

*The Dreamer*

Soft wisps of golden hair cascaded around her small, beaming face as her mother sang her favorite lullaby. Nestled comfortably in her cozy little bed, she became enthralled with the way her mother gently brushed her hair away from her face as her singing became fainter, and she began to drift off to sleep. Her eyelids were heavy, and she breathed deeply, inhaling the light scent of lavender. Her mother's perfume was a smell that always made her instantly feel comfortable and safe. As her eyelids closed, her mother kissed her forehead, and whispered, "I love you, Laura, see you in the morning."

When morning came, the day broke early, and the sunlight streamed in her window to welcome her to it. Laura reached for her teddy bear that had become wedged in between her mattress and the wall just below the window sill. Clutching him tightly in her little arms, she waited for her mother to come in to her room, like she always did, before she got out of bed. She always liked to pretend she was still asleep so that her mother would kiss her forehead and whisper, "Wake up!"

Closing her dark brown eyes and holding her teddy bear tightly, she waited patiently for those words.

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She was in excruciating pain, writhing around on the floor, moaning. Her mother had grown exasperated by her complaining, thinking she was just doing it for attention. Her mother tried giving her Pepto Bismol, assuming she just had a stomach ache, but when that didn't work, she just figured Laura was looking for more babying.

Laura was not acting, the pain was real. Her lower abdomen felt like it was on fire. Nothing was comfortable for her; not the bed, not the couch, nothing but the floor on the carpet. She had tried going to the bathroom several times to no avail. Her stomach just continued to trouble her immensely, to the point of tears. Even after she had taken the antacid her mother gave her, she still did not feel any relief. She tried telling her mother she wanted to go to the doctor, but her mother seemed to think she was making it all up, which just frustrated her even further.

Finally, after hours of crying and writhing on the floor in pain, Laura tried to go to the bathroom again. This time, there was blood, and she screamed for her mother to come see.

Shaking, she held the piece of toilet paper up so her mother could see the blood she had wiped away from herself. Her mother took one look at it, looked back up at Laura, and told her to go ahead and flush it. Frustrated beyond belief and terrified that she was dying, Laura screamed for her mother to take her to the hospital.

Laura's mother smiled at her and said, "You've started your period. You're a woman now."

Her jaw dropped in disbelief. She was only nine years old.

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"I'm not your real mother," she explained, matter-of-factly. Her face did not give away even the slightest hint of emotion as she said it. "Your mother died when you were a child."

"What are you talking about?" Laura could not find it inside her to even know how to react to what she was hearing.

The woman looked down at her hands. "I'm so sorry, but that's all I can tell you. Your mother was a close friend of mine, and when she passed, you were left with your grandmother for a while. Your grandmother was not able to care for you, so she gave me custody of you when you were three."

"But where is my grandmother then?"

"I'm so sorry, Laura, but she is not well. I doubt she'd even remember you. She lives in a convalescent home with Alzheimer's."

Suddenly, Laura regretted ever asking this woman anything. This woman she had believed was her mother for so long. It seemed as though she had always been treated like an inferior by her, so when kids at school started making fun of her saying she was adopted, it began to eat away at her. She wanted to know if it was true. Deep down inside her, she always felt different. This confirmed her worst fears.

Laura looked at the woman she thought was her mother long and hard, studying her face. She felt that now that she knew the truth, it was probably a

relief to her, and that Laura had most likely just been a burden to her the entire time. "Why did you take me in? You didn't have to."

The woman shook her head. "Laura, it would have been horrible for you to have to go through life moving from one foster home to the next. Your mother and I were very close. I met her when we were both in high school. When I found out she died, I immediately wanted to know what happened to you. Originally, I thought you had been living with your father, but learned that he had disappeared shortly after your mother died."

Laura's eyes lit up. "You knew my father too?"

The woman nodded. "No one knows what happened to him, but I did find out that you were with your grandmother, your mother's mother. After I found that out, I came to see both of you. That's when she asked me if I would take care of you. She knew she would not be able to raise you and care for you the way your mother did." Her eyes filled with tears and she looked down at her hands. "Your mother was a good person."

Laura's feelings went from shock to anger, to acceptance, to disbelief, and back to curiosity. "But, why all these years did you keep this a secret from me? I mean, I'm 15. Don't you think you should have told me this when I was younger?"

The woman shook her head. "I had no idea how to tell you. I just wanted to make sure you were happy and well cared for."

It seemed reasonable. The woman started to cry, and that made Laura feel a little guilty for asking so many questions, but it was her past and she was entitled to know the truth. All of it, no matter how hard it was for her to hear.

"I guess you could just call me Kathy, if you don't feel comfortable calling me Mom anymore," the woman sobbed.

Laura wrapped her arms around Kathy, suddenly feeling incredible guilt for making her cry. "I'll always call you Mom," she said, smoothing her hair away from her face. "I just wish I would have known sooner."

Kathy looked up at Laura and her eyes seemed to search for something. "You are so much like your mother, but there is something in your eyes that reminds me of your father, too."

"Tell me more about my father," Laura pressed, thinking that this would not upset Kathy as much.

Kathy looked frightened. "He was a difficult person to know, but he was kind. There was just always something off about him. I always told your mother that she deserved someone else, someone who was better for her."

"Was he mean to her?"

Kathy shook her head, her lips pursed. "Not to her, not to anyone really, but there was something fake about him. I just got a bad feeling whenever I was around him. Maybe it had something to do with the fact that they were an interracial couple. He was black and your mother was white. It always seemed like he tried too hard to fit in."

"What was his name?" Laura asked.

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"Try to find her ID," a man said. "She can't be over 25 years old."

There were lots of men and women talking at a distance, but what they were saying was indistinguishable. She was drifting in and out of consciousness, and there was a woman beside her who was wiping her face with a damp cloth, trying to talk to her. The words coming out of her mouth weren't making sense, though, they just sounded like gibberish. Her eyes fluttered open and closed. It felt like she was lying on the ground. Suddenly, her entire body felt like it had been dropped from a fifty story building. She tried shouting out in pain, but all that came out was a weakened whimper. Another woman was going through her pockets, and found her wallet, pulling out her driver's license.

The woman looked like a police officer, or a fire fighter, and she looked at the license. "Laura Autumn Cooke," she read. "24 years old, not an organ donor. She's from Arizona. Phoenix." She handed the license to the man who originally asked about her ID. He was definitely a police officer.

Laura was able to open her eyes and look at the woman next to her. She tried speaking but was unable to move her jaw.

"Laura," the woman said, continuing to wipe her forehead with a damp cloth. "Don't try to talk, you've been badly hurt. You're lucky you're alive. We're waiting for the helicopter so we can get you to emergency surgery."

Hurt? Lucky to be alive? Surgery? Laura was starting to process this information but it was extremely difficult with the amount of pain she was in.

Every bone in her body felt like it was broken, her head felt like it was broken, she was pretty sure her jaw was broken because she couldn't even open her mouth to speak. Where were Amber and Luke? And what happened to the...

"Got something here," a male officer said. "You're going to want to see this."

Laura's eyes must have opened more because the doting woman started wiping her forehead a little faster. "Don't worry about anything right now, Laura, we're going to get you to a hospital and you're going to be fine. We'll work this out. Don't try to talk."

Laura started crying. She knew she was crying because she could feel the tears dripping down the sides of her face. It felt like they were dripping into cuts on her cheeks. She wanted to moan, scream, make some kind of noise, but she couldn't even move. She tried to wiggle her toes, and was able to feel them, but could not move them. If she could feel her toes, she wasn't paralyzed, she thought. But she still had no idea what had happened. Or where Luke and Amber were. She couldn't hear them talking. Were they hurt too? If they were waiting for the helicopter to take her to the hospital, how were they getting Luke and Amber to the hospital?

Were they alive? What the hell had happened?

One of the police officers came over to Laura and knelt down next to her. "Laura, I know you've been through a lot and this is all happening very quickly. Can you speak?"

The doting woman spoke for her. "It looks like her jaw has been broken, and I don't think she should really be moving too much. I want to wait for the medics to get here, she is really struggling and she's lost a lot of blood."

The officer nodded. "Laura, I want you to know, I found the cocaine. You are not in trouble, though, okay? I know you know it was there, but I want you to put it out of your mind and pull through this, okay?" He seemed to genuinely care, and she believed him when he said she wouldn't be in trouble for it. "Don't say anything, don't try to talk. Just remember, when you get through this, we are going to sit down and talk about what you all were doing with that much cocaine in your car."

Laura must have passed out right after that, because the next thing she remembered, she was in the helicopter.