

Chapter One

At first, she heard the noise as part of a dream.

Kathy Brown sighed and flipped from her right side to her left. Her hand brushed up against the warm body of her husband, Jack, asleep beside her. Kathy opened her eyes and stared at him. Jack's eyes were closed and his mouth was partly open. He was snoring. Even louder than usual, Kathy thought, trying to block out the sound. Jack's not doing it on purpose, she told herself. There's no point in being annoyed.

Kathy sighed again. Everything Jack did lately seemed to annoy her. Maybe that's what happened to couples after almost fourteen years of marriage. Or maybe not. Maybe something else was bothering her.

Kathy sighed a third time. She decided Jack's snoring was the noise that had wormed its way into her dream and woken her up. She sighed again — her fourth sigh in less than a minute — and flipped back onto her right side, so that she faced the wall.

Slowly, Kathy felt her body start to relax and her mind drift back to sleep. She hoped she could return to the dream she'd been having.

The dream about Michael, her boyfriend in high school. He was tall and handsome and captain of the basketball team. She'd been crazy about Michael, and he broke her heart when he dumped her to go out with her best friend. Now, there he was, smack in the middle of her dream. He'd been just about to kiss her when the loud noise had startled her awake.

Falling asleep again, Kathy could not recover the soft kiss she hoped for. Instead, she found herself stuck in the middle of a dream about ants.

In her dream, Kathy stood in the large, all-white kitchen of her home in Maple Hill. She watched a parade of fat black ants march along the white counter. "Where did all these ants

come from?" Kathy asked the young man standing beside her. She recognized him as the boy who had delivered her groceries a few days ago. The boy was tall and skinny, with chin-length black hair and a tattoo of a spider on the back of his left hand.

"There isn't much you can do to stop ants," the delivery boy told her. "They get in everywhere."

Then Kathy heard the noise again.

This time she opened her eyes and sat up in bed. She looked at the clock on her bedside table. It was two o'clock in the morning. The noise must be Jack's daughter, Lisa, coming home from her date, Kathy thought. It was an hour past Lisa's curfew, and she was probably trying to sneak in without her father finding out. At sixteen, Lisa was turning into more of a handful every day.

Kathy was about to lie back down when she remembered that Lisa was spending the night at a friend's house. So Lisa couldn't be the one Kathy thought she heard moving around downstairs.

Was there someone else in the house, or was she still dreaming?

Kathy sat very still for a few more seconds, on the alert for more sounds. But she heard nothing. Only silence.

“What are you doing?” Jack asked from beside her. He opened one eye and stared up at her from his pillow.

“Shh,” Kathy whispered. “I thought I heard something.”

“What?”

“I don’t know.”

“There’s nothing,” Jack said, tugging on her arm. “Go back to sleep.”

Kathy lay back down. Jack’s arm fell across her waist. His arm was heavy, and Kathy felt it weighing her down, like an anchor. Jack had put on weight in the years they’d been married. Not a lot. Maybe twenty pounds, most of it around his middle. To be sure, Jack was still a handsome man. His eyes were a deep forest green, and his lips were so soft and quick to smile. At almost thirty, Jack still had a full head of light brown hair, even if it had started greying at the temples. At first, Kathy thought the grey made Jack look mature. Lately, she thought it just made him look old.

Not like her high school boyfriend. Michael still looked as good as the day he'd dumped her for her best friend. I never should have answered Michael's letter on Facebook, Kathy thought now. I never should have agreed to meet him for coffee. What's gotten into me? Kathy wondered. She hadn't seen Michael in more than twenty years. Why hadn't she told Michael that she was happily married and the stepmother of a sixteen-year-old girl? Or better yet, why hadn't she simply ignored Michael's letter?

Instead, Kathy had answered the letter and later agreed to meet Michael for coffee. And not just once, but twice. Then came Michael's emails, sometimes as many as six in a single day. And now here Michael was, in Kathy's thoughts and in her dreams, as real as if he were lying right beside her. Kathy pulled her husband's arm tighter around her. Maybe that way Jack could stop her from going to see Michael again.

"Mmm," Jack said. He snuggled closer and buried his nose in the back of Kathy's neck. "You smell good. Is that a new perfume?"

Kathy felt a sudden pang of guilt. She'd bought the perfume to wear for her meeting

with Michael that afternoon. She thought its scent would have worn off by now. “Yes,” she answered. “Do you like it?”

“Very much. I like your hair, too. Did you have it done?”

“Yes,” Kathy said. “This morning.”

“Special occasion?” Jack asked.

“Not really,” Kathy told him. She wished her husband would stop asking questions and go back to sleep. Did he suspect something? she wondered. “I was just too lazy to wash my hair myself.”

“It’s very nice. I meant to tell you earlier. I’m sorry,” Jack said.

“No need to apologize.” Kathy’s hand moved to push away a few stray blond curls that had fallen across her mouth.

“I’m sorry,” Jack said again.

Kathy understood that Jack was no longer talking about her hair.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Jack asked.

By “it,” Kathy knew Jack meant the fight she’d had with his daughter, Lisa, at breakfast.

“Not really,” Kathy told him.

“I should have said something,” Jack said anyway. “I should have taken your side.”

Yes, you should have, Kathy thought. “It’s okay,” she said instead. “Lisa’s your daughter. I know it’s not easy for you.” The whole thing is silly, Kathy thought. I’ve been that girl’s stepmother since Lisa was two years old and she can still barely stand the sight of me.

Of course, Lisa’s mother, Ruth, didn’t make things any easier. Every time Kathy seemed to be getting closer to Lisa, Ruth butted in. Every time Kathy and Lisa started to form a real mother-daughter bond, Ruth made sure that didn’t happen.

When Jack and Ruth divorced, Ruth had promised Jack that he could see Lisa whenever he wanted. The fact that she and Jack couldn’t get along was no reason for Lisa to suffer, Ruth had said more than once. And for a while, she had been as good as her word.

And then Jack met Kathy.

And everything changed.

Ruth hated Kathy on sight. “She looks like a cheerleader, with her cute little nose and those

big blue eyes,” Ruth had sneered. “I don’t think there’s much room for a brain under all those blond curls.” It didn’t matter that Kathy had a degree in English from the University of Toronto or that she had a good job working for a major publishing firm.

Kathy’s job meant she had to travel a lot, so she gave it up soon after she and Jack got married. “Kathy wasn’t very good at her job,” Ruth told Lisa. That was the first of many lies Ruth fed Lisa about Kathy. “She got tired.”

For the next year, little Lisa had stared at Kathy as if she were afraid Kathy was about to burst into flames.

As the years went by, the lies got worse. Ruth did everything in her power to make sure that Lisa would never love her new stepmother. If Kathy bought Lisa a new dress, Ruth would tell Lisa that the dress made her look fat. If Kathy offered to pick Lisa up from school, Ruth would get to the school first. If Kathy got tickets for a play, Ruth would take Lisa to see it first.

“Don’t worry,” Jack told Kathy. “Soon Ruth will get tired of playing these games.”

Except Ruth didn't get tired of playing games. If anything, she got even better at them.

"Things will improve as soon as Ruth meets someone else," Jack said. "You'll see."

Except Ruth never did meet anybody else. None of the men she'd dated since the divorce stayed around for very long. As the years went by, Ruth grew more and more bitter, and her dislike of Kathy grew stronger and stronger. Ruth spread that dislike to her daughter. By the time Lisa turned sixteen, she rarely spoke to Kathy unless Kathy spoke to her first. Sometimes not even then. Sometimes Lisa acted as if Kathy wasn't even in the same room.

To make matters worse, two months ago, Ruth got a new job and moved to Ottawa. Lisa had moved into her father's house in order to finish high school with her friends. Kathy had hoped that she and Lisa would now have a real chance to get to know each other better. But it hadn't worked out that way. Lisa still treated Kathy as if she didn't exist. Sometimes Kathy felt as if her home had been invaded by a hostile alien. At other times, Kathy felt her house now

belonged to Jack and Lisa. “I’m the alien,” Kathy said out loud.

“What?” Jack asked from beside her in bed. “Did you say something?”

“I’m thirsty,” Kathy said, although she wasn’t really thirsty at all. She got out of bed and walked across the hall to the bathroom. The bathroom tile was cold on her bare feet. She poured herself a glass of water. Then she stared at herself in the mirror above the sink. She wore a long white nightgown, and her blond hair fell around her shoulders in loose curls. Her skin was pale and her blue eyes sad. I look so tired, Kathy thought. Tired and old at forty-two.

Again, Kathy remembered her high school boyfriend, Michael. “You look so beautiful,” he’d told her this afternoon. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

Kathy sighed again.

Then she heard the whispers.

It is time Kathy knew she wasn’t dreaming. She knew the sounds were real. She knew that someone else was in the house.

Kathy heard footsteps on the stairs. She listened as those footsteps grew louder, came

