

The Woman Beneath

Chapter 2

Kathy's throat constricted as she downed the pills, her own body trying to reject them. She hunched forward, coughed, forced herself to gulp down the small objects.

"It's fine," she told herself. "It's okay. They'll help."

She stood there for a minute. Two. Three. Concentrating on breathing and nothing else. Calming herself. Clearing her mind.

Then she turned back to her bedroom door.

Inhaling a deep breath, she took a step towards it.

Nothing.

No pressure or weight, no anxiety pushing down on her. No worries swarming her mind or fears plaguing her. Just an odd, distant sensation in the back of her mind - like someone was tickling her brain with a feather.

She took another step, another.

When she reached for the door handle, the tickling sensation intensified. Odd, but not unpleasant. She gripped the handle, turned it, opened the door.

That was... Easy.

Had she really been defeated by *this*? Opening a door?

Kathy let out a joyous, bright laugh. Shaking her head, a wide smile splitting her lips.

She stepped through the open door, headed straight for the house's bathroom. Every step she took felt like she was floating on a cloud, bliss and joy radiating out from deep inside her.

It was only after sitting down on the toilet, she noticed she'd left the bathroom door wide open.

"Huh," Kathy said. A moment later, she shrugged.

After her morning business was done, Kathy headed downstairs, got started on unpacking. There was a lot to do - and whenever she thought about just how much work had to be done, the tickling in her skull flared. But there was no stress, no anxiety, no urge to hide away.

She just got on with it.

"The sooner it's done," she smiled to herself. "The sooner you can sit back and relax."

There were a ton of things to do. A list of chores so long that Kathy couldn't keep track of it all mentally. But, when she wrote it all down in order, it all seemed a lot more manageable.

Unpacking. That'd take most of the morning.

Deliveries. Easy enough, just wait for them to arrive.

Organising. Shouldn't be too difficult and would make life easier in the long-term.

Cooking. Wouldn't be a problem at all.

Cleaning. She'd have Mikey to help her with that.

It all seemed so simple. So easy.

Large tasks broken down into smaller ones, time-consuming ones rearranged in such a way as to maximise productivity.

And there was dinner that evening. Her neighbours coming over to introduce themselves and chat. Something Kathy had been anxious about for days, but which now felt trivial. Meeting the neighbours? That sounded like a *wonderful* idea. A chance to make some new friends, learn more about the area, become a part of the community.

Everything she'd been so worried about before... It all felt so tiny and inconsequential now.

For the first time in a long time, Kathy felt free.

"Mom?" A soft voice said. "Are you... Okay?"

Kathy looked up from the coffee table she was assembling, saw her son standing in the living room doorway.

Short for his age, and he definitely took after her in meekness and awkwardness. Quiet and skinny, more into computer games and films than any kind of physical activity. He was in his last year of highschool, would be a student in one of her classes.

"Yeah," Kathy grinned. "What makes you ask?"

"Just, uhh..." He blushed. "You're not usually so..."

He gestured at her, which made Kathy look down at herself, at what she was doing.

True, she was behaving differently from usual. Normally, she'd be hiding in her room right about now - swamped with anxiety and shame and self-loathing. More than anyone but her therapist, Mikey knew the struggles and pains she went through every day.

He probably thought this was another manic episode. Was scared she'd break down any minute.

"Dr Peters gave me some new medication," she said, retuning her attention to the coffee table assembly instructions. "Are you hungry? I'm almost done with this, so I could get started on food next if you'd like."

"Ah," Mikey stammered. "I... Uhh..."

Kathy looked back up, saw her son's blush. He looked away quickly, unable to meet her gaze.

Again, she looked down at herself.

For a long few moments, confusion and puzzlement were the only things Kathy felt. Then realisation dawned.

It was her top.

A white t-shirt, damp with sweat and tight on her body. She'd worked up a sweat unpacking and piecing together furniture and... And she didn't have a bra on.

The shadows of her puffy pink nipples were visible under the semi-transparent cloth.

Her son had been staring at her chest.

Tickling. Aggressive, vibrating tickling in the back of her skull. Her brain letting her know she was *supposed* to feel anxious about that fact. Judging from just how virulent that tickling sensation was, she was probably meant to be *very* anxious and uncomfortable about it.

But she didn't feel that anxiety. Didn't feel any discomfort.

The only emotion that bubbled up from inside her was amusement. Light-hearted, harmless amusement.

Mikey is a guy, after all. She said to herself. *He's at that age.*

There was no harm in him sneaking a quick glance. Probably, the poor boy couldn't help himself. All those teenage guy hormones, all the testosterone and the societal pressures and everything, he probably couldn't *resist* the urge to look - especially when the goods were openly on display like hers were.

"I'm parched," Kathy smiled, happy to give her son an excuse to escape his embarrassment. "Could you fetch me a glass of water, please?"

Mikey was gone in the blink of an eye, leaving his mother chuckling softly.

She smiled at the door, shook her head, returned to her work.

It was fascinating. Kathy was aware of how she was supposed to be feeling. That was, she was certain, what the tickling sensation was. Signals inside her brain being blocked by the medicine she'd taken, anxiety and stress and uncertainty and alarm. Every time she would've normally felt overwhelmed or uncomfortable, all she got instead was the tickling feeling.

She was, in a way, disconnected from all that negativity.

It'd been years since she'd felt so free, so liberated from the constant, never-ending doubts and worries. Every breath she took felt light and easy. No gasping for breath, no heavy heart, no shaking or trembling.

This. This was what life was meant to be.

As the day progressed, she worked up a good sweat. Her body felt tired, muscles sore from lifting and carrying boxes and furniture. And yet, she wasn't at all unhappy because of it. If anything, the aches and sore spots made her grin. A sense of accomplishment washing over her as she saw all the progress she'd made.

Pretty soon, in an hour or so, the neighbours would be coming over. And, while things weren't *completely* unpacked, the house was at least presentable.

Which was more than could be said for Kathy herself.

Skin sticky with drying sweat, clothes moist and stinky, hair a brambled mess. Not the kind of appearance – or smell – that made for a good first impression.

"Need the bathroom?" She went to ask her son.

"N- no," he stammered, cheeks pink, barely able to meet her eyes.

"You sure?" Kathy asked, hiding her amused smile as best she could. "I'm going to take a shower, might be in there a while."

He nodded his head quickly, face bright red.

Kathy shrugged, headed to the bathroom.

In moments, she was stripping off her soggy clothes, tossing them aside. Hot water rained down from the showerhead, a cloud of steam quickly forming in the air around it.

She looked down at herself.

Two huge breasts hung from her chest, nipples protruding outwards. Breasts that, not to long ago, her son had been sneaking glances at.

What was it about boobs that drove men so crazy?

Ever since she'd been a teenager herself, back when her breasts had grown in, Kathy had been ogled and stared at by men of all ages. No matter what she was wearing – from low-cut dress to baggy hoodies that showed no skin at all – men looked at her, drooled over her.

Usually, that kind of staring would've driven Kathy crazy. Her mind would throw so much at her that she'd be instantly overwhelmed by it all. Why were they looking at her? Was there something wrong with her? Why was it always her? What should she do about it? What *could* she do about it? Was she too attractive? Was she attractive at all? Was that the only reason men were interested in her? Was that all she was? So many questions and doubts and worries and *anxiety*.

But now, there was just amusement.

She smiled, shook her head.

Here she was, in her early forties, and she was *still* managing to turn heads. Her own son's too, no less.

That smile stuck in place as she climbed into the shower, began scrubbing herself clean. The heat washed away everything. The aches and strains of her body vanished, massaged away by the running water. The faint odour of sweat disappeared, replaced with lavender shampoo and soap. The unpleasant stickiness went away, leaving sleek pleasantness.

Her hands explored the curves of her body. Her breasts, her butt, her wide hips and slender waist, her flat stomach and thick thighs.

She closed her eyes, enjoyed the sensations. Lost herself in a happy, contented daze.

When she opened her eyes, turned around in the shower, saw that she'd left the bathroom door open again, she rolled her eyes. Two times in one day. Could it have something to do with the medication?

Usually she locked and double-checked the bathroom door whenever she used it, paranoid that someone would walk in on her.

Without that fear and paranoia there – without anxiety compelling her to make sure and lock the door behind herself – was it possible that she'd lost the impulse to close the door entirely?

She was about to consider that thought more when movement caught her attention instead.

It was hard to tell through the misty, steamy bathroom. But... was that *Mikey*? A dark blur crouching in the bathroom doorway, staring in at her. And, as she looked at it, tried to make out what it was, it pulled away – vanished behind the doorframe.

Was her son *watching* her?

The tickling sensation in her skull returned in force, sending tingles up and down her spine, all around her skull.

"Huh," Kathy shrugged.

She turned her back on the doorway, resumed cleaning herself. Relaxing in the hot, unending stream of water.

Boys will be boys.

The dinner that evening began well enough. The neighbours introduced themselves and their kids; Peter and Penelope – Pete and Pen – and their son and daughter, Andrew and Brittney. And, from there, the small talk and 'getting to know each other' conversations began.

Pete worked in construction, was away from home for weeks at a time on contracts. Pen was a housewife for the most part, though she had a whole assortment of hobbies to keep her busy whenever her family wasn't around. Andrew had just finished college, was spending a few months back home while he saved money for some road trip abroad. And Brittney was, as far as Kathy could tell, completely disinterested in everything.

A typical eighteen year-old girl, more interested in her phone and friends than anything involving her family or home.

Kathy introduced herself and her son, evaded curiosity about why they'd moved away from their old home, let her guests know that she was a teacher – would probably be teaching Brittney in a few days.

That caught the teen girl's attention. No doubt, she'd latch onto the gossip potential – would be texting her friends all about the new teacher in town as soon as dinner was over.

It was only when desserts were served that things began to worsen.

The ever-present tickling sensation started to diminish.

These people... They were eating Kathy's cake. One she'd thrown together earlier today, had put barely any effort into making. A cake that, as she took a bite of, tasted dry and sour and grainy. Gross, disgusting cake.

And they were *eating* it.

Probably forcing themselves to eat out of politeness. Sure, they were smiling and laughing, but they *had* to be disgusted. They *had* to be judging her.

She'd failed. Embarrassed herself. Humiliated herself.

Her chest tightened, heart pounding heavily. A chill ran down her spine as dread washed over her.

"Mom?" Mikey said in a soft whisper. He was sitting opposite her, could see her face. "Are you okay?"

"I-" Her throat was tight, choking her. "Yes... I'm fine..."

She broke out into a cold sweat.

No! She couldn't humiliate herself even more! She couldn't make a scene. An episode right now – it'd destroy any chance she had of appearing normal to her

neighbours. If she didn't calm herself down, she'd lose it. There'd be rumours about the crazy lady who'd moved in, the psycho teacher.

She needed to do the breathing exercise – calm herself.

But she couldn't. Not without drawing attention to herself.

Across the table, Mikey was looking at her with wide eyes. Concerned. He knew. Was probably terrified that she'd screw everything up for him again.

She needed to excuse herself – make some excuse to leave the table. Escape. But she couldn't! Not without drawing attention to herself. Not without drawing all those eyes, all that silent judgement, the whispered comments and mockery.

The rapid racing of her heart was the first sign. Followed quickly by the sweating. The icy dread. Her hand shaking. Mind reeling. Then came the panting, the difficulty breathing, the hyperventilating.

More and more of the eyes around the table found themselves on her. Watching her.

Voices speaking, but she couldn't make out what they were saying over the roaring in her ears. The painful tightness in her chest. Her neighbours were saying something, and she wasn't even paying attention to them.

"I'm sorry," Kathy said quickly, shooting to her feet. Her chair bounced back, slammed onto the floor. "Excuse me!"

She spun, ran out of the room.

Pinpricks of anxiety prodded her from all sides as she sprinted upstairs, burst into the bathroom and locked the door behind herself.

She'd done it. She'd made herself look like a crazy person in front of her neighbours. She'd fed them awful food, disgusting dessert, had insulted them by having a breakdown, then ran away like a coward. One of them – the daughter – was a *student*. So the entire *school* would know about her instability before she even started working there. *If* she started working there. If the school's staff got word of this before she started working-

Kathy dropped to her knees in front of the toilet, emptied her stomach into the toilet bowl.

Fuck! Kathy thought between retches. *You've fucked everything up already!*

Her chest burned. Eyes stinging. Throat raw.

There was a tapping on the bathroom door.

Kathy looked up from where she was curled on the floor, eyes instinctively going to the door's lock – making sure it was in place. She didn't speak, didn't move.

"Mom?" Mikey's voice said from the other side of the door. "They're gone now. Are you alright?"

Great. Not only had she humiliated herself with her random breakdown, but she'd left Mikey there alone to deal with it. What must her neighbours think of her now? Being kicked out by Mikey after she'd run off like she had?

Kathy shut her eyes, wished everything would disappear.

"I'm gonna go wash the dishes," Mikey said after a long pause. "And I'll make sure everything's cleaned up properly. You don't need to worry about any of that, okay?"

He was a good son. Trying to help. He thought he was giving her less to worry and stress about. But he wasn't, not really. All he was doing was reminding her that she was a failure. A failure as a host, a failure as a mother. A failure.

She listened as his footsteps descended the stairs.

Then she listened to the silence.

Time ticked by. The sky dimmed, the light entering the bathroom through its window began to fade. Eventually, it was too dark for Kathy to see. Night descending fully.

She heard the footsteps when her son climbed the stairs again, walked to his bedroom.

Going to bed, most likely. Being responsible.

Kathy had no idea how long it'd been when she finally mustered the energy to get up.

She left the bathroom, went downstairs. The dinner table was clean, dishes washed at put away. The place was spotless.

Shame filled her at the sight.

When she headed back upstairs, she walked straight to her bedroom, stripped off her clothes, didn't bother with a nightie. She dropped down onto her bed, curled up into a ball, tried not to think about the day. A day that'd started off so well, so bright, only for her anxiety to ruin it.

The pills... They'd helped.

Or had they?

Perhaps all they'd done was lure her into a false sense of security, only to stop working and drop her right into hell.

Her son had watched her shower.

Kathy's heart clenched as she remembered.

She'd left the bathroom door open when she'd gone to shower, hadn't thought to close or lock it. And her son had *watched* her through the crack.

A whole new wave of shame and discomfort shook through her.

How was she going to face him tomorrow? How was she going to be able to look him in the eye? He'd *watched* her.

And she'd screwed up everything for him.

At school, he'd be nothing but the crazy teacher's kid. Tormented because of *her*. Again.

No. No!

She couldn't let it come to that.

The pills. If taking them was what it took to protect Mikey, to keep him from being the 'loony bitch's son', that's what she'd do.

She didn't have any other choice.