

The Woman Beneath

Chapter 1

She awoke to an aching chest, bedcovers drenched in sweat, her body hot to the point she felt suffocated by it.

For those first few moments of awareness, she knew why she'd woken up so terrified. She remembered her nightmare, her too-real, too-true nightmare. But, even as she tried recalling the details, the memory of the nightmare faded. In seconds, she couldn't recall anything but a vague sense of dread, of feeling trapped with no escape.

She lay there panting for an eternity. Clutching her chest, trying to calm her breathing.

The overwhelming heat that'd filled her began to dissipate, replaced by an uncomfortable, wet chill. Her racing heart slowed to a painful, pulsating thumping. Her mind, snapped to awareness by the nightmare, began to slow down. It wasn't long before she was faced with a numb ache between her brows. An ache that spread its way around her brain, throbbed uncomfortably with every thought.

The room was pitch-black. And, from the weight of fatigue she felt, she knew she should go back to sleep.

She also knew that'd be impossible.

There was no chance she'd be able to fall back asleep, no matter how much she tried. She was awake now.

Time passed. It could've been minutes, or it could've been hours. There was no way to tell. But, the longer she laid there, the more gross and disgusting she felt - drenched in her cold sweat, skin prickled, blankets feeling damp and heavy.

By the time she got up, her eyes had adjusted to the dark.

She climbed out of bed, stood with slumped shoulders and a growing migraine. Exhausted.

Maybe... Maybe her waking up early could be a good thing?

It was a weak thought, forced optimism.

There was a lot that still needed doing around the house. A lot of things...

She took a step towards the bedroom door, hesitated.

Her body felt heavy. Chest tightening.

Unpacking. Lots of unpacking to do. And repairs. Lots of organising. The garden was overgrown, she'd need to sort that out. And the car needed a check-up. Plus there was all the paperwork that still needed doing. And people she needed to contact, give their new address too.

She took another step towards the door, feeling icy cold from the exposure to the open air. Her nightie clung to her skin, clammy and disgusting.

Meeting the neighbours. Going to the store, filling the kitchen. And there was a delivery today, too. Furniture. She had to be here for that. And she started her new job in a few days. Did she have everything she needed for that? So many things...

Before she even reached her bedroom door, she was trembling.

Reaching out a shaking hand, holding it an inch from the door handle. Unable to will herself to touch it, to open it, to begin the day. A day filled with too many things. Too much. It was all *too much*.

She tried to calm herself, tried to use the breathing trick she'd been taught.

Inhale, hold, exhale, count.

One.

Two.

Three.

Her chest screamed at her, heart drumming against her ribs.

Four.

Five.

Inhal- She gasped for air, hunched over, choked and panted. The trebling and shaking doubled, the dread taking over. Tears formed in her eyes, began running down her cheeks. Her chokes became sobs, her mind reeling, her will eroding away.

"But you did leave the room," Dr Peters said, inclining his head. "You didn't let the anxiety control you."

Kathy Thompson stared down at her lap, face hot with shame.

"You had an episode," Dr Peters continued. "Which, given the big life changes you're going through right now, is quite understandable. It would've been the easiest thing in the world for you to stay there, in your room. To lock yourself away and hide. That's what your anxiety compelled you to do, isn't it?"

She gave a quiet nod of her head, unable to look up and meet the older man's gaze. There'd be too much kindness there, too much comfort.

"But you didn't give in to that temptation. You left your room, despite the anxiety, and went on with your day. That's a good thing! It shows that you're making progress. That you're confronting your anxiety in a healthy way."

He didn't understand. He didn't *get* it.

She hadn't left the room - started on all those tasks - in spite of her overwhelming, crushing anxiety. She'd just gotten even *more* anxious at the thought of *not* doing those tasks. Not taking care of things. What would people think? They'd only just moved in, she did *not* want to gain a reputation for being lazy or strange. This was meant to be a new start for her and Mikey.

It wasn't that she'd overcome her anxiety. She'd just caved to a different *type* of anxiety.

"It's progress," her therapist said gently.

"I start work in a few days," Kathy said, body trembling at the thought. Her chest constricted. "I'm a mess, and I have to start work. I don't think I can. I'm... I'm..."

"Our exercise," Dr Peters said. "Breathe. Count to five."

Kathy nodded her head, went through the motions. For the next two minutes, neither of them spoke. Kathy focused on her breathing, did her best not to think about anything that stressed her out - which was just about everything. Dr Peters sat there patiently, giving her all the time she needed.

When she nodded her head, indicating she was ready to continue, a thoughtful look crossed Dr Peters' face.

He was an older man. Greying hair and a receded hairline, wearing an old, suede jacket and a pair of thick spectacles. In all the months she'd been coming here, she'd never seen anything but a kindly, understanding man. It almost made her forget she was paying a ridiculous amount of money for every hour she spent talking with him.

"We've discussed it before," Dr Peters began, and instantly Kathy tensed. "But I'd like to bring it up again; the possibility of you taking medication to help you with the stress and anxiety."

"I..." She shook her head. "I don't know..."

"You're afraid of side effects," Dr Peters smiled. "And of becoming dependant on medication to function in daily life. You're here to 'deal with the problem', not to be prescribed medicine that'll 'push those problems under the rug'. And you're worried about what people would think if they were to find out you're on medication, that they'll think less of you because of it."

Kathy flushed, nodded her head.

"The thought of needing medication makes you *anxious*, it'd be much better to just ignore it."

She hesitated before nodding her head again.

"We've talked about how that - how ignoring the causes of your anxiety - is ultimately detrimental, haven't we?"

Another nod, shoulders slumping.

"What did we say about fear?" Dr Peters asked.

"It's okay to feel it," Kathy whispered. "Just as long as you don't let it control you."

"I'd like to give you some medicine to try," Dr Peters said. "It's new. Experimental. The only reason I have it is because I'm part of a partnership program with some big pharmaceutical firms."

As soon as she'd heard 'experimental', Kathy's mind was made up. No, this was *definitely* not for her.

"It's completely safe," Dr Peters said with a wry smile. "And, since it's in a pre-trial phase, it's free. The drug itself was made specifically for problems like yours. Extreme, crippling anxiety. And, from what I've heard, it's very effective."

"Thanks," Kathy said. "But I don't-"

"Before you make up your mind," Dr Peters said, leaning forward in his chair. "Answer me this: Do you believe you can keep going the way you are now?"

Kathy gulped. Thoughts flashed through her head; her locking herself in her old bedroom, refusing to come out for days on end. The plates of food her son left outside the door for her, the worry on his face. Her struggle to leave the house every morning, the dread whenever someone looked at her, whenever someone spoke to her. The anxiety attacks, panic attacks, the days and nights spent curled into a ball - unable to sleep, lacking the willpower to get out of bed.

"You start your new job in what, three days? Four?" Dr Peters spoke softly. "A highschool teacher. You're going to have to meet dozens of new people, stand in front of full classrooms while being the centre of attention, you'll have a ton of work and responsibility piled onto you. As you are right now, can you honestly say you're capable of handling it on your own? That you don't need help?"

Her heartbeat quickened. More and more thoughts filled her head; all the countless things that could possibly go wrong.

"I know you're not fond of the idea," Dr Peters sighed. "But *please* consider it, at least. It'll help you handle the stress and anxiety. I promise."

Kathy parked in the driveway, stared at garage doors that refused to open - forcing her to park her car out in full-sight of everyone.

One more thing that needed doing. Fixing the garage doors.

No. Two more things. She needed to have her car washed, too. It was dirty and dented and old, sticking out like a sore thumb in this polished, shiny neighbourhood.

She didn't add those two tasks to her mental list though.

She'd given up on *that* after the list got too long to keep track of. Now, there was just a jumble of tasks floating around inside her head. A half-forgotten, disorganised mess of everything that needed doing.

With a sigh, Kathy got out of her car.

The walk from driveway to front door was filled with her glancing around nervously, checking to see if anyone was watching her. Judging her.

She opened the door with a shaking hand, stepped inside, shut it, collapsed against it the moment she was out of sight from any potential witnesses.

"Breathe," she told herself. "Breathe."

Inhale. Hold. Exhale. Count.

When her legs stopped wobbling, she pushed herself away from the door.

The house's entryway was a corridor that cut through the house. On one side, there was the living room and a small laundry room. On the other, the kitchen and dining room. At the end of the corridor, a staircase that led up to three bedrooms and the house's only

bathroom.

What was she going to do with the third bedroom?

There were ideas. Thoughts. But no plans. Planning *anything* was a no-go with her anxiety. It would just be another on an infinite list of things to do.

Best not to think about that right then.

Instead, Kathy headed upstairs.

She knew what she *should* be doing.

It was the afternoon, and Mikey probably hadn't eaten anything since breakfast. Kathy sure hadn't. She *should* be in the kitchen, preparing something for the two of them. That's what a *good* mother would be doing.

But she couldn't. She was exhausted. Empty. Tired to her bones.

She didn't have the energy to cook, or to wash up afterwards. She barely even had the energy to stand up straight.

The bottle of pills in her pocket weighed the world.

It was fine. She could order food. Mikey wouldn't mind her ordering Pizza for them. He liked pizza.

She tried to ignore the guilt. The ache.

As soon as she stepped inside her bedroom - the largest of the three - Kathy felt herself relax. The cloud of tension that'd followed her ever since leaving the house earlier lifted.

Safe solitude.

She glanced around the room, saw herself in her full-body mirror.

A natural hourglass figure, with an impressive bust and backside, slim and slender in between. A body that'd been attracting the attention of men ever since she was a teenager. It was, she knew, one of the reasons she had anxiety - all those stares and looks, the constant ogling and judgement. And she couldn't just wear baggy, form-hiding clothes either. Not without being judged for that too.

Mousy brown hair that flowed down past her shoulders, one of her favourite things about her appearance. When she'd been a teen, she'd hidden behind messy bangs. Nowadays, Kathy kept her hair straight and neat and presentable.

But, more than anything else, it was her own face that Kathy's attention was drawn to.

Tired eyes with deep, dark bags. Slightly bloodshot, with golden brown irises. They were eyes that showed every bit of weariness and exhaustion Kathy felt. A woman on the brink of collapsing, caving. Her full lips were turned down into a small frown, her make-up doing nothing to mask her anxiety.

She was beautiful. Attractive. Usually, she looked ten years younger than she actually was. But, right then, she looked every bit the world-worn, forty-year-old single mother.

"I'm fine," she lied to her reflection. "I'll be fine."

She turned away from the mirror, began stripping off her clothes. Coat and shoes and too-tight jeans. She'd have taken her shirt and bra off too, if she could have. The idea of wearing nothing but a too-large t-shirt and some panties, no restriction or uncomfortable clothing, was a temptation she knew she couldn't follow. She didn't live alone. It wouldn't be appropriate for her to walk around without a bra on. Not when her son was home.

Sighing, she opened up a cardboard box beside her bed, went rummaging through it for some baggy pants to wear.

She *really* needed to unpack soon.

Before she left the room, she glanced at her discarded coat. Saw the pill bottle that'd rolled out of it.

"I don't need them," she told herself, ignoring the silent panic building inside her. So much to do. So much... "I'll be fine!"

She picked up the pill bottle, set it down on her nightstand.
Then she left, headed downstairs to order pizza.

Kathy woke up panting, clutching her chest. Heart thumping painfully, body wet with sweat.
The world was dark; the early hours of the morning.

She wouldn't be able to go back to sleep. She never could.

Besides, there was so much for her to do. So many tasks, so much to take care of...

Just thinking about it set her heart racing all the more, her body quaking and trembling. Too much. There was too much. Everything was *too much*. She couldn't... She couldn't...

With a shaking hand, she reached for the phone on her nightstand. She needed to check the time. Needed to-

Her fingers brushed something plastic, sent it clattering to the ground. It took her tired, wary mind a few moments to realise what she'd accidentally dropped.

The bottle of pills. The medication Dr Peters had given her.

What'd he said about it?

'Take two in the morning, every morning.'

No! She couldn't! Wouldn't! She didn't need help, didn't need some *drugs* to make her functional. She was fine!

She pulled her hand back, phone still on the nightstand.

Fine. She was *fine*.

But, deep down, she knew it was a lie.

As she was right now, she could barely handle meeting her neighbours. She was meant to be having a family dinner with some of her neighbours this afternoon. A bunch of strangers, and she had to make a good impression - befriend them.

Ever since those plans had been thrust upon her, her mind had been concocting excuses and reasons to cancel.

If she couldn't even bring herself to meet a family of four, how in the world was she meant to cope with dozens and dozens of highschoolers?

The pills... They were meant to help with that. Take away the anxiety. The pressure.

Her therapist had said that there was something misfiring in Kathy's brain. A cable wired wrong. All the drugs did was fix that, make up for the chemical imbalances. She'd still be her. Just her without the constant, overbearing anxiety.

It was worth a try, wasn't it?

But the drug was *experimental*. It hadn't been fully tested. Hadn't been approved...

It took Kathy an hour to get out of bed. She walked to her bedroom door, each step heavier than the last. More difficult. Her body felt lethargic, drained. And, when it came time for her to open the door, she couldn't.

Her hand refused to reach out, turn the handle.

She stood there trembling. Heart sinking.

The longer she stared at the door, the more thoughts filled her head. The endless list of tasks, the thousand things that she had to take care of, all the ways she could fail and humiliate herself.

Heart racing, body trembling, mind betraying her.

Kathy could only stand there for so long before the anxiety overwhelmed her, forced her to turn away from the door in defeat.

Her eyes found the pill bottle again.

What other choice did she have?

Two pills. She could swallow two pills. And, if they didn't help, she wouldn't take any more again.

Just two pills.

What was the worst that could happen?