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*Pieces of Glass*

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The following story is told from my perspective. In order to protect the privacy of others involved, some names have been changed.

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## Chapter 1

# TABLE *for* ONE

*No one ever told me that grief felt so like fear.*

C. S. Lewis

A moment, a slight hesitation, my hand resting on the knob—and then resolutely crossing the threshold into the funky ambiance of the quiet café, I stand nervously, stomping snow from my black suede boots and trying to shrug off the chill. Winter seems to enjoy tormenting Chicago.

I impulsively decided on this little indulgence after an ironic experience in an eclectic bookshop. Perusing colorful storylines on the backs of book jackets, I realized that none of them could possibly be as dramatic as my life to date. Then sadly, I also realized I could never find the ending of my story from the safety of an armchair.

The waiter, who has the look of one who lives in a sparsely furnished studio apartment thick with art paraphernalia, and who reluctantly mingles with commoners like me, asks that terrifying question: “Table for one?” I nod silently, mildly surprised by the ease with which I do it. Perhaps my newfound courage is due to the season’s first coat of snow blanketing the streets and quieting my world for a moment.

So here I am sipping my butterfly glass of wine, thinking I am brave and noble. I open my new book, my shield protecting me from this newly imposed condition—eating alone in public. As a woman who had painstakingly avoided such an engagement in the past, I try to get lost in a new fictional world. My mind wanders, but book, wine, the eclectic atmosphere—all of it steadies me as I toe the wire of my comfort zone.

I have always been more comfortable with daredevil acts than with the everyday nuances of life. Let me jump out of a plane, speak in front of a roomful of strangers, even trek across Siberia. These were the kinds of experiences that defined my life—until now. Now the thought of lounging in public by myself without the faintest possibility of meeting someone seems daunting.

But I have no one to meet. I am a stranger here, and most of the time I take comfort in the anonymity. I grew up in an ever-changing kaleidoscope of strange cities, sights, and smells. Being in the unknown is more familiar than the broken reality I have left behind.

Every new corner, coffee house, and boutique is the sweetest intimacy for my bruised soul. Simple interactions with shopkeepers and neighbors have sustained me and sheltered me from real life. Here I am free from the sympathetic looks of acquaintances, from run-ins with old high school friends that turn awkward when the curious person asks, “So what’s new with you?”

The innocence of that question assumes that we all faithfully move on in predictable normalcy—marriage, job, kids. Not me. I am somehow on the other side of the looking glass, a voyeur into life. But that’s not quite accurate either. I am living, but it’s a life that doesn’t seem real.

I hardly recognize myself. This person I look at through the mirror is fragile, yet I feel solid inside. Some strange substance is

filling up my soul, as if the ache inside me is taking up all the space where my heart should be. Daily proof that I am being changed on a biological level, as if my very DNA were being rewritten; it is the pain that is so much more than pain. Not just a feeling or an emotion that ebbs and flows, it is tangible. Strong, yet soft. Heavy, yet malleable. Something like gold, refined by suffering. I now understand how the term “heart of gold” could evolve into such a compliment. It’s difficult not to appear a saint when you wear a cross of suffering in your eyes and when your compassion is so easily tapped into. From afar, I’m sure it seems like there is a perpetual halo around me. I feel like a stranger could brush me on the street and a chunk of my soul would break off. I wonder if I will hear the wind whistle through the holes. Like a skeleton, I teeter down the street on dry bones.



Most days it feels as if the world is whirling around me and I am standing still. In slow motion I watch the colors blur; people and faces all become a massive wash. Time crawls on, minute by minute, as sheer exhaustion and fear grip my insides. I am trapped within the whirlwind and have no idea when it will stop. Not long ago I had been full of dreams, when the world was friendly and I was raring for adventure and responsibility. Now I long for any reason to get off this dizzying reality.



This is my fate, my life; there is no denying my twisted existence, so I have banished myself to this new territory. A few weeks ago I wandered into the quaint little village of Oak Park. A turn-of-the-century suburb, it has an El-stop and several Bohemian hangouts, which qualifies it as urban enough for me. Frank Lloyd