

Chapter One

NINA

The morning after my mother's funeral, before I had changed the sheets on her bed, before I even knew if I was going to survive living without her, I went into the kitchen and took the fifteen unlabeled casserole dishes from the refrigerator and, one by one, scooped out their moldy contents and hurled all that food out the back door into the snow.

It was the happiest I'd felt in weeks. No, months.

Well-meaning people had brought these as an offering of kindness. People I loved who thought that not bringing food to the dying was maybe the worst thing you could ever do—and I had been grateful. But we couldn't keep up, my mother and I. The casserole dishes stacked up like accusations in the refrigerator. When I opened the door, they shouted their grievances.

I stood there watching as pieces of macaroni, ham, lima beans, squash, and unidentified red items went flying against the deep-blue February sky, then landed on the snowbank, where they created an instant abstract painting. One spunky little yellow casserole dish escaped my hands and bounced off the railing of the porch and then crashed across the ice, and smashed into a million pieces near the garbage cans.

I gave that one a standing ovation, then got my phone and took a picture of the hillside canvas, now splattered with reds and beiges and greens.

I messaged it to Dan, my ex, with one sentence: *When someone dies, people bring horrifying food, and I make art of it*, and he wrote back immediately: *You know Julie doesn't like it when you text me first thing in the a.m.*

Tough, I typed. *She shoulda thought of that when she started dating a married man*. He wrote: *WE ARE NOT MARRIED, NINA*. And then I wrote: *But we WERE*, and I clicked off the phone so I didn't have to hear from Julie about how I was being inappropriate and could I please respect the boundaries she and Dan were trying to set. Last week she actually wrote, *We are being patient because we know your mom is dying but please respect our space*.

I walked through the silent townhouse—silent, that is, except for the sounds of voices in the units on either side. Normal people all getting ready for their next normal day, not even thinking about how lucky they were to be alive.

It was seven twenty-two, the time of the day my mom and I used to have our first healthy shake of the day. We'd lie on her rented hospital bed next to the picture window and watch Kathie Lee and Hoda until some serious topic came up, which would then make my mother remember that we weren't laughing enough. She had decided to treat her stage-four liver cancer with laughter and green smoothies. The drowsy days had flowed into one another, one Mel Brooks movie after another, none distinguishable from the next. We were on Cancer Time now, she said.

Toward the end, she stopped being her regular self and started saying things she felt like talking about, even stuff I suspected she'd never wanted me to know. It was as though the filters had come off. For instance, she had had sex before she got married. She told me it had happened in a man's car, on a hilltop, and it had been awkward as hell but the worst part had been that her underpants had somehow gotten lost under the front seat and it was dark so she'd had to go home without them, and the man returned them to her at work the next day in a brown paper bag—the kind you'd pack a school lunch in.

“Who would do such a thing?” she said. “Wouldn't a gentleman know to simply politely dispose of them and pretend he'd never seen them?”

“Wow,” I said. “You're still carrying that?”

And she said, “Well, now it's become a funny story. I was waiting for that to happen.”

Also, she told me, she'd always loved my father but, well, he'd been a bit of a stick sometimes, and there were two full years after the infertility treatments when she really thought she might have left him if they hadn't adopted me by then. And other things came up, too: she'd always meant to go to Austria and play the piano and wear stilettos. She hadn't ever been to the tropics. As a child, she'd wanted to raise chimpanzees. Silly dreams, she called them. She hoped I hadn't minded too much that I was the only child they'd had, that I hadn't been too lonely with just the two of them. I'd always known I was adopted, that they cherished me in a special way because they'd worked so hard to find me—“looked the whole world over,” as my mother had put it when I was a child. But I had known enough not to ask too many questions; I knew, the way a child knows these things, that it would crush my mother if I asked where I had come from, who I really belonged to.

And then late one night came the big one: “If you want to know who you really are, if you want to find your real mother, there's a nun at the Connecticut Catholic Children's Agency who will help you,” she said. “Sister Germaine, that's her name. In New Ashbury. That's where the orphanage is.”

The world inside my head started spinning out, slowly. The orphanage was two towns over. I'd never known.

“Funny,” she said softly, so softly I could barely hear her, “funny that you never asked. Your dad and I were a little surprised, frankly, at your lack of curiosity. He said it must be because you were so happy with us. That you didn't need anyone else.”

Later, after I thought she was long asleep, she said in a drowsy voice, “Oh, and there's a photograph somewhere. I can't remember where I put it, but you'll find it when you clean everything out, I suppose.”

“A photograph? Of what?” I said. My heart sat upright in the bed.

“I don’t know. Of you, I guess, and your birth mother. The adoption agency gave it to me the day they gave you to me.” She made a clicking sound. “All that worry, all those years, about your real mother showing up. And for no reason. And now...well, we’re safe.”

Safe, I thought, was a funny word to use when every cell in your body has gone all malignant on you, and you’re hours from death. But maybe safe is just a matter of perspective.

~.~

I, however, knew I was not safe. She died three days later with her faith intact and her conscience clear, knowing exactly where she was headed, but I needed a road map back to a life without her. Fueled by my stunning success with the casserole dishes, I sat on the kitchen floor and made a to-do list.

NINA POPKIN’S POST-APOCALYPTIC PLAN FOR REGULAR LIFE:

Return Mel Brooks movies to Netflix. Suggest they put a warning on them that they are useless—useless!—against cancer.

Call the hospital bed rental place and tell them to get this stupid bed of death out of the living room!!!! Then move the couch and end tables and normal people furniture back in from the dining room.

Take the portable commode, the shower chair, and the IV pole to the recycling place.

Do the following in one very busy, probably very bad day: Call Mom’s attorney, put medical bills in one pile, open insurance statements, clean out the attic, burn all your school papers she saved through the years (BUT BE CAREFUL not to burn the photo of you and your real mom, if it even exists), put condo on the market, sell all the furniture, move someplace fabulous.

Take deep breaths. You did the best you could. You can’t cure cancer.

Stop texting Dan.

Long term: Go on a cruise to Barbados, take dance lessons, buy a farm in Vermont, sign up for a space mission to Mars, open a bar, learn to make baked Alaska, take voice lessons, ice-skate at midnight, French braid your hair, fall in love with somebody wonderful.

Stop crying.

A few hours later, I added:

Find your real mom, find your real mom, find your real mom.