

CHAPTER 1

MARBLES

Marbles was the most peaceful little coffee shop in Chicago. Just outside the front door, the city buzzed with the dissonance of afternoon rush-hour traffic combined with the roaring and squeaking of the nearby El Train. On the sidewalk, pedestrians hurried as they shouted into their cell phones to be heard over the deafening noise.

The interior of Marbles seemed a world away from this bustle. Soft guitar music floated down from overhead speakers and blended with the aroma of freshly ground coffee beans and sweet pastries to create an atmosphere of sensory serenity.

The employees attended to their patrons in an effortless flow. Not even the occasional growl of the coffee grinder could break the harmony within Marbles. Customers quietly ordered from the menu which included warm cinnamon rolls made fresh daily, intriguing varieties of roasted coffee,

hand-blended herbal teas, and the best cup of hot chocolate in Chicago.

A serene atmosphere *and* a tasty warm beverage is a recipe for satisfied customers. And the customers at Marbles were that and more. They were *peaceful*. They had *found* their marbles.



The tranquil door tone announced a new arrival. A woman in her mid thirties cautiously peered into Marbles then tentatively entered. A few regulars looked up and smiled at the newcomer, but Edith did not return their looks or smiles. She could not recall when she had stopped looking into the eyes of strangers. But she was certain that, if anyone looked into her eyes, they would recognize the hurt and distrust, and she would be exposed. She felt too vulnerable to let that happen, so like most elevator riders, Edith focused her gaze upward and looked towards the menu. She edged forward with the intention of ordering, but the unfamiliar menu and surroundings proved a bit overwhelming, and she stopped several feet in front of the counter.

Edith needed more time before committing to a specific order, so she did what she usually did in an uncomfortable situation; she studied the interior layout of her surroundings. For as long as she could remember, Edith had been fascinated with interior design. When she was eight years old, her parents had allowed her to rearrange the living room. It had taken her the entire day to measure dimensions and draw several designs. Her parents, who rarely complimented

her on anything, had both praised her creativity and even adopted one of her plans. She had discovered a gift for organizing interiors. How ironic that she had such disorder and chaos inside her life.

In Marbles, she noticed a unique combination of round and rectangular tables arranged neatly to the left and right sides of the counter. Small blue vases graced each table with a sprig of purple and yellow wildflowers. Above her, soft light cascaded from paper-shaded hanging lamps and radiated in overlapping circles on the counter, reflecting light off the metallic flecks in the marble counter top. The only thing that seemed out of place was the artwork. Edith scanned all of the walls. Gold-framed collages of images and words were displayed in vertical columns three-high on every wall. They were abstract and colorful, but their placement really disagreed with her design sensibilities.

A man and woman stepped in front of her to order, and Edith was relieved for the new distraction. The woman wore a chic bolero jacket over a yellow knee-length dress and black, stiletto heels. Silver jewelry on her wrists and neck accentuated her every movement. Her brown eyes sparkled as the woman quietly laughed with her partner. She looked so put-together and happy.

Edith looked down at her own wrinkled clothes and scuffed shoes. Without thinking, she touched the top of her hair hoping that her grey roots were not visible. Somehow, she just could not pull things together. It took too much energy; energy that she just did not have. She felt as if she had no control over anything in her life, not even her clothes or her hair. But it was worse than that. In her honest

moments, she would admit to herself that she felt like an emotional hostage in a place where joy could not enter and pain could not leave.

It was Edith's turn to order, and she could delay no longer, so she stepped up to the counter. Her eyes were drawn to the glass bowl filled with brightly-colored marbles placed next to the cash register. *Marbles—how clever*, she thought. "Will you trust me to recommend the best hot chocolate you have ever tasted?" asked the kind voice from behind the counter. Edith looked up to find a woman with a welcoming face, patiently holding a purple ceramic mug. "May I ask your name?" Edith cleared her throat once and answered, "Edith." The server removed a stainless steel canister from a quietly whirring device that mixed and heated hot chocolate. In one smooth motion, she poured a dark chocolate ribbon into the purple mug and artistically added a swirl of whipped cream and chocolate shavings. Edith inhaled the delicious aroma. "That smells good, and it was so quick!" Edith said. The server smiled and replied, "I could tell that you needed hot chocolate so I started making it before you ordered. Here is your hot chocolate, Edith. May I get you anything else?" Edith was amazed but could not show it. She did not want to extend herself to this stranger, so she looked down and fumbled through her purse to pull out her money while shaking her head. "I'm fine," she said unconvincingly, "I'm fine." Her words dropped heavily to the floor. They were not true, and they both knew it, though neither of them said anything.

Edith received her change and mug of hot chocolate. As she moved toward the back corner of the store away from the windows, she glanced down to count her change then

hesitated. “Is something wrong?” the same kind voice asked from behind her. Edith put her hot chocolate down on the nearest table and picked the shiny green marble out of her change. Holding it up, she turned and asked her question without saying a word. Motioning to a table along the wall, the gentle voice said, “Would you mind if I told you a story? I think you would enjoy hearing it.”