

Chapter One

“I’ve taken care of everything,” I told Maribeth firmly. This was the last Saturday in June, last summer, and we were about to throw open the doors of Cave, the art gallery Maribeth Ramsey owned in Tribeca, which is downtown in New York City. Outside, it was blisteringly hot, but inside it was cool, hushed, empty, dim—you’d never guess that in half an hour people from all over the city would be crowding in for our new show. “Here’s the adjusted price list, all typed up.” I flapped several pieces of paper in front of her. “I’ve re-set the lights—aren’t they perfect? And I made sure every painting has the exact right title.”

Loretta—that’s my mother—had told me that at Thursday’s opening-night party several titles had been jumbled up. This was such an insult to the artist, I always thought, like putting the wrong name on a tombstone! It never would have happened if I’d been here, but on Thursday I had a fever—one hundred and three. Loretta claimed I’d contracted a kind of homesickness-in-reverse, that I missed my father. An executive officer on a nuclear submarine, he was away on patrol after being home for almost two years. But if Loretta’s theory was true, why did I get a fever on my sixteenth birthday back in February, with my father right there beside me?

“Ellen, you’re a wonder!” Maribeth—my mother’s best friend, and my friend, too—gave me a bear hug. She had on a dress where orange, brown and red melted together, like an erupting volcano; it had accordion pleats and sleeves that looked like hanging Japanese lanterns.

“Maribeth,” I had to ask, “after you wash that dress, don’t you have to iron it very carefully? Doesn’t it take forever?”

“Oh, honey, it’s brand-new—I have no idea. Probably I’ll have to dry-clean it for a fortune.” That was Maribeth—act now, deal with it later. “Why, want to borrow it sometime?”

“Me? No way! I mean, no, thank you.” Since turning sixteen, I’d made a decision, kind of a New Year’s resolution on my birthday. Now my hair was all one length, no more bangs or layers or blond streaks—solid brown hair that fell just above my shoulders. I never wore more than two solid colors in a whole outfit. Eight unbroken hours of sleep. Three well-balanced meals a day and no snacks in between. Life was complicated enough. It was time to make my life altogether simple.

“Ellen has not taken care of everything, and Ellen is not a wonder.” This came from Sam, Maribeth’s eighteen-year-old son. He’d been in the gallery’s other room, but with all the quiet emptiness in between, he’d heard us—or he’d been eavesdropping. “Look how she’s drowned that painting with light.”

My neck stiffened as if I’d been sitting all afternoon in the front row at the movies. Sam was pointing at the painting I loved best in the show, a nighttime forest scene called “Lost in the Familiar.” I could almost feel the wet earth beneath my feet, smell the damp leaves, see the curved branches rustling like the fans of slave girls. Several times before, we’d exhibited this

artist, a Brazilian woman, and always her work had been bright and lively, startlingly blue lakes pierced with light—white light that when you stared closely at it contained bits of green and brown. But this show was all darkness and gloom. What had happened to her? *Something*, clearly. Something painful. But these paintings were her best.

“Too little light,” I informed Sam, “and that painting will melt into the wall.” Cave was kept deliberately dark, except for spotlights on the paintings. “I bet it was your fault Thursday night when the titles were wrong!”

“Don’t bet,” Sam said. “Besides, with these titles, no one even noticed.”

“Sam is right.” Maribeth sighed. “No one noticed. And the titles were my fault.”

But I thought “Lost in the Familiar” was an enigmatically beautiful title, and didn’t suit any other painting.

Sam adjusted the spotlight with his right hand. He’s tall, and his curly hair is completely gray, and his left hand is forever clenched in a fist. That, and a slightly awkward leaning to the left, noticeable mostly when he walks, are the only signs that he has cerebral palsy. When my brother, Barry, walks, he looks drunk. Barry also has what’s called mild CP, though his case is more severe than Sam’s. Now that he’s four, Barry has trouble with the toothpaste tube, and usually a huge glob explodes out. He can feed himself crackers, but they crumble in his hands. He needs help dressing and eating; he wear knee pads because he’s always falling; he still wears diapers; and if you tell him, “Barry, close the bedroom door and bring me your slippers,” he will forget one or the other.

Never mind about Barry—the way Sam acted, Sam was the only handicapped person in the universe, and how he suffered!

“Better?” Sam challenged me, but his tone was surprisingly friendly.

“Different,” I said, giving it a sideways glance.

“Better,” Sam insisted. “Why won’t you agree with me when I’m right? But no—whenever I say black, Ellen Gray says white.”

“I do not!” I said.

Sam grinned. “See?”

Maribeth let out a loud laugh. “You two sound married,” she said.

Sam's grin disappeared, and he stalked out of the gallery. As far as I knew, Sam had never had a girlfriend.

I was about to reset the light when I had to stop. I could see deeper into the forest—there was a sliver of a moon just beyond one branch. “It is better,” I told Maribeth in a low voice. “Sam knows his stuff, doesn't he?”

“He's been around paintings his whole life,” Maribeth said. “You're learning.” Maribeth had tied her frizzy red hair back into a scarf, but it kept on escaping like water spraying from an open hydrant. She had round, bright, dark eyes, at the same time sharp and gentle. “Don't be so hard on yourself, Ellen.”

Was wanting to be good at something a fault? If so, I longed to be the world's most flawed human being.

“Loretta told me you practically ran the eleventh grade this year, all by yourself.”

“Don't I wish!” I said. But I had only a few extra-curricular activities. I was captain of the softball team, and had created the school's recycling program (“Don't Waste Waste”), and after school worked at Loretta's library and here at the gallery. “I don't do all that much,” I said. “I still have time to visit my grandparents every other weekend.”

Maribeth shook her head. “It's too much, Ellen. Maybe I should fire you—then you'd have your Saturdays free. But you're too good—you take care of everything.”

It was exactly the right thing to say to me. More than anything, that's what I wanted to be when I grew up—a person who could take care of everything. It didn't matter what I would actually do for a living. Still, I couldn't help saying, “Sam doesn't think so.” Why did I let him get to me, anyway?

“Sam's a little hard on you,” Maribeth said, “because he's so hard on himself.”

This made absolutely no sense. What did I have to do with Sam's relationship to Sam?

All afternoon I sat on a high stool behind an oak desk with my list of prices, and never got bored staring at people staring at paintings. Some only pretended to look. Some went into a hypnotic trance. Some were so aware of themselves that really every painting could have been a mirror.

A few paintings sold, but no one even asked about “Lost in the Familiar.” I could almost see it in my room, reflected in the mirror over my bureau. There sure was room for it—all my posters had come down in February. I had two hundred and twenty-seven dollars saved up—was that enough for a down payment on a seven thousand dollar painting? But the painting would never appear on my wall. All my money was for Barry's future.

Toward the end of the afternoon, a middle-aged man in too small jeans and with too much chest showing came up to me and asked, “Are you a cave dweller?”

I blinked at him. “What?”

“You’re here,” he said with a toothy smile, his dimples so deep it looked as though a knife had cut them out. “This place is called Cave. Are you a cave dweller?”

I kept my face so straight, you’d think I smiled about as often as we had an eclipse. “Are you interesting in purchasing a painting?”

“You’re awfully pretty,” he said. “But you don’t know it, do you?”

I could list the people who did. Maribeth said I looked like a Spanish princess; Loretta thought I was a double of Barbara Stanwyck, an old-time movie actress; Ray, my boyfriend, said I was “as lovely as the pause in the air before someone got a joke and laughed”; my best friend, Roz, said I was as pretty as I wanted to be (whatever that meant); and then there was Sam, who said, rather off the subject, maybe, that if you crossed a mule and a cactus, you’d get me. I didn’t much care. Since February, basically, when I looked at the mirror, it was to make sure I didn’t have spinach stuck in my teeth.

I said, “If you’re not interested in purchasing a painting—”

“I’m interested in purchasing you a drink.”

I was going to make those dimples disappear, fast. “I’m sixteen years old,” I told him. I could have said I had a boyfriend, but it never even occurred to me.

“Oh—well—sorry,” he stammered. “You look much older. Must be a trick of the light.” And he spun around. There was a large comb in his back pocket—the jeans were so tight I could see every tooth. I’ll probably remember him always, I thought, for being so utterly forgettable.

Just before closing, Sam showed up again. “Isn’t it ironic,” he said to me, “how artists supposedly live simple, unconventional, to-thine-own-self-be-true kinds of lives, yet they depend on rich bastards to buy their work.”

“Ironic,” I agreed. “See? Sometimes you say black and I say black.”

Sam bowed deeply. “I stand corrected. I stand to the left, but I stand.”

I laughed casually, but really I was shocked to the core. Had Sam ever joked about himself? Especially about his cerebral palsy? Knowing Sam reminded me of something I’d

once read about training tigers. If you gave tigers your attention and respect, they would behave beautifully. But if you lost your concentration and turned your back on them, even for a moment, they would attack you. One trainer who got badly injured said afterward, “I deserved it—it was all my fault.”

Sam put his fist behind his back. “Ellen,” he said—and did his voice crack a bit?—“when is Barry’s trial?”

I nearly groaned out loud. For a billion reasons this was my least favorite subject. “Barry’s trial is scheduled for August,” I said. Not for a whole entire month, I thought with relief.

“I’d like to attend,” Sam said.

“Why?” I scrunched up my face. “What’s it got to do with you?”

“I’m interested in—” Sam cut himself off.

“In what?”

“Nothing.” He pulled at his gray T-shirt. He always wore gray, for some reason. “Just interested. Why, isn’t Ray going with you?”

“Ray will be in Vermont,” I said.

“What about that friend of yours?”

“Roz? She’ll be up in Maine.” My entire social life—leaving town for the summer. Anyway, I didn’t want to tell Sam, but I wasn’t going to attend Barry’s trial either.

“I’d like to go,” Sam said.

“Fine! You don’t need my permission—a trial is open to the public. Go! Have a wonderful time! Send me a postcard!”

Maribeth came over to us. “Hello, young lovers! Could we close up shop now?”

Sam blushed a fiery red and again he took off. I was glad he left, if maybe a little sorry he got embarrassed. I can blush like that too, hot and vivid.

“Sam was asking about Barry’s trial,” I told Maribeth. “He wants to attend—I can’t imagine why.”

“He probably couldn’t imagine your not wanting to. Sam would love to be able to point a finger at a doctor and say, That’s him! That’s the guy! He’s the reason I have cerebral palsy.”

I shook my head. “I don’t see why anybody needs to be blamed.”

Gently Maribeth said, “That’s very funny, especially coming from you.”

Maribeth knew that for a long time I blamed myself for Barry’s cerebral palsy. Way back, when I was eleven, and just starting to get good at things, wham!, my mother told me she was pregnant. This didn’t fit into my plans at all. One middle-of-the-night I prayed to God that the baby would disappear. And then the baby was born—alive but damaged. For almost half a year I was convinced it was all my fault. “Don’t you see?” I said to Maribeth now. “I don’t need to blame anyone anymore.”

“Honey, you’re missing the point. Maybe something did go wrong, even if nobody wished it, and that’s why Barry’s not normal. And maybe this is the time to do something about it.”

I looked down at the dark wood floor. It always came back to this. That *my* Barry was the wrong Barry. Would another Barry, a “normal” one, give the best hugs, holding tight to your neck and pressing his cheek against yours so you could feel his warm breath? This whole trial, which was open to anybody, even Sam, all centered around the imaginary Barry. And my Barry would have to be there in court, showing all those strangers how he wasn’t as good as the other Barry.

“All right, all right.” I held up my hands as if surrendering. “Let’s say some doctor did something. Then everybody in the hospital could just go to the judge’s office and tell him exactly what happened, and then the judge could decide what to do. Case closed.”

Maribeth smoothed down some of the pleats in her dress. “That’s not how it’s done, honey. Everybody’s got a version of the truth, and only a jury that’s heard everybody’s story can decide what really happened and what to do about it. So there will be a trial, Ellen, and it’ll be long and messy and painful.”

“Maybe that’s why it appeals to Sam!” I said, sorry I’d said it out loud. Maribeth and Loretta were always telling me that Sam had changed, that a year of college had made him far less moody and sullen. Wishful thinking!

“What appeals to Sam,” Maribeth said evenly, “is justice. Getting a jury to realize that a doctor was responsible for a child’s disability, and awarding the child money. Sam was always frustrated that his cerebral palsy was caused by my contracting German measles in pregnancy. No justice and no money.”

The money. What was Barry—a winning Lotto ticket? I've told my parents plenty of times not to worry, I thought. I'm going to take care of Barry—Barry's going to live with me, always. Case closed!

We turned off the lights, making a dark room even darker, and locked up. Outside, the air was close and sticky—you could taste the heat on your tongue. The light was a silver ghostly gray, and seemed to be coming up from below—I felt as if I was standing on it. For some reason I thought of Sam. What would he make of this unusual light? I practically had to grab my own shoulders and look myself in the eye. Sam had no right to be in my head. He couldn't just show up there the way he could at the trial.