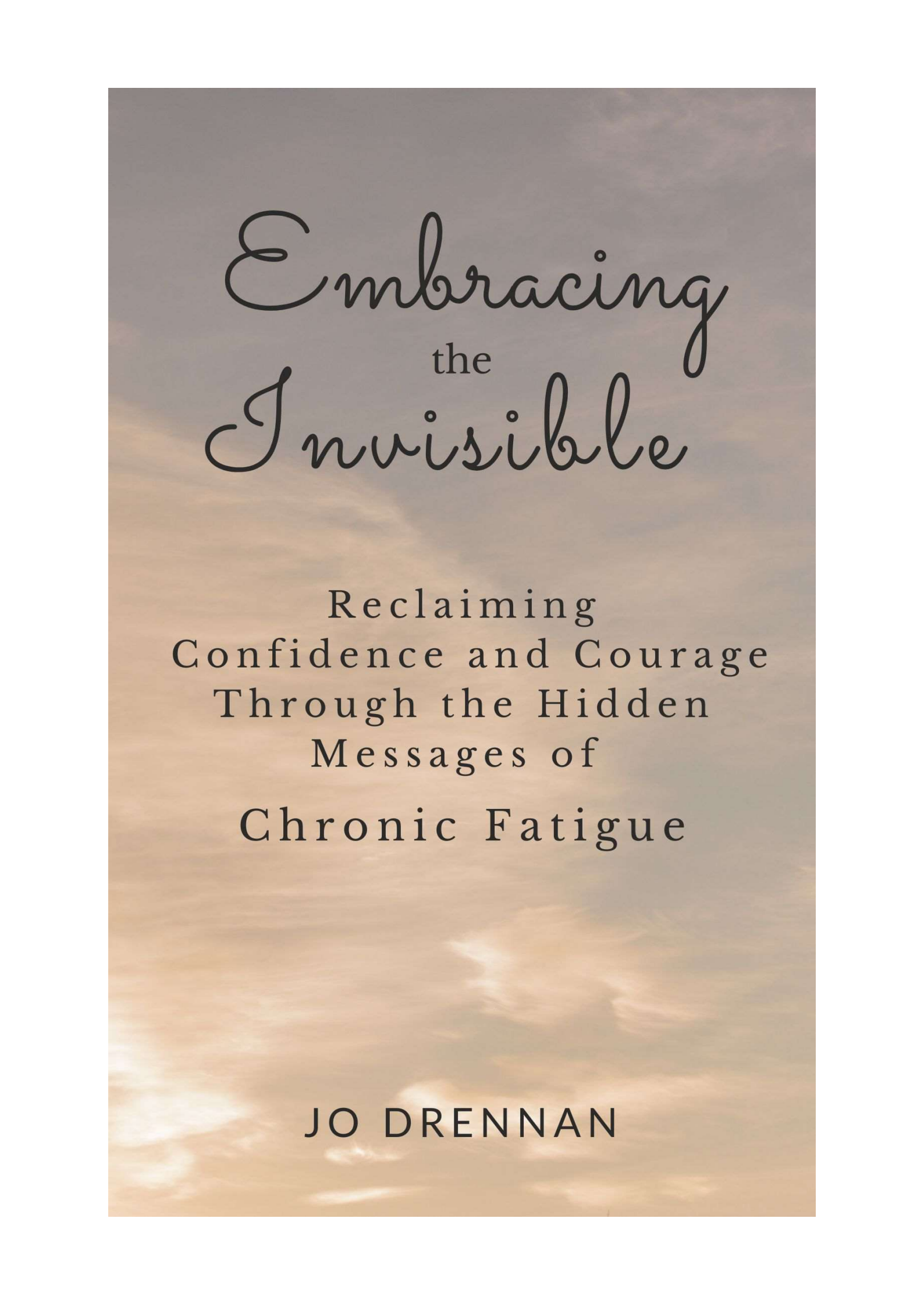




Embracing the Invisible

Reclaiming
Confidence and Courage
Through the Hidden
Messages of
Chronic Fatigue

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Introduction

Meet Claire.

She is fictional, but the life she leads, the pace she keeps, and the quiet unravelling beneath a capable exterior are drawn from stories many of us know too well.

Her experiences come from my own journey, from women who have trusted me with their truths, and from the subtle patterns so many of us carry without realising.

By day, Claire works as a project manager in an engineering firm. Her world moves quickly: deadlines, planning, coordination, expectations.

People count on her to keep everything running smoothly. She's the one who steps in, steps up, and keeps going. The person others describe as capable, organised, and unshakably dependable.

From the outside, she looks steady and in complete control.

The competent, committed leader at work.

The calm, confident captain on the netball court.

The caring friend who coordinates brunches, beach runs and spontaneous dinners that bring everyone together.

Inside, she is stretched thin in ways she refuses to acknowledge.

When her body finally stops cooperating, she chooses to face something she has spent years outrunning: the deeper truth beneath her exhaustion.

Through moments of confusion, fear, honesty, and quiet courage, she begins to uncover beliefs and rules she absorbed long before her adult years.

Claire's story is one of moving into awareness.

Of learning how the body speaks when the mind refuses to listen.

Of discovering the quiet strength it takes to stop, turn inward, and truly hear herself.

And of realising that the patterns formed in childhood don't disappear just because we grow up, they travel with us, quietly guiding our choices until we finally turn to meet them.

Perhaps, as you walk beside Claire through these pages, you'll notice echoes of your own story rising up to meet you.

Disclaimer

This book is for educational and reflective purposes only.

The author is not a medical practitioner, and nothing in these pages is intended to be taken as medical advice, diagnosis, or treatment.

The story and the concepts shared here are drawn from personal experience and the accounts of others.

Please consult a qualified healthcare professional before making any decisions about your health, medications, or treatment plan.

Part 1

1 Sarah Sees the Facade

The morning sun streams through my bedroom window, nudging me awake for the best part of my day. An easy 5K run with Sarah while most people are still sleeping.

I love this time. Clean air, steady rhythm.

No emails or deadlines.

No meetings or decisions to make

No calls to return or tasks to juggle.

No reports, no rush.

No one needing something from me.

As we fall into stride, Sarah glances over at me. “Hey Claire. How are you? How’s work going?”

“Work’s pretty intense right now, I’ve been putting in a few more late nights than usual, just making sure things are all in shape before the annual reviews next month.”

Sarah frowns, her feet tapping the pavement in time with mine. “What do you mean, in shape? You’re always on top of everything. Everyone knows you’ll nail those reviews. You always do.”

She suddenly slows down, her breath catching. She reaches out, gently touches my arm, and brings us both to a stop. We stand face to face and I can already see the question forming in her eyes.

Her expression shifts, brows furrowing as realisation dawns. “Wait...” she says, voice softening. “Are you still covering for that guy?”

I don’t answer right away. There’s a pause I didn’t expect. A stretching silence. The kind of quiet that answers without meaning to.

“Oh Claire,” she says, more certain now. “You are aren’t you. You’re still covering for that guy.”

“Sarah, I can handle it. There’s no point causing drama.”

She doesn’t let it go. “Why do you keep covering for him? This has been going on for months. You’re doing his work for him and it’s making your life harder. How long do you think you can keep this up?”

You've tried talking to him and that didn't make things any better. Why don't you go to the boss and tell him what's going on? Why do you keep doing this to yourself?"

"It's OK. Really it is. I just need to get through next month and then I'll deal with it."

But Sarah and I both know I won't deal with it. Just thinking about revealing a crack in my team makes my whole body tense, like it's bracing for impact.

I'd never let anyone know there's a problem with one of my team members. I've worked with slackers before, and they've never stopped me finishing a project on time, and they never will, no matter what it takes.

I was offered this job because of my diligence, my dedication, and my commitment to results. My bosses know they can count on me to get the job done, no matter how high the stakes.

And no slacker is ever going to stop me.

2 Covering the Cracks

Another late night at the office. Just me, the hum of fluorescent lights, and the glow of a computer screen. The spreadsheet in front of me makes no sense, and the ticking clock seems to mock me.

Andy's dropped the ball again. Missed yet another deadline. And here I am, stepping in to cover for him.

Sarah's voice echoes, each repetition sharper than the last: You're still covering for that guy... aren't you?

I can't shake the feeling that she's right, but facing it makes my stomach churn. I stare at the spreadsheet, willing myself to dive in, but Sarah's words keep circling, making it impossible to focus.

Instead, my thoughts skid sideways. Straight to Andy. We're only a month out from the annual performance reviews.

Too close for loose ends. Too close for Andy's mistakes to land on my desk.

Why is he still on my team anyway? How did he even get here? We pride ourselves on delivering, yet he's the weak link. I've offered help, told him to ask questions when he's unsure.

But he never does. He just barrels ahead with his version of the task, always missing the mark.

The mess in front of me feels heavy, harder to approach than it should. So I reach for the one thing that can cut through the weight, reminding myself why I do this, why I push as hard as I do.

My mind drifts back to last year's annual KPI review. I'm in the boardroom, seated across from senior executives. That familiar mix of excitement and anticipation. It's the moment I work toward all year. The chance to lay out my team's excellent results.

I see them nodding in approval as they look over the reports: Team Performance, Client Satisfaction, Project Milestones and Delivery, Quality of Deliverables, Leadership Capability, Budget Management, Risk and Issue Management, Compliance and Governance, Innovation and Continuous Improvement.

They can choose any report they like. I'm confident they all show the same result.

Consistent Excellence.

I glance at the CEO, expecting his usual stern expression. But this time, there's a flicker of something else, the barest twitch at the corner of his mouth as he almost breaks into a smile.

"Claire, you've really gone above and beyond this year. We weren't expecting this level of output. You've exceeded every target we've set."

I nod, appearing calm and composed, but inside I soar. My chest expands. My spine lengthens, as if I've grown taller just by hearing his words.

A flush of warmth blooms across my face. It's not just satisfaction. It's... Clarity. Momentum. Validation. A fierce yet silent inner knowing that whispers, you're winning. It's the kind of moment that wipes out every doubt, every setback, every late night.

Moments like this are what make every push feel worth it.

And just like that, the chaotic spreadsheet in front of me becomes a fleeting bump in the road. Two hours pass in a wisp. I still make it to the gym for the final class of the day.

My favourite. The Late Finishers Spin Class. It's always packed with people like me who need to burn off the grind of another successful day.

The instructor used to run a slower-paced class in this late slot, until we all asked for more intensity, more challenge, more adrenaline.

He listened.

Now, the room pulses with music, sweat, determination, and a group of people who don't just keep up.

We excel.

People who know the high that comes from pushing themselves beyond what's comfortable.

Pushing harder always worked for me.

Until

The

Day

It

Didn't.

3 The Day I Didn't Keep Up

For as long as I can remember, I've always pushed myself to be the best I can be. In school, sports, social situations, friendships, relationships and now in my career. Being at the top of my field, leading teams, smashing goals, helping people be their best, and excelling in project management.

It's the kind of pace I've always thrived on. Weekdays I'm up early, before the rest of the world, carving through the breeze on my bike, pounding the pavement on a run, or slicing through the ocean in a morning swim. It's not just about fitness. It's how I stay sharp.

How I stay me.

The momentum carries me straight into the weekends without missing a beat. While others might slow down on weekends, I keep moving, just in different ways. Saturday afternoons are for A Grade netball, where I captain a team of women who turn up ready to give their all.

After the game, there's always a barbecue in someone's backyard or a dinner table crowded with food, laughter, and the kind of conversations that spill late into the night. I love being surrounded by people who move fast, laugh hard, and live fully.

Sunday's usually my favourite day of the week. Beach run, swim, and a healthy brunch overlooking the ocean.

But...

This morning feels different.

I'm slow.

Heavy.

Like my body's working against me. Almost foreign, like it belongs to someone else.

Normally I'm up the moment the first light hits my room, but now the whole place is bright and I'm still under the covers. The clock says 5:30. I should have been out the door half an hour ago.

But every muscle is calling for stillness, not movement. Every nerve pleading for quiet, not strain. Every cell aching for pause, not pace.

I picture Sarah and the crew waiting for me, and my chest tightens. I've never missed a Sunday morning run with them. My throat tightens, the thought of calling almost too much to bear.

I reach for my phone. "Hey Sarah. I'm running late. Don't wait for me, I'll catch up at the top of the hill."

"Yeah, no worries. See you soon."

I hang onto the thought that I'll meet them, but my body has other plans. It's like I'm glued to the bed, my limbs too heavy to lift. The more I tell myself to move, the more impossible it feels.

Minutes pass. Nothing changes. I grab my phone again. A text seems much easier this time.

'Hey Sarah, I'm really sorry but I'm not going to join you guys today.

I must be coming down with something. I'll give you a call later.'

As soon as I press send, a wave of guilt floods through me. I drop the phone and bury my face in my pillow, wishing the thoughts would stop.

I should be there. I'm supposed to be stronger than this. What's happening to me? Am I just being lazy? Am I losing my edge?

This isn't me.

I didn't call Sarah later that day, like I said I would.

I couldn't.

4 The Loyal Friend

Next thing I know, I'm waking to the sound of knocking on my door. I blink at the clock. 1 p.m. Somehow, I've slept the entire morning.

I've never even taken a daytime nap, let alone lost seven hours like this. This isn't who I am. I pull myself up, the weight of guilt pressing down on me.

Shuffling to the door, I open it, doing my best to hide my exhaustion. Sarah's eyes scan me for a second. My face pale. Hair wild.

She steps in without hesitation and offers a gentle smile. "Hey, you okay?"

Her voice is kind, calm, and filled with that gentle concern I've always known her for.

"Yeah, it's just... I don't know. I must be coming down with something. I've slept all morning and now I feel kind of... off."

I hesitate, not sure how much to reveal, trying to downplay the sinking feeling inside me, but I know Sarah can see right through me. She always does.

Her gaze softens as she steps closer. "You don't have to explain anything, Claire. You know I'm here for you, right? Whatever's going on, you don't have to hide it from me."

She pauses, waiting for me to speak, but I stay quiet. The pressure of my own thoughts building. The guilt. The confusion. The disappointment in myself.

I want to push them away, but something in Sarah's voice makes it impossible to keep pretending everything is fine.

"I've never been like this, Sarah. I'm supposed to be strong. But today, I couldn't even get out of bed. I don't know what's wrong with me."

"I hear you, Claire. I really do." She nods slowly, and I notice how calmly she speaks.

"I get it. You're used to being the one who takes care of everything and everyone. But Claire, you're human, you're not a robot. You don't have to be 'on' all the time."

"Yeah, but I don't know how to stop, Sarah. I feel like if I stop, I'll let everyone down. I'll lose my edge. I'll fall behind."

Sarah takes a step closer, now standing just in front of me. "Sometimes, when we push ourselves so hard, our bodies try to send us a message, try to get our attention.

And if we don't become aware of the subtle messages in the beginning, those messages get bigger and stronger until we have little choice but to listen."

My voice cracks, "I just... I don't know how to not push. It's like, if I don't, everything will fall apart. I don't see any other way to live my life."

Sarah places a hand gently around my shoulders. "You don't have to have it all figured out today, Claire. You're not failing and you're not weak. I'm here for you, and you don't have to carry all this alone. You're allowed to rest and you're allowed to take care of yourself too."

Sarah pulls back slowly, her eyes soft and knowing. “I’m here, Claire. Whatever you need.”

As I stand there, unsure of how to respond, Sarah wraps both arms around me. I hesitate for a moment. It’s unfamiliar to actually let someone comfort me like this. But then I feel the warmth of her embrace, solid and steady, and something inside me softens.

I melt into her.

The weight of everything somehow lightens.

And in this moment, I realise that maybe, just maybe, I don’t have to carry everything by myself.

I nod, still unsure, but the quiet promise of her words flows through me, filling me with a sense of possibility that I can face whatever this is.

5 When Control Keeps You Stuck

The weeks that follow merge into a persistent blur. I get up every morning, determined to do better, to feel better.

The internet is full of advice.

Vitamin C, Magnesium, Ashwagandha, CoQ10, Iron, Zinc, B12, Maca Root. Rhodiola, L-Tyrosine, Bladderwrack, Kelp, Curcumin, Piperine.

Green powders, red powders, brown powders, black powders.

Increase salt. Cut back on salt.

Daily movement, but not too much.

Rest, but not too long or you’ll lose condition.

Gentle walking but stop immediately if your heart rate spikes.

Some say start with blood tests. Others say don’t bother with blood tests.

Ground yourself in nature. But stay out of the sun.

Meditation apps, gratitude journals, grounding mats.

Cold showers in the morning. Warm Epsom salt baths at night.

Morning sunlight. Blue light blockers. Infrared saunas.

No caffeine. Or just one cup. Ensure it’s mould-free.

Eat more. Eat less. High protein. High fat. Low carbs.

Gluten-free. Dairy-free. Low oxalate. Low histamine. Low FODMAP.

Detox. Don't Detox.

Track your symptoms. Let go of the need to track your systems.

Join a support group. Avoid support groups, they're full of negativity.

Be patient. Be proactive.

Push yourself. Don't push yourself.

And in between all of this...

Live a joyful, peaceful, low-stress life.

Joyful. Peaceful. Low-stress.

Right.

Time to stop researching and start planning. I'm certain I can fix this if I just get the formula right for me.

Somewhere between hope and desperation, I start stacking habits. No screens in the morning. Tongue scraping, oil pulling, lemon water.

A smoothie packed with greens, spirulina, and turmeric comes next, followed by a lineup of supplements I take like clockwork and some gut support capsules that cost more than my weekly groceries.

Then comes a 10-minute vagus nerve reset I found on a podcast, followed by alternate nostril breathing, then affirmations that tell me I'm healthy, vibrant, and filled with energy.

I say the words out loud, even when I don't believe them.

I've cleared my evenings for yoga and added ten minutes of meditation before bed. I even tried a three-day juice cleanse. I'm doing everything right.

Or so I tell myself.

And yet... I don't feel any different. Sure, my skin's a little clearer and my energy spikes for a few hours in the morning. But by 2 p.m., I'm counting down the hours until I can crawl back into bed.

I used to thrive on early morning workouts. Leg days were my favourite. But now, my legs feel heavy just walking to the car.

I tell myself it's only temporary. My body's adjusting. I'm just in a phase of recovery. It's only a matter of time before I'll improve.

I stop playing netball. Running is out too. I'm just too tired. But I keep whispering to myself, I'll get back to it soon.

Everyone says rest is the answer. So, I rest. But the rest doesn't seem to make the exhaustion go away. And the more I rest, the less I feel like myself.

I've cut back on social commitments. I'm not the friend I used to be, the one everybody loved to be around. The one who used to laugh out loud. The life of the party.

Now I feel like I'm watching myself from a distance. Like I'm not really in my own life anymore. My old life. My vibrant, full life, lays just on the other side of the haze, out of reach.

It's been four weeks. Four long weeks of trying everything. Of doing everything right. Of treating healing like a job, a checklist, a performance to perfect.

But it isn't working.

As I lay in bed at 11am on a Sunday morning, after sleeping through my morning routine, I can't ignore the truth anymore.

The fatigue is still here. My mind is still foggy. I should be feeling better by now. People say this stuff works. So why am I still here, stuck in this endless cycle of trying and failing?

I thought I could control this. I should be able to fix it.

I stare at the ceiling, listening to the hum of the fan overhead, trying to make sense of a body that refuses to respond.

Sarah's words drift back to me, clearer now than when she said them.

Maybe she's right. Maybe this is bigger than something I can fix on my own.

6 Feeling Like a Fraud

I never thought I'd end up in a doctor's office over something as trivial as being tired. But Sarah wasn't going to let up.

She insisted I see someone, and now she's right here beside me in the waiting room.

We both know I wouldn't be here if she didn't bring me.

Being here feels like admitting defeat. I'm the one who fixes problems, not the one who has them. I'm the one who helps others. Not the one who needs help.

Sitting here... I feel like a fraud.

What am I even supposed to say to the doctor?

... I'm tired!

My whole life, I've pushed through exhaustion like it's nothing. And now here I am, asking for help because I'm tired.

"Claire Williams." My heart kicks at the sound of my name. There's no going back now.

I glance at Sarah, a lifeline here for me to grab hold of any time I need.

"Claire, I'll be right here when you come out. And if you want me to go in with you, just say the word."

I shake my head slightly, trying to force a smile. "I don't know... I just feel like I'm wasting his time, you know? I'm just tired. I'm okay, I'm just tired."

Sarah squeezes my hand, her eyes never leaving mine. "You're not wasting anyone's time, Claire. We both know it's more than just tiredness. You need answers. You're doing the right thing by being here and no matter what, I'm not going anywhere."

The tension in my shoulders and the tightness in my chest ease just a little. "Thank you."

It comes out as barely a whisper, conveying nothing of the massive roar of appreciation I feel for her.

7 Diagnosis of Exclusion

I sit across from a doctor I've never met before, and in the next fifteen minutes, I'm supposed to tell him everything that's been unravelling inside me.

The exhaustion that feels like it's embedded in my bones. The muscle aches that refuse to go away. The fog that clouds my mind.

How am I supposed to squeeze the last four weeks of hopelessness, desperate tiredness, and confusion into fifteen minutes?

"Hello Claire. How can I help you today?"

"Hi Dr Lewis. I just don't get it. For weeks now, I've been so tired..." The sound of my voice barely feels like mine.

I've never told anyone other than Sarah, and she's someone I trust with my life. I want to stop speaking and get up and walk out, but I can hear her voice in my head: Claire, we both know it's more than just tiredness.

I continue, hesitantly. "I sleep, but I never feel rested and there's this constant ache in my muscles, like I've been working out for hours.

And my mind... I can't think straight. I keep forgetting things.

Work is... Well, four weeks ago I was at the top of my game. I manage a lot of people and a lot of projects.

Up until four weeks ago all of that came easily, but now I can barely face any of it."

He doesn't look up. He just taps away at his keyboard as if he's heard it all before, as if my words are just another set of data to be processed.

I want to scream at him. Look at me! But instead, I swallow the rising lump in my throat.

"Is there any other pain or discomfort?" he asks, still not meeting my eyes. His voice is clinical, matter-of-fact, as if we're discussing a broken arm or a cold.

I nod, trying to gather my thoughts. "I just... Everything feels so heavy. Like I'm carrying something I can't put down. I try to do the things I used to do, but it's like my body is betraying me."

He types some more, his face expressionless.

I can feel the gap between us, a vast chasm that grows deeper, wider, with each keystroke. The more he types, the more I feel like a line of code in someone else's program. Reduced to data, stripped of context. Neatly slotted into a system that doesn't care who I am or how I got here.

Just input. No personal story. No space for nuance. No space for me.

And then, finally, he looks up. "It sounds like you're dealing with the hallmark symptoms of CFS, Chronic Fatigue Syndrome."

His voice is neutral, bland. "Persistent fatigue, muscle soreness, and difficulty concentrating. These are all consistent with the condition. However, CFS is a diagnosis of exclusion. We can't make a definitive diagnosis without ruling out other possibilities first."

My stomach tightens. My temples throb. I'm sure my face is bright red with frustration.

And I'm also sure he wouldn't even notice.

A diagnosis of exclusion. I've heard that term before. Something that essentially means there's no clear cause, no specific test to confirm it. It's all about eliminating other conditions until you're left with nothing else to blame.

He continues, typing more notes into the computer.

"I'd recommend a series of tests to rule out any other underlying conditions. This includes a complete blood count to check for any anaemia or infections, thyroid function tests to rule out hypothyroidism, and some autoimmune markers to make sure there's no evidence of conditions like lupus or rheumatoid arthritis."

He pauses, looks up at me, and reels off even more tests.

“We'll also need to check your vitamin and mineral levels, particularly for deficiencies in things like vitamin D or B12, which can sometimes contribute to fatigue.”

I nod, though his words feel like they're bouncing off me. How many tests can there be?

And just when I think he's done with the barrage, he launches into more possible tests.

“We can also set up a sleep study. CFS can sometimes overlap with sleep disorders, and it's important to see if there's a disruption in your sleep cycles.”

I'm teetering on the edge of something immense.

Every nerve feels stretched to breaking point.

A dark storm building inside me.

Threatening to unleash in a wild burst of rage.

Or crumble into a crying heap of hopelessness.

Anger pulls one way, fragility the other.

And still, he has more...

“Once we have those results, we'll be able to have a more comprehensive discussion about the best way forward. It's important to take a thorough approach with CFS, and I want to be sure we're not overlooking anything.”

The sentences spill over each other. A single, unbroken muddle of meaningless noise. As I look forward, all I see is a relentless chain of tests. Each one leading to the next.

The waiting stretches out before me, a thick fog of uncertainty I can't escape. An endless cycle where answers are slow to come, and solutions, if they do exist, seem impossibly far away. The whole thing looks like a painful drawn-out journey with no clear end in sight.

He hands me a bunch of envelopes.

“Claire, here are the referral letters for the specialists and instructions for the tests. I've also included the forms for the blood work we discussed. I'd like you to schedule a follow-up appointment once we get the results back.”

I force myself to nod, though my mind is spinning. It's all I can do to stand up. My legs shaky, even heavier than when I walked in.

I came here for clarity, and now I feel more lost than ever.

A forced “Thanks” slips out before I can catch it, bitter on my tongue, paired with an unrealistic smile.

I slide the envelopes into my bag, their edges sharp, digging into my palm, as if they know they'll never be opened.

Walking toward the door, the weight of the task ahead settles in.

I catch sight of the chirpy receptionist smiling at me. “Would you like to book another appointment now, Claire?”

It takes every ounce of energy I have left to respond. My head tilts just enough to register a silent no.

Thankfully, Sarah is now right by my side and answers the receptionist with words I cannot find.

“Thanks, but not right now.”

8 When The Usual Fails, The Unusual Awaits

As we step outside, the crisp, cool air jolts me into finding my voice.

“It was useless, Sarah. He doesn’t even know what’s wrong with me. No clear diagnosis, no definitive answers. He says it might be chronic fatigue syndrome, but he can’t confirm it.”

My words burst out, unconstrained and scalding. “And the treatment. Well, there is none yet. Not until after I’ve had test after test after test.”

Sarah doesn’t speak. She walks quietly beside me, in silent support. And somehow, in her silence, I find the strength to continue.

“I feel like my body’s betraying me. A month ago I was fine, and now I can’t even get through a normal day without feeling like I’ve run a marathon I didn’t train for.”

My voice rises with each word until I’m practically shouting. “How did I get here? And why can’t anyone help me?”

Sarah stops and turns to me, her gaze steady and warm. “I’m so sorry you’re going through this Claire. I can see how much it’s wearing on you.”

The kindness in her voice cracks something inside me. Tears slip free before I can stop them.

“It just feels... hopeless. I can’t keep doing this. I’ve tried everything. Vitamins, meditation, sleep hygiene, changed my diet, cut out coffee, changed my workout routine. Nothing works. And now the doctor has me facing months of tests. Where does it all end? When do I get back to where I was a month ago?”

“Claire, I know it feels hopeless right now. But perhaps there’s another path you haven’t considered. Something outside the box. Outside the busyness of all the testing and endless

doctors' visits. Outside the hustle of the usual management strategies. Something softer and quieter."

I turn to her slowly. Jaw tight. Arms folded. Eyebrows raised. But it's not curiosity.

It's disbelief.

"Another path?" My words come out laced with resentment. "You do know how many things I've already tried, right?"

"Yes, Claire, I do know how much you've tried. And if you're willing to hear me out, you may just be interested in trying my idea too."

I pause, shrugging a little. "Okaaaaayyyy ... I guess so. I mean what have I got to lose at this point?"

"I know someone. A coach, a counsellor of sorts, well she's a trainer, technically. She helps people with fitness and energy management. But she's... different. She's been through what you're going through."

"A trainer? That's the last thing I need, Sarah. I already know how to run, ride, swim, work out. I don't need someone telling me how to get fit."

"It's not like that Claire, she had chronic fatigue syndrome a few years ago, and she completely turned her life around. She gets it."

"Oh yeah? What's she going to tell me to do, take up yoga and drink green smoothies? I've already been there, done that."

"She might. But that's not the point. She doesn't just focus on the physical stuff. She looks at the whole picture, a holistic view of how you got here."

And it's not like you'd be booking a session with a psychologist. On the surface, it's just fitness coaching. She holds private sessions at our gym. Her name is Cara, you would've seen her there."

I almost roll my eyes, but something about Sarah's tone pulls me back. There's something different in her voice. "Wait... how do you know so much about her?"

Sarah's expression shifts. She doesn't answer right away. Her gaze drifts to the footpath, then slowly returns to mine.

"I saw her last year. I was dealing with something... Something different to you. It was anxiety. Pretty severe, actually."

I blink, startled. "Anxiety? You?"

Sarah nods gently. "Yeah. I got really good at making it look like everything was fine. I didn't want anyone, especially you, to worry."

I stare at her, trying to reconcile this with the Sarah I know. The steady, calm, always-there-for-you friend. The one who always has the right words, the thoughtful texts, the heart-felt hugs.

“But... you were always so calm. Like, unshakeably calm.”

Sarah’s smile is almost wistful. “That’s what it looked like. But underneath... sometimes it was chaos.

Panic out of nowhere.

Racing heart.

Tightness in my chest.

Sweaty palms.

A lump in my throat.

A knot in my stomach.

Sometimes all of those things together at once.

Cara helped me unravel it. And eventually, soften it’s grip on me.”

I’m quiet now, letting this version of Sarah settle in. This woman beside me, so strong and yet once so vulnerable.

I whisper, “You never said a word.”

Sarah shakes her head gently. “I didn’t want to worry you... You had so much going on. And honestly, I didn’t want anyone to know. I had to keep it together in front of everyone. But the truth is, I wasn’t holding much together at all, and pretending only made it worse.”

Her honesty lingers between us. How can hearing her admit that unsettle me and steady me all at once.

I realise how easy it is to assume someone is okay just because they look it. And how lonely the pretending must’ve been for her.

“Thank you for telling me Sarah”

Sarah nods, her voice firm but kind. “It’s time we stopped trying to hold it all alone.”

Her words settle into the silence between us. Not as advice, but as an offering.

She glances at me, eyes steady. “There were so many times I wanted to tell you, Claire, about the anxiety. But I always hesitated. I just couldn’t find the right time.”

Her voice softens. “Now is the right time, because maybe my experience can help you find a way through yours.”

I nod, slowly. Her openness settles something in me. And trust begins to take root.

“Thank you, Sarah. Really. Thank you so much. I’ll give Cara a call”

The End of Part 1

Thank you for walking alongside Claire through these early chapters.

I’m in the final stages of writing *Embracing the Invisible*.

It’s been a slow, honest process: noticing the scripts I’ve carried for decades and softening the ones that once defined me, allowing a truer voice to rise to the surface.

If you’d like to read more of Claire’s story, please email me at jodrennan@protonmail.com for Part 2.