

## ☛ Chapter 1 ☚

*I have lived in the company of ghosts. I have known this for a long time—that I rattled around among specters and spirits and wraiths. But I also knew that they were, indeed, my company.*

*My house, where the vapors lurked, had nine main rooms, not counting baths and laundry and storage and closets. Of those nine rooms, I inhabited five. I used only one of the three baths, one of the six closets, none of the storage areas.*

*A small room off the main part of the basement had been constructed for cold storage when the house was built in 1914. The wooden door at its entrance was at least four inches thick, the door of a vault. An ancient icebox sat inside, which was odd, since an icebox would normally have been kept in the kitchen, or maybe on the back porch. But it came with the house, and we left it where we found it—its bottom compartment open and yawning, forever awaiting the iceman to make his daily rounds, lugging the enormous block of ice that would keep the food cold and fresh for the next twenty-four hours.*

*Every time I entered the room and turned on the light—with its strange, metallic clink—I regretted that we never got around to putting in a regular ceiling light. A bare bulb, hanging from a lopsided wire, lit the pale green walls. I wondered if the floor had once been dirt, if the previous do-it-yourself owner had poured the concrete floor himself.*

*Shelves ran along two sides of the storage room. In one corner of the shelves, the Lionel trains from my childhood lay in their original boxes. People have told me that the old boxes are often as valuable, or even more valuable, than the Lionel trains themselves. But to me, their value came from the fact that playing with the trains, as they wound around the Christmas tree each year of my childhood, was the only moment in my memory that my father ever got down on the floor, on his hands and knees, and smiled the whole time.*

*Different boxes contained a jumble of seemingly unrelated parts and pieces: plastic animals, fake trees, wood lattices, street signs. But I recognized them as remnants of an entire miniature world that my parents created for the trains to pass through: a city zoo; a farm with a house, barn, stables, and animals; a village with buildings that lit from within; and people who sat on park benches under the shade of fluffy trees.*

*In the opposite corner of that shelf, the HO trains from my ex-husband Jeff's childhood lay in other boxes—boxes that had been neatly labeled and packed and shipped to us by Jeff's mother. Of his three siblings, Jeff had somehow been designated the Keeper of the Trains. Who knows if it was because of some secret soft spot Jeff's mother had for her only son or for some other*

*reason. Jeff's mother was never one to let many of her thoughts rise to the surface.*

*This was perhaps the only room in the house we never painted. The walls retained the same nondescript green they had on the day we moved in. About two feet off the ground, a faint rust-colored water line wove its way across one wall. I always wondered how it got there—how could water enter this room and make its mark so far above the ground?*

*About half of the basement's height sat underground, and, on occasion, water would gradually insinuate its way from outside to inside—first through the exterior stucco, then through the plaster and wood frame and lath, and finally through the bricks that comprised the basement's interior walls. We fought an eternal battle against crumbling bricks. The walls of our basement regularly blossomed into white, powdery crystals. When the blooms got large and heavy enough, clumps would break off and rain down in piles of chunky dust on the floor.*

*It was remarkable that this one wall—with its painterly line commemorating some event in the history of the house—never changed. I checked it from time to time, to make sure, to marvel at the stubborn permanence the wall bore. It was the same wall that held the shelves that held the trains.*

*Jeff and I were just a couple of wide-eyed kids with a little baby when we moved into this house. John fussed and cried when he wasn't held, so we took turns carrying him. While we scrubbed the floors and painted the walls and dug dirt in the gardens, we tickled and rocked and sang to our baby. He gazed at the world around him like he could stare a hole right through*

*everything and see into its very center. In three years, Kate came along, blonde and golden and fitting right into the universe like it was easy as pie, and every single thing was pure delight.*

*The house felt full. Not just with the family and friends and pets that were constantly coming and going and not just with all the things we gathered and put in different rooms that marked our lives, it was full in the only way that can make a house into a home.*

*Everything seemed to get bigger and bigger. Not just the children, but life itself.*

*When my parents bought their house, the azalea bush directly in front of it was in full, blazing bloom, and my mother was pregnant with me. I know this from a photograph of my parents standing in front of the azalea that spring when I was just a bump on my mother's belly. There is another photo of my mother the very next year when the bush blossomed again, and she is holding a baby just a few months old—the wild-haired infant was me.*

*When John was growing and kicking inside of me, like my parents had done, Jeff and I trudged around to place after place. I worked so hard to look past the scraps of other people's lives and to gaze ahead, trying to picture if the mortar and brick that stood around us could ever be a true home. Jeff could see the cracks in my hope forming. He would reach for my hand. He would kiss it. "We'll find it, baby. We will."*

*I grew up thinking that this was the way life was meant to be. You grew to adulthood and you found a worthy partner and you started a family and you made a home to raise them in. And you*

*stayed. You weathered whatever came along, and you stayed. You kept right on staying until the moment of your very last breath on Earth, and you did it in the place where you'd lived.*

*Both my mother and my father died at home. My mother, with no warning whatsoever, simply did not wake up one morning. I had talked to her on the phone—twice—the night she died. She went to bed that night the same as every other night, in her big bed in the house where she had spent the first twenty years of my life. She tended the flowers in the beds and washed the drapes once a year like clockwork and made sure her children were dressed and fed and minded their manners. She joined the PTA and the church guild and the neighborhood ladies' group that met once a month for a light luncheon and cards.*

*My father had gone upstairs to dress after he'd finished his full pot of coffee and his morning newspaper, and he thought: "That's funny. It sounds like the goddamn alarm clock is buzzing."*

*My mother lay in bed still and peaceful as could be with the alarm clock screaming. My father went over and shook her big toe through the blanket. He called her name into the daytime blackness of the room, the bright July sunlight held back by dense blackout curtains, save for the littlest peek here and there. He went over and pushed the peg of the alarm clock and stood there with his index finger still pressing it, as if he had an inkling that when he took his finger off he would have to figure out what to do next. And, he had the further inkling that this would be the first in a chain of events that marked the beginning of an entirely different life.*

*He shook her toe a few more times and then went over and*

*sat down on his own side of the bed. It occurred to him that maybe if he got back under the covers and shut his eyes for a time and then opened them up again, it might all be different.*

*Eventually he picked up the phone. “Bob,” he said, “Bob, I think Mary’s dead. I’m not sure, but I think that maybe she is,” which was an especially sad and strange thing to say considering my father was a doctor and he knew through and through that my mother would never take another breath.*

*Five years after that, my father was a shadow of his former self. He spent most of that five years sitting in one chair, at the table in the dining room. From that chair, he sorted through his piles of mail and leafed through his magazines and sipped at his bowls of lukewarm broth and watched whatever happened to be on the television. He drank—a lot—and he smoked so much that the walls of the house, which had been painted a bright, eggshell white under my mother’s watch, became coated in a sickly bronze. He ate nothing but canned soup: chicken noodle or cream of mushroom. He drank his whiskey straight in big tumblers with his initials etched in a diamond pattern, glasses my parents had gotten as a wedding present. The callus on his thumb was substantial from running it across the letter M, over and over, the one initial they had in common.*

*His hands shook, his lungs and his liver were shot, and he could barely sense the ground underneath him because he could no longer feel his feet. But worst of all for him, his eyesight was nearly gone, so he could no longer see to read his beloved newspaper. He drank his pot of coffee and smoked a great many cigarettes each morning while squinting at his paper, holding it*

*close to one eye first and then the other; but the news on TV was giving him all the information he got, really. The man who had gotten down on his hands and knees to play with the Lionel trains, who had painstakingly built a mountain—complete with a tunnel for the trains to pass through—and a lake, well, that man had vanished, piece by slow piece.*

*When my twenty-five-year marriage to Jeff ended, I asked him if he wanted the trains. I asked him several times. He always said yes; but he never came to claim them. Eventually he moved far away, and the trains remained in their neatly packed boxes, shipped at great expense from his parents’ house in West Virginia.*

*So many things have been just like this for me—the shards and shreds of a life gone by. Like all people who marry, we came from two separate families, and we joined together to make our own new family. I became the Keeper of the Trains, a role I chose freely, without burden or regret—because I understood that there might come a time when someone would want those trains.*

*I lived among closets filled with the history of others, because any of the things within them might be needed at any time. Or perhaps the rooms themselves might be needed, as they had been many, many times as my children—and several of their roommates and friends and significant others and spouses—needed a place to live, to call home.*

*It is possible that they will not need this again from me. It is more likely, in fact, that the time will come, as I move toward my twilight, that I might need sanctuary from them.*

*In the meantime, I rattled around a great deal of space, just in case that space might be needed.*

*It's the first day of September 2012, and I have been living alone for a long time. When Jeff first left—fourteen years ago today—I could read without glasses even the smallest print on the train boxes. When my hands reached up to dust those boxes, the craggy blue veins did not stand out starkly against my sallow hands. The skin did not pucker into fascinating, horrifying patterns that measure my years.*

*When John left for college eleven years ago, I had three more years in the house with Kate. Since she left, it has been just me.*

*Yes, I have lived in the company of ghosts. I knew well what they were. But I also knew that they were, indeed, company.*

## ☛ Chapter 2 ☚

*M*adeline had only one contact when she and Jeff moved to Chicago at ripe summer's end of 1980; but that one contact led to a job and that job led her to Ellie. They were both twenty-four years old. Ellie's unfettered laugh and her crazy waist-length braids and her spectrum of facial expressions immediately drew Madeline into a friendship. They reclaimed their childhood love of ballet together and met for two or three dance classes a week. They learned how to knit together, compared patterns and stitches, and helped repair one another's mistakes. Bad days at work, or good ones, were often followed by a glass of wine at their favorite neighborhood pub. Ellie was a self-proclaimed lightweight as a drinker, and Madeline was completely charmed by how quickly Ellie's spirits could rise to buoyant and beyond. Ellie threw her head back with hearty laughter and tossed around her crayon-yellow blonde hair.

They weathered the next thirty-one years together, through everything that happened in their lives: the births of five chil-

dren, the deaths of three parents and two brothers, and the breaking apart of one of their families. All of it.

It was with Ellie that Madeline took a walk on the morning of September 1st. Ellie asked if Madeline would meet at the sculpture park, a path of several miles that wound along a creek and through both open, grassy spaces and shady, wooded thickets. Though the park was within Madeline's town, she had walked it only once before. Madeline had genuinely liked the experience of wandering the path and examining the large, highly varied sculptures, but she had just never returned. *I am so much a creature of habit*, Madeline thought. *The lake is close; I go to the lake.*

Long before Jeff moved to his new apartment on the first day of September, Madeline had associated the date with a new year—much more so than January 1. The shift of the seasons, the smell of fresh school supplies, the whirl of upcoming holidays, filled Madeline with a sense of anticipation and possibility.

Madeline greeted Ellie with this heady outlook. Hope floated inside Madeline like an infusion of oxygen as they embarked on the path and dove into a breathless catch-up. The feeling burst immediately when the subject turned to dating.

"Ellie, what in the world am I going to do?" Madeline said.

"You," Ellie said, "are going to take a much-needed break from what you've been trying to do ever since Jeff left—the single-minded 'project' you have made out of dating. The mission to secure a new 'forever.'"

"Huh," Madeline said, in the particular deadpan way that

had been their thirty-year private joke. Madeline had adopted Ellie's go-to response, the one Ellie used to indicate that what the other person had just said was baffling, confounding, or hopelessly irrational.

"It's time," Ellie said. "You need the break."

"Huh."

"I think this will be a great thing."

"Huh." Madeline added, "I think *you* need the break."

"OK, perhaps we both do."

How many walks just like this one had Ellie and Madeline taken over the past ten years since Jeff left? Madeline wondered. How many times had they clipped along on some pathway, beachfront, nature preserve, or botanic garden? How many cups of coffee had been sipped in little cafés, student centers, large malls, or bookstores, while they deconstructed Madeline's latest date, possible romance, new romance, budding relationship, full! rosy! cheeked! blush! of! love! first stagger, swaying, reeling, crumbling, dissolving, dissolving, dissolved.

The thought of all this exhausted Madeline. She was utterly bored with herself. Bored and worn-out and miserable about how much time and brain space and thought and conversation the whole subject of dating and relationships had sucked from her life. She had a nearly overwhelming desire to lie down in the grass right then, halfway along the trail, right there, in the middle of the sculpture garden, and resolve to stay there, not move, not continue, until something changed. The blades of grass would soak up the late summer sun and caress her with their easy warmth. She would watch the wispy