

Chapter One: The Last Month

When I walked through the door that day, I knew time was short. It wasn't something anyone had to say. I saw it in her eyes—those same eyes that had watched over me through sickness and struggle when I was just a boy. Now, they were tired. Fading. But still trying to be strong for me. That was her way. Even at the end.

The hospice nurse nodded softly as I entered the room. I had dropped everything to be there. It wasn't a decision—it was instinct. A soul's pull. You only get one mother. And I hadn't always understood her. I hadn't always agreed with her. But in that moment, none of that mattered.

John and I had just stepped out for lunch that day. We were emotionally drained, and the nurse had gently encouraged us to take a break. I remember feeling uneasy, like leaving for even an hour might somehow matter. But we left anyway, trusting she would rest.

Then came the call. We rushed back. The nurse met us at the door with that expression you never forget—kind, yet solemn. My mom hadn't passed in front of us. She had waited, I believe, for us to step away. As if she didn't want us to see her last breath, to carry that image forever. That was her way too—protecting us until the very end.

What mattered was that even in her final moments, she remained fiercely independent, choosing to leave this world in quiet dignity. She didn't want us to witness the final breath—but she knew we were close. She knew she was loved.

My mom always worked two jobs, so I rarely saw her growing up. She was up before dawn and often home long after I was in bed. Her life was made of sacrifice, not spotlight. I didn't understand it as a child—how her love looked more like labor than lullabies. But I see it now. She gave everything she had, and then gave some more. When I think of love now, I see her at the kitchen sink after a double shift, still making dinner. I see her falling asleep in the recliner with the remote in her hand. I see her hands—not calloused, but graceful and elegant, the kind of hands that wrote thousands of letters, answered phones with poise, and managed the details of men who built airplanes. She worked as a personal secretary for what is now Boeing, and in the evenings, she sold clothing and handbags in retail. Her hands weren't worn from labor, but from holding everything together with dignity.

I think about the birthdays she missed, not because she forgot, but because she was working. The school plays where I scanned the audience and didn't see her, not realizing she had traded that moment for our next meal. As a kid, those absences felt like neglect. As a man, I see them for what they were: selflessness disguised as distance.

She missed my sports games too. Baseball, soccer, basketball—I tried them all, even though I was always the smallest kid out there. In ninth grade, I was 4’11” and barely 90 pounds soaking wet. Coaches smiled politely but rarely played me. Teammates sometimes mocked me, though a few looked out for me. I kept showing up, hoping maybe she’d make it to a game. But she never did. Now I know it wasn’t because she didn’t care. It was because she was exhausted. And still, every once in a while, she’d leave a note in my backpack: “Proud of you. Keep trying.” At the time, I wanted more. But now, I treasure those words like they were medals.

The room was still, except for the quiet hum of the oxygen machine and the soft rustle of curtains swaying in the summer breeze. July in Destin, Florida is a strange combination of blazing sun and ocean breeze, a clash of beauty and burden that somehow mirrored what was happening inside me. The kind of air that clings to your skin and your memories. I remember thinking how strange it was that time kept moving at all—how people outside were shopping, heading to the beach, going about their lives. Meanwhile, inside that little room, everything was slowing down.

I sat beside her every day, holding her hand, adjusting the covers, trying to make her comfortable. I said her name more gently than I ever had. I brought her sips of water, whispered memories, and watched the rise and fall of her chest like it was the ticking of a clock I couldn’t slow down. There

were moments when she would open her eyes and smile faintly, though she barely had the strength. Those smiles were gold to me—reminders that she was still there, still with me, even if just barely.

Some days were better than others. There were flickers of clarity, moments when she seemed to return to me completely. Once, she asked about a Christmas long past—the one where I made her a ceramic jewelry holder with my name painted crooked on the side. She still had it in her room. Another time, she talked about her mother, how she missed her, how the memories had started to blur but the feeling of her touch never left.

There's a strange silence in the room of the dying. The TV hums softly, someone might shuffle past the door with a tray, but it's the silence between words that gets you. That silence is where all the things you wish you'd said come to life. And in that silence, I realized something: I didn't really know my mother.

Not the way I wish I had.

I knew the woman who raised me, yes. The one who nursed me through spinal meningitis at three, who prepared meals and made sure my clothes were clean. But I hadn't known the woman *behind* the mother—the girl who once had dreams, the young woman who faced hard choices, the one who lived with regrets she rarely voiced.

She didn't talk much about her past. She came from a generation that didn't believe in unloading their burdens onto others. You carried what was yours to carry and you did it quietly. But in those final weeks, as her voice softened and her breath grew thin, little pieces came through.

I learned more in those quiet moments than I had in years of conversation. I learned that she once wanted to be a nurse but had to give up her education to care for her siblings. That she never fully forgave herself for staying in a marriage that dulled her light. That she worried I wouldn't understand the sacrifices she made—and that maybe she didn't always make the right ones.

In her final month, I began to understand things that took me a lifetime to see. That some of the distance between us wasn't from lack of love—it was from lack of understanding. I judged her choices, not knowing what options she had. I saw her as stubborn, not realizing it was her strength holding everything together. I saw her as old-fashioned, not realizing she was doing her best with the world she was given.

She was proud of me. I heard her say that to others, and even though I longed to hear it more directly, I knew she meant it. She'd tell people how I'd made something of myself, despite what I'd gone through. That I had grit. That I didn't let meningitis, or the doctors' predictions, or the chaos of life stop me from pushing forward.

But there was so much more I wish I'd told her.

I wish I'd told her I finally saw how hard it must have been to raise kids without a handbook, to make ends meet, to fight her own battles while trying to protect ours. I wish I'd told her I forgave her for the times she didn't show up the way I needed. That I finally realized she was just doing the best she could, like I would do years later with my own children.

That's the thing about parents—you understand them better the moment you become one. And by the time that understanding matures, it's often too late to say what's been buried inside for years.

In those final days, I wasn't alone. My best friend John came in the last week, as did Melody. They both saw the toll this was taking on me—how my strength was cracking under the weight of sadness. They relieved me when I was overwhelmed, sat beside her when I needed to breathe, and spent such sweet time with her. Watching them with my mom was a gift I hadn't expected. Gentle conversations, soft prayers, kind hands.

John found old songs she loved on YouTube and sang along with her—"You Are My Sunshine," and other melodies that lit something inside her even in her fading state. There were tears, yes, but there was also peace in that music. It filled the room with warmth I couldn't summon on my own. Melody brought grace—pure, gentle grace. She prayed silently, her eyes closed, her hand resting over my mother's as if shielding her

with something invisible but powerful. She didn't need words. Her presence spoke everything. As I watched them both, I was encouraged—to be my mother's best, last encouragement. To offer her peace. Song. Prayer. To believe, even in her fading breath, in the power of eternal healing.

There were moments I stepped outside, sat on the front steps with my head in my hands. The sun would set and the cicadas would start their evening chorus, and I'd feel the weight of years—hers and mine—press against my chest. I wanted more time. Just one more morning where she made toast and coffee. One more afternoon in the car listening to her hum along with a country station. One more chance to tell her everything that never found its way into words.

I found myself journaling at night. Scribbles, mostly. Just trying to make sense of the swirl inside. Writing helped me breathe, helped me hold on to memories as they happened. I wrote about her hands. Her voice. The way the sunlight would hit the curve of her cheek as she slept. I wrote about regret. About love. About letting go.

In the quiet of those final days, I leaned in and said some of it anyway. I said thank you. I said I loved her. I said I was sorry for not seeing her more clearly. I hope she heard it. I think she did. Her fingers curled just a little tighter around mine. And sometimes, that was enough.

She passed on July 30th.

And something inside me shifted. It wasn't just grief—it was a rewiring of my soul. A realization that the clock doesn't stop for any of us, and the things unsaid become the loudest echoes when someone's gone.

That last month wasn't just the end of her life. It was the beginning of a new understanding for mine. And it started here, in that small room, with the hum of machines and the weight of unsaid words. This book begins there—not at the end of her life, but at the beginning of a deeper truth in mine.

The truth that love, when fully realized, doesn't always arrive in time to be spoken. But it can still be written. It can still be felt.

This is my attempt to speak it now—before I'm gone.