

## Chapter 1

Dayna had driven about forty minutes south of Boston at a steady eighty miles per hour before deciding enough was enough and took the next exit. She decided to check into the first motel she came to, The Green Garden Motel.

It didn't matter where she stayed; rage controlled her now. She never thought her husband capable of an affair. Sure, other people's husbands, but not Richard. His face flashed before her: his wrinkled brow, his smirk of pleasure as he thrust into that other woman in *their* bed, the bed they had shared for twenty-six years.

But his moaning had been the worst part. A gross, guttural sound Dayna had never heard him utter when making love to her. Her fingers tightened on the steering wheel before throwing the car in park and making her way towards the motel office.

Her knuckles were still white from gripping the steering wheel on the drive. They gleamed as she took the flimsy, plastic key card from the greasy man behind the counter. He wore a nametag that read: MICK and underneath that: HAPPY TO HELP. She guessed the latter was a lie.

Dayna found her room with little effort. Room 42, first floor. It was horrid. A dingy, flowered bedspread clashed with the plaid curtains. It reeked of cigarettes despite the NO SMOKING sign. The pine green carpet looked recently vacuumed, but probably hadn't seen a replacement in twenty years, maybe more. With no bags to unload, she walked to what she presumed to be the mini bar. The small fridge smelled faintly of bleach, but it had what she wanted. Vodka. She downed two nips.

Sitting on the bed, she began to cry. She felt pathetic. On the drive, she had reached one conclusion and right now, she was damn sure of it. There are only two types of middle-aged women in this world. According to Hollywood, there are the ones who are still thought of as attractive. The ones who have spectacular sex and extramarital affairs because they have an abundance of men to choose from. The ones who are pushed against walls and fucked at impossible angles.

Then, there are the forgotten ones. Like her. They get up every morning and study the progression of age in the mirror, utilizing expensive anti-aging lotions, potions, and pills, trying to prevent the inevitable. They're the ones who lack any sexual presence, living as motherly figures, while the men their age lust after twenty-year-olds with tight, perky butts. The memory surfaced again: her husband at the foot of the bed. The tail of his shirt flapping over his bare ass, his slacks around his ankles and a bright turquoise thong resting by his shoe. A topless woman hinged across the bed in front of him, her black pencil skirt bunched up around her lower back. The girl's long, blond hair cascading past her ears, brushing the bedspread. Dayna had stared at her breasts as they swung in time to Richard's thrusts. As she remembered, the woman—girl—couldn't have been older than twenty-five.

Dayna shivered, and any trace of sadness dissipated into a violent rage. Losing all composure, she grabbed a third nip from the mini bar, drained it and whipped it at the wall. She ripped the pillows from the bed and threw them around the room. A hanging picture clattered to the floor. Tears streamed down her face as she screamed and pounded on the bed. Unsatisfied, she slammed her right fist into the wall as hard as she could. After her third punch, she stopped, catching a glimpse of herself in the large mirror hung above the dresser.

She walked forward, mesmerized by her reflection. She barely recognized the wild woman who stared back. Her pulse pounded in her ears as warm blood dripped from her knuckles. Her cheeks were wet with tears, eyes blackened from mascara, hair disheveled. She hated herself, but she hated Richard even more. A feeling of utter desperation flowed through her as if carried by her veins, a feeling so strong, it overpowered her.

A flicker of movement caught her attention. It was a momentary lapse of light, as if someone had crossed behind her. She whirled around, half expecting to see greasy Mick from the front desk grinning at her.

Nothing. The room was empty.

Now, she no longer felt like a ruined middle-aged woman, but a scared little girl. Stress. It was clearly stress. Stress can do strange things to a person; she'd heard the stories. She just needed to calm down, maybe splash some cool water on her forehead.

In the bathroom, the soft buzzing of the cheap fluorescent lights calmed her in a way she couldn't explain. Taking a deep breath, she leaned over the sink and splashed cold water onto her face.

Richard surfaced once more, with eyes wide and mouth agape. He had spotted her watching them from across the bedroom. He'd shoved the girl away from him and she shrieked. He'd whirled around, making a pathetic attempt to shield his genitals from Dayna's sight, then grabbed for his pants. Fumbling to latch his belt, he stepped towards her. "It's not what you think," he had said. Or at least that's what Dayna thought he had said. It had been difficult to hear over the drumming of her heart.

She splashed her face with more water and reached up blindly, feeling for a towel, and brought it to her face before straightening. The cheap fabric was scratchy against her skin. As she removed the towel and gazed into the mirror, her eyes widened in surprise, then fear. A black figure peered back at her. It appeared womanly but lacked any real detail. Its presence, however, was dark, utterly negative.

Dayna spun around. Nothing! Her hand dropped and jittered by her side. Hoping her eyes were playing tricks on her, Dayna turned back to the mirror. The figure had returned. It was now directly behind her, close enough to reach out and grab her. It wore a hooded cloak that cast a shadow over most of its face, distorting any features. Only its eyes were exposed, eyes unlike any she'd seen before. The whites were a stormy grey and the pupils black as coal. God only knew what kind of creature lurked underneath the rest of that hood.

The figure lunged forward within the glass and let out a raspy scream. Dayna jumped back terrified, falling into the tub. Grabbing at the shower curtain, she tore the cheap plastic liner from the rings and regained her footing. She charged out of the bathroom, running for the front door where her trembling hands fought with the unfamiliar locks.

She managed to break free into the parking lot and lock herself inside her car. Panting, she began to cry. What the hell had she seen? She jammed her key into the ignition and tore out of the gravel parking lot.