

## Chapter 1

### Claire

It's probably going to sound crazy to you, but I felt as though someone was watching me all the time, night, and day. You know how it is—you sense these things. Well, I did, anyway.

That's right; I could sense it. A hole the size of a crater slowly burned in the back of my head, created by their stares. By 'they,' it wasn't clear who it was that watched me yet.

But they were there, for sure.

An eerie silence had seemed to follow me everywhere, and it was impossible to shake that feeling of someone observing from afar. Someone spying, tracking me.

Knowing everything...

I shook my head quickly as if it could banish the intrusiveness from my head.

Damn, these wretched thoughts! I said to myself. But every time, a chill would run down my spine like icy fingertips tracing their way up and down my back. Taunting me, Poking fun at me.

My eyes darted, nervously searching for any sign of movement in the crowd, but there wasn't anyone out of place; everyone seemed totally normal. Well, except for me, of course.

Okay, I'm just exaggerating, but you know how it is when you feel pursued like that.

I almost dared not glance back, afraid to ask who it could be, feeling as if they were observing me again, peering in on everything like a pervert.

The idea sent shivers up my spine, making the hair on my arms and back stand on end. And my gut clenched as if it would make me vomit, just that sensation of someone there, knowing everything I did, every tiny move. Initially, a tingling came to my scalp, which gradually traveled down my head and neck before settling into the back of my skull.

It was the same nervousness that had pervaded me when taking my dental admission test; it was that cold bite gnawing at my gut, a feeling unwilling to go away. This was a warning, and that was clear; a terrible thing was about to occur.

It was an omen, a premonition if you like. Something very bad would be coming my way.

Soon.

To try and regain my composure, I closed my eyes.

There was little doubt that if Stephen had overheard me saying all this, he'd have me committed to a mental institution.

I needed to zero down on the task at hand.

So, I took a half-day off work, using it to come here.

I'm all by myself now. See. Look around! Who can wish me harm?

Choosing the proper dress for the charity ball hadn't been easy either; after all, who liked wasting time wandering from store to store? I supposed some girls didn't mind it. Some even claimed to like shopping. As for me, it was loathsome, a chore, and irritating.

However, the attire had to be suitable for the occasion. The planning committee had chosen to preserve the masquerade ball theme for this year's event.

Phyllis was in charge this year, so Stephen and I wanted to show our support.

I had little interest in the woman, but as Stephen often reminded me, I should "be nice, Claire." He played golf with her husband, Bob, you see, and Bob happened to be Stephen's long-time friend and business partner. Both were decent guys; they wanted me to back Phyllis up and ensure the event went well. It was something I had to do—according to Stephen.

And Stephen was never wrong about this kind of thing, was he?

But Phyllis was the kind of person who always seemed to try too hard. She needed to be liked to extremes, so she was a bit of a people pleaser, always fussing about something.

It all had to be just so, just perfect. So annoying. Everyone had to love everything about her, big or small as if she would implode if you missed a moment's flattery.

Phyllis had an oblong face framed by a short blonde bob hairstyle that she thought made her look stylish and sophisticated, but to me, it smacked of desperation and made her look maternal.

But despite this, people seemed to love her enthusiastic and friendly demeanor. Phyllis would pop up no matter where she went or what group she joined.

"Everything all right for you, dear?"

Or "Oh, your hair is lovely, dear," she would say.

Or "Wherever did you buy such a divine dress?"

"Look at you," she enthused. "Your makeup is so on point today! Very pretty, sweetie."

Ugh. Her words were creepy, all this excessive enthusiasm about every topic imaginable. I'd look around me when it happened, and the weird thing was that everyone around Phyllis looked as if they felt charmed by her efforts. But weren't they ultimately exhausted from all the energy being thrown their way, like I was?

And then there was that other thing—the other side of her.