

# FACES OF FEAR

A NOVEL

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## PROLOGUE

*He had to look.*

*He had to look at it all, and be objective, and make the final decision.*

*He let the damp towel fall away from his waist and drop to the floor in a sodden heap around his feet, steeling himself as not only his face but his entire body was revealed in the full-length mirror in his bedroom.*

*He stared at his image quietly, suppressing the instinctive urge to turn away, forcing himself to view it with utter detachment, as if it were nothing more than some hideous sculpture an inept student had produced, and which he must now find a way to turn into a work of art.*

*Not that it was all bad: he had kept himself lean and strong, and a fit body had at least given him good legs.*

*The torso would eventually take care of itself.*

*But the face. The face was the key to everything.*

*The key to his future.*

*The key to his happiness.*

*He took a deep breath and focused his entire attention on what he had come to think of as nothing more than a canvas upon which the original artist had put nothing more than a rough sketch, but that he would turn into a masterpiece. It was simply a matter of analyzing each feature and making the decisions that would not only put them all in perfect balance, but please the viewer as much as the artist himself.*

*He began.*

*The jawline was too square, too prominent, and the chin was marred by a deep cleft. Bone would have to be shaved in order to achieve a softer look.*

*The ears were far too large.*

*The brow line too prominent, leaving the eyes too deeply set.*

*The cheekbones were not prominent enough.*

*And the nose. Though not yet thirty, it was the nose of an old man, a nose that would grow into a bulbous purple-veined monstrosity if it were left alone.*

*But it would not be left alone; none of it would be left alone. He already knew exactly the nose he wanted.*

*And not only the nose. He also knew the ears, the brows, and even the lids that would give the eyes the perfect almond shape he craved.*

*Though anyone else would think it was an impossible job, he knew better. It was simply a matter of removing a millimeter or two here, adding a millimeter or two there, until the framework was right. Then it would all go together.*

*Beauty was all about proportion.*

*He knew what he wanted; he'd done his research. And, after all, it was only the face that would require anything even faintly experimental, and he himself had rehearsed the new procedures he had devised to the point where, in all fairness, they couldn't truly be called experimental at all.*

*They were perfect.*

*He himself had perfected them.*

*He stood back now, finally willing to appraise his full body in the mirror. And now—now that he was looking at it truly objectively—he realized that the raw material was actually excellent.*

*The skeleton was proportionally perfect.*

*The soft supple skin was nearly hairless.*

*The makeover would be simple, and he would finally be what he was always meant to be.*

*He gazed deep into the mirror, and in his mind the masculine lines of his body morphed smoothly into the softly curving lines of a shapely woman.*

*The reflection in the mirror became indistinguishable from the vision of his dreams: a beautiful, perfect woman, desirable, fashionable, successful.*

*All he needed was patience.*

*But it had been so long, and how much patience could be expected from anyone, let alone from him? How much longer must he wait before his body and face would be a perfect reflection of the woman he had always been?*

*Soon, he told himself. Soon. But if he didn't keep a firm rein on himself—if he lost control and couldn't wait just a little longer—he'd never realize his vision. Patience. That was the key. Work slowly, work carefully, work methodically. Keep the goal in sight.*

*And make no mistakes.*

*He tamped down the emotions roiling within him and went back to the clinical evaluation of what he saw in the mirror.*

*The breasts would be easy, as would the work on his genitals. Those techniques had been perfected more than half a century ago. But the rest of it . . .*

*He rehearsed it all once more in his mind, reanalyzing his image piece by piece, feature by feature, the tips of his fingers twitching as if they held the scalpels themselves. He went through it all a third time, and then a fourth, and as he took it all apart in his mind and put it all together again, the truth slowly sank in.*

*He was ready.*

*Finally ready.*

*Exquisite.*

*He picked up the telephone from his nightstand and punched in a speed dial number. "It's time," he said to the person who answered. "It's finally time."*

Part One

# CHANGES

ALISON SHAW FELT GOOD. REALLY GOOD. SHE MADE THE FINAL TURN around the smooth cinder track with long, easy strides. She'd done six full laps, but with the cool breeze coming in from the beach four blocks away, there wasn't even a hint of the choking exhaust that usually drifted directly from the Santa Monica Freeway onto the playing fields. She felt she could do at least three more laps when she heard the coach's whistle. End of period; end of day; end of week. A shower, and she could go home. She slowed her pace so Cindy Kearns could catch up with her.

"There's a party at the beach tonight," Cindy said, catching her breath and wiping more perspiration from her forehead than was on Alison's entire body. "Jeff Simmons is going to be there." Cindy was pretty sure Alison had a crush on Jeff, but if she did, she wasn't showing it. In fact, she was shrugging like she couldn't care less.

"Can't," Alison said. "My mom has to go to some fancy banquet for one of her clients tonight and I'm fixing dinner for my dad."

"How domestic of you," Cindy said. "What about after dinner? It

won't even get dark until after eight, and it could go until midnight."

Alison rolled her eyes. "And Jeff Simmons will bring a keg of beer, and everybody will get drunk, and the cops will come, and then we'll all have to call our folks to come get us. Gee, it sounds like so much fun, how can I resist?"

Cindy decided to ignore her sarcasm. "So if you don't want him, can I have Jeff Simmons?"

Alison glared at her best friend in not quite mock exasperation. Ever since she'd turned fifteen last month, all Cindy seemed to think about was boys—as if some kind of switch had been turned on. "I barely even know Jeff," she said. "And I'm sure he's no more interested in me than any of the other boys are, which means not at all, which is fine with me. Besides, even if I wanted to go, my dad's bringing home a movie. So add Jeff to your list of conquests, and call me with all the details tomorrow."

Once again Cindy ignored Alison's tone, and pushed through the double doors into the girls' locker room, which was even warmer than the air outside, and muggy from the showers that were already going full blast. Cindy quickly stripped off her sweaty gym clothes and dropped them in a dank pile on the floor.

Alison had just shed her shorts when Coach DiBenedetti walked through the locker room, a bra dangling from her fingers. "Lost and found," she announced. "Who left a bra under the bench?"

Paula Steen, one of a half-dozen seniors in the class, snickered. "Well, we know it's not Alison Shaw's," she called out, eliciting exactly the laugh she was looking for from her friends.

Seeing Cindy open her mouth to take a shot at Paula, Alison spoke first. "Is it a training bra?" she called out to the coach, loud enough for everyone to hear. "'Cause if it isn't, Paula's right—can't possibly be mine." When even Paula's friends giggled, she decided to push it a little further. "I'm still looking for the pretraining model!"

The coach smiled at Alison. "You're just a late bloomer," she said. "And the last blossoms are often the best of the season."

In the silence that followed, it seemed to Alison that everyone was staring at her.

"You've got a model's body," Cindy Kearns put in a second before the silence would have gotten awkward. "In fact," she said, turning to stare straight at Paula Steen, "you've got exactly the body Paula's always wanted."

"But she doesn't have the face I have, does she?" Paula shot back, tucking her own gym clothes into her backpack.

"I'll see you in my office, Paula," the coach said, sternly.

"It's okay," Alison said, suddenly wishing she'd just kept her mouth shut. "Really."

"It's not okay," Marti DiBenedetti said. "My office, Paula."

Paula glowered at Alison. If she was already in trouble, she figured, she might as well get the absolutely last word. "The longer you stay a little girl, the less competition for the rest of us," Paula sneered as she hefted her backpack and followed the coach to her office. "Only gay boys like bodies like yours!"

"Just ignore her," Cindy said as Paula disappeared around a corner.

"Ignore what?" Alison countered, forcing a lighter tone than the way she was feeling. She undressed quickly, still smarting from Paula's ridicule, and self-consciously wrapped herself in the skimpy gym towel. "I don't know what's so great about big boobs anyway. I'll either get them or I won't—it's not like I have anything to do with it." She followed Cindy to the cavernous shower room, which was empty except for Gina Tucci, who was leisurely washing her hair at the farthest showerhead.

And who was Paula Steen's best friend.

Alison hung her towel on a hook, braced herself for whatever Gina might say, and stepped under a showerhead. She rinsed off quickly, then wrapped the towel around her again before returning to her locker. Gina was still washing her hair. Maybe everyone wasn't staring at her after all.

She was almost dressed when Cindy came back from the shower. Alison tucked her blouse into her jeans and buckled her belt, then sat on the bench brushing her hair while Cindy dressed and rummaged in her backpack. Then, using the mirror she'd affixed to the inside of her locker door, Cindy erased smudges of mascara around her eyes and carefully applied dark pink lipstick.

"Want to get a Coke?" Alison asked her.

"Can't. My mom's picking me up."

"What about tomorrow?"

"Call me," Cindy said, picking up her backpack. "I'll give you the full report on tonight."

Then Cindy was gone and Alison was alone in the locker room. She stuffed her dirty gym clothes into a plastic bag and shoved them into her backpack, then caught a glimpse of herself in one of the mirrors on the locker room wall. Rising to her feet and carrying her backpack with her, she moved closer to the mirror and took a look at herself.

And what she saw wasn't bad. In fact, she looked fine. She didn't need a lot of makeup, and she didn't need pounds of hips, and breasts, either. And she sure didn't need to compete for one of those idiot boys who Paula—and even Cindy—seemed to think were so hot. So what was she worried about? Paula and all the other girls like her could have all the boobs and all the boys, if that was what they wanted.

She looked just fine, and felt good.

And she knew she'd keep telling herself that until the sting of Paula's comments wore off and she once again truly felt as good as she had half an hour ago, when she'd come off the track.

MARGOT DUNN SAT at her vanity table, her hand trembling as she gazed at the diamond earrings that lay on her palm. She could hear her husband cursing in his dressing room as he fumbled with the bow tie to his tux, but his voice sounded oddly muffled, as if coming from much farther away than the few yards that lay between them. But even

if she'd heard him clearly, there was no way she could help him. Not the way she always had before. The gulf between herself and Conrad Dunn—between herself and everyone else in the world—had grown too wide.

The hairdresser had come, done his job perfectly, and gone; her makeup man had come and done his best. And she had actually been able to slip into the gray silk Valentino that Conrad had chosen for her to wear to the banquet tonight.

The Dunn Foundation banquet.

The single event where everyone she knew was certain to be present, and certain to be opening their checkbooks, if not their hearts, for her husband's charity.

The event at which she herself had always been the crown jewel.

Yet when it came time to actually put on the glittering diamond earrings and pronounce herself ready to go, she couldn't do it. She couldn't find the energy, just as she couldn't find the energy to help Conrad with his tie.

Right now she didn't even have the energy to cry.

But she had to find the energy, had to dig deep within herself and find the resources to get her through the evening. Taking a deep breath, she twisted her head to the right and lifted her eyes from the earrings to her reflection in the mirror. For a brief moment, when all she could see was the left side of her face, she felt her spirits rise ever so slightly, and seized the moment to attach one of the jewels in her hand to her left ear.

But even as her fingers worked to slip the post through the tiny hole in her earlobe, she caught a glimpse of the puckered sag of her right eye, and almost against her own volition found herself turning her head to expose the other side of her face to her gaze. Where once she had beheld on the right side of her face only the perfect reflection of the left, now three thick jagged scars sliced from the lower edge of her jaw up through the plane of her cheek, their upper extremity pulling her lower eyelid down so a red semicircle always glowed be-

neath the deep blue of her iris.

Her eye, formerly so beautiful, was now as hideous as the rest of that side of her face.

Red, white, and blue. Like some fucking Fourth of July bunting, hanging from her ruined face.

Ramón, her makeup specialist, had done his best, but no amount of makeup could cover those shining purple gouges, and no mascara could mask the bloodred rim semicircle that underscored her eye.

Her face—the face that Conrad Dunn himself had worked so hard to make perfect—look utterly incongruous with the elegant simplicity of the dress and the perfectly coiffed hair.

She closed her eyes and willed herself the strength to finish dressing, to accompany her husband to this important fund-raiser for the foundation, to eat, to drink, to smile and greet his clients, friends, donors. To pretend to be oblivious to the fact that while the left side of her face still looked like it belonged on the cover of *Vogue*, the right side of that same face now made people turn away, trying to hide not only their revulsion at how she looked, but their pity as well.

Nothing could hide the damage their yacht's propeller had done to her face last summer.

It all seemed so impossible. It had been such a perfect day. They'd been on the foredeck, and she was enjoying the single drink she allowed herself on Saturdays and Sundays, and all she'd done was stand up to get a better view of Catalina. And the boat hit a wave, and pitched, and she felt herself lose her balance, and the next thing she knew, she was in the hospital with her entire face bandaged.

And after that, nothing had been the same again, and now, tonight, she could no longer pretend that it was.

She just couldn't do it.

Feeling Conrad's warm hands on her shoulders, she opened her eyes and saw his reflection in the mirror, concern in his eyes. "We have to go," he said softly, as if feeling every agony she was going through.

"I can't."

His grip tightened, as though merely by touching her he could transfer his own strength and character into her. "Of course you can," he urged, his voice gentle. "You must. I need you with me. You look wonderful, you know—that dress is perfect." His lips curled up into a playful smile and he lifted a single brow in a comical leer. "Shows just the right amount of your exquisite cleavage."

Margot turned from the mirror to look up into his soft eyes. "Conrad, stop lying. You can't be seen with me looking like this. Not tonight. Your father would turn over in his grave."

"My father loved you, Margot, and he would want you to be there, adding at least a little class to what has always been nothing more than our family begging for money with the unspoken threat of not keeping the women looking as young and beautiful as they like if they don't cough up enough money so our real work can go on. My father would have wanted you there, and I do want you there. You belong with me."

"But—"

"But nothing. I'm going to fix your face. You know that. I made you perfect once, and I can do it again. You know I can, and you know I will."

Margot turned back to the mirror and dabbed at the moisture that continually leaked out of the sagging lid of her ruined right eye. "I am the worst possible advertisement for a plastic surgeon," she said.

"Think of yourself as the 'before' model," Conrad said, keeping his voice as light as he could. "Next year, you'll be the 'after' model, and knock them all dead. Think what they'll cough up when they see what I can do! Now just put on your other earring, my darling, and let's go." He gave her shoulders another reassuring squeeze, and Margot, knowing that his will that she accompany him was stronger than her will to stay home and hide, found the strength to add the other diamond to her right ear.

Conrad took her hand and drew her lightly from the vanity stool. He turned her to face him, and she flinched as he touched the terrible

scars that had destroyed her once flawless face.

“You will always be beautiful to me,” he said, and kissed her gently on the forehead. “Now come on, let’s head for the banquet and make the grandest entrance anyone’s ever seen.”

Margot closed her eyes and nodded. She had a job to do tonight. She was Conrad Dunn’s wife, and she would not fail him. She took a deep, determined breath, and let her husband lead her from her room.

Somehow, she would get through the evening.