

Becoming Ellen.

Chapter One.

Ellen Homes was feeling jaunty, which was interesting, because until recently she'd never found any use for the word *jaunty*. Sure, she'd read it, but with her particular brand of detached living, which excluded most conversation—or human interaction, if at all possible—she'd never had a chance to try it out. Jaunty, Ellen decided, felt like a sunny day with a thrilling breeze, though right now it was dark, only a couple hours before dawn. She looked out the window of the bus at the deserted, gray, early-a.m. sidewalks and suppressed a smile.

Not that anyone would see the fleeting expression. It wasn't difficult for Ellen to fall naturally into her old state of invisibility, not for someone with as much practice as she had. For more than twenty years, Ellen had developed the knack of being absent. It had begun simply, with seeking shadows and silence, because the alternative was *notice*, which had never been a good thing for Ellen. Concentrating hard on withdrawing from the physical world, she would *will* herself to not be a part of it. Her diligence, coupled with the fact that nobody in her life had ever *wanted* to see her, had finally, and happily, resulted in the ability to virtually move through life invisibly.

At least it had until she'd run into Temerity—or, to be more accurate, until the blind girl had run into her. Without vision, Temerity had “seen” Ellen in a way that Ellen was unprepared for, a way that lacked the judgment of physical appearance, because for Temerity *appearance had no meaning*.

The bus shushed and roared in its bizarre syncopated way as it followed its familiar route. There was another word that Ellen had learned from Temerity, who was a musician—*syncopate*. “Oh, it means that the backbeat, the weaker rhythm, changes and becomes stronger than the primary beat,” the violinist explained when Ellen had asked.

Syncopate, the weak becoming stronger. Ellen liked that. She wasn't sure why exactly. It might have been the way the word felt as it came out her mouth with a rhythm of its own, in three short, distinctive bursts. *Sync-o-pate*. But she suspected the more likely reason was that she just loved words. She had spent so much of her childhood hidden in closets and attics, with only the characters of books to keep her company, that vocabulary and phrases had become her friends.

But Ellen was most fascinated by honest human interaction. Observing and noting those exchanges had tethered her to the world, but loosely, anchoring her at a safe distance. To her, strangers weren't just curiosities, they were *riveting*. Ellen studied their minute behaviors and recorded their exchanges with each other in her lined notebooks. Life's little snapshots, she called them. Turning from the window, she directed her attention to the other passengers and took out her current notebook.

Almost directly across from Ellen, a woman and a child were slumped in their seats. They had the exhausted, malnourished look that Ellen recognized from her own neglected childhood. The girl was playing with a small plastic toy, but she

looked up at the bus advertisements and pointed to an elaborate doll. Her mother glanced up and then shook her head wearily. The girl pleaded, cling to her mother's arm, until her mother shoved her and told her to stop being stupid.

Frowning, Ellen wrote the exchange down in her notebook. But then she noticed something else. The mother's tired gaze shifted again and again to the ad, and her own eyes filled with tears, which she wiped away angrily, and then she kissed the top of the girl's head, and Ellen wrote, *Mother feels badly.*

As the bus pulled up to the next stop, the doors opened and a very large white man, ruddy, and so big that he almost filled the aisle, lumbered up the steps, where he stood, aggressively scanning the other riders. Ellen slipped farther down in her seat, and the man's erratic, drug-altered gaze slid past her without so much as a pause-as usual when she encountered people. He rubbed his fingers against his thumbs rapidly and licked his lips. Ellen could see that he was extremely unstable, either under the influence of some strong drug or mentally ill. A young thin black man wearing jeans and a zipped up leather jacket slipped around him and took a seat in the back.

The threatening stranger swayed slightly as the bus pulled away. Then he leaned down until his face was inches from an elderly passenger's. He spat, "Hey geezer, give me a dollar."

The senior whimpered with fear and shook his head. "I don't have any money. Please leave me alone."

Ellen checked to see what the driver would do. She could see him watching furtively in the huge review mirror, but he maintained his neutrality.

In the center of the slightly raised row of seats along the back of the bus, Ellen noticed the young man in the leather jacket watching the bully with a blank face. It was the *lack* of expression that was notable—the absence of fear.

"What are you looking at?" the large man shouted down the bus at him.

"Nothing," the man in the leather jacket responded. "Less than nothing."

Ellen decided she liked him.

The buy started toward him. "You want some of this?" He pounded his chest with his fists.

"No," the other man responded lazily, suppressing a yawn. "I don't want none of that."

The driver finally spoke up. "Sir, I need you to take a seat," he called out.

For a few seconds—Ellen counted to twelve slowly—nothing happened. The disturbed man's eyes shifted right and left several times. It appeared he was trying to digest this information, and there was clearly a glitch in the processing. Then he took another step toward the back.

"Sit down, sir!" the driver called out with more force.

With surprising speed, the big man spun and ran at the driver with an apelike roar, his arms outstretched, his fingers curled into claws.

The driver saw him coming and slammed on the brakes. Ellen and the other passengers were flung forward. Ellen managed to stop her face from hitting the seat in front of her only because she already had her hands braced up against it. The young man from the back flew forward but landed on his feet at a run and kept

running toward the attacker, who had his hands around the driver's neck. The bus went into a slide.

The bus's wheels hit the curb as the vehicle flipped and landed on its side. Ellen's shoulder slammed hard against the window to her immediate right. She felt a hard thump as something landed on her left hip, but everything was a mess of sounds and motion. It was hard to separate the screaming from the screech of metal on concrete and the smashing of glass from the whining of the bus's engine.

The bus rocked twice, and then found its sideways balance. Ellen raised her head and looked around.

The man in the leather jacket had grabbed the back of the emergency seats on the left and was dangling a couple of feet over the facing seats. As she watched, he let himself drop and moved immediately to the attacker, who was lying in a heap on the ground. She watched him seize the man's arms, twist them behind him, and produce handcuffs. The bus driver dangled by his seat belt, blood dripping from his forehead.

Ellen became aware that something was digging into her side. Twisting awkwardly, she looked down. The little girl who had been sitting across from her was lying on top of Ellen, her mouth open in silent shock. *Well*, Ellen thought philosophically, *at least she landed on something soft*.

"Are you okay?" Ellen asked as gently as she could. Speaking to children under any circumstances was alien to Ellen, and this wasn't just any circumstance. The girl stared at Ellen as if surprised to find that there was someone underneath her. Trying to avoid the glass shards around them, Ellen worked her fanny onto what had been the wall of the bus below the window, the glass of which was now replaced by exposed cement. Putting one arm around the girl's tiny waist, she shifted her so as not to sit on her, which Ellen was sure, would crush the little fledgling. "Are you...uh...okay?" Ellen repeated.

The little girl looked into Ellen's eyes, said, "I think so," in a mewling voice, and then threw herself against Ellen. Ellen's whole body went rigid, but she resisted the instinct to shove her away and sat frozen, patting the child's back with an open palm.

Where was her mom? But before she could look, Ellen smelled something that disturbed her more than the moans and cries that were oozing up around her...smoke.

"All right then," she said to the little girl. "We need to get out. Come on." The child didn't so much as blink. Ellen tried to think of some way to motivate her. From the depths of her past she remembered something someone had said to her when she was entering yet another unwelcoming foster home. It hadn't made the home any better, but it had helped Ellen walk through the door. So she said it now. "Be brave. Okay?" She got to her feet and pulled the girl up. The child wrapped her arms around Ellen's thigh, but she moved with Ellen as they made their way toward the window, now above them, with the words, EMERGENCY EXIT in gleaming red.

Glancing back, Ellen saw that the big man in handcuffs had rocked himself onto his knees, and his crazed eyes were fixed with hard, insane hatred on the man in the leather jacket who was trying to free the driver.

“Wait here, just on second, I’ll be back,” Ellen said, unwinding the girl’s arms from her leg. The girl allowed it, but watched Ellen’s face with dazed anxiety.

Halfway to the front, Ellen was stopped by the sight of something wedged between two seats. It was the girl’s mother, completely still, with her face twisted strangely against her chest. Beyond her, the bully growled and planted one foot in preparation to stand.

Without even thinking, Ellen put one foot on his chest and shoved hard. He went over backward, his weight pinning his arms underneath him. Then she took up a position beside the man struggling to release the driver’s seat belt. He looked started at her sudden appearance but he smile, a little desperately. Bracing herself on the center divider, Ellen reached both hands up over her head and pushed up on the driver’s hip with all her might. “Okay,” she forced out. “Now.”

With the weight somewhat eased, they were able to unfasten the seat belt, then break the driver’s fall.

“Okay, I’ve got him, you get out!” the man in the jacket commanded.

When Ellen reached the emergency exit, the little girl attached herself to her again. The window was open, and a man was reaching down.

“Hurry!” he told Ellen as she lifted the small girl, who barely weighed more than her obese cat, up and through the exit. The it was Ellen’s turn, though she was not so eager to trust her considerable weight to other arms.

But she had no choice. So she allowed herself to be hoisted up until she flopped out onto the side of the bus and then was helped to the street before scuttling out of the way.

She was sitting on the curb, panting when someone put the little girl in her lap. “Here’s your mommy,” the man said, patting the child’s head.

Ellen opened her mouth to say, “She’s not my...” and then she thought of the real mother still inside the bus, the unnatural angle of her neck, and she said nothing.

With a siren’s scream of relief, the first emergency vehicle pulled up, scattering Good Samaritans and spectators alike.

Suddenly the soft brown eyes of the young man appeared in front of hers. “You guys doing okay?” As he leaned down and his jacket fell open, Ellen saw something shiny clipped to his belt over his faded black jeans and white T-shirt. A badge.

Not used to being seen, much less spoken to, Ellen just nodded and kept her gaze down.

“Thanks for your help.” Ellen felt pressure on her shoulder and looked at it. Her whole body seemed to pulse and writhe, seeking escape, but he turned and called out to the paramedics, “Let’s get someone to take a look at these two.”

“No,” Ellen objected her heartbeat fluttering up from its already accelerated pace into a flurry of constant thrumming. “No. Please. I’m fine.”

But as she said it, she saw a figure strapped tightly to a backboard being lifted down from the bus. Ellen reached out and pulled the little girl’s birdlike body against her, instinctively trying to prevent the child from seeing.

When she looked down, she saw that the girl had already registered the image that Ellen knew she could never erase of her mother—helpless, unconscious,

and clearly broken. Then Ellen noticed a large red bump was beginning to rise on the child's forehead.

Every instinct in Ellen was screaming *Hide! Find cover!* But for the first time in her life she did not want to listen. She needed to stay present, to help, to watch over, to be...was it possible? *Responsible* for someone else. Ellen's pulse steadied, settling into a furious but determined drumroll. "Yes, please, right away."

In the ER, the child was put in an individual room, her tiny figure dwarfed by the adult-size gurney. Ellen pulled up the room's single hard-plastic chair to the side of the bed farther from the door and slumped, keeping her head low and the girl's small hand in hers, marveling at the soft fragility of the bones in the tiny fingers, like slim weeds in the crack of a sidewalk, dried brittle in the sun.

The admitting nurse approached them. "What's your daughter's name?" she asked, readying a clipboard to receive the information.

"I don't know," Ellen said.

Using their linked fingers, the girl pulled herself close to Ellen's ear and whispered, barely audibly, "My name is Lydia."

"Lydia," Ellen told the woman without making eye contact. "I'm not her mom, she's...she's in the next room. There." Ellen pointed.

The nurse glanced up brow furrowed, but smiled grimly. "Are you in pain, Lydia?"

Lydia twisted to look up at Ellen, who thought, *In her world she's been told not to say anything to strangers.* Ellen nodded once to the girl, granting permission, and Lydia responded to the query with a quick shake of her head.

At that moment, two policemen entered the small room. Ellen reached up with her free hand and wrapped it tightly around her upper left arm. The spidery scars there itched as though they were freshly scabbed instead of year old. She wasn't even sure why, only that whenever she saw police in uniform, Ellen had flashed of one of her early foster homes, of a policeman with a drinking problem and a cruel streak, and she remembered the startled look of pity on the face of the teacher who had noticed the multiple scabs scratched into Ellen's arm, prompting yet another change of foster homes. Ellen shook it off now, like raindrops from an umbrella.

The first officer scanned the room twice before he spotted Ellen. "We need to get some information and a statement from you, ma'am."

Ellen took a shaky breath and tried to think of how to tell them with the least amount of words and notice. "A guy, big, white, probably on drugs, got on the bus and attacked the driver. It crashed." She was rubbing her arm furiously.

"Are you all right?" the officer asked.

Ellen stopped the rubbing and held her fisted hand firmly in her lap, though the sensation on her arm grew into a burning so strong she imagined she could hear it sizzling. "I'm fine," she said quietly.

"Ms....Homes, could I speak to you outside for a moment?"

A gale force terror struck Ellen and she squeezed her eyes shut to block the wind of it, momentarily rendered incapable of movement. Then she rose stiffly and pried Lydia's hand from hers. "I'll be right back," she told the girl.

“Don’t leave.” The girl spoke simply, almost inaudibly. Yet the two words crushed Ellen.

“I won’t,” Ellen said, then she thought, *Don’t lie to her!* So she added, “Not yet.” As Ellen followed the officer out, his partner sat down next to the bed. Lydia ignored him and kept her eyes riveted on Ellen on the other side of the glass.

“So, you wouldn’t have any idea who we could contact to pick this child up, would you?”

Ellen’s heart leapt from her chest, slammed against the wall, and slid to the floor, shriveled and bruised. She stood motionless until it flopped its way back into her chest. This was too much like her own story, no one to come for her. It was one of many chapters of her life too painful to be relived. She had survived it precisely because she did not relive it—ever.

Ellen shrugged off the shadow of her own debilitating scenario and managed a single word. “No.”

The officer shook his head. “Child services is on their way, and they can place her for the night at least.”

Ellen thought of the mother’s battered body being carried from the bus and understood that one night would almost certainly become a hundred, then a thousand. The memories of her own mother’s desertion that ambushed her now were so painful that, out of desperation, she began to shut down. The Novocain of denial, of a lifetime of conditioning herself not to feel, to look only forward, never back, began in her gut and spread. The addictive response was a hit of saturated numbness.

“Can I go?” Ellen asked the officer.

“I’m not going to keep you.”

Without waiting, Ellen gratefully turned away from him and back toward the room. She would go in and tell Lydia that she had to go but that she, Lydia, would be all right. Though the only thing Ellen knew for certain was that the girl was about to become a ward of the state. Through the glass, Lydia was watching her with her strange, round eyes. She raised her hands and held them out toward Ellen.

Ellen felt something just above her stomach splinter, like thin ice fracturing, and it crumpled her. She put one hand against the window to steady herself. She tried to force her body to turn toward the doorway and go back in, but at the moment a woman in tan slacks and a tight bun walked briskly through the emergency room doors. Ellen knew what she was even before the woman took up her position in Lydia’s doorway. She’d seen this same person a dozen times before, and each time they had been different ages, had different hair, skin color, were a different sex, even had different accents, but they’d all been the same person to Ellen. Not even a person really, more like a force, an *institution*.

“Lydia Carson?” the woman called out, advancing on the girl like an animal she’d struck with a car and that was bleeding on the side of the road. Through the open door, Ellen could hear her say, “My name is Serena and I’m here to help you. There’s no reason to be afraid.”

Ellen could not enter while the generic face of so many of her nightmares occupied that space. *What a stupid thing to say*, she thought bitterly. *Of course she’s afraid, of course she has reason. Why pretend to a child who knows fear so much better*

than you? She remembered hearing the same banal words, the same promises of safety and care that were never delivered. She stood, wondering if anyone could see that she was inside out and praying that they couldn't see her at all. Struggling to fend off the panic, Ellen began to take sharp, shallow gulps of air as the woman's expression, a fixed smile that did not extend to her eyes, stimulated a flurry of ugly images for Ellen. Before she fell spinning into that dark, gaping void of emotions she could not control, Ellen fled.

She reached the corner of the hallway and powered on around it, so targeted on the anonymity that would hide her beyond the exit that she did not see the man directly in her path. Ellen tried to alter the direction of her momentum—not an easy shift when her one hundred and eighty pounds were fully committed elsewhere.

"I'm glad you're okay. Are you leaving?" It was the undercover police officer from the bus.

She looked up in both surprise and relief. Somehow this capable cop in jeans didn't frighten her the way the uniforms did. The harshly lit hallway revealed that he was much older than he first appeared, closer to midthirties, she thought.

"Uh, yeah," Ellen managed.

"I'm glad I ran into you. I wanted to give you this." He pulled out a card and handed it to Ellen. She looked down at it to avoid the naked feeling of his eyes on her. It read DETECTIVE LIONEL BARCLAY. Beneath that were his precinct and phone number.

Ellen mumbled, "Sure," and pocketed the card.

"How's the little girl?" Detective Lionel Barclay asked.

"I don't know." She hesitated. For some reason she felt compelled to share something with this man. The sensation was alien, yet not as threatening as she would have thought. So she ventured, "I don't suppose she's doing very well, do you?"

Lionel Barclay sighed. "No, I don't suppose she is. I think it really helped that you were there. You seem to be good with kids."

If the detective had pulled out his gun and shot her, Ellen could not have been more startled. *Good with kids?* Kids had made her own childhood a living hell. She had been *good* at avoiding them, but that was the extent of it.

"I, uh, don't really know any kids," was all she said.

The detective laughed. "Well, let me know how you're doing. I'm really grateful to you. If there's anything you need, please let me know."

Ellen nodded shallowly and got going more carefully this time, but picking up speed as her need to be invisible grew to an aching necessity. The hospital doors opened and Ellen felt the chilly early-morning air rush over her, soothing her tattered nerves.

But the name Lydia Carson repeated itself over and over with a steady, constant beat in her brain. The mantra grew from weak to strong, forcing back the paralyzing memories.

Lydia Carson, Lydia Carson. Over and over, Ellen repeated the feeble syllables of the name in a syncopated rhythm until they steadied and grew stronger. *Lydia CARson, Lydia CARson, Lydia CARson,* like a new heartbeat born of intent.

