

Laura's Story

By Howard FHG

*She knew the difference
between kindness and control*



She didn't forgive the man. She didn't believe forgiveness was owed. But she forgave the girl she had been—the one who froze, who stayed silent, who carried shame that never belonged to her

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This is a work based on true events.

Laura's Story (Hardcopy Color)

ISBN: 978-1-0678311-5-8

Laura,

If you ever doubt your strength, open these pages and remember the woman who rose from every storm with grace. You taught me how to stay, how to breathe, how to love without fear.

Know this — My heart walks beside yours, always.

— *Fred*

Authors Note



Laura's Story grew from a place of truth — not in the sense of exact events, but in the emotional landscapes so many people quietly carry. This book is a tribute to the strength found in ordinary lives, to the resilience that rises in the darkest moments, and to the quiet courage of choosing to keep going when the world feels too heavy.

Laura is not one person. She is many. She is the women who survive what should have broken them, the mothers who hold families together with tired hands, the friends who show up when it matters, and the people who learn — slowly, painfully, beautifully — that healing is not a straight line.

Throughout this story, I tried to honour the tenderness, the struggle, and the small victories that shape a life. If you saw yourself in her, or someone you love, I hope you felt seen. If you carried her with you after the final page, I hope she reminded you that even the quietest lives can hold extraordinary strength.

Thank you for walking beside her.

With all my heart,

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Chapter One — The Night That Changed Everything

The memory lived inside Laura like a room without windows—sealed, airless, waiting. It didn't fade or distort; it simply existed, suspended inside her like a breath she could never release. She never spoke of it—not in meetings, not with friends, not even in the quiet moments before dawn. It followed her the way a flickering streetlight follows a late-night walker: always there, always humming.

She was thirteen. That fragile age when you still believe adults are guardians, not threats. Sue's laughter had carried on the wind, bright and careless. Rick had been kicking dust off his shoes, pretending he wasn't nervous, pretending he wasn't watching the road for a car that might stop.

It was supposed to be a ride. Just a ride. Hitchhiking the way kids did then reckless, trusting, unaware of how quickly the world could tilt. The man who stopped didn't look like danger. He looked like a Tuesday afternoon. Ordinary. Forgettable. That was the cruelty of it.

The streetlight flickered.

The details never left her, but she never let them out either. They lived in her muscles, in the way she startled at sudden voices, in the way she tensed when someone brushed her arm. The assault wasn't a moment—it was a rewiring.

Sue buried it. Rick locked it away. But Laura's body refused amnesia.

That night became a hinge in her life. Everything after swung from it—her first love at fifteen, already tangled with mistrust; her connection with Rick, built not from romance but from the illusion of safety; a bond forged in silence, in shared fear, in the

unspoken truth that they had survived the same storm and walked away with different wounds.

Her addiction arrived like a warm blanket and stayed like a chain.

She didn't break. She armored.

Alcohol softened the edges, quieted the locked room when it rattled too loudly. She told herself she was functioning.

Responsible. In control. But control had been taken from her long before she ever tasted it.

Rick noticed. He didn't intervene. Their friendship had been built on parallel suffering, on the belief that naming pain made it more real. So, he watched her drift, and in her drifting, he found permission for his own.

Two people drowning, each pretending the other was the one underwater.

The first time she walked into AA, she felt like she was trespassing. The room was too bright, the honesty too sharp. She sat in the back, rehearsing lies she didn't need. No one asked her anything. They simply nodded, as if to say: You're here. That's enough.

Weeks passed. She listened. She learned the cadence of confession.

Then came the night she opened the door inside her.

"I was assaulted when I was a kid," she said. "I didn't know how to stop it. I didn't know how to tell anyone."

The room didn't recoil. Cathy squeezed her hand. Someone whispered, "Thank you."

Something inside her loosened.

She walked home under humming streetlights, the kind that dimmed and brightened again. Naming the ghost didn't banish it. But it gave it shape.

Healing didn't arrive like sunrise. It arrived like weather—changing, unpredictable. She learned to recognize the small victories: needing space without apologizing, flinching

without blaming herself, acknowledging the past without letting it crush her.

She didn't forgive the man. She didn't believe forgiveness was owed. But she forgave the girl she had been—the one who froze, who stayed silent, who carried shame that never belonged to her.

In the days that followed, something shifted. Not loudly, but like a season changing. She noticed the hum of the refrigerator, the way light slanted through the blinds, the rhythm of her own breath.

For so long, she had lived in the locked room inside her. Now she felt the faintest draft of air coming through a crack she hadn't known was there.

One evening, after a meeting that left her raw but steady, she walked home slowly. Streetlights buzzed overhead, their halos trembling in the cool air. She watched her shadow stretch and shrink beneath each one.

She paused at the corner where the road curved toward home. A train horn sounded in the distance, long and low.

For a moment, she wasn't thirteen. She wasn't the girl on the roadside. She wasn't the woman drowning in bottles.

She was simply Laura—standing in a quiet street, alive.

The next morning, she woke before her alarm. The house was still, the kind of stillness that felt like a held breath. She whispered into the dim room, "You did the best you could."

The words surprised her.

Later, she found an old photograph tucked behind a stack of plates—her, Sue, and Rick at the lake, sunburned and smiling, arms slung around each other like they were invincible. She traced the edge of the photo with her thumb.

It didn't hurt the way it used to.

Healing wasn't erasing the past. It was learning how to carry it without letting it crush her.

That evening, she walked to the park. Children's voices echoed from the playground. A couple strolled hand in hand. A dog skidded in the grass.

Life insisted on itself.

She sat beneath a maple tree and felt the weight of her past settle beside her—not gone, not forgotten, but no longer pressing against her ribs.

For the first time in a long time, she felt the faintest flicker of something she hadn't dared to name.

Not hope. Not yet. But the possibility of hope.

When she stood to leave, the path lights blinked on one by one. She walked through them slowly, letting each pool of light warm her skin.

She didn't flinch when shadows shifted. She didn't tense at footsteps behind her. She simply walked.

The night felt different. Or maybe she did.

Inside her house, the quiet greeted her gently. She filled a glass with water and stood there breathing.

A small shift. A small victory.

She curled up on the couch, pulled a blanket over her legs, and let the memory of the meeting settle. It didn't claw at her. It simply rested.

She opened her notebook and wrote—not everything, just enough.

For the first time in a long time, the quiet didn't feel like a threat.

It felt like a beginning.

The next few days unfolded softly. Laura moved through them with cautious curiosity, noticing things she had long trained herself not to see: the mail carrier straightening her mat, the faint scent of cedar in the hallway, the rhythm of her footsteps on the kitchen tile.

Noticing meant feeling. Feeling had always been dangerous. But now, sensations arrived gently, like visitors knocking politely.

On Thursday, she found herself staring at a row of apples in the grocery store—red, green, yellow. Shiny, imperfect, bruised. She couldn't remember the last time she'd looked at something so ordinary and felt present.

A woman beside her smiled. "They look good this week."

"They do," Laura said.

A tiny exchange. A pebble dropped into still water.

That evening, she sat at her kitchen table with one of the apples. She turned it over, studying its small imperfections. She took a bite. The crunch startled her. The sweetness surprised her.

It was just an apple.

But it wasn't. It was a moment. A real one.

She wrote in her notebook: *I tasted something today. I was there for it.*

The sentence looked small, but it felt enormous.

On Friday, she returned to the meeting hall. She didn't sit in the back this time. She chose a seat where she could see faces, not silhouettes.

When the floor opened for sharing, she felt a gentle shift inside her.

"I've been trying to notice things," she said. "Small things. Things I used to ignore because I was too busy surviving."

Cathy smiled. "New is good."

After the meeting, she lingered outside. A man—Daniel, she thought—lit a cigarette. "You did good in there," he said.

"I just talked."

"That's the hard part."

She walked home without replaying every word she'd said.

Another small victory.

Saturday arrived with steady, cleansing rain. Laura brewed coffee and watched drops race down the window. Rain used to

make her anxious—too many memories lived in storms. But today, the rain felt softer, like the world washing itself.

She wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and let the sound fill her.

For the first time, the rain didn't pull her backward. It held her where she was.

Later, she opened the photograph again. Sue's grin. Rick's awkward smile. Her own sunburned face.

"I hope you're okay," she whispered—not to herself, but to the two kids beside her. The ones who had carried their own locked rooms.

She wondered where Sue was now. Whether Rick ever let himself remember. Whether either of them had found their own cracks of light.

She folded the photo and placed it in her notebook.

Not to hide it.

To keep it.

By afternoon, the rain had eased into a mist. She walked to the park and sat beneath the maple tree. The leaves dripped steadily.

She closed her eyes.

For a brief, trembling moment, she felt something inside her expand—permission to exist without bracing, to breathe without flinching, to imagine a future not shaped entirely by the past.

A drop fell onto her knee, darkening the fabric.

A tiny mark. A tiny reminder.

She was here.

She was alive.

And for the first time, that felt like enough.

That night, she wrote again—about the apple, the rain, the bench, the shift beneath the maple tree. She wrote until her hand cramped, until she felt emptied in a way that didn't hurt.

When she closed the notebook, she whispered:

"I'm still here."

And the quiet—for once—whispered back.





Chapter Three — Vancouver The City of Bright Lights

Work settled into her life quickly, the way routines do when you're trying not to think too hard. The restaurant was small but always humming—cutlery clinking, pans hissing, conversations rising and falling like tides. The neon sign outside buzzed each evening, its pink glow bleeding onto the sidewalk like a heartbeat.

Marco moved through the space like he owned the air inside it. He appeared beside her without sound, spoke softly enough that she had to lean in, smiled in a way that felt like an invitation she hadn't asked for.

At first, she told herself she was imagining it. She was still raw from leaving, still learning how to breathe without Rick's quiet presence filling the corners of her life. She didn't trust her instincts—not after years of teaching herself to ignore them. So when Marco's hand brushed her elbow, she told herself it was nothing. When he stood too close showing her how to balance a tray, she told herself he was being thorough. When he complimented her hair, her posture, the way she carried herself, she told herself he was being kind.

Kindness had always been the most dangerous disguise.

The first shift in the air came on a Friday night.

A man in a suit—loud, flushed, the kind who believed the world owed him something—grabbed her wrist when she set down his drink. Not hard, but with the casual entitlement of someone who had never been told no.

"Hey sweetheart," he said. "You're too pretty to be hiding in a place like this."

She pulled her hand back, steady but firm. “Please don’t touch me.”

He laughed, sharp and dismissive. “Relax. I’m just being friendly.”

Before she could respond, Marco appeared at her side. His hand landed on the small of her back—light, but claiming.

“Everything alright here?” he asked, voice smooth.

The customer shrugged. “Just talking.”

Marco’s smile didn’t reach his eyes. “She’s with me.”

The words hit her like a cold wind.

She’s with me. Not an employee. Not a person. A possession.

The customer backed off. Marco kept his hand on her back a moment too long.

“You don’t have to deal with men like that,” he murmured.

“I’ll take care of you.”

A warning hummed through her—old, familiar, unwelcome.

After closing, he asked her to stay.

“Just a quick talk,” he said. “About tonight.”

She didn’t want to. Every part of her wanted to go home, curl up in the small room she rented above a laundromat, let the city noise drown out the noise in her head. But she needed the job. The money. The stability. She needed to believe she hadn’t made a mistake coming here.

So she stayed.

He locked the door behind them.

Her pulse quickened.

Marco leaned against the counter, arms crossed, studying her with a softness that felt like a trap.

“You handled that well,” he said. “But you need to understand something. Men will take advantage if you let them.”

She nodded, unsure what to say.

“That’s why I look out for you,” he continued. “You’re important to me.”

He stepped closer. Too close.

“You know that, right?”

She stepped back. “Marco... I appreciate the job. I appreciate everything. But—”

He reached out and touched her cheek with the back of his fingers.

The world narrowed to a pinpoint.

“Don’t be afraid,” he whispered. “I’m not like the others.”

She pulled away. “I should go.”

A flicker crossed his face—annoyance, entitlement, calculation. Then the smile returned.

“Of course. Long day. We’ll talk tomorrow.”

She grabbed her coat and stepped outside. The neon sign sputtered, flickered, then steadied—casting a thin, trembling light across the wet pavement.

She walked home quickly, breath visible in the cool night air. Vancouver’s streets were alive—cars hissing through puddles, voices drifting from open doorways, music thumping from a bar down the block. But she felt alone in a way she hadn’t expected. Not the peaceful solitude she’d hoped for. This was different. This was the kind of aloneness that made the world feel too big.

In her room, the radiator clanked in the corner, struggling to warm the space. She sat on the edge of the bed, hands trembling.

She had come here to escape the weight of being needed. She hadn’t expected to land in a place where someone wanted to own her instead.

She lay back on the thin mattress and stared at the ceiling. The city hummed around her, restless and indifferent. She closed her eyes and tried to breathe.

She told herself she was safe.

She didn’t believe it.

The next morning, she arrived early, hoping to slip in unnoticed. But Marco was already there, leaning against the bar with two coffees.

“For you,” he said.

She hesitated.

“It’s just coffee,” he added, smiling.

She took it. The cup was warm, the gesture disarming. He talked about the schedule, the weekend rush, the new menu items. He didn’t mention the night before. He didn’t touch her. He didn’t stand too close.

For a moment, she wondered if she had imagined everything.

But trauma teaches you to trust the flicker, not the calm.

Days passed. Marco’s attention ebbed and flowed—warm one moment, distant the next. He praised her work, teased her gently, stepped in when customers crossed lines. He made her feel seen in a way that was both comforting and suffocating.

She told herself she could handle it. She had handled worse. She had survived worse.

But survival wasn’t the same as safety.

And every night, walking home beneath the flickering streetlights, she felt the old fear stirring—the one she had tried to outrun all the way to Vancouver.

The one that whispered she wasn’t done running yet.

That night, she barely slept. Every time she closed her eyes, she felt the ghost of Marco’s hand on her back. The room felt too small, the air too thin. She lay awake listening to the radiator clank, and the rain tap against the window.

By morning, her nerves felt scraped raw. She moved through her routine on instinct—shower, clothes, shoes, keys—each step mechanical. The folded flyer in her pocket felt like a secret she wasn’t ready to name.

Inside the restaurant, the air was warm and thick with onions and butter. Marco studied her face.

“You look tired.”

“Long night.”

“You know you can talk to me, right? I’m here for you.”

The words slid over her like oil—slick, heavy, impossible to hold without getting covered in something she didn’t want.

She nodded. Easier than speaking.

But something inside her clicked. A lock turning.

She didn’t want him “here for her.” She wanted space. Breath. Choice. She wanted the version of herself who had stood under a streetlight and felt possibility instead of fear.

By mid-afternoon, the restaurant buzzed with noise—cutlery clinking, orders shouted, customers laughing. But Laura felt separate from it all, as if watching through glass.

When Marco brushed past her, she flinched. When he complimented her, her stomach tightened. When he stood too close, she stepped away.

He noticed.

“You seem distant today,” he said quietly.

“I’m just tired.”

“You sure?”

She nodded, throat tight.

He reached out as if to touch her arm.

She stepped back.

Something flickered across his face—hurt, irritation, calculation. Too quick to deny, too slow to hide.

She knew that look. She had seen it before. In different men. In different cities. In different lives.

The locked room inside her rattled.

When her shift ended, she didn’t linger. She grabbed her coat and stepped into the cool evening air. The sky was bruised

purple, streetlights humming to life. She walked quickly, breath visible in the fading light.

Two blocks.

The flyer felt heavy in her pocket.

She stopped at the corner, staring down the street toward the address. A woman pushed a stroller. A man walked a dog. A bus hissed to a stop.

Normal life. Ordinary life.

Life that didn't feel like hers.

She took one step toward the women's center.

Then another.

Then she stopped.

Her heart pounded. Her palms were damp.

She wasn't ready. Not yet.

She turned away, breath shaking.

But the knowledge was there now—solid, undeniable.

There was a place she could go. A place that wasn't Marco's restaurant. A place that wasn't her tiny room. A place that wasn't the past she had tried to outrun.

A place with a blue door.

She walked home slowly, city lights blurring at the edges of her vision. At the bottom of the stairs to her building, she gripped the railing.

"You're not trapped," she whispered.

The words surprised her.

Inside, the room felt the same—small, quiet, a little lonely—but something in her had shifted.

She wasn't the girl who froze. She wasn't the woman who drowned. She wasn't the ghost who drifted.

She was someone standing on the edge of a choice.

She sat on the bed, pulled the flyer from her pocket, and smoothed the creases with trembling hands.

Tomorrow, she told herself.

Not a promise. Not a plan.

A direction.

A beginning.

The next morning, she woke with a clarity she hadn't felt since arriving in Vancouver. Not peace—she wasn't there yet—but something steadier. Something like resolve.

She dressed slowly, tucking the flyer into her coat pocket—not because she planned to go, but because she needed to know it was there.

At the restaurant, Marco greeted her with his usual smile. But today, she saw it differently—the way it didn't reach his eyes, the way he watched her with expectation, not concern, the way his kindness bent toward ownership.

And for the first time, she didn't shrink.

She stepped past him, voice steady.

“Morning.”

He blinked, thrown off by the shift.

Something inside her straightened.

She wasn't running. She wasn't hiding. She wasn't pretending.

She was choosing.

And that choice—small, quiet, almost invisible—was the first step toward the blue door.

The first step toward herself.





Chapter Seven — A Room Full of Distance

The days began to slip out from under her. Laura woke each morning with the same dull heaviness in her chest, the kind that made even simple tasks feel like wading through cold water. She moved through the apartment on autopilot—making breakfast, packing Rick’s lunch, dressing Jenn—while her mind drifted somewhere just beyond reach. She wasn’t sad, not exactly. Just... untethered. Like she was watching her own life from a few steps back.

Jenn was three now, full of energy and questions that came faster than Laura could answer. Some days, Laura felt steady enough to meet her daughter’s curiosity with warmth. Other days, she felt like a frayed wire—sparking, unpredictable, too close to snapping.

The apartment didn’t help. The thin walls made every sound feel amplified: the upstairs neighbor’s footsteps, the pipes groaning, the faucet dripping in a rhythm that seemed designed to wear her down. She tried tightening it. She tried ignoring it. Eventually she just let it drip, because she didn’t have the energy to care anymore.

Rick noticed the change in her, but only in the way someone notices the weather—something to comment on, not something to understand.

“You, okay?” he asked one evening, not looking up from the television.

“Just tired,” she said.

He nodded, satisfied with the simplest answer. He didn’t ask what kind of tired. He didn’t ask why. He didn’t ask anything.

There were moments when Laura felt herself slipping—small, frightening lapses that made her question her own stability.

She would forget whether she'd turned off the stove. She would lose track of time, standing in the kitchen with her hands in the dishwater long after the water had gone cold. She would start a sentence and forget where it was going, the words dissolving before they reached her tongue.

Once, she found herself sitting on the edge of the bathtub, staring at the tile floor while Jenn tugged at her sleeve, asking for a snack. Laura blinked, realizing she had no memory of walking into the bathroom at all.

Another time, she put the milk in the cupboard and didn't notice until the next morning. She found her keys in the freezer. She left a load of laundry in the washer for three days, opening the lid only when the smell forced her to.

She told herself it was just exhaustion. Just stress. Just life.

But deep down, she knew it was more than that.

Her sleep grew thin and restless. She would wake in the middle of the night with her heart racing, unsure what had startled her. Sometimes she thought she heard Jenn crying, only to find her daughter sleeping peacefully. Other times she thought she heard footsteps in the hallway, or the creak of the front door, or someone whispering her name.

She knew none of it was real. But the fear felt real.

She would lie awake, staring at the ceiling, listening to Rick breathe beside her. His sleep was deep, untroubled. She envied him for that. She resented him for it too.

In the mornings, she felt hungover from dreams she couldn't remember.

She stopped calling her sister. Stopped visiting the neighbor down the hall who used to invite her in for coffee. Stopped going to the park unless Jenn begged.

The world outside their apartment felt too big, too loud, too demanding. Inside, at least she knew the shape of things—even if that shape was suffocating.

Rick didn't notice her withdrawal. Or if he did, he didn't say anything. He came home, ate dinner, watched TV, went to bed. The routine was predictable, and predictability had once felt like safety. Now it felt like a cage.

Sometimes Laura imagined packing a bag and walking out the door. Not leaving Rick. Not leaving Jenn. Just... leaving. Stepping into a world where she didn't have to be anything for anyone.

But she never did. She stayed rooted in place, held by responsibility, fear, and the faint hope that things might get better.

The apartment itself began to feel unstable, as if the walls were shifting when she wasn't looking.

The kitchen light flickered for weeks before finally burning out. She meant to replace it, but every time she thought about climbing onto a chair to reach it, her body felt too heavy. So, she cooked in the dim glow of the stove hood, shadows stretching long across the linoleum.

The carpet in the living room had worn thin in the places she paced most. She hadn't realized how often she walked that same narrow path until she noticed the flattened fibers beneath her feet.

The air felt stale, no matter how often she opened the windows. The curtains she'd sewn herself years earlier now looked tired, their edges fraying. She kept meaning to mend them, but the needle and thread stayed untouched in the drawer.

Even the mirror in the hallway seemed to betray her. Some days she barely recognized the woman staring back—eyes dull, shoulders slumped, hair pulled into a hasty knot. She looked older than her years. Worn down. Faded.

She would touch her reflection's cheek, half expecting it to feel cold.

Jenn, perceptive in the way young children often are, began to cling more tightly.

"Mommy, don't go," she would say when Laura stepped into the next room.

"I'm right here," Laura would answer, forcing a smile.

But Jenn's eyes followed her everywhere, wide and watchful. She sensed the shift, even if she didn't understand it.

One afternoon, while Laura folded laundry, Jenn crawled into her lap and pressed her small hand against her mother's chest.

"Your heart is fast," she said.

Laura froze. "Is it?"

Jenn nodded solemnly.

Laura held her daughter close, trying to steady her breathing. She didn't want Jenn to feel her fear. She didn't want Jenn to inherit it.

But children absorb what they're given, even the things left unsaid.

One night, after Jenn had finally fallen asleep, Laura stood at the kitchen sink washing dishes. The faucet dripped steadily beside her, each drop a tiny, sharp reminder of everything she couldn't fix.

Rick came in behind her, his footsteps soft. He didn't touch her. He rarely did anymore.

"You're quiet lately," he said.

She kept her hands in the water. "I'm fine."

"You sure?"

She hesitated. For a moment, she considered telling him the truth—that she felt like she was unraveling, that she was scared of the person she was becoming, that she needed help and didn't know how to ask for it.

But when she turned, he was already looking past her, toward the living room, toward the TV waiting to be turned back on.

The moment passed.

“Yeah,” she said. “I’m sure.”

He nodded and walked away.

Laura turned back to the sink, but her hands were shaking. She gripped the edge of the counter until her knuckles whitened, grounding herself in the cold laminate.

For the first time, she wondered if she was disappearing not just from her marriage, but from herself.

The next morning, she woke before dawn. The apartment was still, the air cool. She sat on the edge of the bed and listened to the silence.

Something inside her felt different—looser, unmoored. Not broken, exactly. But close.

Jenn stirred in the next room, her small voice calling out for her mother. Laura stood, steadying herself with a hand on the wall. She wasn’t okay. She knew that now. ** **

She wasn’t okay. She knew that now.

But knowing didn’t change the morning routine. Jenn still needed breakfast. Rick still needed his lunch packed. The day still demanded her attention, even if she felt like she was moving through fog.

She poured cereal into a bowl, the clatter of the flakes too loud in the quiet kitchen. Her hands trembled as she reached for the milk. She steadied herself against the counter, breathing slowly until the shaking eased.

Jenn padded into the kitchen, rubbing her eyes with small fists. “Mommy, I had a dream.”

Laura forced a smile. “Yeah? What about?”

“A big bird. It was flying and flying and flying.”

Laura nodded, placing the bowl in front of her. “Sounds nice.”

Jenn shrugged. “It was. But then it got tired.”

Laura froze for a moment, the words landing too close to home. She brushed a strand of hair from Jenn’s forehead and kissed her cheek.

“Even birds rest,” she said softly.

But she wondered when she would get to rest. Really rest. Not the shallow sleep that left her more exhausted than before. Not the moments of stillness that felt like drowning. Real rest — the kind that made you feel human again.

She couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt that.

* * *

By late afternoon, the heaviness had settled deeper, like wet sand filling her limbs. She moved slowly, deliberately, afraid that if she stopped, she might not start again.

Jenn played on the living room floor, humming to herself as she lined up her dolls in a neat row. Laura watched her from the couch, her body sinking into the cushions as if gravity had doubled.

“Mommy, look,” Jenn said, holding up a doll with tangled hair.

Laura tried to muster enthusiasm. “She looks beautiful.”

Jenn giggled. “No, she looks silly.”

Laura smiled faintly, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

The phone rang in the kitchen, sharp and jarring. Laura flinched. She didn’t move to answer it. The ringing continued, echoing through the apartment, until finally it stopped.

She exhaled shakily.

She used to answer every call. Used to crave connection. Now the thought of talking to anyone felt overwhelming, like trying to lift something too heavy.

Jenn climbed onto the couch beside her, curling into her side.

“Mommy, are you sad?”

Laura swallowed. “No, sweetheart. Just tired.”

Jenn nodded as if she understood. Maybe she did. Children often understood more than adults gave them credit for.

Laura wrapped an arm around her daughter, holding her close. Jenn's warmth grounded her, kept her from drifting too far into the numbness.

But even as she held her, Laura felt the distance growing — not between her and Jenn, but between herself and the world. Like she was fading at the edges.

Like she was becoming see-through.

That evening, Rick came home later than usual. He dropped his keys on the counter, shrugged off his jacket, and opened the fridge without acknowledging either of them.

Laura watched him from the table, her hands wrapped around a mug of tea gone cold.

"You're late," she said quietly.

"Work ran long," he replied, his voice flat.

She nodded. "Okay."

He grabbed a beer, cracked it open, and sat on the couch. The television flickered to life, filling the room with noise that felt too loud, too bright, too much.

Jenn crawled into Laura's lap, covering her ears. "It hurts," she whispered.

Laura stroked her hair. "I know."

She wanted to ask Rick to turn it down, but the words stuck in her throat. She didn't want to start anything. Didn't want to risk the fragile balance they lived inside.

So, she held Jenn close and waited for the noise to become background again.

After Jenn fell asleep, Laura stood in the doorway of the living room, watching Rick stare blankly at the screen.

"Do you ever feel..." she began, then stopped.

He didn't look at her. "Feel what?"

She hesitated. Vulnerability felt dangerous. "Lost."

Rick took a sip of his beer. "Everyone feels lost sometimes."

“That’s not what I mean.”

He shrugged. “Then I don’t know what you’re asking.”

She didn’t know how to explain it — the numbness, the fear, the sense that she was slipping away from herself. She didn’t have the language for it. Not yet.

So she said nothing.

Rick turned back to the TV.

And Laura felt the loneliness settle deeper, like a second skin.

The next day, something small but significant happened.

Laura stood in front of the hallway mirror, brushing her hair. She paused, studying her reflection. The woman staring back looked tired, yes — but there was something else there too. Something she hadn’t noticed before.

A flicker.

A spark.

A faint, stubborn glimmer of the girl she used to be — the one who had dreams, who had opinions, who had a voice.

She touched the mirror, her fingertips meeting their reflection.

“I’m still here,” she whispered.

The words surprised her. They felt fragile, like a newborn thing. But they were true.

She wasn’t okay.

But she wasn’t gone.

Not yet.

Jenn called her from the other room, her small voice bright and insistent. Laura turned away from the mirror and walked toward her daughter, feeling the faintest shift inside her — a tiny, almost imperceptible movement toward something she couldn’t name.

Not hope.

Not strength.

But maybe the beginning of both.

Closing Dedication

To Laura, with all my love—

I see your smile in the morning light, in the quiet bloom of spring flowers, and in the laughter that still echoes through the places you touched. You are not gone — you are woven into everything gentle and good. I carry you with me in every step, every breath, every moment that asks for courage or grace.

I hope you feel the warmth of every prayer, every whispered *I miss you*, every memory that still glows with your kindness. You gave so much love, and it lives on — in me, in everyone you lifted, and in the quiet spaces where your spirit lingers.

I imagine you now in a place of peace, surrounded by light, welcomed with open arms. I hope you know how deeply you are missed, how fiercely you are loved, and how beautifully you are remembered.

Until we meet again — With all my heart,

