at Laguna Gloria—”

“Love that place.”

“And you know what else? I even thought about the guy from the corner store robbery.”

James was nodding up until that point. “Wait . . . what guy?”

Nora couldn’t believe he didn’t know who she was talking about. “The corner store robbery, remember?”

“I remember you were in a store when some guy tried to rob it. That guy?”

“No, no—another hostage. He had dark brown hair and clear blue eyes.” She remembered his handsome face perfectly. Bits and pieces of memory about him were coming back. “It was cold and wet that night, and he wore a hand-knitted scarf wrapped

around his neck.” She knew it was hand-knitted because the stitches were so uneven. “I must have told you.”

“You did not.” James was appraising her through a squint, like maybe he thought this was the brain damage talking.

But oddly, this was one thing she was completely sure about. “We . . . we had this connection.” The spark had been instant. “We hit it off.”

“Wait—you hit on some guy during a robbery?”

“I didn’t hit on him. I made him laugh while we were being held hostage.” They’d stood together watching the robbery unfold and he’d said it was weird how you meet people when you least expected it, and she’d said it was weird that the robber was dressed like Darth Vader.

“Well, *that* sounds totally normal, Nora.” James playfully nudged her with his shoulder, then glanced at his watch. He hopped to his feet and picked up the plate of cake. “I would love to stay and hear more about how you picked up a guy during a robbery, but I’ve got a date. Let me know when you’re coming back to work. I’ve been using your office and I’ll need to move a few things. By the way, I’m glad you’re not brain damaged. That place is hard enough as it is.” He gave her a thumbs-up before he disappeared into the hall.

That place *was* hard. Nora knew it was; she could feel it in her bones. But an army of ants was running through her brain, so many thoughts and memories vying for attention. She had to pull herself together, had to figure out who or what she was now that she’d come back from the dead.

Then she’d think about just how hard that place was and what she was going to do about it.

## About the Author



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Julia London is the *New York Times* and *USA TODAY* bestselling author of numerous works of romantic fiction and women's fiction. She is the recipient of the RT Bookclub Award for Best Historical Romance, and a six-time finalist for the RITA award for excellence in romantic fiction. She lives in Austin, Texas with two teens, two dogs, and an astonishingly big pile of books.

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