

PENGUIN BOOKS

KAT ELLIS
HARROW
LAKE

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Penguin
Random House
UK

First published 2020
001

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Set in 10.5/15.5 pt Sabon LT Std
Typeset by Jouve (UK), Milton Keynes
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-0-241-39704-6
Proof: not for re-sale

All correspondence to:
Penguin Books
Penguin Random House Children's
One Embassy Gardens, New Union Square
5 Nine Elms Lane, London SW8 5DA



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Transcript of interview with Nolan Nox, Director of
Nightjar, for *Scream Screen* magazine (*Nightjar*
twentieth-anniversary special feature)

CJL: C. J. Lahey, columnist with *Scream Screen*

NN: Nolan Nox, director of *Nightjar*

CJL: Thanks for agreeing to talk with me for *Scream Screen's Nightjar* twentieth-anniversary special feature, Nolan – do you mind if I call you Nolan?

NN: How about this: I'll let you call me Nolan like we're old pals, and you won't say a damn word about me smoking while we do this. I'm sick of you people telling me I'm not allowed to smoke in my own office.

CJL: [Laughs] Deal. So, it's twenty years since *Nightjar* first whipped horror fans into a frenzy worldwide. What do you think it is, exactly, about this movie

that really fired up such an intense and long-lasting reaction from fans?

NN: [Pause] That's really what you want to ask me? *Nightjar* won dozens of awards, including two Emmys, and you want me to tell you why my film is good?

CJL: OK, let's take a different approach. [Pause] In *Nightjar*, we see a small Prohibition-era town cut off from civilization by a freak storm – we're talking fallen trees, floods, a contaminated water supply, and all roads out of town blocked. *Nightjar*'s inhabitants are starving, and they're caught up in this spiralling sense of panic and superstition and fear. That claustrophobic tension you created within the film demanded the perfect setting, and to this day fans still flock to the town of Harrow Lake, Indiana, where you filmed *Nightjar* – maybe looking to capture their own little slice of *Nightjar* terror. What was it about Harrow Lake that made you choose it for your backdrop?

NN: Harrow Lake had hardly changed since the late twenties. As a mining town, it was almost destroyed by some kind of ground disturbance back then, leaving half of it buried under a landslide and the other turned to Swiss cheese with these gaping craters in the hillside. They had to totally rebuild and I guess they couldn't afford to modernize it after that, which was lucky for us. Everything there – the houses, the stores, even the damn

people – was in mint 1920s condition. Then there were the caves, of course. When I went with the scout to see Harrow Lake, I just knew. It was perfect.

CJL: You mentioned the caves just now – those are some of my favourite scenes – but filming there didn't quite go according to plan, did it?

NN: [Pause] I assume you're referring to Moss.

CJL: Well, yeah. It's kind of unusual for one of the crew to disappear during filming, isn't it? [Laughs]

NN: Ron Moss was a competent cameraman, and a valued member of my crew. His disappearance wasn't *unusual*, it was tragic – and damned inconvenient.

CJL: Oh, I didn't mean to make light of it. But could you describe what happened leading up to his disappearance?

NN: Are you sure your readers will want to know all this? We're re-treading a lot of old ground here. [Pause] All right. We were nearing the end of our filming schedule for the caves and had just wrapped the scene where Little Bird is cannibalized by the starving villagers. The crew were getting packed up to move on to the next location when we heard noises coming from inside the caves – strange clicking sounds. I'd never heard anything like it. Anyway, one of the other crew members noticed Moss was no longer with us, and all his equipment was just lying there on the grass where he'd been

filming. I'm talking expensive kit, and Moss wasn't the type to dump it and wander off. We searched as far as we could, but saw no sign of him. By that point, the noises had stopped, and we called in the local authorities to carry out a proper search. They didn't find him.

CJL: But they did find human remains.

NN: [Sighs] Those were nothing to do with Moss. The ruin of the church where we were filming was inside a sinkhole. It had collapsed when the ground shifted a century before. It doesn't take a genius to figure out the bones they found in the caves were from back then – either from the graveyard next to the church, or from someone who got caught in the landslide.

CJL: So you don't believe in Harrow Lake's local legend, then?

NN: You mean Mister Jitters? Don't be ridiculous. There's no hundred-year-old monster eating the locals, and there never was. Harrow Lake is just a small town that got hit by a terrible disaster and never fully recovered. I'm not surprised they explained it away with some paranormal nonsense – curses and whatnot. It's easier than admitting they mined too deep into their own hillside and damn near buried themselves. [Pause] Actually, cut that last part. People who live in these hick towns are so quick to take offence, and I can't be bothered dealing with the hate mail.

CJL: Sure. Go again, whenever you're ready.

NN: OK. [Pause] I'm not sure what exactly we heard in the caves that night. That clicking . . . maybe it was some natural phenomenon, maybe not. All I know is that I never saw anything unusual in or near the caves, and I have no reason to believe Moss's disappearance was anything other than an accident. We'll probably never know exactly what happened there. Look, these stories – small-town legends about monsters or demons or evil spirits – they're all just an excuse for people to avoid seeing the real monsters all around them. It's a way to shatter the proverbial mirror. That's why I make the movies I do: I'm reconstructing the mirror. [Pause] Make sure you use that, all right? That's a damn good quote.

CJL: [Laughs] Oh, I will. But just to pick up on a point there: don't you think it's a little coincidental – beyond coincidental, in fact – that your daughter also disappeared when she visited Harrow Lake last year?

NN: I don't want to talk about Lola.

CJL: But isn't it strange that –

NN: I thought we were here to discuss *Nightjar*. Let's leave my daughter out of this and move on.

CJL: But –

NN: That wasn't a suggestion. [Pause] Let's take five. Maybe you can use that time to pull your head out of your ass and start asking me relevant questions.

One Year Earlier

LOLA

CHAPTER ONE

I bury my secrets in a potted plant on West 17th Street. There's nobody inside the brightly lit lobby of the apartment building next to me, and only a couple of people farther along the street. A man and a woman. From their loud, slurred voices, I guess they've just rolled out of Bar Qua. They're not interested in a seventeen-year-old girl loitering next to an overly primped topiary.

I shove three things into the dirt. Nothing too shocking really: a keychain, a lighter and a lurid pink lipstick.

The keychain I stole from some guy. I saw a girl give it to him outside the public library, and there was something about the heat in her cheeks that made me tell my tutor I was going to use the restroom, and I followed the boy inside. The moment he took his jacket off, I grabbed the keychain from his pocket.

It's not fancy or expensive, only a silver letter *D*. I just wanted to see if I could get away with it.

The cigar lighter is Nolan's – my dad's. I took it because I knew it would piss him off. That's a good, solid reason, right? It's gold, and has the looping double *N* of his initials

engraved on the casing. I probably should have guessed he would accuse and then fire the maid when the lighter failed to show up, but I didn't, and he did, and so it became a secret.

The pink lipstick is my newest acquisition. I stole it tonight from the restroom of Bar Qua – the same bar the couple up the street just stumbled out of. I just couldn't resist hiding one last secret before leaving New York behind.

I don't always take things that aren't mine. I usually just scribble my secrets on scraps of paper and bury those. But I've been stealing more and more over the last few weeks. Small things, like a pen or a pair of sunglasses left on a restaurant table. Easily missed. Easily slipped into a pocket or purse. I know this isn't a healthy development or anything, but at least it *is* a development. My life doesn't have many of those. And it's good to have a hobby, I guess.

There was a farewell party going on in the bar. This guy with hard, over-gelled hair and a loose tie was at the centre of it all. I hung around, having a few drinks, eating hors d'oeuvres, daring someone to notice me.

Look at me. Go on, look.

But they didn't know that I'm the daughter of a legend. All they saw was a strange girl not talking to anyone. Then came the inevitable frown from Mr Hard Hair, the exchange of raised eyebrows with Ms Chardonnay and Ms Lipstick Teeth: *Do you know her? No, you? No.* And then the subtle shift in temperature as that group of connected people closed ranks and froze me out.

Of course they didn't recognize me. Nobody ever does unless I'm next to Nolan. He trots me out all the time at parties. Industry parties. Parties where people know him well enough that they wouldn't dream of taking my picture or paying me more than the most fleeting of glances, because everybody knows that *you don't cross Nolan Nox*.

Twenty minutes after Mr Hard Hair and Ms Chardonnay and Ms Lipstick Teeth looked me straight in the eye, I'd be surprised if even one of them remembered seeing me.

After being dismissed, I wandered to the restroom and saw the garish pink lipstick sitting next to the basin. Two young women – one of them the owner of the lipstick, I guess – were involved in a very animated discussion about some older woman named Celine Reynard who was, by all accounts, *a two-faced bitch*. I washed my hands and pretended to smooth my hair in the mirror.

'And the whole time, she was screwing Joanna's teenage son behind her back! Can you imagine?'

I could imagine – quite vividly, which I probably shouldn't have. Celine, who I'd decided was probably elegantly grey-haired and svelte, with some spotty kid energetically grinding away while Joanna went about her day, making business calls or cooking a lasagne or driving to the liquor store or whatever mothers do, totally oblivious to the skin show going on behind her back.

Maybe Joanna should pay a little more attention to her son.

'What did you do?' the other woman asked.

The first woman shrugged. ‘What *could* I do? I wasn’t going to be the one to tell Joanna and have Celine call me a liar to my face.’

She used washing her hands as an excuse to break eye contact, her nostrils flaring. Was she lying? Her neck had started to turn blotchy.

Before I could make up my mind, the other woman changed the subject to a boring update on her home renovations, so I tuned out. I was about to leave when my gaze snagged on the lipstick sitting next to the sink. Casually, I reached out and slipped it into my pocket. Walked to the door. Let the throbbing music of the bar swallow me.

And they didn’t even glance my way. They were as oblivious as poor Joanna. But did that make me Celine Reynard – stealthy rogue, breaking all the rules? Or was I Joanna’s sweaty son, craving attention? I search the cracks in the sidewalk for an answer. If it’s there, it’s buried too deep for me to see.

It isn’t the car itself, but the harsh screech of its tyres that catches my attention. My heart sinks. It’s Nolan’s car, though I doubt he’s inside. This is confirmed when the driver’s side window rolls down and my father’s assistant glares out at me. ‘Get in the car, Lola!’

‘Hey, Larry,’ I monotone, making no move to get in. I tilt my head and tap my chin. ‘Did you do something new with your beard?’

He hasn’t, of course. His beard is probably exactly the same as when he first grew it in kindergarten. Larry Brown

is a short, stocky man with black hair covering pretty much every part of him you can see. I saw a documentary once about some guy who absorbed his twin *in utero*, but it kept growing inside him like a tumour until it was the size of a raccoon. When they cut it out, the tumour-twin was this mass of flesh with hair and teeth growing out of it.

That's what I think of when I see Larry.

'Nolan texted me, said to come find you,' he says, ignoring the beard thing.

'He texted you? Nolan doesn't text.'

'Well, he did tonight,' Larry snaps. I stifle a wince. For Nolan to text Larry rather than call, he must be too incandescent with rage to actually speak. And I caused that. 'Damn it, Lola! You know you shouldn't be here. He'll be out of his mind worrying about you.' He sighs. He's an aggressive sigher. I guess I've messed up his plans for the night, whatever they were. 'What were you thinking?'

'Oh, *Larry*,' I drawl, channelling Lestat from *Interview with the Vampire*. 'I thought only of oblivion, of course.'

It's easy for me to slide into another persona like this. I watch way too many movies.

If Larry gets the reference, he gives no sign of it. He's probably too distracted by the vein pulsing all the way up the middle of his forehead.

I bite my lip, but stop as soon as I notice I'm doing it. Nolan would tell me I look like an airhead. Not Optimal.

'How did you find me?' I ask.

'You took Nolan's key card. I tracked the chip in it.'

Damn. I didn't know he could do that.

'I don't want to go back yet,' I say. 'Can't I just have a little while longer?'

Just a little more time, a little more air, and I'll be fine. I only need a little bit more . . .

'Lola, for the love of . . . *no.* Just get in the car.'

Down the street, the drunk couple have become long-reaching shadows. If I ran after them, told them a strange guy was following me, would they let me go with them? Maybe for an hour, or a night? Or would they pretend not to hear, and keep walking?

Larry leans against the steering wheel. The horn blares. Larry acts like he meant to do it. '*Now, Lola.*'

I could do it. Just run . . .

I get in the car. The door locks snap into place as Larry starts the engine. I stare at him in the rear-view mirror, holding his gaze as I push the button to raise the privacy partition. He mutters something that sounds like 'damn stupid teenagers' and shakes his head, breaking eye contact before the screen does it for him.

Lights flash past the window as we hurtle between the high-rises of Hudson Yards. My eyes blur, and I start listing all the best things to say when I see Nolan. If I can just figure out a few Optimal things to distract him, I might survive the night. I mean, sure, he'll be angry that I left the apartment on my own and without his permission. But he won't really want a fight, not while all his energy is focused on his new project – and not when we're about to be stuck with each other on an eight-hour flight. Besides,

it was kind of *his* fault for not telling me we were moving again.

I arrived home from my tutoring session at the library to find the apartment packed up, my life reduced to a neat stack of boxes with my name on. When I tracked Nolan down inside the cardboard maze and asked him what the hell was going on, he just glanced at me and said, ‘Oh, didn’t I tell you? We’re going to Paris in the morning. I start work on the new movie there next week.’

Then he went back to his study, humming along to that damned jazz record I can’t stand.

Oh, didn’t I tell you? Just like that. No big deal.

I felt my flesh hardening like volcanic rock, ready to explode at any moment. I couldn’t breathe. And he wouldn’t even look at me long enough to notice. Wouldn’t even look at me.

Look at me!

So I left. He noticed *that* apparently.

I’ve made a list of Optimal things I can say to Nolan by the time the car sidles to the kerb outside our building. Things like *I overreacted* and *I shouldn’t have left* and *You were right*. A list keeps me from saying the wrong thing to Nolan and making everything worse.

Deep breath. Get out of the car.

The Ivory is a beautiful, disapproving beast. It rises ten stories above me with curved art deco stonework. It’s easy to imagine flappers skipping out of the lobby on nights like this, all lipstick and gin and looking for a *swell time*.

Nolan is obsessed with the 1920s. He loves the music, the art, the decadence. The architecture, too – it’s in the bones of every building we’ve ever lived in. He once told me ruefully that he wished he’d been around back then to witness the dawning age of cinema – to be able to shape it from that Big Bang moment. I was surprised to hear him say that. Nolan doesn’t usually admit to wanting anything he can’t have.

‘You forgot your purse.’

Larry stands next to me, holding it out like you would to a stranger on a train, his thoughts elsewhere now that he’s done Nolan’s bidding. You wouldn’t think the guy has known me my whole life.

He and Nolan used to be college buddies – before Larry screwed up some big investments and went broke. Maybe he was different back then, before he had to ask Nolan for a job, but it’s hard to imagine them as friends. Larry is such a Renfield.

I take my bag and am about to head inside the Ivory when Larry moves to follow me.

‘Where are you going?’ I ask.

‘To check on Nolan. He didn’t pick up when I tried calling –’

‘Larry. He’s fine.’

We both know that’s not true; for Nolan to text Larry instead of calling him is a really bad sign. *‘Why would I spend ten minutes having a goddamn conversation by text when it can be wrapped up with a twenty-second phone call?’*

This is so, so bad.

The windows of our apartment at the very top of the Ivory are glowing. Nolan's waiting for me, and I don't want to do this in front of Larry. He's still hovering, though. Undecided.

'Look,' I say. 'It's late, and we have things to sort out before our trip.'

There's a tense silence before Larry finally nods. 'If there's anything . . .'

'OK!' I call over my shoulder, already walking away.

The street noise dulls as soon as I'm inside, leaving only the sound of my shoes clicking over the polished floor of the lobby. I pass the reception desk, ready to flash Matty a smile, even though he never smiles back anymore. Once, while he held the door for me, he let his hand curl around my arm and linger there a little too long, his fingers nestled against the side of my breast. I could've just stepped away from him or told him not to touch me, but the contact caught me by surprise. It actually reminded me of a time when I was leaving one of Nolan's film premieres and some guy grabbed me and tried to bundle me into the trunk of his car. The incident was kind of exciting, honestly – like finding myself in a movie with no script. Smiling, I described to Matty how I kicked my would-be kidnapper and screamed the way I thought I should, until the man let me go. Nolan had come running over just as the guy was wheel-spinning away. Then he picked me up and let me sob against his Armani suit. That was kind of nice.

'Nolan didn't report it to the police,' I told Matty. 'That's weird now that I think about it. But there was a

news story a couple of days later about a man who was found burned alive inside a car just like the one I saw that night . . . Maybe it was a different car – I’m not sure. But I think about that guy whenever I smell roasting meat.’

Matty snatched back his hand then, and scuttled off to his spot behind the reception desk. In that moment, I could have said or done anything to him without a single consequence. Stories can be powerful things.

Matty isn’t sitting at the reception desk now. He always works the late shift – he has the haggard appearance of a man who’s anxious to avoid his wife and kids – but tonight the foyer is empty. He’s probably just on a bathroom break, but it feels like the whole building is hollow. I don’t like it.

I take the elevator up to the penthouse and step out into a marble hallway that has only one door on it – ours. I’m so preoccupied fishing around in my purse for the key card I ‘borrowed’ from Nolan that I almost tread in the sticky dark red mess pooling under the apartment door. Looks like one of his fans has sent him another memento.

In the six months since Nolan and I moved into this apartment, he has been the unamused recipient of a box of dead toads, a pie made from what the Police Forensics Team informed us were dog intestines and, most recently, a jar with a human toe in it. If Nolan wasn’t so anal that he insists on opening all his own mail, Larry could intercept these *gifts*. But I guess I’d have no reason to send them if he did. (I’m kidding – I didn’t send *all* of them. Only the toe. And only because Nolan had been particularly shitty about letting me have my own laptop. He went off – *again* – about

‘the dangers of the internet’ and how I’m ‘better off without all those lies infesting my brain’. All the same words he uses when he arbitrarily fires my tutors for not keeping a close enough eye on what I’m up to online.) Anyway, the shine of *gifting* wore off for me when Nolan hurled the jar across the kitchen and it smashed, sending the fake toe sailing into a pot of coffee I’d just made.

I still don’t have my own laptop. I don’t even have a phone.

Now the ‘blood’ runs out in lines under the door, between the marble floor tiles, like it’s moving, reaching for me. I stop before the toes of my shoes touch the puddle. It’s an even deeper red at the edges, drying to a crust.

Before I can swipe the key card down the lock, the door swings slowly inward. I brace myself for Nolan’s ice-cold fury, but he isn’t standing in the doorway. There’s nobody there.

More blood-goop stains the parquet floor. The trail is patchy, like a heavy weight has been dragged and set down a few times. A prickling feeling sweeps over my skin. My grip tightens on the key card and I hold it out like a weapon in front of me as I linger just outside the door.

‘Nolan?’

He doesn’t answer, but I hear *something*. Like faint music, maybe. Not a conspicuous sound, but enough for me to know that Nolan is home. *Hub*. He never leaves the door to the apartment unlocked.

Sidestepping the mess, I go in. I smell last night’s takeout, the coconut oil the housekeeper uses on the leather furniture,

and Nolan's Montes – his Montecristo Relentless No. 2 cigars, which he smokes exactly twice a day. But there's another smell, too: tangy and unpleasant.

The long foyer is dim, but there's enough light to see that the trail leads between the stacked boxes lining the hallway, past the kitchen, and disappears into Nolan's study. The door to the study is oak with a coloured glass inlay made to look like interlocking pieces of a geometric puzzle. I'm never entirely sure what Nolan is up to when he's locked away in there. The puzzle door is *always* closed – whether he's inside or not.

It's open now.

'Nolan, are you home?'

Still no reply, but I've identified the murmur coming from inside. That damned jazz record is still playing in his study – 'T'ain't No Sin', one of his favourites. It keeps repeating the same few bars over and over, jumping like it has a scratch. Nolan won't like that.

The red path is wider here; it has spread into the cracks around the parquet blocks, threading outward like bloated veins.

'You left the door open . . .'

The trail thickens as I edge around it and cross to the study doorway, following the path. I know there's too much 'blood' to have come from a package. I *know* that.

Maybe Nolan's been called out to the studio and didn't have time to deal with the mess. Maybe I can get this cleared up before he gets home. That would be the Optimal thing to do.

It feels wrong to go into Nolan's study without his permission. But with two quick steps it's done. Here the smoky scent of his Montes hangs like an invisible cloud. I spot the cigar stub sitting in a spray of ash on Nolan's big oak desk, next to the ashtray. Next to it, not *in* it – as though it's been knocked over and left like that. The feeling of utter wrongness chokes me.

Stop it. Stop it! Don't be such a child, Lola.

Nothing has been packed away in Nolan's study yet; he likes to keep his workspace *just so*. The walls are covered in shelves of books and awards and photographs taken on various film sets. These things represent his life's work, his pride. On his desk there's a picture of me, too. None of my mother.

Lorelei herself has been AWOL for most of my life, so she doesn't get a spot on the desk. But she is in the framed *Nightjar* poster – the only movie she ever starred in. It's Nolan's most iconic film, shot in Lorelei's hometown of Harrow Lake, Indiana. *Nightjar* earned its place on the wall, even if Lorelei didn't.

I turn off the record player and the upbeat melody jolts to a stop. I can hear the desk phone now. It's lying on its side, a tone of quiet distress bleeding out of the receiver. I pick it up and am reaching for the switch hook to silence it when I see him. I freeze.

Nolan is slumped against a low bookcase, arms crossed over his stomach like he just decided to sit down and relax. For a second, I feel foolish for imagining anything was wrong. This is a joke, obviously. Even though Nolan never

jokes, not like this. My palms sting, my fingers curled too tight.

‘Nolan?’

He doesn’t answer. His eyes roll like he’s struggling to focus, nostrils flaring. Pain – intense pain. I’ve seen that look before, I guess, but only on-screen or on-set, and never from him. He’s faking – he must be. *Acting*. Except Nolan doesn’t do that, either. Unless . . . is he doing this to teach me a lesson? To punish me for leaving the apartment? How am I supposed to react? What’s the Optimal thing for me to do?

But no, the blood – it’s all over his hands, leaking from between his fingers. His cellphone lies in a puddle of it on the floor next to him, the dark screen smeared with fumbled fingermarks. A whole lake of blood.

I’d better clean that up before Nolan sees it.

The thought floats into my head like a soap bubble, and I almost laugh. Because that’s not an Optimal thought to have right now. Because . . .

Because God, he’s hurt. He’s really hurt.

The truth of it hits me with such force, such certainty, that it slams against my chest. I stutter-step in my rush to get to him and my feet skid under me so that I land hard on my knees. I grab the edge of the desk to pull myself back up, but a sudden sound stops me. It’s like fingers snapping again and again, only too quickly to be real. Like chattering teeth, but too loud – *snap, snap, snap, snap, SNAP*. The noise echoes through the apartment, then stops when it reaches the open doorway. My elbow hits the

desk edge with a loud crack as I whirl to face it, pain lancing all the way to my shoulder. But there's nobody in the doorway, and the sound is gone. There's only a vacuum of empty space.

What was that?

I crawl to Nolan's side, waiting to hear footsteps, a door slamming, but there's only the thudding of my heart against my ribcage. Whatever made that chattering noise is gone now.

'Lola,' Nolan says, but it's more of a groan. I don't know what to do, where to start. I need to figure out why he's bleeding, but I can't bring myself to touch him. 'Lola, I . . . I need an amb—'

Nolan's muffled words kick my brain into action. I grab the phone and crouch next to him as I dial 911. I somehow sound calm as I give the operator as much information as I can, trying to drown out the *other* voice inside my head, the hissing static that keeps whispering that he's going to die, going to leave me all alone, going to disappear . . .

'There's already an ambulance on its way to you, Lola,' the operator says. 'We got a call from your dad a little while ago.'

Of course. Did I seriously think he just lay down and waited for me to come home? No. Even here, even now, Nolan has arranged everything.

'He's . . . he's bleeding a lot. I think he's been stabbed. There's so much blood!'

'It's all right, Lola. Now here's what I need you to do . . .'

Following her directions, I run and grab a towel from the bathroom, then force myself to hold it to his stomach. I don't want to face what's really covering my hands; what's making the phone too slippery to hold steady. I can't let Nolan see how scared I am.

If only we hadn't argued earlier. If only I hadn't left him . . . He shouldn't be lying here like this. It's my fault. It's all my fault.

A thousand years pass before footsteps pound up to the apartment door and I hear the clipped, efficient voices of the paramedics. Nolan grunts in pain, then falls still. Is he unconscious or . . .

'No, no, no, no, NO!' I repeat the word like its rhythm can take the place of both our heartbeats.