

Chapter 1 – Laura

Sitting cross-legged on her bed, she holds a picture of her mother in one hand and clutches one of her mother's shirts against her chest with the other. Closing her eyes, she inhales the shirt's scent, warm, flowery, and a tad sweet. The scent of her childhood: a mixture of perfume, washing powder, and that smell unique to her mother. Although soothing, the scent sends a lone tear rolling down her cheek. She blinks, opening her eyes again to look at the image of her mother's smiling face in the picture. The scent and the image, along with the memories, are the only constants in her chaotic life these days.

With a deep shaky sigh, Laura lifts her gaze.

The rest of her surroundings are new and still unfamiliar. This place doesn't smell like her home, doesn't feel like her home. Not yet at least, and maybe it never will.

The room that is to be hers now, looks nice and freshly renovated, and Laura knows it's been prepared to make her feel welcome.

Resting her hands on her legs, she takes in the room from where she sits on the queen-size bed, in between the room's two windows. In front of her is a white bookshelf, still empty, except for her mother's jewelry box.

With stiff legs, Laura walks over to the chest of drawers in the corner, by the window to her right. She turns on the CD player, putting in Jason Mraz. One of ten CDs from her mother's collection she took with her. When the CD starts to spin, she pushes the forward button. **Track nine.**

The light, infectious melody of the acoustic guitar, together with the uplifting singing are in sharp contrast to the lyrics. Laura has known them by heart for a long time.

She and her mother used to sing along to that particular CD on their last holidays together, more than a year ago.

Sighing, Laura climbs back onto her bed again, and leans back against the padded headrest. It's not as bad as she had feared when she boarded the plane fifteen hours ago from Berlin, Germany.

Robert and Margaret Miller did have done their best to make her feel welcome and at home, from the moment she exited John F. Kennedy Airport in New York.

Although Laura recognized them from their video call two days prior, she felt butterflies in her stomach, and her heart in her throat, when finally standing in front of them in person.

"Call us Grandma and Grandpa, please," was the first thing Margaret said. It helped settle the butterflies down.

On their way to the car and throughout the four-hour drive to Needham, Massachusetts, Margaret asked her about the trip, her favorite music, films, and classes at school. After a while Laura's answers became taciturn. Forming words cost her a lot of effort. Resting her head against the car's window she watched the landscape outside rush past.

Most people know Berlin is in Germany so I don't think you need to add this

Helen Sewell
05/08/2020 19:16

She wanted to close her eyes and wake up back home with her friends and her mother. Still, she felt Margaret's wish to help her, and it soothed the aching in her chest.

Grandma, not Margaret, Laura tells herself again as she sits on her bed ~~with~~ tears pricking her eyes. She feels the need to close them and drift off into sleep but her mind keeps reeling.

Grandma and Grandpa – she's never used those words ~~in the past before~~.

It had always been only her mother and her, no other immediate family. Her mother's parents died in a car accident before Laura was born, and there ~~had~~ never been a father in her life.

~~E~~Then everything changed when Laura was fifteen. Within a few weeks, her mother became sick, and was diagnosed with leukemia. Her first chemo cycle was successful. ~~S~~he even had a stem-cell transplant, and got to come home for Christmas. They spend their time looking through photo albums, listening to and singing along with their favorite music, singing along, and cooking their favorite dishes. Then there was an unexpected visitor for New Year's: Michael, Laura's father.

When her mother became sick, she ~~had~~ contacted Michael from the hospital and told him not only about her condition, and but about their daughter, Laura, in case she didn't survive. He agreed to come. That's when Laura learned the truth: He was American. Her parents had a short romance of three months while he was on an internship in Hamburg. When her mother found out that she was pregnant, Michael had already gone home. She moved to Berlin without telling him. They had never spoken again until Laura's mother got sick.

Even now, eight months later, they haven't yet to meet again. They had talked on the phone, however. The first time had been on Laura's birthday in February, then again, a second time, shortly after her mother's condition worsened and she was hospitalized again, once more, because her condition had worsened again. And then there were multiple phone calls during the last five weeks after her mother had learned she was terminally ill.

Her father had signed the acknowledgment of paternity, as like her mother had asked him to do when he was visiting over New Year's. He had talked to his parents about his daughter and they had agreed to take her in if the need should arise. When the doctors told them there was nothing more they could do, they called Michael's parents to settle the arrangements. Afterward, her mother gave Laura all the papers she needed to move, from Germany to a new life in the United States.

That night, Laura refused to leave the hospital. She huddled up on a chair at her mother's bed, a blanket draped around her shoulders. Tears pricked her eyes but wouldn't fall. Four days she stayed like this. She couldn't sleep or eat, only sip on a glass of water the

nurses kept filling up for her, dozing off every once in a while. On her fifth evening, the nurse sent her home.-

Thinking back to those moments, tears spring to Laura's eyes. Her throat becomes tight and constricted. Breathing feels hard.

Mama.

A lump forms in Laura'sher throat, nearly suffocating her. It hurts. Swallowing hurts. Drawing in air through her mouth, she tries to calm herself, but the tears won't stay inside this time.

Mama.

Just as Laura's mother had feared, ~~S~~she didn't make it, just as Laura's mother had feared. An hour after Laura was sent home~~When~~, the hospital called an hour after Laura was sent home to bring~~with~~ the news; that her mother had passed.~~T~~ Laura's knees buckled and her stomach regurgitated the emptiness inside her. And then the tears came.

Her mother's friends organized everything: from the funeral to the dissolution of her household to packing and sending the belongings she wanted to keep to her new address in Massachusetts~~America~~. Numb, Laura watched it all unfold until she was driven to the airport. ~~O~~Only then realization dawned on her: She would move to Needham, Massachusetts.

If it turned out to be bad, it was only two years, she told herself, over and over again, during the six-hour flight ~~over and over again~~. Two years until she turned eighteen and was free to do whatever she wanted – even go back to Germany and her friends. Only two years. If her mother was able to live all by herself after her parents' death and raise a child alone for sixteen years, Laura could live in America for two years.

Lying down, she pulls the blanket over her head and cradles her mother's shirt ~~close~~ly to her chest, shutting out all the foreign sounds ~~and~~, drowning the unfamiliar scents with her mother's familiar one. Closing her eyes, she blocks out this new world around her and gives in to the pain.

She is alone and has lost everything. Sobbing, she cries herself to sleep.

~ S ~

It is still early morning when Laura wakes up, her eyes red and puffy. One night was not enough to get over her jet lag. Neither was it enough to get rid of this feeling of being lost and all alone.

Silently she gets up, pulls on sweatpants and a sweatshirt, puts her hair back into a loose bun, and walks downstairs. To her surprise, her grandpa is already busy in the kitchen, preparing breakfast.

"G'morning, Laura," he greets her with a warm big smile. "You're an early bird, I can see. D'you sleep well?"

Laura catches only the last part but nods nonetheless.

"You look tired."

Changed to avoid repetition

Unknown Author
01/10/2020 11:59

She doesn't know how to respond to this. She cannot tell him she cried herself to sleep, but he looks at her as if he knows that's what she did anyways.

"Well, we aren't scheduled to go to Noanet for your **placement tests and assessment interviews** before Wednesday, so you have two days to get adjusted here. What do you want to do today? Tour of the neighborhood perhaps? Or go see Boston and do some shopping?" He grins at her.

Laura doesn't get everything he's saying and opens her mouth to ask if he can repeat it more slowly. When, from behind, the door to the back porch opens.

"Oh, good morning, honey. I hope we didn't wake you up." Her grandma is as cheerful as she had been the night before. "What'd you like for breakfast?"

It's easier to understand her, she doesn't speak as fast and mumbly as her grandpa. "Just a tea," Laura rasps.

"No, sweetie, you need to eat something. Ham and eggs maybe? Or cereal?"

Laura shakes her head. She and her mum usually skipped breakfast. The first thing she used to eat /She wouldn't normally start waseating before brunch break at school, where she'd have a homemade sandwich during brunch break at school.

"I can make you Johnnycakes if you like?" her grandpa offers from where he stands at the stove frying ham and eggs in a pan.

"I'm sorry," she shakes her head. "What?"

"New England style pancakes. Very good."

"No, thank you," Laura shakes her head, but her grandma won't have it.

"You are too skinny already, honey. You need to eat. How about an apple?"

An apple sounds okay. Laura relents with a small nod, before looking out the kitchen window into the large backyard behind the house. After a warm and clear evening, temperatures dropped below 50 degrees Fahrenheit over the night, leaving a fine white dew on the lawn.

Sighing, Laura remembers her home back in Berlin. A small two and a half room apartment in a house built during the early 19th century, with high ceilings and tall windows. She already misses it.

Home – this is her home now, she tells herself.

A hand holding an apple appears in front of Laura's face. Startled, she looks to the side and finds her grandmother smiling at her.

"Thank you." She smiles back.

If this is going to be her home for the next two years at least. She will have to start making an effort. Why not start today? Biting into her apple, she turns around and looks at her grandparents sitting at the breakfast table, eating toast with the ham and eggs.

"Are there any second-hand furniture stores around here?"

Consider shortening to just "entrance assessments" or something similar

Unknown Author
01/10/2020 12:01

Mumbly is an adjective not adverb, but you could leave it here as author's style, or representing Laura's thoughts.

Unknown Author
01/10/2020 12:39

This is a little clumsy so have given you an alternative sentence.

Unknown Author
01/10/2020 12:42

As you are trying to indicate shock, I might change this line to be less wordy. For example: An apple appears in front of Laura's face. Startled, her eyes dart to the side to see her smiling grandmother holding out the fruit/offering.

Unknown Author
01/10/2020 12:45

Their faces look puzzled. "Second-hand furniture? What are you looking for?" her grandpa asks.

"Just a couple of things to add to my room."

"Like what?"

"A chalkboard," Laura shrugs, "old picture frames, a small bedside table, things like that?"

"Chairish," her grandfather suggests still chewing and her grandma nods. "And Urban Renewals."

"Let's call 'em so we don't make the ride in vain."

"Oh, and ... uhm, can I get a phone card for my mobile, too, so that I can make phone calls here?"

"Oh!" her grandma turns to look at her husband.

Robert gets up from his chair.-

"Right, I forgot," he murmurs, walking over to the sideboard and grabbing a small package, wrapped up like a present.

"Here!" he smiles at Laura holding out the package for her. "We've got something for ya. I forgot to give it to ya last night. We hope ya'll like it."

Abashed, Laura takes it and opens it: a new smartphone and a SIM card. With wide eyes, she stares at her grandparents.

"We're told that's what teenagers need nowadays," her grandma grins at her.

"This is too much," Laura protests in a low voice, thinking about how much it must have cost her grandparents.

"Nonsense, sweetheart, do you like the color?"

A big grin spreads on Laura's face and tears of gratitude well up in her eyes. It's purple; her favorite color. She can't remember having told them when they talked on the phone a couple of weeks ago, but then she doesn't remember very much from that time.

"Hush, honey," her grandma stands up and takes her into her arms.

"Thank you so much," Laura rasps into her shoulder.

"It is nothing, sweetheart. All we want is for you to be happy again."

Note. It's common practice in the UK to use N dashes – where you have used M dashes —. If you want to publish in US use M dashes, as you have done. Thanks