

Prologue

December 1965...

The first letter arrived the day before Thanksgiving.

It was typewritten, folded with precision, and sealed inside a simple white envelope. The address, also typed, was not accompanied by the name of the sender or from where it came. The message inside was brief, impersonal, but unmistakably threatening. It promised that someone was watching. That someone knew where she lived, what time she left for work, and how often she walked alone at night. It ended with a warning: *Be careful.*

The second letter arrived two days later, the day after Thanksgiving. Almost identical, but in the mailbox of a second woman.

Neither of the two took them very seriously, dismissing them as a bad joke. A prank meant to scare them, perhaps a cruel trick from a jealous co-worker or a jilted lover. They were immediately thrown in the trash and forgotten.

Two days later, two more women received similarly menacing letters in their mailboxes.

For the first time, one of the recipients had the sense to go to the police. She turned the letter over to an officer who said it was probably just a practical joker trying to get a rise out of her, but suggested all the same, she make sure to lock her door at night. The officer's dismissive attitude did little to ease any fear.

But as the days passed and letters continued arriving, more women turned to the Parker City Police Department. After a dozen letters were turned over to the PCPD, Lieutenant Wallace Kerns, the chief's deputy, finally opened an investigation. And once the police took serious notice and became involved, it was only a matter of time before the newspapers picked up the story. When they did, it was all anyone could talk about. The *Blue Ridge Herald* ran its first

article under the headline: Anonymous Stalker Targets Local Women—Who Will Be Next? The *Chronicle Dispatch*, never one to be outdone, took a more dramatic approach: Is Parker City's Police Force Failing to Protect Women?

The stories fanned the flames of paranoia, and soon, reports of a dark figure lurking in neighborhoods at night flooded the police station. No two sightings were identical, however. Some claimed the figure was tall and broad-shouldered, others said he was slim and moved like a shadow. But they all agreed on one thing: he was watching. And he was waiting.

The letters were no longer just an eerie nuisance; they had become something else entirely. A warning of what was to come. Though there was not a single person who knew what that was. Except the person sending the letters, leaving the city in a near panic.

Real crime was a rarity in Parker City. It had its share of bar fights, a few domestic disturbances, the occasional armed robbery, but this, this was something else entirely.

Chapter One

Elizabeth Blakely didn't think much about the letters at first. Like everyone else in Parker, she was aware of what was going on, reading the news every morning over breakfast. The headlines were difficult to ignore. And as more letters began showing up, as a single woman, she found herself just as unnerved as all the others in town. So far, the police had made no connection between any of the recipients, which meant anyone could be next.

But it was a thought Elizabeth tried to put out of her mind as much as possible. During the day, the hum of the office filling the air—telephones ringing, papers shuffling, murmured conversations behind closed doors—allowed her to forget about what was going on outside and the anxiety spreading across the city. Unfortunately, her days at the office brought with them a

different type of unease.

Elizabeth knew that all of the men she worked with couldn't keep their eyes off her. Whenever she was in the breakroom making herself a cup of coffee or standing over the Xerox machine running off the latest department reports, she could feel their eyes roaming up and down her body. It was something she'd grown used to because it'd been the case ever since she was a teenager. But it wasn't her fault that she'd been blessed—or cursed, depending on who you asked—with an incredible physique.

Tall and slender, with the right curves in exactly the right places, coupled with the face of an angel and piercing crystal blue eyes, she drove the men wild. While she couldn't deny she enjoyed the attention, she realized deep down it was more a sense of lust than anything else that had the heavy-breathing, testosterone-jacked-up men circling. On the rare occasion a man would actually take the time to get to know her, he'd discover Elizabeth was one of the sweetest people one could ever meet. She'd give you the shirt off her back if you asked, which is what most of the lecherous men were hoping for.

But she was also smart and full of life. She loved reading and dreamed of traveling to far off destinations, learning about the culture and peoples around the world. Even though it was a time when women were beginning to stand up and demand to be seen as more than simply pretty faces meant to cook and pop out babies, she was desperate to find a kind, intelligent man to settle down with. The kind of man who would hold her in his arms and make her feel safe yet never smothered, and who would honestly listen to her and never treat her as an object.

What Elizabeth wanted was the perfect life.

“A pie-in-the-sky dream!” her best friend Joyce would yell at her, trying to get her to see some sense. “You can't have it all, sweetie. No fuckin' way. No fuckin' how.”

Granted, this was usually after Joyce would come home blitzed following a night of partying, riding high on a wave of feminine self-determination, and still aglow following a meaningless one-night stand. But liquor made Joyce strong...and mouthy. After a few drinks, she wasn't afraid to tell you what she really thought. Not that she didn't do that when she was sober. The only difference was she didn't use as much profane language when she wasn't half in the bag. At the end of the day though, Elizabeth just wanted to be happy. She'd grown up seeing her parents madly in love with one another. Her father always dotting on her mother and his two little girls. Her father was a "businessman"—which was all her mother ever said he was—who seemed to do well for himself judging by the fact she and her sister grew up wanting for nothing. They lived in a big house with a pool, went on a family vacation every year, and always had money for new clothes to start school. For good or bad, her parents also encouraged their girls to follow their dreams. When Elizabeth said she was interested in business and wanted to go to college and earn a degree that would land her a good job, her parents didn't try to dissuade her. Her father did sit her down and explain how she might find the going difficult at times, but he said he was more than willing to support her.

Her mother never said it to her, but Elizabeth knew she was worried that pursuing a career would hamper any chance she had of finding a husband and having a family. *Career women* weren't something her mother grew up with, so she couldn't understand any woman's desire to work in an office all day and not find the joy in making a home for her family. She'd raised two wonderful girls and loved every minute of it. She felt being a good wife and mother was enough of a job. There was no need for any other type of satisfaction. Most importantly though, Elizabeth's mother desperately wanted grandchildren. And with Elizabeth having just turned thirty and still not being married and seeing no prospects on the horizon, all hope now fell on

Patricia.

Elizabeth's younger sister seemed to have found exactly what their parents had. Kenneth, her husband of less than two days, was almost too good to be true. A handsome and loving former high school football star turned banker. Patty was in her glory and transformed into a glowing bride as she walked down the long aisle of Saint Joseph's Episcopal Church with all their family and friends gathered for the occasion.

While all eyes had been on Patty, Elizabeth could still hear the whispers of those wondering why it was the younger sister getting married first. But for the most part, she was able to put the remarks out of her mind and celebrate the love her little sister had found.

As she sat at her desk in the Accounting and Business Office of Upton's Department Store the Monday following the wedding, she did admit there was something about seeing Patty in the long, flowing, white chiffon dress that was nagging at her. It wasn't jealousy. That wasn't it. But there was a surprising yearning in the pit of her stomach that she'd never experienced before.

Elizabeth always knew she wanted to be married and have a family, but she'd never felt envious after attending someone's wedding. But she was getting older. A fact her mother had taken to pointing out to her more and more recently in the subtlest of fashions.

She shook the thought away and returned her focus to the stack of papers in front of her.

Numbers didn't lie, and they didn't demand introspection.

Brushing a lock of chestnut hair from in front of her eyes, she turned back to her typewriter and the report that was only half complete. She'd been so wrapped up in her thoughts she hadn't noticed the young man in a dark gray mohair suit quietly approach her desk. But suddenly he was standing there hovering over her with a smile on his face that would put a shark to shame.

"Where was that pretty head of yours, sweetheart?"

The voice made her skin crawl.

“Dick! You scared me,” she said, instinctively placing a hand on her chest.

“I didn’t mean to scare you, honey,” Richard Calhoun offered, not even trying to conceal his eyes lingering on her perfectly shaped breasts beneath the green cardigan she was wearing. The way he looked at her, like she was something to be devoured, set her teeth on edge.

“A little daydreaming on the job? No harm in that, kitten.”

“No, just thinking about my sister’s wedding,” she said, forcing a smile.

“Hey, that’s right,” he said, snapping his fingers and perching himself intrusively on the edge of her desk. “Penny got married this weekend, right?”

“Patty,” Elizabeth gently corrected, desperately trying not to roll her eyes. “Yes. She did. This past Saturday.”

“Patty, right. Sorry. Hey, I bet you were a real fox in your bridesmaid dress.” The smirk on his face made her fingers curl into a fist beneath the desk. Leaning in just enough that all she could smell was the overpowering scent of his after shave, he said, “We should grab a bite after work. You can tell me all about it.”

She felt the familiar tightness in her chest. The uncomfortable balance of politeness and self-preservation. Saying no outright would only make him more persistent.

“Not tonight, Dick. I’m still pretty tired from the weekend. And I might have to work late to finish these reports.”

His smile remained, but the light in his eyes dimmed. Just slightly. There was a shift in the air, subtle but unmistakable.

Calhoun was the guy in the office that none of the girls wanted to be left alone with. He was always on the hunt, just ready to pounce. With his Brylcreemed hair and the cloud of Aqua Velva

after shave that continuously lingered around him, Dick Calhoun fancied himself a true ladies' man. And he'd had luck with a number of the salesgirls in the store, but the few women who worked in the executive offices on the third floor found the young associate business manager to be an obnoxious skirt chaser. Not that any of them could say anything about his behavior to any of their bosses because he was also Old Man Upton's nephew.

"Maybe another time," she added quickly, hoping to smooth over the rejection.

"One of these days, you're going to take me up on my offer," he said, his voice lower now, his gaze fixed on hers. "And when you do, you'll realize how lucky you are."

Elizabeth forced a tight-lipped smile, her pulse quickening. Calhoun held her gaze for a moment longer before sliding off the desk and sauntering back toward his office. But just before he disappeared behind the door, she swore she saw him lick his lips.

A shiver ran down her spine.

"Everything alright, Miss Blakely?" she heard a deep voice ask from behind her.

That was the second time someone managed to sneak up on her without her noticing. At least in this instance it was someone she didn't mind seeing standing next to her desk. Alfred Marsh was the opposite of Dick Calhoun. Where Calhoun was all slicked-back bravado and leering stares, Marsh was effortlessly charming with a quiet confidence, wrapped in a shy demeanor. He wasn't just handsome—he was dreamy, the kind of guy who, without even trying, made a girl's heart skip a beat.

Tall and handsome, with a strong jawline and a pair of deep-set hazel eyes that always seemed to be thinking a step ahead, he had the kind of looks that made women whisper behind their hands and giggle like schoolgirls. And he didn't even know it. That made him all the more attractive.

Unlike the other men in the office who made it their mission to gawk at her whenever she

walked by, Alfred Marsh actually looked at her—like she was a person, not just a set of curves poured into a pencil skirt. It was unnerving in a way Elizabeth hadn't expected. A man like him could make a girl forget herself.

Joyce, ever the blunt one, had taken one look at him and whistled. "Now that's a fox," she'd declared, loud enough for half the department store to hear. "And if you don't make a move, sweetheart, I will."

Elizabeth had rolled her eyes at the time, but now, with him standing there, hands tucked casually in the pockets of his well-tailored suit, she had to admit Joyce wasn't wrong.

"Is everything alright, Elizabeth?" he asked again.

"Yeah," she said quickly, too quickly. His hazel eyes flicked toward Calhoun's door, and though his expression remained calm, there was a sharpness behind it. He knew. Of course, he knew.

"Good," he said, but there was something else in his tone. A quiet understanding.

She felt herself exhale, only now realizing she had been holding her breath.

Alfred hesitated, then nodded toward the papers on her desk. "I came by to grab the updated sales figures. I thought I'd save you the trip."

She blinked, then laughed, relieved for the subject change. "Your office is right there," she pointed out. "Wouldn't have been much of a trek."

He grinned, that easy smile that could knock a girl sideways if she wasn't careful. "I owe you one."

She grinned. "I'll add it to the running tally, but it's kind of my job."

He chuckled, the sound rich and warm, and for the first time that day, the tightness in her chest eased. He turned to leave, then hesitated. "By the way, heard about your sister's wedding. How was it?"

Elizabeth raised a brow. “Word travels fast.”

He shrugged. “I might have overheard something.”

She shook her head, smiling despite herself. “It was nice. You know how weddings are. Too many flowers, too much crying, and way too much cake.”

“Sounds about right.” He considered her for a moment, then gave her a small nod. “Well, I have some calls to make. Thanks again for these.”

Removing the files, he uncovered a copy of the day’s *Dispatch* with its headline staring directly at him, declaring the city was gripped with fear by the mysterious letter writer. A concerned look crossed his face and he looked as though he was about to say something but caught himself.

Giving Elizabeth a little nod of the head, he walked to his office, leaving behind only the faintest trace of cologne—subtle, clean, nothing like the overpowering scent Calhoun left in his wake.

Elizabeth let out a breath. She glanced toward the office door where Calhoun had disappeared and then back to the stack of papers in front of her.

By five-thirty, most of the office had emptied, except for a few stragglers finishing up their work.

One of whom was Dick Calhoun. Elizabeth had no idea what he’d been up to in his office behind closed doors all afternoon, but when he emerged ready to leave for the day, he appeared agitated.

Passing by Elizabeth’s desk on his way out, he looked down at her and said, “Be careful out there.”

Elizabeth’s heart stopped, quickly casting her eyes down to the newspaper lying on her desk.

Wasn’t that the way all the mysterious letters ended? *Be careful.*

No, Elizabeth told herself. She was just being paranoid. All he meant was to be careful getting home because it had started snowing a little earlier which would make getting around more difficult. That had to be it. She shouldn’t let her mind play tricks on her.

When she'd finished her work, she gathered her things and slipped on her coat, shivering slightly as she stepped out into the brisk December air. A light layer of snow lay on the ground as the city streets were lit by the golden glow of shop windows, adorned with festive garlands and twinkling lights. Christmas was just around the corner, but the usual excitement that came with the holiday season was dampened by the underlying tension that gripped the city. There were many who hoped the festive season would help people forget about the recent headlines. But so far, as everyone continued with their annual traditions of decorating and preparing for the holidays, the women of Parker City still found themselves looking over their shoulders, wondering if someone was watching them from the shadows.

Even with the sidewalks filled with people on their way home from work or heading to a restaurant for dinner, Elizabeth felt uneasy. She couldn't stop thinking about Dick Calhoun's last words to her as he walked out the door. And the way his dark eyes looked at her from under the brim of his hat. It set her nerves on end. And now, even as she told herself she was being ridiculous, she felt as though someone was watching her.

Picking up her pace, her heels clicking against the pavement, as she turned the corner onto her street, she felt her pulse quicken ever so slightly. She was letting her imagination get the best of her. She forced herself to relax, seeing her apartment building just down the block, its brick façade glowing in the streetlamps. She and Joyce shared the apartment on the first floor of the converted townhouse only a few blocks from Upton's Department Store. They'd turned the place into a comfortable and inviting home where they'd often have girlfriends over for dinner and game nights.

Fishing her keys from her purse and unlocking the building's main door, then the door to her apartment, Elizabeth breathed a sigh of relief to be home. Turning on the light in the tiny entry

hallway, she noticed that Joyce's coat was missing from the closet, meaning she wasn't home yet. Not having spoken with her yet today, she also didn't know what her plans were for the night or if she'd even be coming home. So, Elizabeth figured she was on her own. Not an uncommon occurrence.

Turning on the lights of the small Christmas tree the roommates had set up in the corner of the living room, she took a moment to enjoy the decorations, rearranging a few of the ornaments that still didn't look like they were in the perfect place. Standing back to see if the changes helped to balance the tree better, she smiled at her work.

Heading into the bedroom, she dropped her purse on the bed and kicked off her shoes, rubbing her aching feet before walking into the kitchen at the rear of the apartment. It was small, just big enough for two people to move around comfortably, but not without brushing against a chair or grazing the counter's edge. The walls were a pale yellow, faded from cooking and the occasional cigarette smoke curling toward the ceiling. A Formica table with chrome legs stood in the center of the kitchen, its surface clear except for a set of salt and pepper shakers and a stack of mail.

Apparently, Joyce had come and gone already, collecting the day's post and depositing it on the table for Elizabeth to see.

The linoleum floor, patterned in a checkered design of dull green and cream, let out a soft creak as Elizabeth walked to the compact refrigerator humming in the corner, pondering what to make for dinner. Eyeing the ceramic cookie jar in the shape of a rooster sitting on top of the refrigerator, Elizabeth begrudgingly admitted a plate of cookies would not be a good dinner.

Letting a sigh of disappointment escape her lips, she opened the refrigerator and began examining its contents. But as she had her head in the refrigerator, deciding what she wanted to eat while watching *To Tell the Truth* that night, behind her, outside in the building's backyard, a

shadow quietly passed by the kitchen window.