

# Laura

by Maggie Newman

Laura Tanner stood on the balcony of the beach house breathing in the sweet salt air of October. She had been gone for three years and the ocean that swelled before her brought a sense of relief, a sense of homecoming.

It was nearly eight a.m. and Jake's early morning jog would bring him home soon. Laura no sooner began to descend the narrow wooden stairway leading to the beach when a shiver streaked across her back. Jake was definitely nearby.

She paused halfway down the stairs and scanned the coastline. An involuntary smile crept across her face.

...

Jake Prescott stopped jogging a few hundred yards from the beach house. His tanned, naked legs ached from the five mile run. Bending forward, he started to massage his calves, then stopped as a wave receded. It left behind a small white shell. Jake picked it up, rubbing it between his fingers.

A shell just like it had given Laura such delight the first time she saw it. Having lived in the Midwest all her life, she had never seen the ocean. She was twenty-four the first time Jake and she walked hand-in-hand along the water, her childlike pleasure giving Jake a new appreciation for something he had taken for granted most of his life.

Jake tossed the shell skillfully across the calm water of an outgoing wave and watched as it skimmed gracefully several times before disappearing into the foam.

*Just like Laura disappeared three years ago.*

It didn't matter that her reason for leaving was valid. It didn't matter that she had no choice in her decision. The hole she left in his life was just as deep, just as painful. Three empty years and Jake still missed her as much as the day she left.

...

Laura watched as Jake plucked something out of the surf. She could see by the curve of his shoulders that he was deep in thought, concentrating on the object in his hand. Abruptly, he tossed it into the ocean, staring after it as if to will it back again.

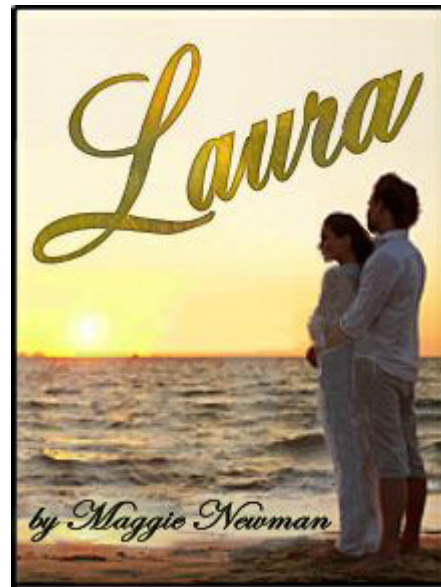
Her heart went out to him, knowing the past three years were as unbearable for him as they had been for her.

Settling back against the handrail, Laura closed her eyes and drifted lazily into the past...

...

A week before she and Lou Crenshaw were to exchange wedding vows, Laura sat alone on the edge of her bed, a photograph cradled in her hands. A teenage boy and girl smiled up at her, their arms around each other's waist, an amusement park roller coaster looming behind them.

Their relationship had begun when they were children and over the years a friendship had grown



and developed into mutual love and adoration. Even so, Laura had always felt an emptiness, one small pinhole in their "perfect" relationship.

Unable to justify her misgiving, Laura eventually dismissed it as mere foolishness. Lou was a kind, gentle man who loved her completely. She was fortunate to have him.

Laura placed the picture next to her cellphone on the nightstand and moved over to the window. A cool, spring breeze filtered through the screen, bringing a feign salty fragrance with it.

*Foolish, foolish little girl.*

In three short days she would be Mrs. Louis Crenshaw. It was time to wake up and smell the flowers, not the ocean.

The sound of her cellphone jarred Laura fully back to reality. She drew another deep breath but the sense of salt air had disappeared. Undaunted, she turned and snatched the phone from the nightstand.

\* \* \*

Jake thought about heading back to the beach house, then changed his mind. Every morning, he faced the same decision. And every day the result was the same.

He knew all too well that once he walked back through that door, he would have to accept the fact that Laura was gone... really gone. He kept telling himself the pain would lessen in time, but how much time would it take before he could live with the truth.

No, there was no reason to go home just yet. He walked along the water's edge, gradually building speed to his normal jog, gradually building resistance to the familiar ache in his heart.

\* \* \*

Laura opened her eyes just as Jake passed the beach house. She raised her hand momentarily, then dropped it to her side. The tapes in her mind went into play and she closed her eyes again...

\* \* \*

An unfamiliar male voice came over the phone. "Laura Tanner?"

"Yes, I'm Laura Tanner."

"Miss Tanner, I'm afraid there's been an accident."

Laura sat silently next to Lou's hospital bed. Holding his limp hand and desperately trying to will him back to her, she watched as Lou's eyes fluttered open. He gradually focused on her face and a weak smile crossed his lips.

On what would have been their wedding day, Laura smiled back at a stranger. Tears that had not come previously now rolled down her cheeks and momentarily stained the starched white sheets.

After weeks of extensive therapy, Lou was confined to a wheelchair, but the doctors were confident he would eventually walk again. Friends and family, forever and always optimistic, were certain Lou would recover enough to lead a normal life.

By then, Laura had lost sight of what "normal" consisted of. Lou's life had always revolved around physical activities. No matter how much encouragement he received, he would never accept being less than one hundred percent.

Laura's energy was slowly being drained and she would find her patience wearing thin. Guilt would set in and she would immediately reprimand herself, convinced that Lou already held the market on self-pity, feeling cheated by a drunk driver who crossed the center line and altered his life forever.

The painful and disappointingly slow therapy continued month after month, until Lou was finally able to walk with the use of a cane. He was embarrassed and surly, but Laura still hoped that time would bring him back to some resemblance of the vibrant, witty man he once was.

As time went on, Lou did manage to cope, adjusting, as he put it, "to the way things had to be". Laura settled into her own routine, one of supporting and encouraging Lou, always attempting to boost his spirits.

Neither mentioned their aborted wedding day or even discussed the possibility of future marriage. For the most part, their relationship was acceptable. They still loved one other, and although the accident hadn't brought them closer together, the bond had already been formed that prevented them from growing apart.

Somehow they managed to put the accident behind them. Lou became a salesman at his father's sporting goods store. Laura opted for a position in a public relations firm thirty-five miles away.

She found the drive necessary in a therapeutic way. Seventy minutes of every day, five days a week, Laura entered a solitary world of her own, a place where she could escape the stress and disappointment of her personal life.

Having accepted the mundane existence she now lived, she committed herself full time to her career.

When a prominent client on the west coast requested Laura's expertise, she accepted without hesitation and fully aware of the irony. Two years to the day she and Lou should have been leaving for their honeymoon in San Diego, Laura was flying there alone on a private jet.

As the plane landed, Laura's spirits were considerably lifted when she realized that after twenty-four years she would finally get to smell the salt air she had previously only imagined.

Laura had never met her client personally. She had worked through his secretary and several of his assistants, but the client had always remained anonymous. She envisioned several possibilities, none of which prepared her for the man she was about to meet.

As she sat in the waiting room with his receptionist she tried to wrap her mind around what she believed to be a self-centered, stuffy man in his mid fifties who had probably never had to work toward his fortune but rather acquired it through family means.

As she leafed distractedly through a current issue of Family Circle (obviously placed there to accommodate a less than affluent clientele), the office door flew open. The tall young man who appeared was fairly thin. Well-defined muscles accented a white tee-shirt tucked firmly into tight fitting jeans that slipped over a pair of dusty black cowboy boots. Laura's gaze drifted back up his frame and settled on a pair of deep blue eyes veiled in long black lashes that any woman would kill for.

The young man glanced briefly from a manila folder he was carrying, meeting Laura's astonished gaze head on. Still fixed on Laura's face, he backhandedly dropped the folder on the receptionist's desk and walked deliberately to where Laura was seated.

"Miss Tanner" the man stated more than asked, and extended a strong, deeply tanned hand. "I'm Jake Prescott."

Laura stood up, nodded, and slipped her now sweaty palm into his. Tall in heels, Laura's 5' 11" stature still fell a good two inches short of her new client.

"Shall we begin?" Jake's face broke into a broad smile. "Shall we begin?" Still holding her hand, he guided Laura toward his office door.

\* \* \*

As the sun continued to rise, Laura could feel the heat on her back. She slowly opened her eyes.

Jake was heading back toward the beach house, but he was walking slowly, the image of a man who had no where special to be, no one special to meet. His posture, strong and assertive when they met, now appeared slumped, almost beaten.

It broke Laura's heart to see what the past three years had done to him, how deeply she had hurt him. She wanted to run to him, shout his name, let him know that she was here and that she would never leave him again, but something pulled her back. As desperately as she needed to see him, feel his arms around her, she was fearful of that moment, fearful of leaving the safety of the past and plunging into an uncertain future.

\* \* \*

Jake leaned back in his leather chair and rested his intertwined hands on the top of his head. "I don't believe it. Everyone's seen the ocean some time in their life."

"I guess you've never met anyone from the Midwest." Laura met his taunting gaze. "I've always dreamed of what the ocean would be like. Sometimes I even imagine I can smell the salt air." Embarrassed by her admission, Laura dropped her eyes to the floor in front of her.

When she looked up again, Jake was standing in front of her, his arms outstretched. She frowned as he grabbed both her hands and pulled her to her feet, inches in front of his smiling face.

"No time like the present,"

"You're kidding, right?" Laura steadied herself. "We haven't even started working yet."

Undaunted by her somewhat feeble observation, Jake led her to the door and escorted her past the receptionist and onto his private elevator. They descended the fifteen floors in silence, Laura standing just slightly to his side and behind several inches so she could look at him without being obvious. Somehow, she felt that he knew, that he was enjoying her not-so-subtle attention.

As Jake drove through traffic, Laura felt as though she had known this man for a very long time but for some reason was not astonished by the feeling. Lou and she had been together their entire lives and never managed to find this peacefulness, this inner tranquility that usually comes from familiarity and sharing.

The noise and confusion of the city began to lessen and eventually faded to intermittent sounds. Laura smiled, suddenly aware of a familiar smell that seemed to consume her. Her heart began to race, her breathing became stronger, her chest heaving with deep rushes of air. She felt light headed and laid back against the seat, closing her eyes and ears to everything around her, allowing the salt air to take over all her senses.

Engrossed in her peace, Laura was not aware the car had stopped, or that Jake had gotten out and come around to her side and opened the door. The soft feel of his hand on hers brought her alert.

As her eyes opened, she gasped. In all her dreams, all her imaginings, she could never have prepared herself for the sight that lay before her. The sun appeared to be a ball of orange flame, enormous in its size, hovering just over a silver haze that stretched from left to right. Gentle, rolling waves moved slowly toward her and then exploded in a burst of white foam and blue-green surf as it pounded the reddish sand and slid gracefully up on the beach.

Barefoot, Jake and Laura walked lazily along the shore, Laura breaking away now and then to stomp childlike in the receding water of the waves. As the strength of the water yanked playfully around her ankles, she would laugh and then race back to Jake, walking silently beside him until the next wave called her away.

As one of the waves disappeared, leaving traces of seaweed and pebbles, Laura spotted something white and rushed over to where it lay, half buried in the sand. She carefully plucked it from its resting place, meticulously brushing wet sand from a plain white shell. Delighted, she proudly showed it to

Jake in her outstretched palm.

Jake moved closer, but instead of examining the shell as Laura expected, he gently cupped his hands around her face.

Laura closed her eyes. The smell of his cologne dissipated the salt air, the roaring in her ears drowned out the pounding surf. The feel of his lips on hers felt warm in spite of the cool breeze that brushed across her face.

His lips lingered, growing more demanding as Laura's fingers folded around the shell in her hand. She found herself returning the kiss willingly. Slowly, Jake pulled away, his hands still cradling her face, and they both smiled.

Laura didn't bother to check into her registered room that night. Jake brought her home to his beach house and she settled in as though it was the most natural thing she could do.

For three months, they worked together, played together, became one, and neither was surprised by the bond that existed between them. When Laura's assignment was complete, she and Jake sat in the sand at the ocean's edge, silently watching the sun disappear behind the silver hazed horizon.

Laura was always amazed how often they could sit for hours in total silence, spoken words never seeming necessary.

"Don't leave."

Jake's direct statement had broken the calm of early evening. Laura didn't respond right away, but instead thought of Lou, of home. Somehow both seemed more like a distant dream than the reality she had lived most of her life. The thought of leaving Jake had been pushed deliberately and forcefully out of her mind all these weeks and facing it now didn't appeal to her.

Laura struggled for words that could possibly explain how she felt, words that could possibly justify her leaving, but none came to her. Instead, she simply replied, "I can't stay."

Jake reached over and took her hand, pressing it firmly against his mouth. Laura felt his steady breath against her palm, and she gasped slightly, almost a whimper. Jake turned his head and looked at her profile, studying the lines of her face, absorbing every feature, securing it in his memory.

What popped into his mind were the words from an old movie. "Love means never having to say you're sorry." Jake was certain it should have been "love means never having to say good-bye". He would never say good-bye to Laura, never.

\* \* \*

Laura opened her eyes and immediately focused on Jake. He was striding away from the water's edge and toward the beach house, directly toward Laura. His head remained down, almost as though he was studying the ground beneath him.

Laura's heart started to pound, her palms tingled and became sweaty. It was all she could do to keep from running to him now. Still, she forced herself to be patient...

\* \* \*

Laura's return home from her west coast assignment was uneventful. Just as she expected, there was no one to meet her at the airport. After all, she had deliberately kept her exact arrival time to herself.

Her Toyota 4-runner was parked where she had left it three months before, a layer of dust dulling the color enough for her to look twice to make sure it was, in fact, her vehicle.

The two-hour drive was the only thing separating her from two very distinct worlds she now wrestled

with in her heart.

Lou was waiting on the front porch, moving back and forth in the old swing he had built as part of what he called his "rehabilitation" after the accident. When Laura came up the stairs, Lou labored to his feet, planting the cane firmly on his left side to steady himself. A broad smile flashed across his face and for a brief moment Laura saw the image of the young man she had fallen in love with so many years ago.

"I've missed you, it's been so lonely around here, I thought you'd never get home." His words came out in a rush as he hugged her tightly, his cane dropping loudly beside him.

"It's good to be home," Laura sighed, struggling desperately to block out the haunting image of Jake standing at the water's edge, his back to her, unable to physically watch her walk away.

The next three years crawled by, each day slipping away with the same routine Laura had become all too familiar with. No great joys, no great disappointments, just the hollow erosion of life slipping away.

Laura stood at her bedroom window. The cool spring breeze moved the sheer curtains back and forth, brushing them against her shoulder. Suddenly a familiar smell grew stronger, consuming her as it had so many times in the past.

The salt air carried a sweet calming sensation that she could taste more than smell. Before she could shake it off, the phone on the nightstand started ringing...

As the doctor explained how a blood clot had suddenly and almost instantly taken Lou's life, Laura stood motionless, unable to comprehend.

Most of the small town turned out for Lou's funeral. Despite his change after the accident, Lou had been well known and loved by all who knew him and each felt the need to pay their respects.

Laura stood at the grave long after the others had gone. Somehow she knew he was finally at peace, physically whole once again. She pictured him running down the sidelines of a football field, racing toward the goalposts, the ball cradled firmly under his strong muscular arm, his legs pumping expertly as he ran. Spiking the ball in the end zone, he spun around, throwing his arms into the air as teammates surrounded him, a triumphant smile etched forever on his tanned face.

That's how Laura would always remember him.

\* \* \*

Jake stopped suddenly.

His head rose slowly and Laura could see the questioning look on his face. His cupped hand shielded his eyes against the rising sun, then dropped quickly back to his side. The mirage before him was so real, so intense.

It was Laura, sitting on the steps, her long brown hair framing features that were slightly hidden by the shadows cast from the sun at her back.

Expecting the image to dissipate at any moment, Jake began to walk slowly toward her, his eyes never leaving her face.

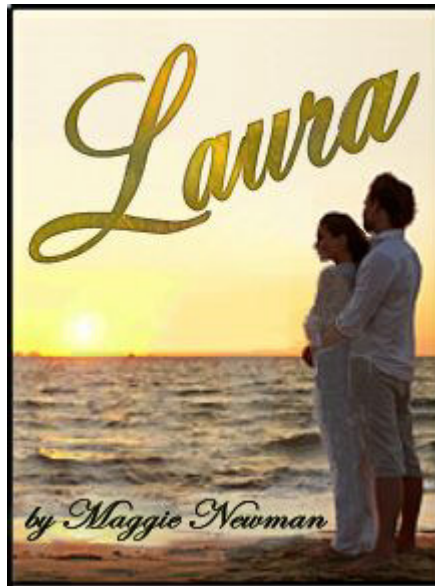
Laura stepped onto the sand, her heart racing as she rushed to his outstretched arms, the gap between them finally gone forever.

# *Laura*

by **Maggie Newman**

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# Mistaken Identity

By Maggie Newman

Sarah Mosley and her abusive husband, Corey, have been missing for three years and are presumed dead. But when their pickup is found at the bottom of a river with Corey still perched in the driver's seat, more questions arise.



Where is Sarah? Was her body washed away during flood waters, never to be found? Or did she somehow manage to escape the 200-foot fall? Worse, did she push the pickup over the edge with deliberate intent?

Desperate to know are two people. A rural sheriff who loved Sarah like a daughter. And Sarah's concerned brother-in-law, certain a laminated bus schedule will lead to Corey's killer.

Unfortunately, the road leading to the truth is crowded. FBI agents have a witness to protect. A Miami crime boss needs information only his ex-lover can provide. And his hired goons want nothing more than to silence her.

Is Sarah Mosley the woman they all seek? Or is it simply that her life has come to depend solely on the case of a mistaken identity?

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