

CHAI, CHAOS & Evolution

Teeba Zaidi



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please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

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*This book is dedicated,
To every woman
who was asked to shrink,
to give up her dreams,
her voice,
her freedom,
for the sake of being good, being quiet, being enough.*

*To every woman
who longed to explore
but was handed sacrifice instead.*

*May you find your way back
to the life that still waits for you.*

Prologue

There are stories we carry for years before we find the courage to tell them. Stories that live in the quiet spaces, between sleepless nights, trembling hands, and forced smiles. This is one of those stories.

For a long time, I didn't know how to speak of what hurt. I tried to bury it in books, in cities, in people who could not hold it. I thought silence would protect me. But silence can become a second wound. And healing, I've learned, begins when you turn towards the very parts of yourself you've spent years trying to escape.

This book was born not out of clarity, but out of chaos. Not because I had healed completely, but because I was learning how to. I wrote it on nights I couldn't sleep on mornings that hurt to wake up to, in cafés and hospital waiting rooms, between hope and heartbreak. Every chapter was a conversation with the girl I used to be, the one who never got to be heard.

She was soft and brave and breaking. And still, she tried.

This is for her.

For every version of me that felt too much, or not enough.

For the girl I was, and the woman I'm still becoming.

If you've ever felt like you were falling apart quietly, I hope this story reminds you:

"You are not alone.

You were never too broken to begin again".

Chapter I

There was no sound in the house except for the hum of the ceiling fan. Aira sat near the window, her diary resting on her lap, untouched. The pen in her hand trembled not from fear, but from exhaustion, the kind that seeps into your soul when your questions are never allowed to breathe out loud.

She has been raised in a world of quiet rules. Of glances exchanged between women in family gatherings. Of fingers tugging at dupattas, when a man entered the room. Of lowered voices and folded hands. And it never made sense to her, not even when she was a child.

She would watch her mother preparing the tea tray with practiced perfection, placing the cups gently, her eyes avoiding her husband's. Her mother's strength was her silence. But Aira, she was not built to be silent.

“Why do we always have to be the ones who bend? Why do we cover ourselves, our heads, our hearts, our desires, just to be called decent?”

From the age of twelve, when the first dupatta was forced on her shoulders and the first whisper about “shame” wrapped itself around her name, Aira had begun to question everything.

She wrote her rage in poetry.

She folded it into essays her teachers said, were too bold.

She let it live in her dreams, where women danced loud, uncovered, and unashamed.

Her thoughts were not loud in the traditional sense. But they were fierce, almost dangerous in a house like hers.

“Why are women the bearers of honor, of silence, of every unfulfilled expectation?”

“Why are we told to cover our hair, so that someone else doesn’t stumble?”

Why must our laughter be measured, our steps soft, our presence small?”

These weren’t just idle thoughts. They were survival. Because every time she rebelled, the weight of her family’s expectations crashed into her.

“Girls in our family don’t raise their voices,” her mother would murmur.

And Aira wanted to ask, what if they’re drowning?

“I am not rebellious. I am just tired of disappearing.

I don’t want to fight for rights. I want to live without permission.

And I don’t want to bow, not my head, not my will, not my fire.”

Aira didn’t remember when silence had begun to feel like company. All she knew was that it pressed against her skin like a second weight, one she carried without any protest. The curtains were drawn. The door half closed. And somewhere beyond it, life went on as though she wasn’t unravelling just a few feet away.

She lay curled beneath a worn blanket, eyes open, body still. She wasn’t asleep but she had not really been awake in days.

People around her said she was “too sensitive”

Her parents called it a phase.

She called it something else.

Survival perhaps!

Or something quieter. Something unnamed.

Books lay scattered near the bed, fiction, poetry, borrowed truths. A pair of headphones hung from the edge of her pillow, still humming a song that had long stopped meaning anything. The walls didn't listen. Neither did the people who lived behind them.

But Aira didn't mind.

She had grown used to being unheard.

Some nights, she spoke to herself. Just enough to stay tethered.

Other nights, she said nothing, because the weight of, saying anything felt impossible.

She could still hear the echoes of words spoken years ago. One line, lived inside her like a wound that wouldn't heal,

“If this doesn't work” Her father had said casually,

“we'll end up spending more on your depression than your studies”

It wasn't said with malice. And that was the worst part.

She took her pills at the same time each night. Not because they helped her sleep, but the routine made her feel a little less invisible. Some days she hallucinated. Some days, she wept quietly into silence.

But she never let herself break completely.

Not yet.

Aira had always known how to hold things together.

She had done it since she was a child, but now, she felt something slipping.

Not loudly. Not suddenly.

But gently, like the quite cracking of ice beneath still water. That night long past midnight she stood before the mirror in the dim light of her desk lamp.

Her hair was unbrushed. Her eyes were tired. There was nothing dramatic about her reflection.

Just a girl.

A little too hollow around cheeks, A little too quiet around the edges.

She raised a hand to the glass and touched it gently, as if trying to feel something on the other side.

A flicker. A memory. A version of herself that wasn't always this broken.

And then without any warning, her lips parted.

Just a whisper. Just two words.

Almost too soft to hear:

“Help me”!

And no one did.

Chapter 2

Delhi had always felt like a promise. A breath of fresh air after a long choke. Aira had imagined the city would heal her, perhaps its chaos would distract her from the noise within. And for a while, it did.

Until it didn't.

It happened on a Wednesday, somewhere in August. The sky was damp with clouds, the walls of her hostel sticky with heat. She had just received the results of her second mock test at coaching; a cruel sheet filled with red marks and ranks that felt like bruises. She stared at the paper, her heart pounding faster than she could breathe. Her eyes blurred. Her palms grew wet.

And then, the world collapsed into silence.

Her chest tightened. She gasped for air, but none came. Her fingers trembled uncontrollably. It was like drowning in plain air. She stumbled out of her room, desperate for something to anchor her.

That's when Tanya and Pragya dii helped her out, not in any grand introduction, but in this moment of collapse.

Present day.

The house had been quiet for hours,
but Aira couldn't sleep.

The ceiling above her felt heavier than the walls. The silence wasn't peaceful. It had weight. Shape. Intention.

Somewhere in the corner of her room, a fan creaked like a tired whisper. Her books were scattered on the floor. Her headphones tangled near the pillow.

It was another night of waiting for morning to come.

Another night of pretending not to feel anything too loudly.

And then, it came again.

That image.

The memory she hadn't invited but couldn't ignore.

She was nine. Maybe ten. The details had blurred with time.

But the moment had stayed.

Her father Mr. Rafeeq Mirza, was a stern man with kind eyes that had grown quieter over the years. He worked as a Senior Accounts Officer in the state civil services.

A job that demanded more silence than expression, more order than affection.

That day Rafeeq had taken her along to his office before a parent-teacher meeting. She hadn't understood much of what he did, only that he worked under someone people seemed to fear and admire in equal parts, an IAS officer.

The corridors smelled of ink, starch, and freshly cleaned floors. It was cold inside, colder than her home.

Then, without much warning, he had led her into a large cabin, grand in its simplicity, and pointed to the tall leather chair behind the desk.

“Sit there,” he said, not unkindly. “That’s the chair of an IAS.”

She hesitated.

Climbed up anyway.

Her feet dangled inches above the floor.

He watched her for a moment and said something that stayed in her blood longer than she ever admitted:

“Remember this.”

She did.

Even when no one believed she could.

Even when they told her that she wasn’t made for something so serious, so prestigious.

Even when the mirror showed a version of herself, she hadn’t learned to love yet.

She remembered that chair.

And the feeling that, for just a few seconds, she had belonged somewhere.

Now, years later, the room around her looked nothing like that office. The walls were dull. The bed sagged. And her father barely spoke to her unless it was about expectations or disappointment.

But still, in the quiet, she whispered a reply to a memory no one else heard:

“One day, I’ll sit there again. Not because he wanted me to.

But because I earned it.”

Then she wiped her face with the sleeve of her kurta, got up, and opened a fresh page in her notebook.

Because some girls don't break.

They bend. And then they rise

Chapter 3

There were evenings when Aira would sit alone on the terrace, eyes fixed on the dusky sky, watching the way the fading lights painted the clouds. She believed there was someone out there, something divine, yes, but she never quite understood the need to bow, to chant, to perform rituals just to be heard.

“God isn’t insecure,” she once said to Rhea, her voice full of conviction, “He doesn’t need my praises to exist. I just want to talk to him like a friend. Like a presence that doesn’t demand anything back.”

Prayer never gave her peace. What gave her peace was lying on her bed, whispering things into the ceiling, believing someone was listening. That was enough. That had to be enough.

But at home, that wasn’t acceptable.

“You didn’t read Surah Yaseen today either?” her mother asked one afternoon, her voice laced with both disappointment and fear.

Aira shook her head quietly.

“Who will marry you, if you don’t even pray properly? You won’t even know how to adjust in a new home!” Her mother folded the laundry with the same frustration she has been carrying for years. “And stop saying things like, you won’t get married. What will people say?”

Aira stared at her mother, her heart racing not out of fear but fury.

“I don’t want to get married, Ammi. I’ve told you before, I just want to adopt a baby girl someday and give her everything I never had. A home, freedom, love.”

“Haww!” Her mother dropped the dupatta in her hand. “Never say that outside! What if someone hear you? What will they think? Who will want to make you their daughter-in-law if you talk like this?”

“That’s the point, isn’t it?” Aira replied, her tone calm but cutting. “I don’t want to be anyone’s daughter-in-law.”

Her mother went silent. Aira didn’t know if it was shock or resignation. But she didn’t wait to find out.

Aira often felt like she had been born in the wrong timeline, the wrong place. Why was she always said to bend while her brother was said to rise? Why was her worth tied to rituals and rings? And why, why always, are women apprise that their silence is their dignity?

She had grown up with these voices around her, voices that told her what to wear, when to sit, how to laugh, and who to be. She had once tried, God knows she had tried, to be the obedient daughter who prayed, fasted. But nothing felt authentic. Nothing felt hers.

Now, in the stillness of her room, she whispered things to the God she loved in her own way:

“I hope You don’t mind that I don’t pray the way they do.”

“I hope You still listen, even when I don’t fold my hands or bow.”

“I hope You see my aching heart and consider that worship too.”

She imagined God as gentle. Not patriarchal. Not punishing. But listening.

And maybe, just maybe, loving her back in silence.

Later that week, a neighbor's, daughter Myra, came to Aira in tears. Barely seventeen. Bright-eyed but shaken.

"Didi," she said, "My cousin said I should learn how to cook so my in-laws won't throw me out. I haven't even finished school."

Aira made her a cup of adrak chai. Sat cross-legged on the kitchen floor with her.

"You don't have to choose between being loved and being enough," she said gently.

"Let them say what they want.

But never forget, your mind is a temple too.

And no man, no kitchen, no shaadi,

is worth dimming the light in your eyes."

That night, Aira wrote in her journal:

"I'm not here to break the women before me.

I'm here to break the patterns that broke them.

If I can teach just one girl to stay whole

I'll have done something sacred".

Feminism, Aira realized, wasn't always about the slogans and marches.

It was sometimes about sitting beside your mother and not arguing, just listening until she cried.

It was telling a younger girl that her dreams were not too big, even in a small town.

It was rewriting the story quietly, one heart at a time.

Chapter 4

You should change your psychiatrist,” her father says over breakfast, not looking at her.

“This one isn’t helping,” her mother echoes. “You’re still... like this.”

Nazia Begum had always been gentle but tired. She taught Urdu literature in a government school, her dupatta always smelled of chalk, dust and jasmine talc. She was a kind of women who believed in healing through warm food and quiet prayers. She didn’t always understand Aira’s darkness but, she tried.

“Like this”, as if her sadness is a stain on the floor, something to be cleaned, not understood.

Her thoughts churn quietly:

They think therapy is a reset button. They don’t realize healing doesn’t follow the rules they’ve written for life. And no, I’m not better. But it took me months to trust someone. To even talk. You think a new doctor will fix what twenty years of silence did?

But she doesn’t say it. She only nods, the way she always has.

In the afternoon, she rereads an old message thread. It’s him again. The boy who once made her feel visible in a world that looked right through her.

She stares at his last message: “Take care.”

Did he ever mean it? Or were those words just decorations?

Flashback

She still remembered what she wore.

A long, flowy skirt, soft as a sigh, and a plain black top tucked in just right. Her favorite pair of jhumkas swung lightly with every step. A nude lipstick that made her feel pretty, a tiny black bindi above the bridge of her nose. She didn't dress for him. She dressed for herself. But maybe, just a little, she hoped he'd notice.

Ahaan wasn't the kind of boy who said much. He never talked about himself unless asked, and even then, he chose his words like secrets were safer than stories. But when Aira spoke, about books, about cities, about the way poetry made her chest ache, he listened. Quietly. Fully.

That day, they met at Lodhi Garden. It was cloudy, and Delhi smelled like wet leaves and distant rain. They walked through the old ruins and half-whispered conversations. She told him about a story she was writing. He said he didn't really read books, but the way he listened made her feel like she was reading her favorite one aloud anyway.

Then, as if on cue, the sky opened.

No warning. Just a sudden, full rain, warm and wild. She gasped and tried to cover her head, but he just laughed and stood there, palms open to the sky.

"You always run from the rain?" he asked.

"Usually."

"Don't," he said, simply.

So, she didn't.

They were drenched in seconds. Her skirt clung to her legs, and her jhumkas tapped against her neck with every shiver. But for the first time, rain didn't feel like something to escape. With Ahaan beside her, it felt like something to remember.

Afterward, cold and messy, they found a tiny cart and shared pani puri. She laughed with her mouth full, and he looked at her like she was the calmest part of the storm.

He held her hand as he walked her back to her hostel gate. Didn't say much. Just made sure she crossed the road safely, stayed on the side without puddles.

Before leaving, he looked at her once and said, "Text me when you get in."

And that was all.

She did.

She still does, in her mind sometimes, writing messages to a boy who made her feel, even if just for a day, what it was like to be looked at gently.

Later that night, she falls into a dream.

It starts sweetly. She's in his flat again. The smell of old perfume and chai lingers in the air. He's there, leaning against the kitchen counter, smiling like he used to. The light is golden. Time seems paused.

"You're here," she says.

"You never left," he replies.

But as she walks closer, his figure starts to blur. The flat begins to fill with water. Slowly, then violently. Her voice

gets drowned. He vanishes. She's alone again, reaching for a version of love that never stayed.

She wakes up drenched in sweat. Gasping. Her journal lies open beside her.

She picks up her pen.

Some ghosts don't knock before entering.

Some leave without ever saying goodbye.

Aira sits up in bed and looks around her room. The posters on the wall, the faint hum of the fan, the silence of a house that feels more like a graveyard of unspoken things.

I am not healed.

But I am still here.

And maybe that counts for something.

Chapter 5

Her friend Rhea calls. Aira answers but doesn't speak much. Just listens.

Rhea, fierce, golden-hearted. Rhea has been with her through the unspoken winters. She is the kind of girl who never lets silence become a wall. She carries truth like fire on her tongue but never burns, only warms. Even when Aira disappeared into her sadness, Rhea never let go. She texted through the breakdowns, called through the storms, waited through the silence. There are people who save lives with grand gestures, and then there's Rhea, saving Aira's piece by piece, phone call by phone call, truth by truth.

Flashback

The clinic smelled faintly of eucalyptus and old silence, the kind that lingers in places where people come to heal.

Aira sat cross-legged on a brown leather couch that squeaked every time she shifted. She wore her favorite white chikankari kurta, loosely paired with denim. Silver jhumkas swayed as she tilted her head. Her muted nude lipstick wasn't for anyone but herself.

Rhea sat beside her, flipping through a half-torn magazine. Her wrinkled cotton shirt and old jeans made her look like someone stitched from poetry.

"You know," she murmured, "these waiting rooms feel like traps. Like silence is daring you to scream."

Aira didn't respond. Her mind was still echoing with her father's last words before she left home:

"If this doesn't work, we'll end up spending more on your depression than your studies."

A bell rang. The old peon called her name.

"You want me to come in?" Rhea asked.

Aira shook her head. "I'll be okay."

But she wasn't. She had learned to say, "I'll be okay" like others said, "thank you."

Inside, the room was warm, quiet. Dr. Ankita Sabarwal smiled gently. "You must be Aira."

Aira nodded. "Aira Mirza". Twenty-two. Preparing for the UPSC."

"And what brings you here?"

There was silence in the room for a moment.

Then, everything came back as a flood of memories.

Her father's harsh love. Her mother's quiet sadness. A house where affection was assumed, never spoken. The day she wore her favorite dress only to be called "too inviting." The night she cried quietly, so no one would hear.

She stood up abruptly. "I'm sorry, I need a minute."

Outside, Rhea was waiting. Aira's voice broke.

"I feel like I'm betraying them. Like I'm saying they were bad parents."

"You're not," Rhea said, holding her. "You're saying you were hurt. That's not the same."

Back in the room, Aira finally spoke.

About being the “good girl.” About the quiet pressure. The shrinking. The disappearance.

“She zones out,” Rhea added. “She works late so she does not have to think. Her sleep’s broken. Her spirit too.”

Dr. Sabarwal nodded. “Therapy will help. But not alone. I’d suggest we start with medication, to let your system rest.”

Aira didn’t reply. Her hands trembled in her lap.

“You’re not broken,” Rhea whispered. “You’re just tired.”

And for the first time in weeks, Aira let herself rest, with her eyes closed, not to escape, but to breathe.

Present Day

The phone buzzed. Rhea Calling.

Aira picked up with a smile already forming.

“I miss you,” Rhea said. “Like stupidly, painfully miss-you.”

Aira chuckled. “You were always the drama queen.”

“And you were always the one pretending not to fall apart,” Rhea said, voice softer now. “How are you really?”

“I’m healing,” Aira whispered. “Slowly. Loudly some days. Silently most.”

“You remember that waiting room?” Rhea asked.

“I do,” Aira said. “I remember that you waited with me even when I didn’t know I needed waiting for.”

There was a pause. A warmth. A knowing.

“I love you,” Rhea said.

“I love you more,” Aira replied.

And that’s the thing about healing:

It doesn’t arrive like thunder.

*It tiptoes in, with familiar voices, chipped mugs, and
someone who says:*

“Take your time. I’m not going anywhere”

Chapter 6

Sometimes the people who save you aren't born from years of knowing. They don't always come wrapped in shared childhoods or matching family albums.

Sometimes, they appear as neighbors in thin hostel walls, with stolen packets of chips, awkward laughter, and rooms that become sanctuaries.

That's how Tanya happened.

Aira had just moved into her hostel, weighed down by anxiety and silence. Her own room felt cold, unfamiliar, too white. And then there was Tanya, next door. Loud, chaotic, impossible to ignore. She had an energy that spilled into hallways, and a laugh that broke rules. The kind of girl who wore mismatched socks and didn't care, who'd bang on your door just to say, "I made chai, come before it dies."

Within a week, Aira found herself in Tanya's room more than her own. Her clothes started showing up on Tanya's chair. Her journal found a place on Tanya's desk. Her sadness? That found space in Tanya's quiet understanding.

Tanya's roommate, Pragya Di, was nothing like Tanya, yet somehow the perfect companion to her fire. Pragya was warm in a way that didn't ask for attention. She listened more than she spoke, always greeted Aira with a gentle smile and sometimes left small Post-its on Aira's books: "You're stronger than you feel today." She had the kind of goodness that made you believe in softness again.

Together, Tanya and Pragya created a space that felt like warmth and unspoken permission to breathe.

Tanya was different. She was the sun Aira didn't know she needed. Playful, unpredictable, and so alive that sadness shrank in her presence. She could make fun of Aira's overthinking one second and defend her with warrior-like ferocity the next. There was no in-between with Tanya. She was always there, entirely. And when the walls of Aira's world began to crack, Tanya was the one who stood, arms open, first.

But that was Delhi.

That was before the spiral. Before the slow unravelling. Before the forced return home.

Now, Tanya's room was miles away, and so was her laughter. The shared coffee sachets, the late-night walks for chips, the music that played quietly while they pretended to study, it was all locked away in another city, another time. Sometimes, Aira would close her eyes and try to summon it: the smell of Pragya Di's soft hair oil, the scratch of Tanya's playlist shifting from Lucky Ali to Kaavish, the way their conversations filled every corner of that small hostel room until it felt like home.

But now, there was no music.

Present day.

Her phone buzzed. It was Tanya.

Tanya (2:14 PM)

"Random memory: remember when we skipped coaching just to sit by that lake? I still have that ugly sketch you made of me"

Aira smiled, the real kind, the one that softened her face and curled her fingers around the phone like a lifeline. Tanya. Her chaos, her mirror, her warmth. Delhi wouldn't have been the same without her

Flashback:

They had sprawled out on the lawn behind the metro station, breathless from laughing too hard over some inside joke. Tanya was humming something old and romantic while Aira drew stick figures in her notebook, pretending to study. The sky was a dull orange, and everything smelled like dust and possibility.

“Do you think we’ll ever escape?” Tanya asked, plucking grass. “Like, really escape. Get the life we want.”

Aira didn’t look up. “We already have. This moment is proof.”

Tanya watched her closely. “You’re such a liar. You’re still scared of going home.”

Aira’s silence said more than words. And Tanya didn’t push.

Back in the present, Aira’s smile faded. That moment felt like another life. One that slipped through her hands too soon.

She heard her parents’ voices downstairs, low, tense. They were discussing her psychiatrist again. Her father didn’t approve. He said she wasn’t improving fast enough. That maybe it was time for a “better one.”

Aira wanted to scream. Or run. Or dissolve. Anything but sit here with her own thoughts spiraling.

“You think I want to be like this?” she whispered aloud, to no one. “You think I’m choosing this?”

There was no answer. There never was.

She curled deeper into the bed, her thoughts racing.

Night came with shadows.

Aira dreamt of corridors that went in circles. Of Tanya disappearing into crowds. Of her mother’s voice echoing through the walls, calling her name but never finding her. Of a classroom where everyone pointed at her, whispering, laughing.

When she woke, her cheeks were wet.

She got up and walked barefoot to her mirror. Her reflection startled her.

“I’m still here,” she said softly. “But I don’t know for how long.”

She opened her journal. The words came like a wound opening.

"To the girl I was...

You deserved better. You still do. I’m trying. I swear, I’m trying."

Chapter 7

Aira never remembered a version of her life without them.

Sameera, Anya, Noor.

They weren't friends made at summer camps or through playdates arranged by polite mothers.

They were the kind of friends that arrived like destiny, written into the soil she grew up on.

Not Friends. Not neighbors. Something older than both.

Girls who came and never left.

Sameera had the quiet dignity of someone raised to serve without complaint.

Her father was a retired army officer who turned as school principal, stern, righteous, and rarely home. Her mother wore silence like a second skin, always folding clothes with care, always boiling tea leaves till they turned bitter.

Sameera learned early how to fold pain into obedience.

She was the one who ironed everyone's uniforms, who wrote poetry in her biology notebook margins, who prayed even when no one else did.

But she wasn't meek.

Her kindness was deliberate.

Her silences were loaded.

When Aira had her first breakdown, it was Sameera who found her under the stairs. She didn't ask questions. Just lit a candle and sat there, whispering surahs and stories until Aira breathed again.

Sameera believed in rules, but she broke them for her girls. Every single one.

Anya was raised by chaos, a single mother who taught Kathak during the day and cried quietly over old love letters at night.

They lived in a two-room apartment above a tailor shop. Their walls were stained with stories.

The air always smelled like incense and forgotten promises.

Anya wore bangles that never matched, and words that never stopped.

She had a poem for every heartbreak, a curse for every injustice, and a theory about the moon being lonely too.

Aira adored her.

Anya once painted stars on Aira's ceiling after a bad exam result.

She believed in art like it was religion.

She believed in Aira the same way.

Noor was the wildfire.

The daughter of a nurse who worked three shifts and a father who was always emotionally unavailable. Noor grew up braiding her own hair and signing her own report cards.

She was loud, unfiltered, dazzling.

She dyed her hair without asking. She kissed boys before they knew what to do with their hands.

But beneath the thunder, she had a softness she only revealed in dim light.

Noor fought for Aira in ways no one else did.

Fought with teachers. With relatives.

With Aira herself, when she forgot her own worth.

Noor was the kind of girl who looked you in the eye when you lied and said, "I'm fine."

And then made you say the truth.

They weren't perfect.

Sameera was too forgiving.

Anya romanticized her pain.

Noor ran from hers.

But together, they were enough.

For the girl who was grieving.

For the girl who was breaking.

For the girl trying to remember who she was before the world told her what to be.

"They were not Friends.

They were not classmates.

They were mirrors. They were fire.

They were the first women who taught her love could be soft and sacred and stubborn."

Aira hadn't answered her phone in days.

She had turned off the lights, stopped eating properly, and pretended she didn't care. The world outside moved on, as it always did. And inside her room, time folded into itself. She read the same line from *The Prophet* ten times and still couldn't feel a thing.

And then, at 6:42 p.m. on a Wednesday, someone knocked on the door.

She didn't move.

Another knock.

Then Anya's unmistakable voice, muffled by the door but still musical:

"Open up, tharki. I brought chai and rage."

Aira cracked the door open.

Outside stood all three of them, Sameera in a loose white kurta with tired eyes and steady hands, Anya with a tote bag full of snacks and colored pencils, and Noor in a hoodie three sizes too big, chewing gum and glaring like she was ready to fight whoever hurt Aira this time.

They came in without asking. They always did.

Sameera put the kettle on. Noor checked the fridge and made a face. Anya threw her bag on the bed and pulled Aira down beside her.

"I'm fine," Aira whispered, and immediately regretted it.

Noor raised an eyebrow. "You wanna try that again, or should we collectively slap the denial out of you?"

Anya threw a cushion at her and Sameera just smiled, gently pulling Aira's hand into hers. "You don't have to be okay today. That's why we're here."

They sat in silence after that.

Not the awkward kind. The kind that only comes when people know your worst and still show up.

Sameera eventually brought everyone chai in chipped cups. Noor found an old Spotify playlist and started humming along to Prateek Kuhad. Anya took out her sketchbook and began doodling the four of them, exaggerated eyes, tangled hair, halos.

Aira didn't cry. Not yet. But her chest felt a little lighter.

They didn't ask for explanations. They didn't offer solutions.

They reminded her who she was, the version of herself that existed before heartbreak, before exhaustion, before she doubted, she could ever belong again.

Friendship is when someone shows up at your door even when you've forgotten how to knock on theirs.

Before leaving that night, Noor scribbled something on a sticky note and stuck it to Aira's mirror:

"You are not hard to love. You are just hard to reach when you build your walls so high. Let us in."

And when Aira finally fell asleep that night, there was a softness in her bones she hadn't felt in weeks.

Chapter 8

There's a kind of silence that doesn't come from peace, but from exhaustion.

Aira knew that silence intimately. She had known it since she was seven, when her world began to stretch and break in ways no child should have to understand. Her home was not made of comfort, but of tension. Her childhood not made of mischief, but of survival.

Some children learn to ride bicycles or tie their shoelaces. Aira learned how to anticipate storms before they arrived, how to lower her gaze, how to breathe without sound, how to disappear in a room full of people. She had become fluent in fear, fluent in pretending.

At school, she was the quiet one. Observant. Withdrawn. She wasn't conventionally pretty then, just a dark-skinned girl with unruly hair and a voice she rarely used. Children can be cruel; her classmates didn't hesitate to remind her of how she didn't fit their narrow molds of beauty. She tried to stay invisible, and somehow even that invited ridicule.

The world outside mocked her appearance. The world inside dismissed her pain.

Her parents never asked how she felt. Her opinions were never invited, her emotions rarely acknowledged. Her house echoed more with instructions than conversations. Her mother, burdened with silence of her own, passed down her repression like an heirloom. Her father, rigid,

authoritarian, treated affection like a luxury they couldn't afford.

But there were moments. Fleeting, fragile moments.

One memory that never healed but was neither recurring .

Aira thinks of that moment

One memory stayed with her like a wound that never fully healed.

She must have been eight. It was Eid morning, supposed to be joyous. Her Friends were all dressed, the house smelled of kheer and fried kebabs. But Aira had spilled a glass of sherbet. A small accident. It soaked the edge of the white tablecloth and dripped onto the floor.

Her father's anger erupted like a storm. He shouted. Loud. Sharp. Unrelenting. Before she could explain, his hand had landed across her face, open-palmed and swift. The room went silent. The adults looked away. Her mother lowered her gaze.

But one person didn't.

Dadi stood up from the other side of the room, her eyes blazing. "Yeh koi tareeka hai? Bacchi hai sirf!"

Her voice cut through the heavy air, fierce and unshaken. That day, Dadi didn't care about what was appropriate. She cared about Aira.

After the guests left, she found Aira hiding under the bed, eyes swollen, cheeks burning.

Dadi knelt, brushed her fingers gently over the bruise, and said, "I know it must be hurting but remember you did nothing wrong"

From that day, Aira loved her like a second mother. Dadi was bold, unapologetic, always dressed in deep shades of maroon or navy, her eyeliner sharp, her tone sharper. She was fire. But with Aira, she was warmth.

In a world where most adults turned away from her pain, Dadi chose to witness it. To stand beside her. And that made all the difference.

But trauma is a patient ghost. It follows you through cities and seasons.

One night, months into her new life, the weight of her past returned, heavy and uninvited. It was after 2 a.m., and her room felt smaller than usual. Her chest was tight. Sleep refused to come. She reached for her phone.

She typed a message to someone she hadn't spoken to in months, him. The boy who once meant something. The one who had seen pieces of her others hadn't. She didn't know why she messaged him. Maybe because he felt familiar. Maybe because silence was unbearable.

"I don't want anything. I was just venting out."

A long pause.

"I was alone and I was crying. So I thought of writing something... about you."

"After that day, I thought we were friends."

Then, finally, his reply:

"Okay. If that helps, you can continue."

The words spilled out before she could stop them.

"You know what happened? My father is abusive. My mother had a heart attack. They blamed me for

everything. And it's only been six months since I moved here, after that hospital incident."

"I take one sleeping pill a day now. Just to keep myself from falling apart. I know it's not healthy."

There was silence on his end. She expected nothing. But then:

"I know. I understand."

Aira felt something shift. Not relief, but recognition.

"I guess that's why I messaged you," she wrote. "I didn't want to lose you. I don't even remember the last time I met myself."

His next message surprised her.

"I don't want to get married. I don't even want relationships anymore. It's not just you. I'm scared of people now."

There it was. Two people, bruised by different battles, reaching out in the dark.

That night, nothing was fixed. But something softened. And sometimes, when you're drowning, softness is enough.

Chapter 9

It was a dusty afternoon. Aira sat on her bed, staring at the chipping paint on the wall, the hum of the cooler doing little to quiet the storm inside her.

Her phone buzzed.

Tanya Calling.

She answered instantly.

“Hello, Miss Chaos,” Tanya said with a soft laugh.

Aira managed a half-smile. “Hello, Miss Stability. I was missing you.”

“Remember that day we bunked classes and went to that Tibetan café near Connaught Place? You wore that ridiculous oversized hoodie and said it was your invisibility cloak.”

Aira laughed, genuinely this time. “And you kept pulling my hood down because you said Delhi deserves to see my face.”

“Because it did,” Tanya said. “You were alive then, Airu. You were happy.”

Aira fell silent.

“I’m not saying you aren’t now,” Tanya added quickly. “But I know... something’s different.”

Aira paused. “Everything feels like it’s collapsing. And I’m just watching it fall apart like I’m not even there.”

“You’ll get through this,” Tanya said. “You’ve always been the girl who found poetry in pain. You’ll write your way out again.”

But before Aira could reply, a voice boomed outside her room.

“Aira! You forgot to submit that form again? Every single time, we have to face embarrassment in front of others because of you!”

Her father's anger punched through the walls. Aira froze.

“I reminded you last week to get it done!” he continued. “Is this what you call being responsible?”

Her mother joined in, softer but still critical. “Don’t you understand? Life doesn’t work like this. You can’t always hide behind mood swings and depression.”

The heat behind their words didn’t stop. Aira clutched the phone tighter.

“I’ll call you later,” she whispered to Tanya, cutting the line.

Her heart pounded. Her breaths grew shallow. The walls shrunk in around her. And then, the sharp drop in her chest. The dizziness. Her fingers trembling uncontrollably.

Panic.

She staggered to the bathroom, gasping for air, pressing her hands against the cold sink. Her father came rushing in, his anger forgotten.

“Aira... sweetheart? Are you okay? What’s happening?” he asked, panic rising in his voice as he held her shoulders.

She couldn't speak. Just shook her head violently, her eyes wide and brimming.

"Breathe, Aira. Just breathe. Look at me." His voice softened, and he hugged her close.

But it didn't help. Not really. His arms were warm, but they couldn't undo the weight of his earlier words. They couldn't erase the loneliness that had taken root inside her.

That night, after everyone went to sleep, Aira sat quietly with the blade she'd found in the drawer.

Just one scratch, she told herself. Just to feel something.

Then another.

Then another.

Four thin, red lines appeared across the upper part of her left hand. Not deep. Not bleeding heavily. But enough.

Enough to make her realize that the pain wasn't working. Because she felt nothing.

No hurt. No sting. No guilt.

Only silence.

It terrified her.

She picked up her phone again. Hands shaking.

Ayaan.

Her brother. The only one she could trust in that moment.

"Ayaan... can you come to my room?" she whispered. "I... I did something. Please don't freak out. Don't tell Mama. Please. She can't know."

He was there in seconds.

He didn't yell. Didn't question.

He just sat down beside her, held her arm with trembling hands, and carefully began applying the antiseptic tube. She flinched a little, more from shock than pain.

"Why, Aira?" he whispered.

"I didn't know what else to do," she said quietly, staring straight ahead. "And I wasn't even scared."

She handed him the phone. "Call Sameera. She'll know what to do."

Sameera and Noor picked up on video call. One look at Aira and both of them broke down.

"What have you done to yourself?" Noor cried. "Aira, what the hell is this?"

Sameera's eyes welled up, but her voice stayed calm. "Ayaan, listen. Don't panic. It's superficial. Just clean the area again. Apply Betadine. Cover it with sterile gauze. Wrap it gently. And make sure she doesn't sleep without talking to someone tonight."

"I'm here," Ayaan said softly, voice shaking.

But Aira?

She just laughed.

A strange, hollow laugh that scared everyone on the call.

"What's funny?" Noor asked, tearfully.

"I didn't feel it," Aira said. "Not one bit. Isn't that funny?"

Sameera looked straight into the screen. “It’s not funny, Aira. It’s a red flag. And we’re going to help you. I promise. But don’t laugh at your pain. Not this one.”

She looked down at the makeshift bandage Ayaan had wrapped.

Then she reached into her closet and pulled out a jacket.

Buttoned it all the way up.

“Don’t tell Ammi, okay?”

“Okay,” Ayaan said, still holding her arm. “But you have to promise me something.”

“What?”

“That this will be the last time.”

She didn’t answer.

Because in that moment, even promises felt like lies.

Chapter 10

Breakups are never cinematic. No poetic rain. No heartfelt goodbyes at the metro station. Just a strange quietness. The kind that lingers between skin and bone. That's what Aira had been sitting with for days.

She had stopped crying. And that wasn't a good sign.

Her phone buzzed with a message from Tanya.

"Wear black. You're coming out tonight."

"Why?" Aira typed back.

"Because we made you an id on a dating app"

Aira blinked.

Pragya dii chimed in on the group chat:

"We chose your most dangerous picture. Full power."

Rhea followed right after:

"You're going on a date tonight. No backing out. We're your emergency contact."

That evening, they dressed her up like she was going to war.

Pragya dii curled her hair with the gentleness of an older sister who knew what heartbreak did to a girl. Tanya made her wear silver hoops. Rhea handed her a dark wine lipstick with a wink. "Tonight you pretend you've never cried over a boy."

Aira looked at herself in the mirror, maroon dress, Kohl-lined eyes, lips painted like rebellion. The reflection still looked tired. But there was life.

Kunal, the date, was... fine. Not bad, not great. Just another boy with slightly sad eyes and a coffee habit.

They met at a quiet café. She was five minutes early; he was ten minutes late. They both apologized at once.

Within twenty minutes, he told her, "I'm leaving the city tomorrow. Got a job in Bangalore."

Aira blinked. "So, this is a goodbye coffee before hello even began?"

He laughed. "Basically."

And strangely, that changed something. With no expectations hanging in the air, she opened up. About the breakup. The loneliness. The disappointment of loving someone who never showed up.

He nodded, shared his own story. About the girl who never looked back. About his emotionally absent father. About the panic that crept in every night before sleep.

It wasn't a date. It was two strangers offering confessions across a coffee table.

"I won't tell anyone," he promised.

"Me neither," she said, holding up her cup like a silent toast.

And that was it.

They left without following each other on Instagram. No "let's keep in touch." Just a strange, fleeting kind of healing.

Outside, Tanya's car pulled up at the café.

Rhea stuck her head out of the window. "Get in, loser, we're going for chai."

They drove to the old metro station tea stall, the one that had seen their best nights and worst decisions.

Tanya handed her a paper cup. "Well?"

Aira took a sip. "He's leaving tomorrow, so I dumped all my heartbreak on him. He did the same."

Pragya dii stared. "You trauma-dumped on a Bumble date?"

"Therapy is expensive," Aira smirked. "He was free."

They all laughed. That loud, free, belly-deep laughter that only comes when your friends are sitting beside you under a fading sky, mocking each other with love.

For the first time in weeks, Aira felt light.

Present Day

The therapist leaned forward gently, eyes kind but alert. "You said you harmed yourself a few days ago. Can you tell me more about that moment?"

Aira stared at the ground. "I didn't do anything extreme. I just... scratched my hand. Once. Then twice. Then again."

"Did it hurt?"

She shook her head. "No. That's what scared me. I didn't feel anything. I didn't even cry."

Silence.

Then the therapist said, “Numbness is the body’s quiet scream. It’s still pain, it just has no sound.”

Aira looked up. Her throat tightened.

“You’re not broken,” the therapist added. “But you are overwhelmed. And when people don’t have safe ways to release emotion, they improvise. Even if it hurts them.”

Aira didn’t reply. But her fingers softened on the fabric of her jacket.

After a moment, the therapist asked, “What’s something that brings you comfort? A safe thing?”

Aira thought for a second. “Books,” she said quietly. “Reading books.”

The therapist smiled and reached for her shelf. She pulled out a gently worn copy of *The Kite Runner* by Khaled Hosseini and placed it in Aira’s hands.

“This one’s special to me,” she said. “It’s about love, guilt, redemption, and forgiveness. I think you might find pieces of yourself in it.”

Aira held the book like it was made of glass.

“Can I really take it?”

“Just return it when you’re ready,” the therapist said. “Or not. Sometimes, stories need to stay.”

Aira didn’t know how to say thank you without crying. So, she just nodded.

And for the first time in a long time, she was looking forward to page one.

Chapter 11

Therapy became a rhythm. Tuesdays and Fridays. Same chair. Same notebook. Same soft voice that held space for her rage and her silence. Aira was getting better. But healing didn't look like peace.

It looked like fire.

It wasn't one moment that made her a feminist.

It was hundreds.

Aira remembered being twelve and pulling her kurta lower because a neighbor uncle stared too long.

She remembered being fifteen and told not to sit like that, without being told what that meant.

It was like her body was a currency, of honor, of shame, of negotiation.

But no one had asked if she wanted to be part of the bargain

Why did her body have to feel shame?

Why did her silence protect others and punish her?

Why were mothers taught to suffer beautifully, and daughters told to follow?

The therapy room began to feel less like a clinic and more like a courtroom, with Aira as the prosecutor of her own upbringing. Her therapist, calm and composed, listened to each argument. And every time Aira spiraled into fury, she would gently ask, "What are you really trying to understand here?"

Aira would fall silent. Sometimes cry. But most days, she would just breathe hard through clenched fists.

At home, the questions didn't stop.

Her mother was often at the receiving end. Not because she was the villain, but because she was the first woman Aira had ever watched surrender.

"Ammi, why did you never fight back?"

"Why did you stay when you were constantly blamed for things that weren't your fault?"

Her mother would try to answer, gently at first, but often her words dissolved into defensiveness. "It was different back then."

But Aira refused to let it go.

"That's not an answer, Ammi. That's an excuse dressed as a memory."

One evening, during a particularly intense conversation about how girls were raised to carry shame like second skin, her mother muttered, "You've changed."

Aira replied, "No, I've just woken up."

The books helped.

In the beginning, she couldn't read more than two pages. Her eyes would skim the words. Her head would buzz. The antidepressants slowed her thoughts to a murmur, and every sentence felt like swimming through syrup. But she kept trying. First for ten minutes, then for half an hour.

Then one morning, everything clicked. Like her brain had remembered how to sit still.

She finished one book in a day.

Then two.

And just like that, she was devouring words again.

But she wasn't reading love stories anymore. No quiet longing, no romantic tropes. She had no appetite for tales that ended with a kiss. She wanted answers. She wanted rage. She wanted other women who had asked the same questions.

Simone de Beauvoir.

Arundhati Roy.

Mona Eltahawy.

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie.

Nayyirah Waheed.

Rupi Kaur.

Aira read about women who burned and still lived.

She read essays about feminism, about sisterhood, about grief, about what it meant to have a body that belonged more to society than to the self.

Some days, she scribbled entire passages into her notebook. Other days, she underlined phrases with trembling fingers:

"The world will ask you to shrink until you disappear and call it grace."

"Your anger is valid."

"We are the daughters of the witches they couldn't burn."

With every page, something within her shifted. Her pain, once aimless and heavy, began to take shape. Like clay, being molded into purpose.

That night, she called Rhea

Her voice crackled through the line, warm and familiar.

"I'm reading again," Aira said, lying on her back, book on her chest, ceiling fan spinning above her.

"You sound brighter," Rhea said. "Like your soul is sitting up straight."

"I'm reading about women who refused to shut up. Women who said no. Women who left."

There was a pause.

"I'm glad," Rhea whispered. "You were always meant to be loud."

Aira smiled. "Do you ever feel like this rage will never end?"

"I hope it doesn't," Rhea replied. "Some of us are born to set fire to the cages our mothers never escaped."

Silence fell again. But it was the soft kind, the one that means two people are breathing in sync even from miles away.

Aira asked, "Why do I feel guilty for asking so many questions?"

"Because they taught you that good girls don't question. But you're not a good girl, Aira. You're an honest one."

That hit like a truth she wasn't ready for.

She didn't reply, but she cried. And Rhea. stayed on the line, quiet and steady, like a shoreline holding the ocean.

By the end of that week, Aira had finished four books. She had written ten pages in her journal. She had fought with her mother again, but this time they ended up crying in the kitchen, hugging with apologies instead of defenses.

Healing wasn't linear. It was layered. Messy. Sometimes it looked like rage. Sometimes like reading quietly under a blanket while the world slept.

But something had changed.

She wasn't just surviving.

She was reclaiming.

And it felt like rebellion.

Chapter 12

Delhi winters used to be beautiful.

She remembered how the light used to hit the balcony of her hostel room at 7 a.m., how the fog would wrap the trees in a kind of stillness. It had always been her favorite season, until it wasn't.

That winter, Aira stopped recognizing herself.

Her father's words rang in her ears like a cruel lullaby, again and again.

"We've spent more on your therapy than your education."

"And look at your marks."

She tried to ignore it. Tried to compartmentalize. But the guilt was heavy, like wet clothes clinging to her body, never drying. She stopped scoring well in tests. She couldn't concentrate. Every time she opened her books, her hands would tremble. And when she couldn't breathe through the panic, she started slipping pills into her mouth, two, sometimes three, just to sleep. Just to shut the thoughts up.

She wasn't trying to die.

But she didn't want to feel alive either.

The attacks came without warning. Sometimes in the library, where she sat for nine, ten hours pretending to study while her brain waged war inside her skull. Sometimes in the metro, surrounded by strangers.

Sometimes in the shower, where her sobs were drowned by the sound of running water.

She began hearing whispers in empty rooms.

Saw shadows move where nothing stood.

The world wasn't ending, but hers was unraveling thread by thread.

Still, she tried to escape it.

She dressed up sometimes, red lips, soft curls, a spritz of perfume, and stepped out like she was okay. Like she still cared.

She'd go café hopping with Tanya or Rhea, trying to trick herself into joy.

She overworked herself in libraries.

She starved herself on bad days, saying food made her sluggish. It wasn't about weight; it was about punishment.

But her friends noticed.

Tanya would bring her chai and say nothing, just sit.

Rhea would force her out for walks, make her laugh over dumb reels.

Pragya di would watch her sleep just to make sure she did.

They were terrified. She was drowning, and they were holding ropes, trying to pull her back up. But Aira was slipping.

"I'm fine," she kept saying.

But everyone knew she wasn't.

Present Day

At Noor's Place

"Do you remember," Aira said, flipping through a dog-eared copy of *The Bell Jar*, "how I stopped eating for an entire day in January? Just because I couldn't solve one mock paper?"

Sameera's face tensed. "I remember Tanya calling me that night."

They were all here, Noor, Anya, and Sameera, cross-legged on the carpet in Noor's living room. There was lemon tea in chipped mugs, open books, and a playlist of old Kaavish songs playing softly in the background.

"That winter was the worst," Aira continued. "But none of you let me be alone. I don't think I ever said thank you."

"You don't have to," Anya said. "You were surviving. That was enough."

They started talking about everything, about pain, about love, about how their bodies had carried shame for years. Sameera, half-studying for her next exam, chimed in between pages.

"You know what I realized while studying psychiatry?" she said. *"Most women don't need fixing. They need unburdening."*

Aira smiled.

She pulled out a stack of books from her bag and scattered them on the floor.

The Bell Jar

Women Who Run with the Wolves

A Room of One's Own

The Second Sex

The Seven Husbands of Evelyn Hugo

The Palace of Illusions

"I'm not reading romance anymore," she said. "I'm reading rebellion. I'm reading women who walked through fire."

Noor raised an eyebrow. "And what have you learned?"

"That the world doesn't hate loud women," Aira said. "It fears them."

They laughed. They talked about everything, men who couldn't handle them, aunties who passed comments about clothes, mothers who taught them strength without realizing it.

"I'm not angry anymore," Aira said softly. "I'm aware."

Noor passed her a biscuit. "That's scarier."

Aira chuckled, biting into it. "Good."

Later that night, as they sat in silence under fairy lights, Aira whispered:

"That winter almost killed me."

"But it didn't," Sameera said.

"No," Aira nodded. "Because I had you all. And because someday... even the winters become books. And you learn how to read yourself back."

Chapter 13

Some mornings, Aira still woke up with the weight of yesterday pressed against her ribs. There were days she didn't move at all. But lately, just lately, she had started to shift. Not dramatically, not beautifully, but gently. A little deeper breath. A small walk on the terrace. The pages of an old notebook opening again.

She had begun to write.

At first, it was in scattered words, lines that made no sense, metaphors that collapsed halfway through. But then it grew. The writing became a pulse. A place to speak without fear. Her pain started to form into something she could see, and in a strange way, control.

Noor noticed first.

"You're not floating anymore," she said one evening, sitting beside her. "You're here."

Aira offered a tired but real smile. "Some days, I still want to disappear," she said quietly. "But...some days, I don't."

Anya and Sameera stayed close too. They didn't always know what to say, but they made space for her to say it. They listened. They waited. They showed up.

One evening, Aira sat cross-legged on her bed, phone pressed to her ear, voice softer than usual.

"Rhea," she whispered.

Rhea's voice on the other end was warm, full of breath and softness. "I was just thinking of you. How are you?"

Aira hesitated. The lump in her throat returned.

"I don't know. I'm writing again," she said. "And it's helping. But I miss you. I miss Delhi. I miss...feeling like someone understood."

Rhea exhaled. "You are understood. Even from here. You're not alone, Aira. And look at you, you're still standing. Do you remember what I used to say?"

Aira chuckled through her tears. "That I'm stronger than I think."

"Exactly," Rhea said. "You're doing the work. You're not broken. You're becoming."

Aira closed her eyes and let that sink in. She hadn't cried in days. But now the tears felt clean. Not grief. Just release.

The next morning, she sat across from her therapist in a quiet, sunlit room. The windows were cracked open. The air smelled like old wood and peppermint.

"You've been doing better," the therapist said gently. "Not perfect. Not linear. But there's movement."

Aira looked down. "Sometimes I feel like I'm faking it."

Her therapist leaned in slightly. "Healing often feels like that at first. Because we're not used to peace. We don't trust ease. But you're showing up, and that's no small thing. You're allowing joy to exist beside grief. That's transformation."

Aira blinked slowly, absorbing the words.

Later that day, she returned to her room and pulled out her favorite notebook. She remembered that quiet café in Delhi, the one with mosaic-tiled tables and soft jazz

playing in the background. The boy across from her had smiled as if he saw only her.

“Do you know you glow when you talk about books?” he had said.

And in that moment, she had felt beautiful. Not because of how she looked, but because someone had seen her light.

She wrote about it now, not with longing, but with gratitude. He had hurt her, yes. But he had also reminded her that she had light.

That night, Sameera left a post-it on her pillow.

“You’re allowed to bloom slowly.”

Aira smiled. She didn’t know what tomorrow would bring, but she knew she’d write through it. And maybe, just maybe, she’d be okay

Chapter 14

The house was filled with tension that morning thick, stifling, unspoken until it finally exploded.

Aira stood near the dining table, arms wrapped around herself, as her father's voice rose, sharp as broken glass.

"You kids don't know the meaning of real problems," he snapped. "You're just making it all up. Depression? Mental illness? It's a fashion statement now, isn't it? When we had nothing, no one gave us the option to collapse."

Aira tried to hold her ground, but her body betrayed her, her breath hitched, her palms went cold.

"You live in comfort, eat good food, sleep in your room with the fan on, and still you cry that your life is hard?" he went on. "It's all just drama, Aira. All a facade."

Something inside her cracked open. It wasn't anger. It was grief, pure, silent grief for being so deeply misunderstood.

She walked away before she could scream. Her vision was already blurred. Her heart was thudding like a warning bell as she rushed into the bathroom and locked the door behind her.

She couldn't breathe. The walls felt too close, her body too heavy. Her chest rose in short, desperate bursts. Her hands trembled as she grabbed the sink for balance.

Make it stop. Please, make it stop.

Then her eyes caught the blade, lying by the edge of the mirror shelf. Small. Harmless looking. Familiar.

She reached for it with trembling fingers.

And then she did it again

One cut. Then another. Then a third.

The sting didn't scare her. The blood didn't shock her.

It just... felt real.

Like the pain finally had a face.

She slid down against the wall, the blade slipping from her hand as dizziness wrapped around her like smoke.

A knock on the door broke the silence.

"Aira," her mother's voice called gently. "Can I come in?"

No reply.

Another knock. Sharper. Then panic.

"Aira, open the door. Please, open it."

The lock clicked. The door opened, and a scream followed.

Everything blurred after that, her mother's frantic voice, hands pressing cloth against her wrist, someone shouting for the car keys.

At the hospital

The lights overhead were too white, too sterile. The bedsheets beneath her felt unfamiliar.

Aira lay quietly, an IV in her hand, gauze wrapped around her wrist.

She didn't cry. She didn't speak. She just stared at the ceiling like it might offer her some kind of answer.

That's when the memory came, sliding in without warning, like it had been waiting for a moment when her guard was down.

Delhi.

She and Tanya had spent the evening wandering through a hidden artist's alley near Hauz Khas, a place alive with poetry and quiet rebellion. That night, the two of them had found themselves sitting at their favorite tea stall outside the metro, clutching warm clay cups as rain drizzled on the pavement.

"You know," Tanya had said, "sometimes I think this is the only kind of healing we need. Late-night chai and no lies."

"No filters," Aira replied softly.

"No parents," Tanya smirked.

"No expectations."

Tanya looked at her then, something knowing in her eyes. "Promise me you won't let this part of you die."

Aira remembered smiling through the ache in her chest. "Only if you promise to remind me when I do."

That night had felt infinite.

Now, lying in the hospital bed, it felt like a dream from another lifetime.

Chapter 15

The IV dripped slowly, syncing with the rhythm of the beeping monitor beside her.

Aira lay in the dim hospital room, pale under white sheets that smelled like Dettol and resignation. Her wrists were bandaged lightly, but it was her chest that ached, the heaviness that no doctor could measure, no scan could explain.

The door creaked open. Her parents stepped in, hesitant, as if entering a stranger's room. Her mother's dupatta was tightly clutched, and her father looked everywhere but at her.

No one spoke at first.

Then her mother broke the silence.

"Why would you do something like this, Aira?"

The question was simple, sharp, and too late.

Aira turned her face toward the window. "You always ask what I did... never why I felt it."

Her father sat down stiffly. "You have everything. A room, food, your education"

"But not you," she said, voice quiet but hard. "Never you."

They both looked startled, as if she had uttered a curse.

"You gave me rules, reputations, and responsibilities.

But you never gave me space.

Or softness.

Or the safety to be... broken.”

Tears pooled in her mother’s eyes, but she didn’t wipe them.

Aira kept going. “You wanted a daughter who could survive anything, So I became her. But it came at a cost. I stopped asking for help. I stopped crying in front of you. And eventually... I stopped feeling like your child.”

Her father opened his mouth, then closed it.

“We didn’t know how to talk like this,” he finally said.

Aira turned to him. “You still don’t. But you could try.”

The silence that followed was not empty, it was trembling, awake, sacred.

Her mother reached for her hand. It was the first time in years.

“I didn’t know how to say I love you,” she whispered. “I thought doing everything for you... was enough.”

“But you never asked me who I was becoming,” Aira replied.

“You wanted me to succeed, not struggle.

But when I did struggle, you called it weakness.”

Her father looked up. “It’s hard, Aira. We didn’t grow up learning this language of feelings.”

She gave a faint smile. “Then let me teach you.”

And for the first time, they didn’t talk about degrees, marksheets, or future plans.

They talked about fear.

About silence.

About how love, when never spoken, becomes a wound.
Her parents didn't have all the right words. But they stayed.
They listened.
And that was a start.
Later, when the nurse dimmed the lights, Aira scribbled in her notebook:
"They taught me not to cry.
I'm teaching them how to listen.
Maybe healing runs both ways."
She had been discharged by afternoon. The wounds were shallow enough to be dressed, but the silence she carried was far deeper.
Back in- her room, she sat on the edge of her bed, legs curled to her chest, when a soft knock came again.
"Aira," her mother called. "Can I come in?"
"Yeah," she said, voice thin.
Her mother entered, carrying a cup of tea, milky, cardamom-laced, just the way she liked it. She placed it gently on the side table and sat beside her, close, but not crowding.
"I've been thinking," her mother said after a long silence, "about what you said last week. About not wanting to prepare for the UPSC anymore."
Aira didn't speak.

"I always thought I was doing what was best. But maybe... I was doing what was easiest to believe. If you want to take another path, we can figure it out. Together."

Something broke in Aira then, not loudly, but like a slow melt. Her lips trembled.

"I don't know what I want," she whispered. "But I want to want something again."

Her mother reached out and touched her wrist, gently, carefully, like it was glass. "That's enough for now."

Present day – Therapy

"I've started writing again," Aira said quietly, not quite meeting her therapist's gaze. "It's still rough. But it's... honest."

The therapist smiled gently. "That's all writing ever needs to be."

"I don't know where it's going."

"You don't have to. Let the words go first. You'll follow."

Later that day while having dinner with Her Father

It was quiet over rice and sabzi. Her father didn't say much, until midway through the meal, when he asked, casually, carefully.

"So... have you thought of what else you might want to do?"

Aira paused. "Something with literature. Maybe mental health. Or writing."

He nodded. "Okay."

No lecture. No opinion. Just a quiet okay.

It wasn't forgiveness. It wasn't understanding.

But it was, finally, a sliver of space.

That Night

Aira curled into bed, her journal on her lap, pen poised above a clean page.

She wrote:

"I lived through the night I didn't want to live through.

I'm still bleeding, yes. But I'm also breathing.

And maybe that means I'm still becoming."

"Maybe I am not lost.

Maybe I am just slowly returning to myself"

Chapter 16

Delhi

It always starts the same way.

Aira is walking back to her hostel, the streets of Delhi soaked in the golden haze of night. Her body moves, but her mind is elsewhere, still caught in the suffocating weight of that final conversation with the therapist.

"₹2000 per session, Aira. That's the standard. I know it's a lot... but healing takes commitment."

Commitment. The word echoes, absurdly ironic. How could she commit to healing when her hands were already so full, of silence, of shame, of secrets too heavy to carry and too dangerous to share?

She couldn't tell her parents. She wouldn't. They'd only pull her back home; lock her into the same walls she had barely escaped. So, she kept walking. Through the gates. Up the stairs. Into the stale darkness of her room.

Three sleeping pills. That was all she had taken to help herself rest.

But by 3 a.m., she is still wide awake, staring at the ceiling fan as it circles like a slow countdown. Everyone else is asleep, the halls echo with stillness.

Her eyes fall on the packet again.

Only three left.

Her hands tremble.

She swallows them all.

She doesn't remember falling asleep, because she never really does. At 6 a.m., she drags herself out of bed, disoriented. She walks through the dawn haze, eyes heavy, body floating. She gets chai from the metro tea stall. The world is quiet. Empty.

Except for the dog.

The same dog that always waits near the metro entrance. His tail wags slowly when he sees her, as if sensing her sadness. She crouches down beside him.

"You're the only one I can talk to," she whispers, running her fingers through his fur. "And you're not even human."

He leans into her hand like he understands.

She sips her chai in silence, tears falling freely now. There's no one to see. No one to stop her.

By the time she gets back to her hostel, it's nearly 8 a.m.

Then it skips. The dream always skips.

She's waking up at noon. Tanya's roommate, Pragya dii, is knocking at the door.

"Aira? Come have some food."

The moment Aira opens her eyes, she knows something is wrong. Her body feels heavy, like it doesn't belong to her. Her stomach churns. Her vision swims.

Tanya walks in, concerned. Aira is crying now, curled up in a corner. And when she tries to stand, she collapses beside the bed and begins to puke violently.

"Aira!" Tanya shouts, running towards her. "What did you do?!"

"I took pills," Aira whispers. "I just wanted to sleep."

Tanya's face goes white. She grabs her phone and starts frantically searching online. "Oh my God, oh my God..."

Pragya dii runs to order food. Tanya holds her until the food comes, but Aira can't even bear to look at it.

That's when Tanya knows this is serious.

"I'm taking you to the hospital."

It's all chaos from there.

Government hospitals refusing to admit her unless parents are informed. Tanya pleading. Aira too dazed to speak, still whispering in half-consciousness:

"Please don't call them. Please... I don't want to go home."

But her pulse is dropping. Her body isn't responding to treatment. Even the three injections given by a private hospital seem useless.

"I have to tell someone," Tanya mutters, hands shaking as she dials.

She calls Rhea.

Rhea panics and reaches the hospital as soon as she could

And Aira is still slipping.

Another skip.

It's midnight.

Aira lies on her bed, eyes half-closed. Pragya di is beside her, stroking her hair gently. Tanya and Rhea just returned from the hospital, a pulse checker in hand.

The beep is slow.

28.

Rhea bursts into tears.

"You can't die like this," she says. "You can't."

Aira, half-delirious, murmurs again, "Please don't send me home."

Rhea wipes her tears and makes the call anyway. Because this time, she knows they might lose her.

She calls her Friends, Noor and Sameera and they panicked, they can't see their friend dying. Noor and Sameera have always treated Aira like their own kid, so they mutually decide to tell her parents.

Then comes the end.

The door opens. Tanya stands in the morning light, her legs shaking.

"Your father's here," she says.

Aira bolts upright, the horror written across her face.

"You said you wouldn't!" she screams.

"You all promised!"

Rhea stands at the foot of the bed, silent. Tanya wipes her face. Pragya stares at the floor.

"You betrayed me," Aira chokes, tears falling freely.

A knock at the door. Her father's voice, gentle but broken:

"Aira, open the door. I'm here now."

And just like that, the world she fought to build in Delhi begins to collapse.

They pack her bags while she sleeps.

When she wakes up, her father is waiting. And Aira knows, with every bone in her body, she is not coming back.

Present Day

Aira wakes up with a gasp, choking on air. Her hands scramble for the water bottle beside her bed.

Her heart is pounding.

The room is dark, quiet and unfamiliar, and yet the weight of Delhi presses down on her chest like it never left.

She drinks deeply. Her hands shake.

It's been months.

But some days she still wakes up like this

From a dream that was never a dream.

From a memory that won't die

Chapter 17

Dadi's room always smelled like coconut oil and prayer incense. Aira didn't know why, but that room felt like a separate world altogether, a pause button in the chaos of her life. When she sat beside Dadi, her head resting on the softness of her lap, the world outside didn't feel so cruel. Dadi would stroke her hair, humming softly, sometimes reciting couplets from old Urdu poetry that made no real sense to Aira, but felt like a lullaby to her bruised heart.

After all the breakdowns, the nights of crying into her pillow, the panic attacks that felt like drowning, Dadi remained her only anchor. She never asked too many questions. Never forced Aira to talk. But her presence was a shelter.

Aira had stopped praying long ago, but Dadi never tried to change her. "God listens to broken hearts more closely," she would say, "and yours has been calling Him for a while now, hasn't it?"

That morning, Aira woke up late and found Dadi waiting with a hot cup of elaichi chai and rusk. No big conversations. Just a smile, a pat on the back, and the slow clinking of chai cups. They sat together on the verandah, wrapped in silence. The kind of silence that doesn't ache.

Later, as the afternoon sun filtered through the jaali window, Aira lay on the bed in Dadi's room, half asleep, half safe. And maybe, just maybe, she felt like a child again, loved without needing to explain herself.

Dadi spoke, her voice raspy but wise, “You’re trying so hard, beta. But don’t forget that blooming is slow. Even pain, if listened to patiently, tells you where it hurts and how to heal.”

Aira didn’t reply. But her eyes welled up, and Dadi just nodded, as if she had already heard every word Aira couldn’t say aloud.

Aira’s Therapy Session

The sunlight fell differently now.

It didn’t pierce. It lingered. Like it was learning to ask permission.

Aira sat in the therapy room again, but this time, she wasn’t alone.

Her parents sat beside her. Awkward, unsure, too quiet. But present.

Dr. Sabarwal smiled gently. “Thank you both for coming. This is a brave thing to do.”

Her father cleared his throat. “We want to... understand her better.”

Aira glanced sideways, surprised by the shift in his tone. It wasn’t cold. It was cautious.

The session unfolded like an old photo album, pages turned gently, carefully.

Her mother spoke of her own childhood. How she was raised to swallow emotion and call it grace.

Her father spoke of shame, how no one in his family ever used the word “depression.”

And Aira listened. For the first time, she saw not just parents, but people.

“You know,” she said softly, “the hardest part wasn’t the silence.

It was realizing that the silence was inherited.”

Dr. Sabarwal nodded. “And now, you’re breaking that chain.”

That night, back home, Aira opened her journal. The words came differently now, not like wounds bleeding, but like rivers clearing.

“I come from a lineage of unsaid things.

Of daughters who bowed and mothers who watched.

But I’m learning to speak, to stay, to survive,
without shame”.

Her poems grew bones.

Weeks later, she stood at a small gathering in a café strung with fairy lights and warmth. She was invited to read at a local open mic night, her first public performance.

She wore her mother’s old dupatta. Her father dropped her off, waiting in the car for her to finish.

She read a piece titled “The House That Didn’t Ask”, a poem about growing up in homes that provided everything but curiosity about how you felt. When she finished, the room was still.

And then, applause.

Not loud, but honest. Like someone had exhaled what they didn't know they were holding.

Later that evening, her mother placed a plate of warm roti and daal in front of her without a word. But she sat next to her, quietly, and said:

“I read your poem. I understood some parts. Some hurt. But I'm proud.”

Aira didn't speak. She just nodded, slowly.

Healing wasn't always in grand gestures. Sometimes it was in soft chapatis. In someone finally sitting beside you, instead of across from you.

She went to sleep that night knowing something had shifted, not fully, not finally, but enough.

Enough to build from.

Chapter 18

The mirror reflected someone she almost didn't recognize, but not in the way that used to make her heart sink.

Aira stood there quietly, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. Her gaze wandered to the faint lines beneath her eyes, the fuller cheeks, the collarbones that once jutted out now softened by weight, by time, by healing. Her skin no longer glowed the way it did when she was running around Delhi's streets, but it carried a lived-in warmth now, a duskier softness that felt more like home.

Her eyes lingered on her own. Dark, like always. But something in their stillness had changed. There was no panic anymore, just the quiet steadiness of someone who had seen the storm and somehow stayed standing.

She whispered to her reflection, "I don't hate you anymore."

There was a time when her voice trembled while speaking to strangers. Aira used to mumble, talk too fast, fill every silence with nervous laughter. She remembered the oversized kurtas, the hurried walks past college seniors, the way she'd pull the sleeves over her hands whenever she felt watched. She remembered the way her heart would thump if anyone called her name too loudly.

The girl who packed for Delhi was unsure of herself, hopeful but hesitant. She had folded dreams into her bag, dreams that smelled like rain on Dilli's pavements and

chai by metro gates. She had imagined freedom would feel like wide-open skies. It didn't. Not immediately.

But the Aira standing here now? She was different.

She didn't walk like she had to prove anything. She didn't carry herself like she needed to shrink to fit. She had scars, yes. Bruises that lived in memories, reminders of everything she had fought through. But there was something about her now, about the way she moved through rooms, that said: I survived. I'm still here.

She traced her jawline in the mirror. Not sharp, not delicate. Just hers.

"My body doesn't exist to be seen," she whispered. "It exists to hold me."

She sat by the window and scribbled in her notebook:

"I am not the girl who left.

I am the woman who came back.

Not whole. Not healed. But blooming anyway."

Later that night they lay back on the terrace floor, shoulder to shoulder, eyes on the night sky. The stars blinked slowly, like they knew how tired each of them were.

"I think I'm finally learning how to live," Aira whispered. "Not just survive."

The others didn't respond. They didn't need to.

In that quiet, something healed.

Noor broke the stillness with a mischievous smile. "Okay, don't kill me, but... I've been talking to someone."

Sameera immediately sat up. “Wait, someone? Is this the guy?”

Anya gasped. “The one we always teased you about? The one from your internship days?”

Noor’s cheeks flushed. “Yes, okay? It’s him. We reconnected on Instagram. He’s... sweet.”

Sameera clapped dramatically. “I knew it! My matchmaking senses were never wrong.”

Anya added with a grin, “Now the real question is, wedding in spring or fall?”

Noor chuckled, then shook her head. “Yes, it’s him. We reconnected on Instagram. He is still sweet. Thoughtful. But... I don’t think I like him in that way anymore.”

There was a pause. Sameera tilted her head. “Wait, what? Then why are you talking?”

Noor smiled softly, eyes on the sky. “Because it reminded me, I still have a choice. I can like someone and not want a relationship. I can be close to someone and still want to choose me right now.”

She sat up, pulling her knees to her chest. “I want to study more. Travel on my own. Get a job that makes me feel alive, not just secure. I want to figure out what I want without having to shrink for someone else’s comfort.”

Anya nodded slowly. “So... no wedding in spring?”

Noor laughed, a real laugh. “No wedding. Just spring.”

They all burst out laughing, the kind that shakes your shoulders and makes your eyes tear up. Aira laughed too, fully, loudly. It felt like sunlight cracking through the chest.

They all burst out laughing, the kind that shakes your shoulders and makes your eyes tear up. Aira laughed too, fully, loudly. It felt like sunlight cracking through the chest.

Noor looked over at her. “I missed this. Us. You. Like this.”

“I missed me like this too,” Aira said quietly.

Later that night, after the chaos of fries and teasing and memories, Aira sat by the window of her room. The wind curled around her like an old friend. Her diary lay open, and she let her pen do the talking.

*“I once carved silence into my skin,
thinking pain would write peace inside me.
But healing is quieter than pain,
it doesn't scream; it stays.
It sits beside you in the dark,
hums lullabies when you can't sleep,
and waits... until you're ready to speak again”.
She paused, fingers lingering above the page.
“I am not the girl I was when I left for Delhi.
I am not the girl who came back either.
I am all versions of her, stitched together, threadbare and
luminous.
And finally, I am learning to love the story”.*

Aira closed her diary, exhaled deeply, and looked up at the moon.

She didn't know what tomorrow held.

But tonight, she felt held.

Chapter 19

There was something sacred about the quiet these days.

It wasn't the silence of loneliness, or the thick stillness that once made her skin crawl with grief. It was the stillness of a room filled with pages, words, and a girl finally learning to breathe again.

Aira sat curled near the open window, a faint breeze fluttering the pages of the book resting on her lap. The mid-morning sun spilled onto her blanket like honey, warming her bare feet. On the table beside her lay a clutter of novels, some bookmarked, others underlined, and one or two that she kept returning to like old love letters. Her world had become quieter, but far richer.

She was reading everything these days, devouring words as though they could stitch something whole within her.

There had been a time when she consumed romance novels like a lifeline. In Delhi, she and Tanya would laugh late into the night about characters that felt more real than their own broken hearts. Back then, love stories gave her escape. The whirlwind emotions, the grand gestures, the poetic ache of longing, all of it offered her a place to hide.

But now, her shelves were lined with stories that carried the weight of generations, of culture, of truth. She found herself immersed in the voices of women who had carved space through sorrow. She found beauty in the unapologetic mess of flawed characters. She read about

war-torn villages, silenced rebellions, forbidden revolutions, and brown women choosing themselves.

Aira's heart no longer beat for fairytales. It beats for truth.

There was Audre Lorde on her nightstand, Toni Morrison by her bedside, Arundhati Roy peeking from her bag. She had recently discovered Ismat Chughtai, and the words felt like fire. Her evenings were now spent sipping chai with the voices of Sylvia Plath and Virginia Woolf echoing in her room.

She was falling in love again, not with a person, but with this self that lingered quietly in corners, observing, becoming.

Internal Monologue

"I used to read to escape. Now I read to return.

To return to the girl I buried beneath years of pleasing.

To return to questions that don't demand answers.

To return to strength that doesn't roar, but pulses."

"Books don't save me, I save myself.

But they hand me the tools.

One page at a time."

Later that afternoon, she texted Noor and Anya that she'd be coming for their weekend chai session.

When she reached Noor's terrace, the table was already set with samosas and laughter. Sameera was teasing Noor mercilessly, waving her phone in the air.

“Oh ho, someone’s been texting their ‘mister special’ again,” Sameera smirked dramatically.

Noor rolled her eyes “Come’ on; I’ve already told you he’s just a friend. That’s all there is to it. I don’t know what the future holds, but you know how focused I am right now. I want to build something real for myself. My career, exposure, learning new things, that’s what matters to me.”

There was a pause, a nod of understanding around the table.

Then Anya broke the silence with a grin. “Okay, enough serious talk. Let’s cleanse our souls. Everyone name the ugliest crush they’ve ever had. No skipping

Sameera clapped her hands. “Yesss. Let the humiliation begin.”

Anya started, “Mine was this guy in 7th who wore orange socks every single day and once said his favorite movie was Chhota Bheem. I was obsessed with him for a month.”

They all burst out laughing.

Noor shook her head, “I had a crush on a guy in tuition just because he used scented erasers. That was the entire reason.”

Sameera howled, “Oh my God, I liked a guy whose voice cracked every two seconds. It was like being serenaded by a squeaky chair.”

Aira laughed, quietly but fully. She didn’t add a name, but in her mind, she recalled someone too. The innocence of it. The silliness. How healing it felt to laugh like this.

In that circle of chatter, Aira didn't say much. She simply listened, heart full, spirit grounded.

Monologue

"I am not who I was.

Not the girl who begged books to save her,

Not the one who wrote her pain in silence.

I am the woman who reads to remember.

Who highlights truths in margins,

Who breathes with stories that mirror her.

The woman who is learning that becoming,

is also a kind of return."

Chapter 20

There are mornings when Aira forgets she was ever broken.

They don't come often. But when they do, they arrive quietly, like the first sip of hot chai after hours of winter rain. That morning, she woke up before the sun. Her window was ajar, and the breeze smelled of wet leaves and old memories. She turned on the lamp beside her bed, reached for her journal, and began to write.

"I feel different these days.

Like I'm finally meeting the woman I used to pray I'd become."

There was something fierce and tender about this version of her. She didn't flinch when someone raised their voice anymore. She didn't panic when her days had no structure. She was learning, slowly, to trust herself.

That afternoon, her phone rang.

Rhea.

It had been a while since they had spoken properly. Life had been busy, Rhea had moved cities for work, and Aira had been drowning in books and quiet mornings. But the moment she heard Rhea's voice, something in her steadied.

"I've been thinking about us," Rhea said. "The way we've held ourselves up all these years. All the things we weren't told growing up."

Aira smiled softly. “Like how feminism isn’t about shouting louder, but about surviving softer?”

“Yes,” Rhea chuckled. “And how our battles are quieter. Lonelier, even.”

Their conversation drifted from gender and womanhood to past wounds and private triumphs. They spoke of consent, of freedom, of how their mothers survived silence and how they were learning to break it. Rhea was always the mirror Aira needed, slightly cracked, but deeply honest.

“I miss you,” Rhea said gently.

“I miss you too. And I’m trying, Rhea. I really am.”

That evening, Aira found herself flipping through a dusty notebook filled with old letters and pressed flowers. A photograph slipped out, a picture from a day in Delhi, at that café where laughter had once lived.

She remembered the boy, the one who held her hand with such reverence, as if it were something sacred. Their love hadn’t ended with fireworks or cruelty. It had just... slipped away. But there had been warmth. There had been days where she believed she could build a life with someone.

That version of her had loved with everything she had.

Now, she was learning to love without losing herself.

Later that night, she sat at her desk, staring at her laptop screen. She’d bookmarked a dozen websites, literature programs, writing fellowships, short-term courses in comparative literature and feminist theory. Her heart raced, but this time, it wasn’t fear.

It was hope.

For the first time in months, Aira knew what she wanted. Literature had not just healed her; it had anchored her. She wanted to study it, breathe it, live inside its folds. UPSC still lingered in a corner of her mind, but it no longer consumed her. She would try. But this, this was her calling.

Monologue

“The girl who once walked into therapy with shaking hands,

now opens books like doorways.

The woman she’s becoming doesn’t beg the world to understand her,

she writes her own understanding.

She still breaks sometimes, but now she writes about the cracks.

And somewhere between deadlines and diaries,

between chai breaks and classic novels,

she finds it —

a flicker,

a direction,

a light she thinks she deserves.”

Chapter 21

Shahana Aunty (Sameera's mother) walked in that afternoon with the kind of energy only she could carry, loud, loving, and slightly chaotic. Her arms were full, not just with her signature floral tote bag, but with a bundle of books and a pink box from Aira's favorite café

"I saw these and thought of you," she said, placing the books one by one on Aira's bed. "I know your kind of stories."

There it was, *The Pearl That Broke Its Shell* by Nadia Hashimi, *The Forty Rules of Love* by Elif Shafak, *A Thousand Splendid Suns* by Khaled Hosseini, and a few more novels stacked neatly like offerings. The pink box held her favorite pastries, the chocolate tart she always ordered on hard days and the almond croissant that reminded her of Delhi mornings.

Aira looked at her, a woman of quiet defiance and deeply hidden tenderness, and felt something loosen in her chest. "You remembered," she whispered.

"Of course, I did," she said, brushing Aira's hair back gently. "You forget how seen you are."

She stacked the book aside, picked up her journal, and wrote softly:

"Somewhere between love stories and liberation, I grew up."

She closed her journal and leaned back against the cool wall, her gaze trailing across the room, a small space now

filled with dog-eared books, bookmarked essays, and a quiet steadiness. The girl who once clung to love stories to feel seen was now learning to see herself through stories of revolution, of resilience, of radical tenderness.

Aira had always been... different.

She remembered being twelve, maybe younger, and telling her Dadi that she didn't think she would ever get married. The way her Dadi's eyes had softened, unlike the rest of her family's usual panic. She remembered whispering once, "I think I'll adopt a girl one day. I just want to give someone a life I never had." And Dadi had nodded, as if saying, "You will."

But the rest of her world had never understood that. Independence was romantic until it threatened tradition. And Aira? Aira had always been threatening in that quiet way, not by rebellion, but by simply refusing to bend.

The books she was reading now felt like companions on that journey, stories that reminded her she wasn't alone in her contradictions. Women who didn't want husbands. Women who chose art. Women who chose themselves.

Aira made chai and sat by the window, a worn copy of *Women Who Run With the Wolves* on her lap, her hair tied in a messy bun, eyes catching the last golden light of the evening.

She thought about the women in her family, some loud, some silent. How most of them carried their lives like folded saris, tucked tightly in neat corners. And how she... she had always spilled.

There was poetry in that mess. In her refusal to fit.

The door creaked open without a knock, classic Sameera.

“Tumhare ghar ka darwaza kabhi band nahi hota kya?” she teased, tossing her tote bag on the couch and walking straight into the kitchen. “I could be a burglar, you know.”

Noor followed behind, dramatically sniffing the air. “I smell chai. Which means Aira is in one of her poetic moods again.”

Anya closed the door gently and grinned, “Good. I was hoping for poetry. And maybe biscuits.”

Within minutes, the house filled with overlapping voices, the clinking of chai cups, and the quiet ease of sisterhood. These weren’t just Friends, they were chosen people. The ones who had held Aira through breakdowns, who had sat beside her in silence when words failed, who had made her laugh when her world was otherwise falling apart.

“So,” Anya said, raising her brows, “Are we going to ignore the fact that Sameera has a new crush?”

Sameera groaned and buried her face in the cushion. “I hate all of you.”

Noor leaned in, laughing. “Tell us! Who is he?”

“Just someone from the library,” Sameera muttered. “He’s smart. And kind of cute. And he helped me find that obscure Urdu poetry book last week.”

Aira blinked. “Wait, you mean Hasan? The guy with the round glasses and the quiet voice?”

Sameera nodded shyly.

“Oh no,” Anya gasped dramatically. “He is not worthy.”

“Literally,” Noor added, holding her cup like a microphone. “That man probably reads Faiz for breakfast and writes existential poetry for dinner.”

“He’s sweet though,” Sameera insisted. “And he always puts the books back neatly. That’s rare.”

Aira smiled. “It’s cute. You like quiet boys with tragic eyes.”

“Well, don’t we all?” Anya said with a wink.

They burst into laughter, the kind that fills all the lonely spaces. The kind that stays.

As the night wound down and laughter dissolved into the background hum of an old Bollywood song playing softly on the speaker, Aira leaned against the windowsill, staring at the streetlamps outside, dim pools of golden light flickering like forgotten memories.

The voices of her Friends melted into a comforting hush behind her. Aira let herself exhale, tracing the fog on the window glass with her fingertip.

And then, without meaning to, she remembered him.

The way he had looked at her like she was poetry he hadn’t yet finished reading.

The way she had offered her heart, unwrapped, unguarded.

The way she had loved, so entirely, so recklessly.

How had a girl like her, the one who never wanted to get married, never dreamed of a wedding, and always imagined adopting a daughter alone, fallen so deeply?

Maybe it wasn’t about wanting it.

Maybe it was just that love, real, raw love, doesn’t ask for permission. It doesn’t follow blueprints. It simply arrives.

In silence.

In chaos.

In longing.

In loss.

And when it leaves, it doesn't leave empty-handed.

It takes pieces of you, yes, but it also leaves behind something.

A lesson.

A softness.

A scar that hums like a song.

"Love doesn't knock,

It seeps in through the cracks.

And when it's gone,

You're never quite who you were before.

But sometimes... that's the point."

Aira wiped the tears with her sleeve and turned back to her Friends, ready to return to the warmth.

But somewhere deep inside her, under the stories, under the pain, a quiet voice whispered:

"You are still learning to love yourself the way you once loved someone else.

And maybe,

That too,

Is a kind of love story".

Chapter 22

The rains had come early this year.

Aira sat by the window, watching as drops traced chaotic patterns on the glass. The clouds outside were thick and low, like memories trying to settle. It was one of those rare afternoons where the outside world mirrored her insides, quiet, swollen with thought, waiting to pour.

Lately, something inside her had been shifting.

It wasn't loud like heartbreak or sudden like joy. It was subtle, like dust slowly settling after a long storm. She wasn't sure what to call it, but she knew it had something to do with how she held books now, the way her fingers lingered on the pages as though they were extensions of her own soul.

She had fallen in love with herself again but not the way she used to.

She has stopped taking therapy because her parents thought she didn't need it anymore and Aira was learning to fight with this all by herself and somewhere she knew that something had changed with her parents. They are not fully understanding but they were trying and that was more than enough for now.

That evening, Aira sat with her journal open, pages curled at the edges from constant touch. Her handwriting had grown smaller lately, tighter, more deliberate. As if every word needed to be chosen, earned.

"I used to love women who fell in love with men."

“Now I love women who fall in love with freedom.”

“Maybe I’m becoming one of them.”

The bell rang unexpectedly.

Noor, Sameera, and Anya had shown up, soaked from the rain, holding plastic bags of snacks and chai cups that were already going cold.

They plopped onto Aira’s bed like they owned it. Anya immediately began towel-drying her hair with a dramatic sigh. Sameera opened a packet of chips, already crunching like it was a stress response.

Aira raised an eyebrow. “Rough day?”

“You have no idea,” Sameera muttered. “Guess who I ran into today?”

Noor perked up. “Oh no. Don’t tell me it was him.”

Anya gasped theatrically. “The crush?”

Sameera groaned, already regretting she said anything. “It wasn’t that big a deal.”

Aira grinned. “So, what happened? Did he finally notice the eyeliner you only put on when he’s around?”

“Oh, shut up,” Sameera laughed, throwing a cushion at her. “He just asked for directions. That’s it. Nothing romantic. Nothing dramatic. And yet my heart did the drum solo from *Kabhi Khushi Kabhi Gham*.”

They burst into laughter.

Noor smirked. “Honestly, I still don’t get the hype. He’s cute, sure, but he gives ‘emotionally unavailable boy who writes sad poetry and never texts back’ energy.”

Anya nodded. “Exactly! He’s the kind of guy who’d break your heart and then send you a playlist about it.”

Aira added with mock sincerity, “We love a man who ruins your life aesthetically.”

Sameera rolled her eyes. “Come on, you, guys. He’s not that bad! He’s going to be an engineer soon. He’s starting his own startup too! Plus, he’s got a good family. And hello, I’m going to be a doctor. Doctor and engineer is a power combo. Imagine us showing up to weddings, careers sorted, parents crying happy tears.”

They all groaned and laughed again.

“Manifesting your shaadi with your crush through career alignment,” Anya teased.

“Exactly,” Sameera said proudly, popping another chip into her mouth.

It was warm, loud, full of old inside jokes and new stories. And as they moved from playful roasting to random topics, the worst movies they cried over, their dream cities, the joy of growing older and more unapologetic, Aira felt something loosen inside her

She realized something: healing doesn’t always come in silence. Sometimes, it comes in giggles. In chai cups passed around. In late-night banter about crushes. In the presence of those who never needed an explanation to hold space for you.

Later that night, after the girls had left and the house was once again still, Aira returned to her room.

She lit a candle on her desk, sandalwood, her favorite, and opened a book she had just begun: *Women Who Run* with

the Wolves. Her fingers traced a line on the page, but she wasn't reading anymore.

Instead, she stared out the window.

She thought of the woman she was becoming. Someone who cried without shame, loved books more than people, and saw softness not as weakness but as resistance.

She thought of all the versions of herself she had shed to arrive here.

"There was a girl who only wanted to feel less broken."

"Now she wants to feel fully alive."

And maybe, just maybe... that was more than enough.

Chapter 23

There was something quietly powerful about the way Aira now held her mornings. She'd wake up, light stretching across her desk scattered with books, Woolf, Lahiri, Tagore, Morrison, Rushdie. Her journal lay open, pages filled with pressed petals, scribbled verses, and dreams of a future she was finally willing to believe in.

She had started preparing for her Master's entrance in JNU, English Literature. A university she once walked past in awe, now becoming a beacon of her becoming. With every underline and margin note, with every poem recited under her breath, she was rebuilding herself, this time with words as bricks and meaning as mortar.

Her phone buzzed one slow afternoon. Tanya.

"Hey," Aira smiled, already warmed by the name.

"Busy being a nerd?" Tanya teased.

Aira laughed, curling up near the window. The clouds outside looked heavy, like they might finally cry.

"You remember our old routine?" Tanya asked, and Aira already knew what she meant.

The memory was vivid. Delhi. Their little escape after long days.

Making chai in chipped mugs, sitting near the windowsill, playing Kaavish on loop,

Especially Faasle.

"Hue faasley jhoote sisiley....."

The rain would patter outside like a soft rhythm to their silence. Cigarettes half-lit. The city humming its own grief. That moment wasn't just comfort, it was refuge.

"Faasle still makes me ache," Aira whispered. "But it also reminds me I lived."

Tanya was quiet on the other end. Then softly said, "You did. And you're still living, love. That's the bravest part."

Aira nodded, eyes glistening.

Later that week, she met with her Friends. Noor brought homemade brownies, Anya had a whole playlist of their childhood songs, and Sameera had come armed with sarcastic remarks and open arms.

They sat in a warm circle, cross-legged on a carpet, talking about life, heartbreak, growth, ambition, and everything in between.

Sameera mentioned a guy she'd started talking to, playfully blushing.

"Oh, so finally the prophecy is fulfilling!" Noor teased.

"We all saw this coming years ago!" Anya added.

Aira just smiled, heart full at the sight of love that didn't hurt.

They weren't the same girls they used to be. But they had held each other through change, and now, they were watching one another bloom.

That night, Aira stayed up rereading passages from her literature books. The words felt different now, not just academic, but intimate.

She scribbled in her journal:

"I used to think my pain would bury me,
but now I know,
it was just soil,
and I was always meant to grow."

That night, after her Friends had left and the house had fallen into its quiet rhythm, Aira sat by her study table, flipping through pages of her prep books. But her eyes wandered to the Polaroids pinned to her wall, self-taken portraits from recent days. In some, she wore simple cotton suits with jhumkas, in others, long skirts with loose shirts and kohl-smudged eyes. She had begun to dress again, not for others, but for herself.

She had started clicking pictures again too. Capturing light, her bookshelf, her teacup with swirls of steam, her shadow cast against her curtain. There was healing in the small rituals of reclaiming beauty.

More quietly, more courageously, she had also started posting again. Sharing her writing, bit by bit. With Rhea's constant nudging and gentle bullying, Aira finally opened a poetry page on Instagram.

"Just your words, no filters," Rhea had said. "Let them see what I already know, you're brilliant."

And people did start seeing. Aira's inbox was no longer a place of silence. Readers wrote in, saying her words felt like home, like grief understood, like a breath they had been waiting to exhale.

Aira wasn't entirely healed. She knew healing wasn't a finish line. But she was becoming someone she liked. Someone softer, braver, and wildly curious.

Before bed, she lit a small candle, played Faasle one more time, and opened her journal.

“Love is never planned.

It arrives without knocking.

It breaks, it teaches,

And sometimes it leaves.

But it always leaves you a little more whole than you were before”.

Chapter 24

The days no longer felt like battles. They flowed, sometimes slow, sometimes quiet, but not hostile. Aira found herself breathing a little easier. Not because everything was perfect, but because she had stopped expecting perfection. She had begun to accept, her pace, her pauses, and the people who loved her in their flawed, complicated ways.

Her parents were two of them.

They still asked her the wrong questions sometimes, still looked at her phone screen longer than necessary, still didn't quite understand what "healing" meant. But something had changed. Or maybe she had. Maybe she no longer needed them to understand everything, just enough.

Dinner was warm. Simple sabzi, roti, a bowl of dal. Her father told a joke from the newspaper, and her mother chuckled softly, adjusting her dupatta as she passed her the bowl of rice.

Aira listened, smiled. She noticed the silver strands in her mother's braid, the soft tremble in her father's hand as he poured water into a glass. These were the same people she had once blamed for everything. Now, she saw the child in them too, scared, tired, trying.

"Abbu" she said gently as they washed the dishes together, "you drive too fast."

"And you worry too much," he replied with a wink.

It wasn't much, but it was everything.

Later that night, Aira slipped into her bed, pulling the light quilt over her legs. She had washed her face with rose water, applied a hint of moisturizer, tied her hair up lazily. She looked at herself in the mirror, not with scrutiny, not with judgement. Just looking. Just being.

She picked up *A House Without Windows*, a book she had been meaning to reread. Its delicate prose calmed her. The story of Zeba, the girl who left the human world to find a house without walls, resonated with something deep inside her. She understood the longing for escape. And the deeper longing to find peace within.

She put her headphones on, scrolling through her music library. Her thumb paused at one song, *Tere Pyar Mein* by Kaavish.

The chords began, gentle and familiar.

Aira closed her eyes.

She wasn't the girl she used to be. She no longer raged at the world or begged it to see her pain. She wrote instead. She dressed how she liked. She had started posting pictures again, captioned with verses of her poetry. The poetry page Rhea had convinced her to create was slowly growing, each word an echo of her strength, each comment a gentle reminder that she wasn't alone.

She turned the page. A breeze danced through the open window, carrying the scent of night jasmine and distant monsoon clouds.

Somewhere between the rustle of pages and the softness of Kaavish's melody, she felt it:

Not joy exactly, but peace. And in peace, she found something better than happiness, she found herself.

Chapter 25

Aira sat by the window of her room, curled in a loose cotton kurta, her phone buzzing with back-to-back messages on the Friends' WhatsApp group:

Noor: Girls. Call. Now. Emergency. Like, real emergency.

Sameera: Are you pregnant or something?

Anya: I'm grabbing popcorn anyway.

Aira: I'm calling in 2 mins. Let me make chai.

By the time Aira joined the call, Noor had already launched into a frenzied rant.

"A rishta has come for me," she said, eyes wide, tone a perfect blend of panic and disbelief. "Like a proper rishta. With biodata and stuff. My mom is already polishing silverware!"

The screen split into four, each friend's face mirroring different degrees of mischief and concern.

Aira grinned, reaching for mugs. "Is this about like a real rishta"

Noor groaned. "Yes! A rishta. A full-on biodata, salary slips, and a polite boy with a car who works in Dubai. Apparently, the jackpot."

Sameera raised an eyebrow. "You don't look thrilled."

"I'm not," Noor said firmly. "I don't want this. I want to finish my degree, get a solid job, maybe move to a new city. I want to build something for myself first. Explore."

Earn. Learn. I want to get lost in an unfamiliar street and find my way back alone. That's what I want right now."

Anya hummed in agreement. "Honestly, good for you."

"I'm not even saying I'll never get married," Noor added. "But even if the most amazing guy walked through the door right now, I wouldn't say yes. Because it's not about him. It's about me. And what I want for my life."

There was a pause.

Sameera suddenly clutched a cushion to her chest, trying not to smile.

"What?" Aira narrowed her eyes. "Why do you look like that?"

"I have news too," Sameera said with mock innocence.

Noor rolled her eyes. "Please don't say you're getting married."

Sameera giggled. "Not yet. But I did talk to him today."

Aira gasped. "Wait. Hasan?"

Sameera beamed.

"Oh God," Anya groaned, "don't tell me you're in love with Mr. Startup Aspirant again."

"Hey, don't hate," Sameera said, putting her hands on her face. He was telling me about this app he wants to build for community health outreach. Honestly, it was cute."

"You're literally romanticizing his pitch deck," Anya muttered.

Sameera laughed. "I'm just saying! He's sweet. Has a good family. He listens. And I'm going to be a doctor, so... doctor and engineer? It's giving power couple energy."

Noor snorted. "You're giving delulu energy."

"I take that as a compliment," Sameera said. "He's not as bad as you guys think. He even asked how your internship was going, Aira."

Aira blinked. "Wait, he remembers that?"

Sameera nodded proudly. "He remembers everything."

The teasing resumed, the room once again filled with their signature chaos, old inside jokes, dramatic impressions, nostalgic school memories.

Aira sipped her chai and took in the scene: Noor's fierce fire, Sameera's bubbly confession, Anya's sarcasm, and the messy, beautiful love they all carried for each other.

Healing didn't always arrive in the form of solitude or breakthroughs.

Sometimes, it arrived in the form of presence ,

Of four girls on a shared bed,

A bag of chips between them,

A single confession turning into a night of laughter.

And stories of future cities they'd one day roam.

The night Noor's rishta became the unofficial dinner, table agenda. Her chachi was in full swing, discussing complexion, salary, family background. Noor's father was mostly quiet, nodding to whatever Noor's mother concluded.

It was all familiar and suffocating.

Until Aira intervened.

“Can we all take a breath and ask Noor what she wants?” she asked calmly.

The table froze. Aira rarely raised her voice, but this was not that version of her anymore. She had read enough, unlearned enough, healed enough to speak.

“She’s the one who will live this life, not you, not me. Consent is not just for intimacy; it’s for decisions too. Her marriage, her career, her freedom, it’s hers.”

Sameera nudged Anya under the table, trying not to grin. Noor looked down, biting a smile.

“Aira, don’t make this a feminist issue,” her uncle mumbled.

“But it is,” she said. *“Feminism isn’t about fighting men. It’s about creating room for women to choose. If Noor wants to marry, good. If she doesn’t, also good. But don’t make her feel guilty for wanting time or clarity.”*

There was silence, but a thoughtful one.

Later that night, Aira sat by her desk, reflecting. How strange and beautiful it was, to have women in her life who showed up. Who held space. Who reminded her that love, whether romantic or platonic, was never about guarantees. It was about staying.

She opened her journal and wrote:

“Love isn’t a map. It’s a compass.

It doesn’t promise straight lines,

But it always points you home.”
And maybe, just maybe,
Home was never a place.
It was a room full of laughing Friends,
Warm chai, and late-night confessions”

Chapter 26

The rain felt soft, like a whisper against the windows of the bookstore café. Aira sat near the corner, curled into a chair by the window, her fingertips brushing over the spine of a book she wasn't really reading. The smell of old pages, fresh brew, and petrichor mixed into a strange comfort.

Outside, the city wore grey like a memory.

Inside, her heart did too.

She had come here to escape the noise in her head, the lingering doubts, the low hum of solitude, the ache that still lived in the unspoken places. She hadn't expected anything today. Least of all him.

He walked in like time hadn't passed. Same walk. Same jacket. The kind of presence that didn't need permission to haunt.

And when his eyes met hers, the world stilled.

"Aira?"

Her name on his tongue sounded exactly like it used to. Heavy. Familiar. Unsettling.

Aira's breath caught for half a second. She nodded slowly, her expression unreadable, the years between them trembling in the space of a single second. He walked over. "I wasn't expecting to see you here."

"Neither was I," she said quietly, closing the book.

The silence that followed wasn't awkward. It was aching. Full. They both knew it wasn't just this room they were sitting in. The past. Everything unsaid.

They ended up at the same table. Two coffees between them. No sugar. Just words.

"How have you been?" he asked, carefully.

"Alive," she replied.

And that was the truth.

He looked down. "I never thought I'd lose you like that."

Aira's voice softened. "I never thought I'd survive it."

He flinched a little. "Do you still write?"

"I do. More now." She paused. "Most of it isn't about you anymore."

A small smile. "That's good."

But the truth was, parts of her still bled when it rained. Especially with Kaavish playing in the background. Especially in cafés where they once sat like this, hands brushing beneath wooden tables, the scent of coffee tangled with longing.

"You remember our first date?" he said.

"The tiny café near Hauz Khas. You were late."

"You forgave me too quickly."

"I always did."

Aira looked out the window. She could almost see their past versions across the street, laughing, lost, younger.

"But I don't anymore," she added.

This time, her voice didn't tremble.

He nodded. "I deserved that."

She watched him for a moment, not the boy she loved, but the man he had become. And strangely, she no longer needed him to explain why he left, or why it broke her the way it did. Some pain just needed to be felt. Not fixed.

There was something freeing about not needing answers anymore.

They spoke a little longer, about books, cities, what-ifs. But not love. Not really.

When they stood to leave, he reached out gently. "I hope you find someone who... sees you."

"I already do," Aira said. "Me."

She stepped out into the rain without looking back.

That night, Aira sat by her window, pen in hand, tea in the other lost in the memories of past

Flashback

The Delhi air that evening was thick, not just with smoke and winter, but with a strange kind of anticipation. Aira stepped out of her hostel wearing that one white coloured shirt she always felt beautiful in. She wasn't nervous. Not exactly. But something in her chest fluttered like pages caught in the wind.

He had texted her earlier

"Come over. I've made pasta. Don't bring anything, just your laughter."

She rolled her eyes at the cheesiness. But smiled anyway.

His flat was dimly lit. One lamp, some fairy lights above the curtain rod. The smell of burnt oregano wafted from the kitchen. “It’s not Michelin-starred,” he laughed, “but it’s edible.”

They ate on the floor, plates resting on a textbook. Some song by Prateek Kuhad played low in the background. He handed her a spoon, and when their fingers brushed, Aira didn’t flinch. Not this time.

It wasn’t like a movie.

No dramatic music. No thunderstorm.

Just a quiet conversation about poetry and God, and then, his hand gently tucking her hair behind her ear.

“Can I kiss you?” he asked.

She nodded. It was a simple thing, the kiss. Soft. Warm. Slow. Like being trusted for the first time.

And then, the silence between two breaths broke.

They didn’t rush. His hand rested on the side of her face, thumb tracing her cheek. Her heartbeat felt like a metronome. He didn’t demand her body, he waited. Asked again. And when she said yes, it wasn’t because she felt she had to.

It was because she wanted to trust someone.

To feel wanted and not used.

To feel like a girl who could say yes on her terms.

That night wasn’t about that only. It was about surrender, of pain, of fear, of everything she’d been holding in her ribcage for far too long.

But love didn’t stay. He didn’t either.

Months later, when things fell apart, quietly, without blame, without closure, those same touches began to feel like bruises. The memory of his fingers on her skin felt like guilt. His laughter echoed in her mind like a betrayal.

She told Rhea once,

“You know how strange it is to miss someone and also feel sick remembering them?”

Rhea just nodded. No answers. Just understanding.

That night, back in the present, Aira sat by the window of her hometown room. The moonlight filtered through the half-drawn curtain, touching the poem she had just written.

“He asked with softness, and I said yes.

Not because I loved him, but because I was tired of being untouched.

And when he left, he took nothing with him.

Except every version of me that believed it was safe to open the door”.

She folded the paper slowly. Tucked it inside her diary.

There was pain, yes. But there was also pride.

Because she had survived.

And she had turned that night, once tender, now a wound, into art.

Chapter 27

Noor's voice on the phone was breaking. "Can you come? Sameera and Anya are already here," she said.

That was all Aira needed. No questions, no hesitations.

By the time she reached Noor's home, the atmosphere was thick with tension and unshed tears. Sameera sat curled up in the corner of the couch, Anya next to her, legs crossed, nervously picking at the thread of a cushion. Noor was pacing, her dupatta clenched tightly in her fist like a lifeline. As soon as she saw Aira, she rushed into her arms and broke down.

"They're forcing me to say yes," Noor sobbed. "This new guy, this Rishta, they say he's from a good family. And I don't know what to do, Aira. I can't even think"

Aira sat her down gently. "Do you want to say yes?"

Noor shook her head, voice trembling. "I don't want to get married. Not right now. I want to work, I want to move to a new city, explore who I am... I want to build something before I become someone's wife."

"Then say that" Anya said softly.

Noor looked down. "I'm scared. What if they think I'm rejecting their love? What if they think I'm selfish, or ungrateful? What if they never see me the same way again?"

Sameera groaned. "This is so messed up. Why do they always rush us? Like we're just boxes on a checklist they want to tick off before they die."

There was silence, heavy and uncomfortable.

And then Aira spoke, quiet, but firm. “Because we’re women. And our freedom is tied to everyone’s honour but our own.”

All three turned to her. There was something in her voice that felt ancient, bruised, and wise.

“I’ve been thinking about this a lot,” Aira continued. “We grow up with stories about dreams and wings, but the moment we try to fly, someone ties our flight to family reputation, to traditions we didn’t ask to inherit. The minute we say no, we become rebellious. The minute we ask for time, we become ungrateful.”

She paused, and her voice softened. “I saw someone recently. From my past. He was the boy I thought I’d build a life with once.”

Sameera blinked, surprised. “You met him?”

Aira nodded. “Unexpectedly. It was a moment I didn’t know I needed. We talked. Not long, but enough. I realized I wasn’t angry anymore. Just... older. Softer. I told him I didn’t blame him, not fully. And then I walked away.”

Anya reached out and squeezed her hand. “That’s huge.”

“I thought closure needed answers,” Aira said with a faint smile. “Turns out, sometimes it just needs presence and a quiet goodbye.”

Noor looked up, her eyes still damp but clearer. “I wish I had the courage to say no out loud. Not just in my head. I wish they could see that I’m not trying to rebel, I’m just trying to live the life I want. That I can love them and still want a different path.”

Aira reached over and held her hand. “You can. And you’re allowed to.”

The room fell silent again, but this time it wasn’t heavy. It was thoughtful.

Anya got up to make chai. Sameera opened the windows. The friend reunion had started with tears, but now it pulsed with warmth and quiet strength.

As Anya clanked cups in the kitchen, Sameera grinned and sat cross-legged, eyes gleaming. “Okay wait, I have to tell you all something now that we’ve emotionally survived round one.”

Noor wiped her eyes. “What?”

Sameera tried to sound casual, but her blush betrayed her. “So... you all remember him, right, the one I had a massive crush on?”

Aira raised an eyebrow. “Don’t tell me he texted you.”

Sameera squealed. “Not just texted! One of our mutuals told me he likes me, has liked me for a while, and I didn’t believe it. But guess what? He’s been texting me for the past week. Like full conversations. He asked me what my dream city is. WHO DOES THAT?”

Anya peeked in from the kitchen. “This calls for extra chai.”

Noor chuckled through her sniffles. “Wait, this is serious. Sameera might beat all of us to the wedding.”

Sameera waved them off dramatically. “Please, I’m just here for soft boys and existential chats. But like... this one feels different.”

Aira smiled. “Maybe that’s how it starts.”

They didn't solve everything that night, but they started something.

And somewhere between Noor's dilemma, Aira's past, Sameera's soft excitement, and the shared ache of being women born into expectations, there was a kind of healing. The unspoken kind that happens when you're finally surrounded by people who get it.

"The Price of Her Yes"

She was born with wings stitched in hush,

Taught to fly low, not to rush.

Every dream had a price, they said,

And every "no" a war to tread.

Her voice was sweet until it grew loud,

Until it questioned, until it bowed—

To no one.

They dressed her in honor's veil,

Wrapped her choices in a cautious tale.

Told her freedom was a family badge,

Yet locked her soul behind their badge.

She learned to say yes without feeling,

To smile while her insides were peeling.

But somewhere between the stares and shame,

She carved a self they couldn't name.

She is not clay for your legacy's mold,

*Not a script in your story told.
Her body is hers. Her silence, a war.
Her yes, if given, must open a door.
And if she says no?
That, too, is holy.
So, ask her not to shrink or bend,
For women are storms, not trends.
And the fire you fear in her heart tonight—
Is the dawn of a world where she owns her light.*

Chapter 28

The days had begun to slow down, like soft music fading into silence. Aira no longer woke up with the same ache in her chest. The mornings were still quiet, yes, but the stillness felt gentler now. Like she had made peace with it. Like silence wasn't her enemy anymore.

She had taken to watering the tulsi plant outside her room. Making tea the way Tanya taught her- light, no sugar. She dressed in loose cotton suits again, sometimes with a bindi, sometimes with her hair open, and there was no one to notice it except herself, and maybe that was enough.

There was something strangely powerful about learning to exist without needing to be witnessed.

One afternoon, while she was deep into reading *The God of Small Things*, her mother walked in and said, "Shabana aunty's daughter is in 8th grade. She's struggling with English. They were asking if you could maybe help her... just once or twice a week?"

Aira almost said no. She didn't feel ready to guide anyone. But something about the timing made her pause. She closed her book gently and nodded.

The girl's name was Sana. Thin frame, soft voice, and eyes that didn't quite meet Aira's when she entered the room.

She reminded Aira of herself, not just the quietness, but the guarded silence. The kind of silence that wasn't peaceful, but protective.

They sat cross-legged on the floor, with an old grammar book between them.

Aira didn't rush. She asked her favourite question:

“What do you love to read?”

Sana didn't know. So Aira gave her a thin book of short poems. And that's where it began.

Each time they met, they didn't just go over English tenses. They spoke in small fragments about school, about friendship, about what it feels like when your voice doesn't feel big enough to matter.

Aira never told Sana her own story. She didn't need to. Healing, she realized, didn't always need to be spoken out loud. Sometimes, it was passed quietly, in the way you listen, in the way you treat someone like they already matter.

One night, Aira sat at her writing table, the yellow lamp casting a soft glow on her journal. She picked up her pen and wrote without thinking:

“You cannot pour light into someone else's world without spilling a little onto yourself.”

And I think maybe, that's how we survive.

Not by shouting our healing into the world, but by letting it echo gently, one person at a time.

Outside, it began to rain.

Aira leaned back, hearing the sound of droplets on the tin roof, a song she hadn't heard in a while. She thought of Delhi, of Faasle and chai. But tonight, the rain didn't feel like a memory. It felt like a beginning.

And maybe for the first time in months, Aira didn't feel like the girl she was.

She felt like the woman she was becoming.

Later that day, while Aira was watering the tulsi plant, her mother sat down on the verandah, her dupatta drawn loosely over her head, the same way her mother had taught her.

The air was quiet, until her mother spoke, like peeling back years in one sentence.

"Maybe if I hadn't sacrificed so much, your father would have loved me more."

Aira froze.

This wasn't the passive silence she'd grown up with. This was a confession.

She sat beside her.

"Why do we wear our silence like bangles, Ma, pretty but heavy?"

Her mother didn't laugh. Just stared into the space between memory and surrender.

"I was raised to believe that good women give up parts of themselves.

You were raised to believe you deserve to stay whole."

And there it was the generational gap Aira had been trying to name for years. A bruise passed down like heirloom.

Chapter 29

Sameera had always been there. Like breath. Like spine. Like the ache that reminds you you're alive.

She wasn't loud with her love. She didn't need to be. Her presence was louder than anything Aira had ever known. Through the noise of breaking hearts, family expectations, and sleepless nights, Sameera remained, a calm in the storm, or sometimes, the storm itself if anyone dared to hurt someone she loved.

Aira often wondered if people like Sameera were born or made. Selfless, kind, sharp-tongued when needed. A woman with fire under her skin and honey in her voice.

When Aira was at her weakest, rock-bottom days, eyes swollen from crying, too broken to speak, Sameera didn't offer advice. She offered her bad jokes. The kind that made no sense. The kind that made you roll your eyes and laugh, not because they were funny but because they came from someone who loved you enough to be silly.

"Want to hear the worst one yet?" Sameera had said one night, wrapping her arms around Aira on the cold kitchen floor.

Aira didn't answer. Just blinked.

Sameera continued "umm....okay I won't torture you with my lame jokes"

And somehow, in that crumbling moment, Aira laughed. A real laugh. The kind that hurt her cheeks. The kind that meant she wasn't entirely lost.

Sameera had that magic.

Their bond wasn't performative. It wasn't about constant calls or birthday posts. It was deeper. Like an invisible thread tied during childhood that never loosened, no matter how far life flung them.

They had grown up stealing mangoes from the backyard, whispering secrets during sleepovers, and crying through the same dramas. Sameera always the rebel, Aira always the dreamer.

Even now, Aira felt safest when Sameera was near. They didn't have to say much. Just being was enough.

As the rooftop air grew cooler, Aira pulled her shawl closer. Sameera was still beside her, legs folded, phone now abandoned. They sat in silence until Aira's phone buzzed.

A message from Noor.

Noor: "Can you come tomorrow? I need you."

Aira looked up at Sameera. "She needs us."

Sameera nodded. "We knew this was coming."

Noor's rishta talks had intensified again. Aira had overheard bits and pieces from her mother. "He's from a good family," they all said, like that was the only parameter for happiness. But no one wanted to hear about Noor's choices, her dreams, her perspective about life.

Their girl was caught, between duty and desire, between dreams and family.

Aira's chest ached.

She stared into the sky, and her mind drifted, back to the days when things were simpler. Before heartbreaks and expectations, before families started keeping score.

A flash of them all at thirteen, Noor with her eyeliner too thick, Sameera stealing pakoras from the kitchen, and Aira reading her poetry out loud as the other two mocked her dramatic metaphors. They'd danced to awful Bollywood remixes, sworn to never get married, and declared themselves each other's soulmates.

"Remember that day we made mango milkshake and all three of us ended up crying for different reasons?" Aira said softly.

Sameera snorted. "You cried because you thought you'd never fall in love. Noor cried because she already had. And I cried because the blender broke."

They laughed. The kind of laugh that sticks to your ribs like sugar.

But under that laughter, they both knew, Noor was hurting now. Quietly. Desperately. And like always, they'd show up.

Because that's what this bond was. A holy trinity stitched by secrets, survival, and sisterhood.

Chapter 30

The cursor blinked like a heartbeat on her laptop screen. 499 words written. One left to go. Her application to the Shimla Literature Program was ready, personal statement, samples, recommendation. Everything but the decision to send it.

She hovered over the “Submit” button, not out of fear, but a strange, unfamiliar calm. Maybe because she wasn’t doing it to prove anything this time. Not to Delhi. Not to her past. Not even to her parents.

This was for the girl who used to whisper her poems into the dark.

Aira hit “Submit.”

The screen faded to white, a confirmation box appearing in soft font. It was done. She leaned back in her chair, a smile touching her lips. Not relief, reclaiming.

That evening, the house smelled of turmeric and fresh rain. Her mother was humming an old song in the kitchen. Her father was watching the news, grumbling about electricity bills. Nothing had changed. And yet, everything had.

Aira moved quietly, her journal under her arm, and sat by the window. A breeze brushed her cheek. Her fingers traced the edge of the page as she wrote:

"I was not born for silence.

I was born to write myself back into being.

Not obedient. Not quiet. Not 'good.'

Just whole."

She paused, smiling. Sameera would laugh at the poem and say it was too dramatic. Noor would steal the journal and read it aloud, badly, on purpose.

Flashback: The Three Girls

Years ago, under dim fairy lights on Noor's terrace, they had promised each other they'd never let the world break them.

Sameera, the romantic, the overthinker, the softest storm.

Noor, with her too-loud laugh and fight-the-world attitude.

And Aira, the quiet one with ink on her hands and wars in her chest.

They had dreamt of studying abroad, starting cafés, writing books. No one had told them how heavy a girl's dreams could become once the world tied it to "izzat."

The next day, as they sat cross-legged on Noor's bed, mugs of chai in hand, the room smelling of talcum powder and secrets, the three girls tried to figure out how to protect Noor without breaking her family.

Aira was all rebellion and logic. Sameera was calm, suggesting a letter, Noor's words, not her tears.

They didn't solve it all. But they reminded Noor of her own voice. And sometimes, that's the first step.

That night, Aira wrote again.

"A girl who chooses herself

*in a world that taught her not to ,
is not selfish.*

She is a revolution."

And for the first time, she didn't feel like a fraud when she called herself a poet.

Chapter 3 I

It wasn't raining anymore. The skies had cleared, but the earth still smelled of forgiveness. That strange, wet scent of soil that lingered after storms, like the air knew everything that had happened.

Aira walked barefoot across the courtyard, the early morning sun stretching gold across the cement. She clutched a paperback to her chest.

Inside, the house was quiet. Her mother was praying. Her father, reading the paper with his usual frown. Ordinary things.

But something inside Aira had shifted.

She had decided: she would apply to universities outside the state. She would prepare for the JNU English Literature entrance. And no, she wasn't giving up on the UPSC dream. But she was no longer sacrificing her happiness for someone else's version of success.

That afternoon, she sat with her father over tea. They didn't talk about the future. They spoke about books. About Ghalib. About Delhi. It was the gentlest conversation they'd ever had. Aira realized something: when she stopped expecting her parents to become the people she needed in her childhood, she could begin to love them for who they were now.

Later, she texted Tanya,

Aira: "I think I'm finally breathing again."

Tanya replied with a meme. Then a heart.

She laughed.

That evening, she met Noor and Sameera again. The friend court was more relaxed now. Noor had written a letter to her parents. She hadn't shown them yet. But she held it in her bag like a shield.

"One step at a time," Aira told her. "Even rebellion needs rest."

Noor looked at her. "You seem... different. Like not waiting for the world to give you permission anymore."

Aira smiled. "I think I stopped apologizing for existing."

Sameera flopped down next to them with a grin, biting into a half-eaten biscuit.

Aira raised an eyebrow. "Okay, now that things are calm... any update on your little love story?"

Noor and Anya instantly turned their heads, eyes wide.

"Oh-ho!" Anya laughed. "Tell us, Sameera. The suspense is killing us."

Sameera tried to look uninterested, but the corners of her mouth betrayed her. "Fine," she said, rolling her eyes dramatically. "We've been talking."

"Talking?" Noor gasped. "Since when?"

"A week," Sameera admitted. "Maybe more". He texts me first. He's... sweet. Talks about Urdu poetry like its air."

"Oh my God, I love this for you," Aira said, genuinely delighted.

Sameera smiled, softer now. "He told me about Dua-e-Ashoorah the other day. Said he prays it regularly. Talks about God like He's close. Not distant or punishing."

Noor leaned in, intrigued. “Wait, he’s spiritual?”

“Deeply,” Sameera said, her eyes shining. “And respectful. And... I think he’d take care of my parents. That means everything. You know how I’ve always been worried; I’m the only child. But he gets it. He talks about family like it’s sacred.”

They all went quiet for a second, the kind of pause that comes when a dream starts feeling real.

Then Anya grinned wickedly. “Okay but what’s his worst quality? Like does he wear sunglasses indoors or something?”

“Shut up,” Sameera laughed, throwing a cushion at her.

The room burst into laughter, the kind that echoed down shared years.

The night ended with music and bad jokes and old stories.

And later, alone in her room, Aira opened her notebook and wrote something she didn’t plan to share with anyone:

“They never expected her to rise. But she didn’t need permission to become the fire.”

Then, she slipped into bed, put on *Tere Pyar Mein* by Kaavish, and opened her book.

Outside, the silence hummed like a promise.

The girl who once broke was learning how to build.

Chapter 32

““Come now. Please. It’s urgent.”

That was all Noor messaged.

Aira didn’t need a second thought. Neither did Sameera or Anya. Within twenty minutes, all three were at Noor’s place, shawls slipping from shoulders, eyes sharp, hearts racing. The air in the living room was stiff, like it had heard too much shouting and hadn’t recovered yet.

Noor stood near the sofa, pacing like a storm trapped in a small jar. Her eyes were red, but not from crying. From fury.

“They said the boy is from a good family,” she said, without greeting anyone. “That he earns well. That his parents are religious. That his sisters are well-settled.”

She paused, her voice almost shaking.

“And I said, so what? I don’t want to get married right now. I want to work. I want to study more. I want to move to another city. I want to wake up in a place where nobody decides my worth based on who marries me.”

Her voice cracked, and the silence between the Friends grew heavy.

“They told me girls who say no become problems. They said, ‘Shaadi ke liye umar nikal jaati hai. Achhe ladke market se chale jaate hain.’ They told me I’m being foolish. Selfish. Dramatic.”

She laughed bitterly.

“But I’m just... existing. I’m just saying not now. And apparently, that’s rebellion.”

Noor’s sister, Ruksar, was the only one who had defended her earlier that day, softly, nervously. But everyone else—uncles, aunts, even her mother had begun the slow, sweet pressure of cultural concern disguised as care.

Sameera sat up straighter. “So, you called your army.”

Noor looked at them, eyes wild. “I can’t do this alone.”

Aira walked over and wrapped her in a tight hug. “You’re not alone.”

The conversation that followed was half battle, half therapy session.

Aira, impassioned, her voice rising and falling like a poem on fire, said, “You don’t owe anyone your future. Marriage should be a choice. Not a deadline.”

Sameera added, “Honestly, even if it was the perfect guy, you still have the right to say no. That doesn’t make you stubborn. That makes you sane.”

Anya rolled her eyes. *“They act like being single is a disease and marriage is the cure. Newsflash- freedom is not a phase.”*

Noor sat down finally, rubbing her temples. “They just don’t get it. They think I’m ruining my chances. But I’m just trying to build a life. I want to live. I want to become something before becoming someone’s wife.”

Aira knelt beside her. “And you will. Even if it takes hell and back to convince them, we’ll fight it. We’ll write the letter again. We’ll have the conversations again. This, what you want, is not too much.”

Outside the room, they could still hear voice, murmuring, her uncle talking to her father, someone else trying to calm down her mother.

Inside, the Friends stayed like a wall around Noor.

The room, once full of chaos, began to ease a little. The tension lifted just enough for a breath.

Aira glanced toward Sameera, who was quietly typing something on her phone and smiling.

“Okay, spill,” Aira grinned. “Who’s making you grin like a 90s heroine?”

Sameera looked up, half-caught, half-glowing. “Ugh. Fine. You know that guy I told you about, the one I had a crush on?”

“The poetry guy?” Noor raised an eyebrow.

“Yeah. Him. We’ve been talking more. And... it’s different now. It doesn’t feel like just a crush anymore.”

Anya sat up straight. “Oho? What changed?”

Sameera tucked her hair behind her ear, hesitant but honest. “I don’t know. He listens. He talks about faith, and poetry, and life like it’s all stitched together. He asked me about my parents... like really asked. Said if anything ever happens between us, they’d be his parents too.”

Noor blinked, a little softened by that.

Sameera’s voice dropped a little. “He’s the first guy who makes me feel like I could have a life with someone... without losing mine in the process.”

Aira leaned her head back and smiled. “That’s rare. And if it ever becomes something... you deserve every inch of that kindness.”

Sameera chuckled. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. But yeah... maybe the crush is becoming something real.”

They sat like that for a few minutes, close, lighter now, letting the laughter stitch over the ache for a moment.

But the ending wasn’t soft.

Noor’s father hadn’t said yes. He hadn’t said no either.

He was thinking. Considering. Pacing between tradition and trust, between what the world would say and what his daughter was asking for.

Noor’s phone vibrated. A message from her sister:

Abbu hasn’t agreed. But he said he needs time. He’s thinking about it.

Noor read it aloud. No one moved. The weight of possibility hung in the air like a breath not yet exhaled.

The girls didn’t celebrate. Not yet.

But they also didn’t give up.

Later that night, Aira took out her journal and began to write.

“To be a woman is to carry softness like armor, and rage like a secret.

It is to say “no” and be called ungrateful.

To dream and be told to wait until someone else chooses you.

But tonight, we chose ourselves.

And that, too, is a kind of revolution”

She closed her notebook, exhaled deeply, and let the silence hum.

Tomorrow, the world would resume its weight.

But tonight, they had tilted it, just a little.

Later that evening, as laughter simmered and biscuits crumbled into half-sipped chai, Aira’s phone buzzed.

“Congratulations! You’ve been accepted to the Literature Immersion Program at Him Spring, Shimla.”

She stared at the screen. The glow of it reflecting off her face, mixing with the warmth of the room, the noise of friend chatter. She read the email twice. It was a five-day program. Fully residential. All focused on creative writing, critical thinking, and mountains. She had sent her portfolio on a whim. A few poems. A short essay about language and healing. A note on Virginia Woolf.

And now, here it was. Shimla. Mountains she’d only seen in photos. New people. No one she knew. Five full days. Alone.

Her thumb hovered over the screen. She hadn’t told her parents. What would they say? Could she really go?

“Why are you looking like that?” Sameera asked, stealing a wafer from the plate beside Aira.

Aira turned her phone toward them.

Noor squealed before even reading the whole thing. “You’re going. There’s no way you’re not going!”

“But I haven’t even...” Aira began.

"Nope." Anya interrupted. "We are not letting the same girl who stood up to Ammi during Noor's rishta drama now get scared of a five-day literature camp."

They all leaned in, voices overlapping with ideas, support, jokes about packing thermal socks, and pink notebooks for poetry.

Inside, Aira wasn't sure. But something within her stirred, a soft thrill. Like maybe the world was opening. Maybe healing wasn't just about surviving. Maybe it was about saying yes to what once scared you.

That night, Aira sat by the window, her journal open in her lap. She traced the word Shimla over and over again. Then underlined it. A single sentence followed:

"Maybe it's time to write the chapter that scares me."

Chapter 33

The dining table felt colder than usual.

Aira placed her cup gently on the glass coaster, the steam rising between her and her parents like a thin curtain.

"There's something I need to tell you," She began, heart pounding. "I got accepted to a Literature Program in Shimla. It's a five-day residential course. They only selected a few applicants. I want to go."

The room fell quiet.

Her mother looked up from her plate. "Shimla? Alone?"

Her father frowned, already shifting in his seat. "What kind of program? And why Shimla? You have books at home. And we already said, no travelling alone."

Aira inhaled slowly, steadying herself. Not this time.

"Abbu, Ammi... this isn't just a trip. It's something I've earned. I sent my writing. They liked it. They chose me."

Her mother's tone was soft but firm. "Still, beta, alone? Who will be there? Who will you stay with?"

"I don't know yet," Aira replied. "But that's the point. I'll be around people who love stories, who read, who write. I want to be there—not just for the learning, but for myself."

Her father's silence grew heavier.

"You always say you want me to become someone strong," she continued. "This is what strength looks like."

Choosing something that makes me grow. Something I believe in.”

Aira had never looked so calm and so determined. She didn’t raise her voice. She didn’t beg. But the air around her carried weight. The version of her they were seeing now, it wasn’t the same girl who cried herself to sleep, who gave in quietly.

This one stood tall in her quiet.

Her father sighed after a long pause. “Five days?”

“Five,” she nodded.

Her mother’s voice softened. “You’ll call every day?”

“I will.”

Her father looked away, but a corner of his mouth twitched. “Okay. But you carry warm clothes.”

Relief washed through Aira like sunlight. She smiled, something between joy and disbelief.

The next morning, she packed her small green suitcase. Carefully folded shawls, her favourite pen, a small journal, and a copy of *A Room of One’s Own*. Her fingers lingered over each item, every piece a part of who she was becoming.

She picked up her phone and dialed Tanya.

“You’re what?!” Tanya shrieked as soon as Aira told her.

“Calm down,” Aira laughed.

“Aira goes to the hills and doesn’t tell me immediately? Sharam karo. What if... I don’t know... what if you find the one there? A soft-spoken, bookish boy who reads *The thousand splendid suns*?”

Aira snorted. “Highly unlikely.”

“Oh, c’mon,” Tanya teased. “Mountains. Literature. Strangers. Someone’s definitely going to fall in love with your sad girl energy.”

They giggled like teenagers. For a moment, the world was just soft friendship Land silliness again.

That night, as Aira lay in bed scrolling through her playlist, going from ‘Labour by Paris Paloma’ to ‘Umraan Lagiyaan’ she was in the world of her own. And music was her escape .

Chapter 34

Friends Group

Sameera: Guys. Something happened. I have to tell you.

That was all it took.

Twenty minutes later, the four of them were on a call, shawls slipping off shoulders, plates of biscuits half-eaten, hair wrapped in towels or uncombed from naps.

Aira lit a candle on her desk and balanced the phone on a stack of books. Anya was lying upside down on her bed with her head dangling off the edge. Noor looked like she had cried earlier but was trying not to talk about it yet.

And Sameera... was glowing.

Aira raised her brows. "You look like a chai commercial. Spill."

Sameera bit her lip, blushed, and finally said it.

"That guy... We've been texting for a while now. And he asked if he could send a rishta."

Screams exploded through the call. Anya threw a pillow in the air. Aira clutched her heart like a soap opera heroine. Noor just smiled, finally.

"He said," Sameera continued, half-laughing now, "that he wants to do things the right way. No sneaking around. His startup just got financed by an investor, he's done with engineering, and he... he really likes me. Not in a silly way. He actually asked if my parents would be comfortable.

Anya “Cliché but fine we’ll accept him for you”

Aira gasped. “Is he fictional? Like from a Pakistani drama?”

“I swear he’s real,” Sameera laughed. “And he listens to ghazals, he talks about Faiz and Parveen Shakir, and he does full-fledged Dua-e-Ashoorah. I mean, what is happening?”

“He’s a green flag parade,” Anya said, dramatically. “Sameera, marry him before he finds out how messy you are when you eat biryani.”

Noor smiled but stayed quiet.

Aira noticed. “Okay. Your turn. What’s going on at home?”

Noor sighed. “It’s still chaos. Abbu keeps saying this is the best rishta I’ll get. That I’m already twenty-four. And if I say no, they’ll think I’m hiding something.”

Anya frowned. “Like what?”

“Like I’m involved with someone. Or too stubborn. Or ungrateful.”

Sameera’s smile faded. “You told them how you feel?”

“I’ve tried,” Noor whispered. “But it’s like shouting into a closed room. I’m so tired. I don’t even want to fight anymore.”

There was a pause.

Then Aira spoke. Her voice wasn’t loud, but it carried a weight that made the others listen.

“Why is it always us who have to fold? Why are girls expected to accept, adjust, compromise? Why is liberation treated like rebellion?”

Noor looked up, eyes wet.

“If all Noor wants is time, space, and the right to build her own life, why does that sound so outrageous to everyone?” Aira continued. “Why must freedom be earned like a luxury, instead of being our right?”

Sameera nodded quietly. “If a guy says he wants to wait till he’s ready, everyone calls him responsible. When we say it, we’re called difficult.”

Anya leaned into the screen. “We’re not born to complete someone else’s life. We’re born to live our own.”

The call fell into silence. But it was not the silence of exhaustion, it was the silence of understanding, of being seen, of something sacred shared.

Noor wiped her tears. “I’ll try again tomorrow. I’m not ready to give up. I just wish I didn’t have to fight so hard to just be me.”

“You’re not alone,” Aira said. “We’ll keep fighting. Together.”

Later that night, Aira came back to her desk. The candle had melted down to a soft pool of wax. She opened her notebook and began to write, not a diary entry, but a poem. A poem she didn’t plan to post or share. Just for herself.

“To be a woman is to be questioned, doubted, tamed.

But also, to be a woman is to rise, to remember, to reclaim.

We are not waiting rooms. We are roads. We are storms.

We are allowed to want more than survival."

Some days slowly, and some days all at once.

That night, the wind outside Aira's window whispered like an old friend. Not the urgent howl of a storm, but a soft reminder, of something unfinished, unresolved.

She lay in bed staring at the glow of her phone screen, its soft blue light painting her face in half-shadows. The group chat was buzzing—

But Aira's mind was somewhere else.

Somewhere back in Delhi.

Back to the days when her heart had once fluttered at the sight of someone's name lighting up her screen. The only boy she had ever truly loved. The one who had taught her what intimacy could mean, but also what it meant to lose herself in loving someone more than she loved herself.

Would she ever love again?

Could she?

Would her body ever trust another to hold it, without collapsing under the weight of old fears?

She sat up and called Rhea.

"Hey," Rhea answered instantly. "What's going on in that poetic, overthinking head of yours?"

Aira chuckled. "You're psychic."

"No, I just know you. Tell me."

Aira told her everything, the Shimla program, the chaos of Noor's rishta, the uncertainty, the flashbacks, the bittersweet ache of remembering someone who wasn't coming back.

"I don't know if I'll ever be able to love like that again," she whispered.

There was a pause.

"You shouldn't," Rhea said softly. "Not like that. Not like how you lost yourself last time. You've built something inside you now, Aira. Something strong, something just yours. Anyone who comes now should meet that girl. Not the broken one who begged to be held."

Aira felt her eyes sting.

"And you remember that one night," Rhea added, "when I told you, if you ever make it out of this, I'll call you the strongest woman I've ever known? Well... you did. You are. You're living, writing, healing. You're going to Shimla. You're choosing you."

Aira exhaled. It felt like releasing a lifetime.

"I love you, idiot," she said.

"I know," Rhea replied. "Now go pack. Shimla won't wait."

Chapter 35

“Ammi” Aira asked, holding her teacup tighter than usual, “why is it always women who have to bend?”

Her mother looked up from the salad she was chopping. “What now?”

“Everything. The headscarf, the silence, the cooking, the saying yes. We have to adjust in our homes, then in our husband’s homes, then raise children, cover our heads because boys stare. But men? They can walk shirtless down the street, and no one blinks.”

Her mother sighed. “That’s the way things are. That’s how we’ve been raised.”

“But that’s not how it should be. Why don’t we ever ask them to change?” Aira’s voice was calm, but inside her, a hundred years of tired women were raging.

Before her mother could respond, her phone buzzed.

She wiped her hands on the end of her dupatta and picked it up. “Hello, salaam, Shahana Baji!”

Aira froze, recognizing Sameera’s mother’s voice on the other end.

“A proposal?” her mother repeated aloud, eyebrows lifting. “Okay, okay. He’s the same boy you mentioned earlier? Wow. And Sameera likes him? That’s wonderful!”

Aira’s own phone buzzed at the same time, twice, thrice, relentlessly.

She opened it.

Friends Group

Sameera: He sent the proposal

Sameera: Airaaaa he actually sent it!

Sameera: You remember I told you that day, I said yes. And now it's real.

Aira smiled, typing quickly.

Aira: So, you like him? For real? This isn't just a crush anymore?

Sameera: I like him, Aira. I actually see a future with him. He listens to me. And he talks to my parents with such respect. I've never seen Mama and Papa so genuinely happy.

Back in the kitchen, Shahana Baji was still talking, her voice excited and rich with plans.

"So, we thought we'd keep the Baat Pakki ceremony small, just the families. Maybe next weekend? You talk to Bhaijaan and let us know if the date works. We want everything simple but sweet for Sameera."

Aira's mother nodded. "Of course, of course. And we're so happy for her. Sameera deserves this."

Aira quietly left the kitchen, walking back to her room with her heart full and oddly soft. Sameera, who had cried beside her, who once swore off men completely, was now texting in all caps about a boy who made her feel seen.

Aira sank into her chair and opened the group again.

Sameera: Can you guys help me pick an outfit for Baat Pakki? Something bright. I want to look like joy itself.

Anya: Say no more. Yellow. You're sunshine. We'll all match.

Noor: So happy for you,. Really. You deserve this.

Aira smiled, but then another message popped up.

Noor: Also... I talked to Abbu.

Noor: A proper talk. Face to face. No shouting. Just tears.

Noor: I told him I needed him to be there. Not just as a decision-maker, but as a father who understands. I told him I'm not saying no to marriage, I'm saying no to being forced into a life I'm not ready for.

Noor: He listened, Aira. For the first time, he actually listened.

Aira stared at the screen, her chest warm.

Somewhere between chaos and calm, they were all growing. Each in their own way.

Noor was finding her voice. Sameera was choosing love on her own terms. And Aira, Aira was still wrestling, still raging, but she was not alone.

She opened her journal, wrote the date, and let the words pour out like soft thunder:

"They say we are meant to bend like branches,

But we were born of fire and river.

We are softness, yes, but not silence.

We are not made to bow, we are made to bloom".

Chapter 36

Sameera's house was wrapped in the kind of glow that only came with celebration. Lights ran along the balcony, marigolds hung from the doors, and the kitchen clattered with trays of sweets, laughter, and clinking cutlery. Today was her *baat pakki* with Hasan, the boy she had once blushed over during friend sleepovers and long confessions under shared blankets.

Everyone had gathered, uncles in pressed kurta pajamas, aunties adjusting dupattas, the house buzzing with joy like a song on loop.

Aira stepped inside and was immediately pulled into a hug by Anya.

"She's glowing like a fairy lamp," Anya whispered, pointing to Sameera, who stood across the room in a deep teal suit, her hair curled to perfection, smile too wide to contain.

"She's glowing like someone in love," Aira said softly, a smile tugging at her lips.

The Friends had started to trickle in earlier that morning, not just the usual four, but six now. Ina and Iraya had come from Lucknow, their presence instantly softening the atmosphere. Ina, with her delicate laugh and almond-shaped eyes, always found the right words to say at the right time. Iraya, quiet but sharp, held people together without saying much at all.

The six of them, Sameera, Aira, Anya, Noor, Ina, and Iraya, had once been girls climbing mango trees and

stealing leftover kheer from the fridge. Now, here they were in silk suits and soft makeup, doing grown-up things like fixing dupattas and holding back tears during family speeches.

They called themselves The Six. No fancy group name, just a quiet bond that didn't need one.

Sameera looked at them from across the room and raised her eyebrows in mock panic. "Are you ready?" she mouthed.

"For what?" Anya mouthed back.

"For the moment I faint with nerves."

They all laughed.

When Hasan's family arrived, the house fell briefly silent. Hasan looked handsome in a cream sherwani, his presence calm and steady, just like Sameera had once described him. He shook hands, hugged uncles, and when his eyes found Sameera's, a tiny universe seemed to settle between them.

The ceremony was simple. Prayers were said, sweets were exchanged, and then, the moment everyone had been waiting for, the official confirmation. Baat pakki.

Aira watched Sameera as Hasan's mother gave her a pair of gold bangles and whispered something that made her eyes shimmer.

She wasn't just Sameera anymore. She was someone's almost-wife now.

After the guests had eaten and the house had begun to breathe again, the Friends retreated to Sameera's room. Plates of leftover kebabs and kheer made their way onto

the floor as heels were kicked off and tight dupattas flung onto the bed.

“So,” Anya said, pulling her hair out of its clip. “When are we starting our Sameera’s wedding planning group?”

“Right after we get over how good Hasan looked today,” Noor added.

“Excuse you!” Sameera gasped, throwing a pillow at her. “Don’t flirt with my fiancé.”

“He’s already family now,” Ina smiled, brushing glitter off her cheek.

“Exactly,” Iraya agreed. “Which means we can lovingly bully him.”

They all laughed, the kind of deep, tear-eyed laughter that only comes when the moment is heavy with love and memory.

Aira stayed quiet for a second, watching them. This moment, with the six of them, felt like something to fold into a letter for her future self. Something to carry to Shimla.

“Guys,” she said finally, “I’m leaving tomorrow.”

The room stilled.

“We know,” Sameera said gently. “Shimla will be lucky to have you.”

“You’ll write the kind of poems only pine trees understand,” Iraya added.

“And maybe meet a Himachali boy who makes chai just right,” Anya grinned.

They groaned.

“But mostly,” Aira smiled, “I’ll figure out what else I’m made of.”

A soft silence followed, warm and full. Then Noor, who had been quiet until now, spoke up. Her voice was steady, but something about it felt like exhale after a long storm.

“My dad said no to the rishta.”

Everyone turned towards her.

“What?” Sameera whispered.

“He said no,” Noor repeated, a small smile forming. “After weeks of debate, he told them it’s not happening. That I can choose when and whom I want to marry. I didn’t expect it. But he said, ‘If you don’t want this, then it’s done.’”

Ina reached out to hold her hand.

“That’s huge, Noor,” Aira said, voice tender.

Noor nodded. “I feel like... like I finally get to live my own life. Like someone cut a string that’s been pulling me backward for years.”

The room wrapped her in a bubble of comfort, tight hands, teary smiles, and quiet pride.

They stayed up late, talking about everything and nothing. Ina played old songs on her phone. Iraya dozed off with her head on Noor’s shoulder. Sameera kept checking her phone, already calling Hasan my person.

They were women now, in the middle of becoming more.

When Aira finally crawled into bed, her heart was both full and aching. She was leaving tomorrow. Shimla, the Literature Festival, a hundred unknowns waited for her.

But tonight, it was all theirs.

Six voices. One roof. A promise made.

And the world, quietly shifting beneath their feet.

Chapter 37

Shimla

The name itself felt like a secret whispered between mountains.

The air was cooler than Aira had expected, carrying the scent of damp pine bark and old stories. She wrapped her shawl a little tighter as she stepped into the old colonial guesthouse where the five-day literature program was to be held. A brass plate outside read: Hillview Cultural Centre, the kind of place where windows creaked, tea came in chipped ceramic cups, and poetry breathed in the corridors.

There were about twenty other students, all from different cities. Aira instantly felt invisible in the most peaceful way, no one knew her here. She was just another girl with a notebook and dark circles and fire in her chest.

And then, there was him.

He stood near the bookshelf in the common reading room the first evening, tall, absurdly tall, in a rust-coloured sweater and black beanie, holding a copy of *The Myth of Sisyphus* by Albert Camus. His fingers traced the underline of a sentence slowly, like it mattered. Like stories really meant something.

He had that quiet seriousness in his eyes, the kind that people mistake for arrogance but is really just a conversation with his own thoughts. Aira noticed he didn't look up much. Except that when he did, he looked

straight at her. Like his gaze skipped everyone else and landed softly, intentionally, on her.

She looked away the first time. Then he looked again the next morning. And the third time during the poetry workshop, when someone read a piece on heartbreak and Aira exhaled a little too sharply. Their eyes met again. A pause. A softness. Something blooming and cautious.

His name, she would learn later, was Rayaana Hashmi.

He had a quiet reputation already, one of the program mentors had whispered that he has published two short stories and was obsessed with the writings of Camus and Bolano. He also had a dog named Plato, which he missed deeply, and he often annotated his books with lines from old ghazals.

On the second evening, as dusk dipped into the pine trees and students wandered the old halls sipping chai, Aira stood alone near the balcony, scribbling.

Rayaana walked over.

“Hey,” he said. His voice was low, slightly textured. “I’ve seen you in the sessions. You have this... way of listening. Like words are silk to you.”

Aira smiled, unsure what to say. “That’s the nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me before asking my name.”

He grinned. “Then let me follow it up. I’m Rayaana. From Lucknow. I write things I rarely show people.”

“Aira,” she replied. “From a small town that’s learning to feel big inside me again. I write things I rarely say aloud.”

That was it.

A strange beginning. Not love. Not even friendship. But something charged and slow and watchful.

Over the next few days, they sat next to each other in readings. Exchanged books. Eye contact. Quiet smiles.

One afternoon, during a break, Aira was flipping through Letters to a Young Poet on a bench when Rayaana walked by, paused, and gently reached out. He tucked a loose strand of her hair behind her ear, his fingers grazing her cheek.

“You were squinting,” he murmured.

She laughed nervously. “That’s such a cheesy excuse.”

“Maybe. But true.”

They shared oranges and coffee. Argued over whether Parveen Shakir was more revolutionary than Faiz. Whispered jokes during a boring lecture. He passed her scribbled notes “You blink when you lie, you make silence feel kind, you’re the most peaceful riot I’ve ever met.”

And sometimes, they just sat beside each other, not speaking. The kind of silence that felt like presence, not absence.

On the third night, Aira performed.

The reading room was warm, the lights dimmed, and someone had placed wildflowers in a chipped vase on the mic stand.

She stepped up, slightly trembling, but steady in voice.

She opened her journal.

“Inheritance”

by Aira

*"I carry memories like spices,
strong, bitter, warm,
reminders of what lingered too long.
He kissed me like poetry,
but forgot to turn the page.
I loved like a river, wide, giving,
and woke up emptied.
They said I should've waited.
That good girls don't say yes like that.
But I wasn't trying to be good.
I was trying to feel whole.
And even if the touch bruised,
even if his goodbye was a closed door
I don't regret the room.
I don't regret the girl who walked in.
She was brave.
And she deserves poems."*

When she looked up, Rayaan was watching her. His eyes full. Like she had just said something he'd always wanted to say but hadn't known how.

That night, he sat next to her on the balcony as she wrote.

"You don't write poems," he said. "You exhale them."

She looked at him, half-smiling. “You should see me when I scream them.”

“I’d stay for that too.”

The words stayed between them. Quiet. Warm. New.

Later that night, as she lay in bed under a quilt smelling of woodsmoke and old paper, Aira’s phone buzzed.

Sameera.

She smiled before picking it up.

“Miss Shimla Literature Festival,” Sameera said dramatically. “Are you going to tell me everything or do I have to bribe someone to leak your poems?”

Aira laughed. “I was waiting for your royal call.”

“Oh, shut up and spill. Tell me everything—how’s the place? Did you meet someone? Did you wear that stupid oversized sweater you love?”

“It’s not stupid,” Aira protested. “It’s poetic.”

“Translation: he noticed it.”

There was a pause. A soft giggle.

“His name is Rayaana,” Aira said eventually. “He’s tall. Quiet. Into Gibran and Camus. Has a dog named Plato.”

Sameera gasped. “A philosopher-boy with emotional damage? Aira, you’re in trouble.”

They both laughed.

Then Sameera lowered her voice. “Back home, chaos. Anya and Ina are fighting about jhumkas again. Dadi is grilling Hasan’s father. And someone told your mom you came to Shimla to elope.”

Aira burst out laughing. “We should write a play about our families”

“Already titled it, Dramaybaazon Ki Duniya,” Sameera said. “Now go write more poems. And make eye contact with tall men who tug your hair behind your ear.”

Aira rolled her eyes, smiling.

As the call ended, she stared at the pine trees outside her window. A wind moved through them like an old hymn. And for the first time in a long time, she didn’t feel like she was surviving.

She felt like she was arriving.

Chapter 38

For the next few days in Shimla, Aira felt as though she were living in someone else's dream. Not because she didn't belong, but because for once, she did.

The weather changed its mood every few hours. Mornings were cold and sharp, afternoons soft with sun, and evenings soaked in mist. The old guesthouse, nestled between deodar trees, felt like it had kept every poem ever written inside its walls.

Aira spent her time surrounded by words, laughter, and conversations that felt like slices of warmth.

She spoke at open forums, leaning into her truths slowly. One evening, sitting cross-legged in the small library where a group of students had gathered for an impromptu session on "Personal Politics in Poetry", Aira shared:

"Feminism isn't just about fighting systems,"

"It's about fighting the fear in your throat when you are told to lower your eyes."

"It's about loving your softness as much as your resistance."

"And reclaiming your name in a world that keeps trying to rename you."

Heads nodded. Fingers snapped. Someone whispered, "God, I needed to hear that."

She talked about books too, how they'd been her only escape during the worst years. How *Persepolis*, *Milk and Honey*, and *The Forty Rules of Love* had held her like lullabies when people couldn't. How poetry had saved her, again and again, when prayers failed to come.

Rayaan was often nearby, sitting quietly, sometimes scribbling something, sometimes just watching her with the kind of attention that made her words feel sacred.

One late afternoon, while sipping chai by the steps outside, Aira was approached by a tall woman in her forties, wearing a beige shawl and black boots. She introduced herself as Dr. Neha Sharma, the literary director behind the Shimla Literature Festival.

"You've got a voice that doesn't just speak, it echoes" she said sitting beside Aira.

Aira blinked, unsure how to react. "That's... really kind of you."

"No, it's not kindness. It's observation. Tell me, have you thought of applying for literature programs?"

Aira shrugged. "In India, maybe. JNU, Jamia. I don't know."

"Have you thought about Oxford? Kingston? Cambridge?"

Aira nearly choked on her tea. "Wait, what? Me?"

Dr. Sharma smiled. "Yes. You. You've got something raw and real. The kind of voice that literary cultures need, not just want. I can write you a recommendation if you decide to apply. Promise me you'll think about it."

Aira nodded slowly. "I just... I don't know if I'm worthy of that."

"I do," she said firmly. "You're the best one here."

That night, Aira stared at the dark ceiling of her room, hearing her heartbeat whisper: Oxford. Cambridge. Me?

The next evening, at the closing ceremony, they announced the final recognitions. Aira, nervously fidgeting with the corner of her shawl, almost didn't hear her name.

"And the voice that moved us the most... whose poetry will now become more than just performances... Aira, your first poetry collection will be published by Green Sparrow Press this year."

Applause exploded around her. Rayaan squeezed her hand under the table. Her ears rang.

Her poems, her ache, her voice, her healing, were going to become a book.

She called Sameera first.

Sameera screamed so loudly, Aira had to pull the phone away from her ear.

"ARE YOU SERIOUS? YOU'RE GETTING PUBLISHED?!"

"Yes, it's a small press but—"

"WHO CARES?! I'm printing your face on my mehendi invitations now!"

Aira laughed.

"But wait," Sameera continued. "That's not even the best part. GUESS WHAT?"

“What?”

“THE ENGAGEMENT DATE IS FIXED! Next Sunday! One week from now! Hasan and I are finally going to be official-official. Eeeee!”

“Oh my God, Sameera”

“I KNOW. You need to come back immediately. We have lehengas to decide. Jewelry to fight over. I’m not doing this without you.”

Aira grinned. “I’ll be back day after. Keep Noor, Anya, Iraya, and Ina on standby. Operation Glam Gang begins.”

“I already told the group. Everyone’s losing their minds. Anya’s crying. Noor’s writing a speech. Ina made a shared Pinterest board. Iraya is planning the playlist. You’re doomed.”

“I’m blessed.”

“You’re loved,” Sameera whispered softly.

Aira closed her eyes, smiling. “I know.”

The final morning in Shimla, she and Rayaana stood by the railing, watching the clouds rise from the valley like incense smoke.

“You changed something in me,” she said quietly.

“So did you,” he replied. “Promise me you’ll apply abroad. You belong in rooms that echo.”

She looked at him. “And if I get in?”

He smiled, brushing her hair back again like it was second nature. “Then write me letters from Oxford.”

She nodded. “And you’ll write me poems from wherever you are.”

“I already am.”

Back home, a storm of celebrations was waiting.

But before that, Aira placed her hand over her chest, the same way she did when she was younger and wanted to say thank you to the universe.

Thank you for this life.

Thank you for this voice.

Thank you for letting me come back to myself.

Now, the buses were waiting below. She could hear the suitcases being zipped, the roll of trolley bags on concrete, someone yelling for an extra charger. Aira stayed still.

She didn’t want to leave, not because of Rayaana, but because of who she had been allowed to be here. The version of herself who didn’t flinch while speaking her truth. Who made friends without overthinking. Who sipped ginger tea while journaling beneath cedar trees. Who didn’t carry Delhi on her back or the shadows of the past in her pockets.

But the mountains had always taught one thing: to stay soft even when you’re letting go.

As she walked down the slope to board the bus, she turned to see Rayaana walking up with hurried steps.

“Wait,” he said, catching his breath. “You forgot something.”

He handed her a folded note. "Don't open it now," he added. "When you get home."

Aira blinked, a small smile tugging at her lips. "Okay."

"No dramatic goodbyes?" she asked.

"I don't do goodbyes," he replied. "I do... see-you-laters."

She nodded, stepping back, holding the note like a spark she wasn't ready to light.

Chapter 39

Back home, the familiar smell of masala and detergent greeted her. Her mother asked how the food was. Her father checked if she ate on time. Everything felt the same, and yet Aira knew something inside her had shifted.

Later that night, wrapped in her blanket, she opened the note Raya had given her.

*“If your writing ever finds me on a bookshelf someday, I hope you still remember this little hill town, the fire, the silence, and the girl who spoke like the wind.

P.S. Let’s read each other again, sometime.”

– R.”*

Her heart didn’t race. It bloomed, slowly, shyly, like a new paragraph.

The next day all Friends planned to meet at Noor’s place

As soon as Sameera entered

And with her came the storm.

“Okay listen, this lehenga is a dream but I’m not sure if the sequins will look good in daylight. Should I go with mirror work instead?”

The Friends had barely settled into Noor’s living room before Sameera began her rapid-fire questioning. Anya was scrolling through Pinterest. Ina had three boutiques bookmarked. Iraya, half-asleep with tea in her hand, nodded softly every ten seconds.

Noor raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t you love the sea-green one yesterday?”

“I did! But now I’m obsessed with the purple ruffle one Ina found. What if I wear that for the after-party?”

“You are the after-party,” Anya mumbled without looking up.

Everyone laughed.

Aira was sitting cross-legged on the rug, flipping through an old bridal magazine. “I still think the sea-green one is magic. It brings out your eyes. And if you really want drama, do a messy braid with it, earrings that touch your collarbone. Done.”

Sameera gasped. “YES. That’s what I needed. We need to go shopping tomorrow. Aira, you’re coming. Non-negotiable.”

“I wouldn’t miss it,” Aira smiled.

“But listen,” she added, eyes lighting up, “we should all get shararas stitched together. Like coordinated, but not matching. Something personal. A whole vibe.”

Noor clapped her hands. “Imagine: six girls, six shararas, six chaos machines.”

“I’m in,” said Iraya softly.

“This is going to be the best week of my life,” Sameera announced, arms wide. “Mark my words.”

The room was filled with laughter, ideas, color palettes, and bursts of sibling love. It was one of those evenings Aira would later hold onto like a pressed flower between the pages of time.

Later that night, Aira sat alone in her room, the soft hum of the ceiling fan above her and Noor's soft playlist floating in from the hallway.

She pulled her knees to her chest.

Her mind kept looping back to that quiet moment in Shimla. The professor's voice, calm but certain.

"You've got something raw and real. You should apply to places like Oxford, Cambridge, Kingston..."

Could she? Really?

Would someone like her, girl from a small town, barely stitched back from years of breaking, really belong in ancient libraries and literary circles that echoed with legacy?

She glanced at the folder on her table, the draft of her poetry book, marked "Accepted for Publication."

The ache in her chest was sharp. Not pain. But disbelief. Hope trying to find room to breathe.

She picked up her phone and called Rhea.

Rhea answered on the second ring.

"Hey..."

"Hey," Aira exhaled. "Got a minute?"

"Always."

Aira told her everything, the professor's suggestion, the festival, the publishing deal.

Rhea was quiet for a beat.

Then, softly: “Aira... I need you to hear this clearly. You were never not worthy. You’ve just been too used to rooms that were too small for your voice.”

Aira swallowed. “But Oxford, Rhea... Cambridge...”

“And why not you?” Rhea pushed. “You think the girls who end up there have more soul than you? You think they write with more truth?”

“No...”

“Then go burn the damn sky, woman.”

Aira laughed, tears in her eyes.

“Also, Tanya says if you don’t tell her this yourself, she’ll fight you.”

“Put me on speaker,” Aira grinned.

They talked for almost an hour, about books, about dresses, about dreams. About how sometimes, the scariest thing is accepting that you can be happy. That you can win.

When the call ended, Aira felt a little lighter. A little braver.

She turned off the lights and slid under the blanket.

Rayyan:

“Saw the post about your book. I’m proud of you. Really.”

Aira stared at the screen for a long moment.

Then turned it over, face down, and closed her eyes.

Chapter 40

It wasn't planned.

Sameera was going to Lucknow for her engagement shopping, and Aira volunteered to go with her.

And Sameera dramatically teased her "Oh someone wants to see Mr. Shimla again"

Aira had texted him half in jest, "If I ever come to Lucknow, I expect the best kebabs and the worst directions."

Rayyan replied:

"Challenge accepted. I'll get you lost in the most beautiful places."

Two days later, she was standing at the Charbagh railway station, a thin dupatta fluttering behind her like a flag of rebellion.

Lucknow smelled like old books and rosewater. There was something cinematic about it, like every turn might hold a secret, every shadow an untold story. Rayyan met her just outside the station, leaning against his scooter like he belonged to the city and the silence.

"Welcome to my part of the world," he said, handing her a cup of kulhad chai. "Sip slow. This city rewards patience."

They started with the streets of Hazratganj, where colonial-era buildings whispered histories in the cracks of their paint. They strolled through Iqbal Manzil, the

scent of attar hanging like an unspoken poem between them.

"This place," Rayyan said, "Is where I first fell in love, with Ghalib, not a girl."

Aira smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear, echoing a gesture he'd once made.

They visited old Urdu bookshops, where Rayyan picked out a Faiz Ahmad Faiz collection with faded gold embossing.

"You should have this," he said. "For your poems and rainy days."

At Tunday Kababi, they sat at a corner table. He watched her take her first bite like it was a sacred ceremony.

"This should be illegal," she whispered, eyes wide.

"Welcome to sin," he grinned.

After lunch, he took her to Rumi Darwaza. Beneath its ancient arch, they stood still, letting the echoes settle between them.

"This city doesn't rush," Aira murmured.

"Neither do feelings that matter," he replied.

As evening poured gold over the Gomti River, they sat by the banks, watching the sky change. Rayyan reached for her hand, not as a question, but as a grounding.

"I used to walk here alone when I felt lost," he said. "But today... I feel found."

Aira looked at him, eyes brimming. "Sometimes I think I write because it's the only way I know how to touch without trembling."

He nodded. "And sometimes I read you like scripture."

They didn't kiss. But something inside them did.

Later, in her hotel room, Aira wrote in her notebook:

" He didn't give me Lucknow.

He gave me the parts of it

that knew how to hold a secret.

The slow tea.

The old stairs.

The pauses that felt like prayers.

And somehow,

that made me trust the city.

And him".

Chapter 41

Later that night, after dinner, Aira sat at the dining table with her father, sipping tea.

“Abbu,” she began carefully, “you know the person who hosted the workshop in Shimla? They said something that stuck.”

Her father looked up from his phone. “Hmm?”

“They asked me why I am only applying to JNU... and why not to universities outside India. Oxford. SOAS. King’s. Places that hold literature in its historical depth.”

He was quiet for a second. “And what did you say?”

“I told them I never thought it was possible.”

“And now?”

“I’m... thinking about it. I want to try.”

He put his phone down, expression unreadable. “Aira, do you know what that means? The kind of finances, the distance, the uncertainties? Delhi was one thing. Shimla, even. But abroad? We can’t call you back if something goes wrong. You’ll be on your own. Entirely.”

“I know.”

“And we’re not millionaires. This is a huge thing. You’d need scholarships. And you’ll have to be sure. No wavering. No calling us midway saying you can’t take it anymore.”

“I won’t.”

He sighed, deeply. “We won’t tell Ammi yet. Let’s think this through.”

She nodded.

“I just don’t want to lose you somewhere far away.”

“You won’t,” she whispered.

That night, Aira lay in bed with her journal open, her fingers tracing words instead of writing them. Her phone buzzed. It was Rayaana.

Rayaana: “Did the note survive the journey home?”

Aira: “It did. And I think it came with more than just ink. It brought questions. And something like courage.”

Rayaana: “That’s what poems are supposed to do.”

Outside, the wind stirred the curtain. In a few days, her friend would be engaged. In a few months, Aira might be in another country.

She smiled into the darkness, a new line forming in her mind:

“To want more is not ingratitude.

It is the seed of becoming.”

The house was bathed in gold.

Sameera’s engagement celebration had transformed the courtyard into a glimmering dream. Fairy lights clung to trees like delicate constellations, and yellow drapes billowed softly in the summer breeze. The aroma of kebabs, biryani, and gajar ka halwa floated in the air, mingling with rose petals scattered across the marble floors. Silver bells were tied to the backs of chairs,

chiming gently every time someone laughed or leaned in to speak.

Aira arrived with Ina and Anya, each wrapped in delicate hues. Aira wore a deep maroon kurta with gota detailing, her hair braided and pinned with tiny jasmine flowers. Ina had gone for a pastel blue lehenga with mirror work that caught the light with every turn, and Anya had chosen an emerald, green sharara that made her look like a walking poetry verse.

Noor, always effortlessly elegant, wore a mustard yellow saree with a thin golden border, her eyes rimmed with kohl. And then there was Sameera, glowing, radiant, surreal. She wore a blush pink ensemble, her dupatta heavily embroidered, a maang tikka resting on her forehead, and bangles jingling like tiny whispers of celebration.

Hasan stood beside her in a cream sherwani with subtle embroidery. He looked nervous, but his eyes didn't leave Sameera for long. There was something grounding about the way they looked at each other, as if they were already married in a secret ceremony only their hearts had attended.

Relatives arrived with gifts wrapped in shimmering paper and tissue. Friends posed for selfies under a handmade sign that read: "Sameera weds Hasan – Love, Light, Laughter."

There was laughter, teasing, and chaos.

The food was nothing short of a feast. Plates of seekh kebabs and tandoori paneer, bowls of creamy korma, roomali rotis being made live in one corner. Children

darted around the dessert table, stealing motichoor laddoos and licking frosting off cupcakes.

And then, the dancing began. Anya led the first round, dragging Ina along, both of them laughing uncontrollably. Aira watched, smiling, until Noor pulled her onto the makeshift dance floor. Even Hasan joined them for a bit before being teased mercilessly by his friends.

When the lights finally dimmed and the guests began leaving, the Friends rushed to Sameera's room like a post-midnight ritual. They all jumped onto the bed, Sameera still in her engagement outfit, jewelry slightly askew and her lipstick smudged.

"Let's open the gifts!" Ina shouted.

One by one, they unwrapped crockery sets, saris, envelopes full of money, personalized art, and letters from relatives who couldn't make it. Anya passed comments on each one, "Basic." "So elegant!" "Oh my God, is this real silver?"

And then the conversation spilled into tea, actual and metaphorical.

Aira sipped from her cup and casually said, "I'm leaving for Delhi tomorrow."

Everyone paused.

"What? Delhi?" Noor asked.

"Passport issue," Aira said, trying to sound casual.

"Why passport?" Anya narrowed her eyes.

Sameera sat up straight, the bangle in her lap forgotten. "Aira, tell us!"

“I might be applying to universities abroad,” she said, almost in a whisper. “Oxford. Cambridge. Maybe Kingston.”

A beat of silence. And then,

“My God, I knew it!” Sameera shouted, hugging her. “This girl’s going international!”

“I’ll be a doctor in two years,” Sameera declared proudly. “And I’m marrying the one I love.”

“Noor’s doing her MBA in Mumbai,” Anya added.

“Ina has a Pinterest board for wedding décor even though she isn’t even dating anyone,” Noor teased.

“Anya is painting again,” Ina smiled. “She has a competition next week.”

“And Aira’s getting published,” Anya said softly.

They all looked at one another. Something in the air stilled. A tenderness. A realization.

“We’ve grown up,” Anya whispered. “We really have.”

And in that small, crowded room, surrounded by laughter and the scent of mehndi and old dreams coming true, they knew: the world was shifting.

And so were they.

Tomorrow, she would leave for Delhi. Then... who knows.

But tonight, she belonged here, in this house, this chaos, this orbit of laughter and legacy.

As the room quieted and Noor drifted to sleep, Aira lay on the mattress beside Sameera and Iraya, staring at the ceiling.

Her phone buzzed.

Rayaan: “Good luck with the madness. Missed your voice at today’s reading.”

Aira: “I was drowning in pink fabric and friend perfume.”

Rayaan: “That sounds like a poem.”

Aira:

“The scent of celebration.

The sound of old stories.

The stillness of goodbye in a girl’s quiet smile.”

She hit send, and stared into the night, heart full.

She didn’t know what was coming.

But maybe, just maybe, she was ready for it.

Chapter 42

The night was unusually still. No rain, no chaos. Just the hum of the ceiling fan above and the distant barking of dogs in the lane below. Aira sat on the floor of her room, laptop open, cursor blinking on a half-filled application form. “Statement of Purpose: Why do you want to study Literature at our institution?”

She had typed and deleted the sentence five times already. What do you write when your reasons aren't just academic? When literature was the only thing that didn't abandon you when the world did?

Her phone buzzed. It was a voice note from Rayaana.

“Hey, I was reading something tonight, Gibran, again. And I thought of you. You said once that poetry makes the ache sound beautiful. That stuck with me. Also... I was wondering if you ever found the letter I slipped into your journal the last day in Shimla. Just, curious.”

She hadn't. Or maybe she had avoided it on purpose.

Aira smiled and replied,

“No, I haven't read it. But I will tonight.”

A minute later, another message:

“You know, when I saw you at the poetry reading that first day, you looked like someone who had been through a war and still had the grace to write about flowers. That's rare.”

She didn't reply this time. She just stared at the screen for a long moment, letting the words melt into her bones.

Earlier that week, she had spent three days in Delhi because of the passport issues and to meet her girls.

She met Tanya and Rhea after nearly a year.

They met outside the blue gate of their old coaching institute, and for a few moments, none of them could speak. Tanya was the first to hug her, tightly, as if trying to patch up all that time had frayed. Rhea held her from behind, whispering, "You actually came back."

They walked through the same narrow lanes, past the chai tapri where they had once skipped lectures to sip tea and talk about Sylvia Plath and revolutions. The chaiwala recognized them. "Arrey, madam ji! Kitne dino baad?" he grinned.

The three of them just laughed. Tanya wiped her eyes.

They even visited the same metro station that they use to. The same stray dog was lying near the railing, Aira couldn't believe he was still there. Tanya named him "Faiz" years ago because he used to follow them after poetry readings.

"I missed this so much, it hurts," Aira whispered.

That evening, they sat in the park behind the old coffee shop, not as girls escaping the world, but as women who had lived through it and were still learning to dream again. Rhea held Aira's hand and said:

"Remember once I told you, if you ever came out of all that darkness, you'd be the strongest woman I know?"

You've come out, Aira. Maybe not fully. But I see you climbing. And I still stand by that."

Aira didn't say anything. She just leaned her head on Rhea's shoulder, and for the first time in months, felt safe.

Back home, that night, long after everyone had gone to sleep, Aira finally opened the letter Rayaana had left in her journal.

It read:

"Aira,

You speak like someone who's seen the dark and still chooses sunlight. That's not bravery, it's rebellion. And it's the kind of rebellion that changes the world in quiet, invisible ways.

If you ever doubt your voice, remember how it silenced a room full of strangers in Shimla.

—R."

She read it twice. Then three more times. Then, heart still fluttering, she opened a new tab on her laptop and typed:

"Top Literature Programs in the UK and Europe."

This time, she didn't hesitate.

The next morning, she sat with her father at the breakfast table. The room was quiet, and her mother was still asleep. She took a breath.

"Abbu... I want to apply for a literature course abroad."

He looked at her for a long moment, then said, "Outside India?"

“Yes. I’ve been reading about programs in the UK. Cambridge, maybe. Or Oxford. Or even Edinburgh.”

“Aira...” he sighed. “We can’t afford”

“I’ll try for scholarships,” she interrupted gently. “And if I don’t get in, I won’t lose anything. But if I do, Abbu... this could change everything.”

He didn’t reply immediately. But something in his eyes softened. “We’ll think about it. But promise me, you’ll be prepared, for everything that comes with it.”

“I promise.”

She smiled. It wasn’t a yes. But it wasn’t a no either.

That night, long after everyone had gone to sleep, Aira lay in bed, writing.

“To the girl I was,

You’re going to be okay. You’re not done becoming yet.

You’ll still get scared. You’ll still cry sometimes.

But you’ll also stand up. Again. And again.

One day, you’ll apply to a university that once felt impossible.

You’ll laugh with a boy who understands poetry the way you do.

You’ll drink cold coffee alone and feel whole.

One day, you’ll stop looking for home in people who broke you.

Because you’ll have become your own.”

She closed the journal, hugged it to her chest, and
whispered into the darkness—

“I’m proud of you.”

Chapter 43

The cursor blinked on her laptop screen. Aira's room was a quiet mess of papers, bookmarked poetry collections, scholarship brochures, and a half-drunk cup of cinnamon tea. Her fingers hovered over the keyboard, heart beating a little faster than usual. She had just completed the last paragraph of her Statement of Purpose.

She was applying. Not just to JNU. But beyond. Cambridge. Kingston. Heidelberg. Places where literature wasn't just studied but lived. Where history and rebellion and poetry mingled in the air, thick and aching like a monsoon cloud waiting to burst.

That night, Aira applied to four universities and three scholarships. Her heart felt lighter and heavier at once. She wasn't even sure which part of the world she belonged to, but maybe belonging wasn't the point anymore. Maybe it was about building something for herself, with her own hands, no matter where she stood.

The next morning, over breakfast, she told her father.

It wasn't dramatic. No shouting. Just a long pause after she said it, after she told him she had applied to universities abroad, and that it wasn't just a dream anymore.

"You'll go alone?" he asked.

"Yes Abbuu" she said softly.

He didn't say anything for a while. Then he put down his cup of tea and looked at her. "It's not that we don't trust

you, Aira. It's that we're scared of what we can't reach. What we can't protect you from."

She nodded. "I know. But I'm not asking to be protected. I'm asking to grow. And I think I finally believe that I can."

That night, her father walked into her room quietly, placed a small diary near her desk, an old one, from his college days. And said, without looking at her, "I didn't go when I had the chance. I hope you do."

Two nights later, she was at Noor's house. No occasion, no pressure, just her, Noor, Sameera, Anya, Ina, and Iraya. Pajamas. Lip balm. Ties loose and hearts a little more open than usual.

Sameera had taken off her engagement bangles and tossed them into her drawer. Her face was bare, free of foundation and lipstick. Just Sameera, the girl who once cried over a broken school ID card, now preparing to become someone's wife.

They all lay sprawled across the living room. Pillows like fortresses. Plates of leftover biryani and half-eaten chocolate pastries in front of them.

"I can't believe you're applying abroad," Ina said, munching chips.

"I can't believe I told Papa," Aira smiled. "I thought I'd choke halfway."

"You didn't," Sameera said. "You never do. You think you will, but you don't."

They spoke for hours, about boys they didn't love anymore, about dreams that had shapeshifted, about poetry, about Sameera's new in-laws who were

surprisingly decent, about Anya's job search, about Ina's crush on a boy who didn't know she existed, about Iraya's new obsession with Persian literature.

Noor sat up, pulled her knees to her chest and said, "We've changed so much."

"We've grown into the kind of women we used to admire," Anya whispered.

"No," Aira smiled, "we've grown into the kind of women we use to need."

There was silence. The soft kind. The kind that wraps around you like a sweater in early winter.

Sameera suddenly said, "Let's not wait for weddings to meet like this."

"Let's not wait for anything," Iraya added.

Aira looked around the room, her girls, her past, her anchors. And in her bones, she felt it again. The flight. The pull. The terrifying beauty of a life still unfolding.

She didn't know what would happen next. She only knew she was ready.

Outside, the stars watched through the window. Quiet, and burning.

Chapter 44

Some evenings are quieter than others, not because the world slows down, but because you begin to.

Aira sat on the edge of the old school swing, the rusted chains familiar beneath her fingers. It was a strange thing, how these places hadn't changed, but she had. Her feet brushed the ground lightly, a rhythm like breathing. The sun was bleeding orange over the horizon. She used to come here with Sameera and Noor when they were twelve. They'd bring fruit peels and bubblegum and dare each other to jump mid-swing.

Now the swings just creaked in the breeze.

It had been four days since she submitted her Cambridge application. Two since her father told her quietly at breakfast, "You're brave. I'm just scared. But we'll try."

And one since she'd started writing again, not poetry for the world, but little pieces only she would read. Sentences that didn't try to prove anything. Just existed.

That night, Anya called.

"Open the gate," Anya said. "I'm outside. And yes, I brought cheese balls."

Ten minutes later, they were sitting cross-legged on the terrace, a blanket wrapped around their knees. It had been a year of growing, of burning quietly, of watching other people celebrate while you stitched your own wounds in silence.

Anya looked at her and said, “You know... sometimes courage is just applying for something even when you think you don’t deserve it.”

Aira smiled faintly. “And loneliness is realizing you might still have to do it alone.”

Anya nudged her shoulder. “But you won’t. You’ve got people. You’ve got us. You’ve got you.”

Some dreams don’t die; they just begin to rest.

Aira sat by her window, the evening light tracing shadows on the floor. Her table was cluttered with poetry books, half-filled scholarship forms, and a yellow sticky note that simply read:

“You can’t do it all. But you can choose.”

It had been weeks since she’d fully admitted it to herself, she was letting go of UPSC. Not because she wasn’t capable. Not because she didn’t care. But because something else had begun to bloom. And this time, it wasn’t rooted in fear or proving herself. It was rooted in love. For literature. For words. For the self she was becoming.

Still, she mourned it.

For all those chai-fueled nights. For the newspaper clippings she annotated. For the old coaching center halls in Delhi, she had once walked into like a soldier.

That night, she wrote.

Dear UPSC,

I never thought I'd write to you like this — not from a place of failure, but peace.

You were never just an exam. You were the version of me that wanted to change the world by understanding it.

I gave you my anger, my purpose, my exhaustion. And you gave me structure. Identity.

But today, I am writing poems instead of essays. Loving stories instead of solving questions.

I thought I was betraying you by walking away. But maybe, I was only coming home.

Thank you for being my anchor, even if you are not my destination.

With love,

Aira.

Rayan had texted again.

“I know you’re busy. I won’t disturb anything. But I’ll be in your city this weekend. Could we talk? Just once.”

She didn’t know what she was expecting, distance, silence, or perhaps just the kind of emptiness that follows intense chapters.

But instead, there was this message.

Not a plea. Not a storm. Just a quiet knock.

And the strangest part?

She didn’t panic.

She smiled.

Not because she was hoping for anything. But because she was no longer scared of facing her past. Because she could finally look someone in the eye and say, I have changed, and I'm not sorry.

Later that evening, while texting Noor about an outfit for her next scholarship interview, Aira paused for a moment. The wind had picked up. Somewhere, a page turned on its own.

It was the beginning of a different kind of becoming.

Chapter 45

The café was warm and quiet, tucked into a leafy lane with brick walls and vines curling around the windows. Aira arrived early, dressed in a soft, off-white kurta, her braid falling lazily over one shoulder. She chose the table by the window, where the sunlight filtered in like honey.

Rayyan walked in a few minutes later, his navy shirt sleeves rolled up, his hair slightly tousled, a familiar calm in his presence. They greeted each other with soft smiles and ordered brunch, omelets, filter coffee, cinnamon pancakes. No grand conversations, no nervous tension. Just the gentle unfolding of comfort between two people.

They talked about books, memories of college, the strange ache of growing up. She told him about the poems she couldn't yet finish. He told her about his weekend walks through the old bookstores near the river. Time passed like it wasn't meant to be noticed.

In the evening, they wandered through familiar streets—narrow, cluttered, alive with scent and sound. Aira spotted her favorite pani puri stall and tugged his sleeve with childlike excitement. They stood by the cart, giggling, as the tangy water stung their tongues. She wiped her lips with the back of her hand and grinned. Rayyan watched her like she was the only poem worth remembering.

They kept walking.

Rain began slowly, like a song finding its first note. A drizzle that turned into a hush, then a curtain. Instead of

running, they stayed. Laughed. Let it soak them until their clothes clung to their skin, until the world blurred into grey and silver.

Someone's speaker in a window above played Ali Sethi. They both looked up.

"Ghazal time?" Rayyan asked, raising a brow.

Aira smirked. "Only if we promise to be off-key."

They sang softly, offbeat and imperfect, their voices blending into the rain. From Ali Sethi to Kaavish, their favorites unraveled in the quiet drizzle. When someone nearby played Tum se hi, Rayyan looked at her with mock seriousness.

"Tumse Hi from Jab We Met next," he said. "We should dance. Right here. Cinematic as hell."

Aira laughed, tossing her wet braid behind. "Too much rain, not enough script."

"Still," he whispered, stepping a little closer, voice lower now, "there's something about this moment. The sky forgiving. The streets empty. You. Me. And no one needing us anywhere else."

By the time they reached the park, the world had turned watercolor. The bench beneath the neem tree was soaked, but they sat anyway, drenched and silent.

Rayyan reached for her hand. No fanfare, no trembling. Just a quiet hold, like punctuation.

He looked at her with the rain sliding down his cheek and said, almost like a secret:

"Aira... I think I've loved you in every version of you I've met."

She didn't respond. Just blinked slowly.

"But I don't want to change your direction. I don't want to be another detour. I only want to walk beside you while you chase every fire, every freedom, every madness. If love means anything, it's that. Letting you be. Loving you still."

His words didn't explode. They settled.

And within her, something cracked gently open. Flashbacks flooded in, of hands that once gripped too tightly, of words used like chains, of a love that never let her breathe. The bruises of old affections. The trauma that sat in her spine like a lesson.

This moment was different.

It didn't ask her to choose.

It only asked her to be seen.

They sat in silence, the rain beginning to ease. Aira leaned her head gently on his shoulder. Not a promise. Just presence.

Later that night, Aira came home still smelling of rain. Her clothes were damp, her heart strangely light. She sat by her desk, opened her journal, and wrote:

"Some days arrive without warning and rewrite your past by how gently they hold your present.

He said he loves me. But did not ask to carry me. Only to walk beside me.

And I, for once, Felt the word 'love' Without fear."

She closed her journal. The rain outside had quieted. But inside her, Something new had begun.

Chapter 46

The next morning was unusually quiet. The sky held the pale grey of early monsoon, soft and uncertain. Aira sat curled up on the terrace of her house, holding a half-empty cup of chai that had long since gone cold. The air smelled of damp leaves and beginnings. Her phone buzzed gently in her lap.

Rhea: You alive or should I file a missing person's report?

Tanya: Spill. Now. What happened with Mr. Poetry in the Rain?

Aira smiled faintly and sighed. Moments later, a video call lit up the screen. She answered without thinking.

Tanya's face filled the screen, bright and curious. Rhea appeared beside her, hair messy, eyes alert.

"Well?" Tanya demanded. "You better not hold anything back."

Aira tucked a strand of damp hair behind her ear. "It was... unexpected. Beautiful, even. We had brunch at that tiny café near the old fort, walked around the city, had pani puri from my favorite stall. It started raining, and we didn't run for shelter. We just... kept walking. Singing Ali Sethi songs, switching to Kaavish. Then Rayyan looked at me and said, 'What if we danced right here to Tum Se Hi, like in a film?'"

Tanya squealed. "Cinematic! Oh my god."

Aira laughed softly. "I said there was too much rain and not enough script. But then, when we sat on that soaked bench under the neem tree, he looked at me and told me he loves me. Not with pressure. Not with conditions. He said he didn't want to interrupt my life, my dreams, but he just needed me to know."

Rhea gasped. "He sounds like a green flag wrapped in a rain-soaked kurta."

Tanya nodded in agreement. "A soft boy with depth. Honestly, rare."

Aira's smile faded a little. "But I don't know what to do. It was perfect, like something out of a film. But I'm still confused. There was no part of me that didn't feel seen, but there was also a part of me that wasn't ready to be held. I came home, wet and overwhelmed, and wrote in my journal because that's the only thing that made sense."

There was a pause on the call. A softness that stretched across cities.

Rhea leaned in, her voice gentler now. "Aira, choosing your dreams over love isn't selfish. It's brave. You're not breaking anyone's heart by telling your own truth. Just because someone is good, kind, and loving, doesn't mean you owe them your presence if you're still figuring out your path."

Tanya added, "You don't have to say yes just because it feels like the universe aligned everything. Sometimes the universe gives us gentle glimpses, not destinations. If Rayyan really is the one, he will understand. He will wait. He will walk beside you when you're ready, not ahead of you with expectations."

Aira looked down at her cup, the tea cold but still fragrant. "I think I needed to hear that. I keep wondering if I'm making a mistake by not saying yes immediately. But maybe the real mistake would be choosing something I'm not ready for, just because it feels good on the outside."

Rhea smiled. "Exactly. You don't owe anyone your future unless you feel completely free choosing it. And you're allowed to choose literature, poetry, new cities, scholarships, long walks, even loneliness, if that's what helps you bloom."

They talked for a while longer. About the rain. About Kingston. About Cambridge still not replying. About how love can be soft and still not be enough in the moment.

Later, Aira returned to her room. She changed into dry clothes, lit a candle by her window, and opened her journal again.

Dear world,

Yesterday, someone told me they love me. And for the first time, it didn't frighten me. But it didn't anchor me either.

There are cities I still want to walk alone in. Books I still want to write without explaining myself. Poems that haven't arrived yet. And dreams that don't fit into shared timelines.

Maybe love will catch up with me one day. Maybe it already has. But today, I am choosing the path that feels like breath. The one that makes my chest rise, not tighten.

And if he is the right one, he will find me there.

Aira was still lost somewhere in her dreams when her phone buzzed. It was an email from Kingston, Australia. For a while her eyes stay stucked on the phone and then she called Rhea and Tanya

Her eyes widened.

“What?” Rhea asked, leaning forward. “Don’t just stare, say something!”

“I... got the scholarship,” Aira whispered.

“WHAAAT?” both of them screamed in unison.

“For Kingston University. In Australia.”

Tanya literally squealed. “You mad genius! You’re going to live our dream. Books, cafes, vintage bookstores”

Aira laughed, a real one this time. “Cambridge hasn’t replied yet, but... this feels huge.”

“It is huge,” Rhea said, beaming. “Even if Cambridge doesn’t come through, this is the universe finally giving you a little push.”

They spoke for a few more minutes, Rhea teasing her, Tanya already planning a ‘farewell’ even though nothing was official yet. And then they hung up, leaving Aira in a cocoon of quiet joy and nervousness.

She went back to her room, sat on the bed, and opened her journal.

"Dear world,"

"I know I've disappointed a few people by not choosing the predictable. I know some dreams don't end with applause or certificates. Like UPSC. It was mine once. But I fell in love with something else — the way words make me feel, the way stories keep me alive."

"So, I'm choosing what chose me back."

"And as for love..."

She paused, then smiled to herself.

"Maybe love isn't always about staying. Maybe it's also in the bravery of leaving when you're not ready. Maybe it's in not lying to someone who sees a future with you, when you haven't even learned how to stay present with yourself."

Aira types a message to Rayyan

"Hey... I just wanted to share something important. I got the scholarship.

For Kingston University. Australia.

It's not official yet, but it's real. It's happening. My inbox doesn't feel like a dead-end anymore.

Somehow, I felt like you'd understand what this means to me. And what it might change."

Aira stared at the message for a moment, hovering over the send button. She took a deep breath, then tapped "send."

Seconds later, her phone rang. It was Rayyan.

She answered.

"Kingston?" he said, his voice already smiling. "Australia? Aira, that's incredible."

There was warmth in his tone. No hesitation. Just pride.

"I didn't know how to tell you," Aira admitted. "It's what I've been working towards. But now that it's here, it feels like I'm standing between two worlds."

Rayyan was silent for a second, but not because he didn't understand. He was listening.

Then softly, he said, "Love can wait, Aira. Kingston cannot."

Her breath caught.

He continued, "If this is meant to happen, us, it will happen. Maybe not now. Maybe not in the way we imagined. But if there's truth in it, it will return in a form that makes sense. And even if it doesn't, I don't want you looking back wondering what the sky felt like in another hemisphere."

She didn't speak, but her silence said everything.

"I'm proud of you," Rayyan added. "Not just for getting in. But for daring to go."

Aira felt tears prick the edge of her lashes. Not out of sadness. But gratitude. A quiet kind of love. One that didn't bind.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"For what?" he asked gently.

"For not making me choose."

"Maybe love isn't always about staying. Maybe it's also in the bravery of leaving when you're not ready. Maybe it's in not lying to someone who sees a future with you, when you haven't even learned how to stay present with yourself."

She closed her journal. The world still didn't feel certain, but it finally felt possible.

Chapter 47

That evening, Aira sat at the edge of the dining table, her fingers tracing the rim of a cup. Her father was reading the newspaper, and her mother was in the kitchen finishing off the tadka for the dal. The clinking of spoons, the soft sizzle, everything felt too loud.

This wasn't new. But what Aira had to say... was.

She looked at her father.

Do it now.

"Abbu," she said, carefully. "Can I talk to you both?"

He looked up. Her mother emerged from the kitchen, wiping her hands on the edge of her dupatta. Aira swallowed.

"I got a scholarship. For literature."

They didn't respond. She continued.

"For Kingston University. In Australia."

Her mother blinked. "Australia?"

"It's a good program. They've accepted me with partial funding and a living stipend. It's not Cambridge, I mean, I haven't heard back from Cambridge yet, but... this is huge, Amma."

Her father set the paper down. "And you applied for this without telling us?"

Aira hesitated, then nodded. "I needed to know if I even stood a chance before I brought it to you."

A long pause followed. Her mother looked at her father. Her father looked tired, not angry.

“How long is the course?” he asked.

“Two years. With the option to extend for research.”

“And then?”

“I’ll see. Maybe teach. Maybe write. But I’ll be doing what I love.”

Her mother finally spoke. “But Australia is so far...”

“I know,” Aira said gently. “But Delhi was far too, once. And we made it through that.”

This time, something shifted.

Her father leaned back, exhaled slowly. “I won’t lie, this scares me. But... I’ve seen you work for this. If this is your path, we’ll figure it out.”

Aira blinked back the emotion rising in her throat.

“We’ll talk to your uncle about the finances,” he added. “Let’s look at everything carefully.”

And just like that, not fireworks, not fanfare, but quiet permission. A rare understanding.

Aira went back to her room and immediately texted Tanya and Rhea.

Aira: Told them. They didn’t scream. They didn’t explode. They actually listened.

Tanya: WHATTTT. I’m proud of them. And you. Let’s goooo!

Rhea: I knew it. The world is shifting, babe. Bit by bit.

Aira fell back onto her pillow, letting the moment sink in. Then came a knock at the door.

It was her mother, holding a plate of food. "You forgot to eat," she said, placing it by the bed. "You'll need your strength. Literature girls have to be brave, no?"

Aira smiled, holding back tears. She nodded.

That night, as she sat journaling again, she wrote:

"Home didn't change overnight. But today, it cracked open, just enough for light to get in."

Chapter 48

Laughter filled the veranda at Noor's place. The fairy lights above them shimmered gently, tangled between branches like fireflies caught mid-dance. A large table was cluttered with bowls of fries, melting ice cubes in paper cups, half-eaten slices of cake, and hands waving excitedly with each new story.

Sameera was the loudest that evening.

"I swear, if I have to attend one more 7 a.m. hospital round, I'll start diagnosing patients in my sleep," she said, half-laughing, half-crying into her Coke. "But guys, I'll be Dr. Sameera soon. Officially."

Noor, radiant even in her loose kurta and no makeup, nudged her with a mock eye-roll. "You already act like one. No one's allowed to even cough around you anymore."

Everyone burst into laughter.

Aira sat back quietly, watching them, Sameera glowing with pride, Noor stealing glances at her MBA entrance results, Ina texting someone and smiling softly, Anya and Araya play-fighting over who would be taller by next year. It was chaotic. Loud. Beautiful.

They had grown up.

And yet, they hadn't.

"I can't believe it," Noor whispered at one point, turning to Aira. "You applied abroad. You actually did it."

Aira smiled, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. “Yeah. Kingston is a real chance. The program’s strong. And I’ll get to read literature the way I always wanted.”

“But...?” Sameera prompted, reading her face like only she could.

“But it’s not Cambridge,” Aira admitted softly. “It was my dream. And I haven’t heard back yet. So maybe... I don’t know.”

No one pushed further. They didn’t need to.

Later that night, after everyone had drifted to the guest room mattresses, half-wrapped in blankets and crumbs, Aira lay awake on the swing by the balcony, her phone screen casting a pale light on her face.

She let the phone fall beside her

The notification slid down her screen like a sigh.

“Thank you for your application to the University of Cambridge...

We regret to inform you...”

Aira didn’t read the rest. She didn’t need to. The words echoed anyway.

She stared at the screen for a long time. The chai on her desk had gone cold, untouched since morning. Outside, a dog barked somewhere in the alley, indifferent to rejection letters.

Her hands moved instinctively to her phone. She opened her messages. Typed.

“Cambridge said no.

I thought I had made peace with whatever outcome. But it still stings.

I don't know why it hurts this much.

Maybe because somewhere deep inside, I still equated it with worth."

She paused. Then added:

"Anyway. Just needed to say it out loud to someone who wouldn't give me a motivational quote in return."

She hit send.

Rayyan saw the message within seconds. And then the phone rang.

Aira stared at the screen, then answered.

"Cambridge doesn't get to decide who you are," Rayyan said, without a hello.

Aira's throat tightened. She didn't respond. She just listened.

"I know what that kind of rejection feels like. Not because you need their approval to be great, but because somewhere, we give these institutions too much power. We let them shape the mirror."

Aira let out a small, unsteady breath. "It's stupid, I know. I got Kingston. That's huge. But this one... it still hurts."

"It's not stupid," he said softly. "But let me say this—success doesn't come dressed in names like Cambridge or Oxford. It comes in moments like these. Where you don't let a label redefine your magic."

Aira wiped a silent tear on her sleeve.

“You got Kingston. You earned Kingston. A place that chose you not for a name, but for your words, your story, your voice. That’s success, Aira.”

His voice dropped, gentler now. “So let it sting. But don’t let it settle.”

There was a pause.

“I’m still proud of you,” he added. “Always.”

Aira looked out the window, where the sky was beginning to clear after an overcast morning.

“I’m glad you called,” she whispered.

“I always will,” he said.

And somehow, in that moment, she didn’t feel like she had lost anything at all.

She cried, for the girl who once thought her dreams only mattered if they came with labels like Cambridge and IAS officer. For the hours she spent pouring herself into essays and books and hopes. For the little thrill she allowed herself to feel every time she imagined walking those stone corridors.

But as the wind rustled the leaves and laughter still echoed faintly from inside, she also smiled.

This wasn’t like the old days.

This wasn’t self-hate.

This wasn’t collapse.

This was grief.

And growth.

She sat up slowly, wiped her face, and opened a new page in her journal.

“Cambridge was a dream. But Kingston is my chance.

I’m not going to waste it mourning what didn’t arrive.

This time, I’m celebrating what did.”

And she meant it.

Fully.

Chapter 49

They weren't born fearless.

They were born in silence, rooms that demanded obedience, societies that prized over powerful, and households where the tea was always served by the daughters.

But somewhere between their childhood prayers and college corridors,

They chose to become thunder.

Not all at once.

Sometimes, the rebellion was small,

A no that trembled, a dream scribbled in the margins of a science notebook, a gaze held longer than allowed.

But the girls held each other.

They had met in summer's golden sprawl, classmates once, neighbours maybe, but soon, inseparable. Sameera, Noor, Anya, and Aira.

Each with a story bruised by expectation. Each with a fire nobody taught them how to carry. So, they learned together.

They weren't sisters by blood.

But they became something fiercer:

A chorus of becoming.

Sameera, the quiet storm, always knew she was meant to heal.

She stitched her wounds into purpose, became a doctor, and chose love not for its convenience, but for its truth.

He was an engineer with soft eyes, who promised to build a world where she would never have to shrink.

Noor, the girl who was taught to cover her dreams before her hair.

She fought the longest battle.

With her silence. With her fears. With a home that wasn't cruel, just unaware. And when she got into her MBA college in Mumbai, it wasn't just admission.

It was emancipation.

Anya, the wild one in soft clothing.

She dipped her pain in colour, made art that didn't ask for permission.

What started as sketches in the back of textbooks became canvases kissed by dusk and defiance.

Now, people paid to feel what she once had no words for.

And Aira...

The girl with ink in her veins.

She once whispered poems to her pillow. Now, she reads them aloud on stages that echo back.

She's leaving for Kingston soon, not to escape, but to arrive.

To study literature in a country that doesn't know her shadows, only her glow.

But the story isn't about their careers.

It's about how they showed up.

When Noor was told to say yes to a man she barely knew, Sameera held her hand.

When Anya's paintings were laughed at, Aira called her an artist before anyone else did.

When Aira doubted herself, Noor reminded her, you write like you've lived a thousand lives, Aira.

And when Sameera's engagement brought back fear of losing freedom, Anya whispered,

You're not giving up your wings. You're choosing someone who flies beside you.

This was not a friendship.

It was an uprising.

A rebellion painted in pastels and henna, chai stains and shared secrets.

Together, they taught the world that women don't need saving.

They need space.

They need to be believed when they say, I want more.

They built that space for each other.

Laughed through heartbreak. Held grief like prayer.

Told the truth even when it hurt.

And in the end, not the end of their stories, just this chapter.

They became the women they needed as girls.

Not perfect. Not finished.

But free

Four girls. One promise:

If we rise, we rise together.

Chapter 50

The house was unusually quiet for a Saturday.

Aira sat cross-legged on her bed, surrounded by half-packed suitcases. Books stacked neatly in one corner, shawls folded carefully by Dadi earlier that morning, and a small pouch of handwritten letters from her Friends, “for the lonely nights,” Anya had whispered when she gave it to her.

Tomorrow she would board a plane to Kingston. Tomorrow she would leave this version of her life behind.

Today was for holding onto it a little longer.

Downstairs, her parents moved softly, her father pretending not to check on her every five minutes, her mother cooking all her favorites without saying much. There had been arguments, of course. Hesitations. But now, there was pride, quiet, hesitant, but real.

That evening, the air smelled of damp earth and something unspoken.

Aira was walking back from a short errand near the park close to her colony, the familiar path lined with bougainvillea and soft echoes of children playing in the distance. She wasn’t expecting anyone. But as she turned the corner toward her gate, she saw him.

Rayyan.

He stood there like a quiet punctuation to the day, hands tucked into his pockets, eyes steady. Aira paused, startled and still.

He stepped forward and handed her a book. A paperback. *The Waves* by Virginia Woolf.

“For when Kingston feels too quiet,” he said, voice gentle.

Aira looked at the cover, then at him. Her heart thudded softly, like a memory returning in slow motion.

“You remembered,” she said, brushing her thumb over the worn edges.

“Of course I did.”

They stood there, just beyond the gate, in the fading light of a day that had almost slipped into night. The world around them dimmed, but the moment between them glowed with a soft, unspoken clarity.

Rayyan shook his head, his voice low but certain. “I was hoping we could be something more. But maybe we were already everything we were meant to be. And that’s still something beautiful, Aira.”

There was no ache in his voice, only a quiet acceptance. And in that stillness, something softened between them, not closure, not continuation, but something honest.

He glanced up at the twilight sky, then back at her. “We don’t have to say goodbye. Not really. Write to me. Mail me poems you discover in rainy cafés. Send me a picture when you find a bookstore that feels like home. Call me when Kingston feels too big, or too small.”

Aira smiled, the corners of her mouth tugging with a kind of ache. “And you? Don’t disappear. Share your

scribbles. Tell me when you find a line in some old book that reminds you of a street in Delhi, or a girl who used to talk about the universe like it owed her an explanation.”

He laughed, soft and full of memory. “Deal.”

They stood there for a few more seconds. Not rushing. Not holding on. Just existing together in that sliver of evening.

Aira took a step back toward her gate. The book still clutched to her chest.

Rayyan looked at her like he was imprinting the moment.

“You’re going to be brilliant there, Miss Literature,” he said.

She held his gaze. “And you’ll be here. Rooted. Writing. Living. I hope both our stories unfold exactly how they should.”

He nodded. “If the chapters align again, you know where to find me.”

Aira turned toward home, the scent of rain still in the air, the warmth of parting not quite a farewell.

And from behind her, she heard his voice one last time.

“Good luck, Aira.”

She looked back and smiled. “Thank you. For everything.”

That night, after dinner, her Friends came over one last time. They didn’t cry, not immediately. They teased her about becoming too foreign to eat biryani. They played antakshari. Noor gifted her a scarf. Ira said she’d be next to visit. Sameera hugged her a little too tight.

And when everyone had gone, and the house returned to silence, Aira lay in bed staring at the ceiling.

No tears.

Only breath.

Only the realization that everything she'd lost had led her here.

To this peace.

To this stillness.

To this new sky.

Chapter 5 I

The house was full again, laughter echoing down the hallways, bags half-zipped and phones being passed around for photos. Tanya was trying to fix Rhea's eyeliner in the mirror, while Ayaan (Ayra's younger brother) was yelling from the verandah that someone had stolen his shoes. Noor and Anya were running around with bowls of raita and salad, and Dadi was sitting in her chair, quietly watching all of them like she was trying to memorize every face.

Aira stood in the middle of the chaos, still as a breath.

Her room was still hers, just cleaner than usual. Her books stacked, her journals packed. The windows open. The bed made. But the walls remembered everything. They remembered the girl who had once collapsed on the floor, shaking, empty. The one who had once looked at the ceiling fan and wondered what it would feel like to stop existing. The girl who had once cried into her pillow until she couldn't breathe.

But this wasn't that girl anymore.

This was the girl who had survived. Who had grown her strength slowly, like a sapling pushing through cement. Who had stitched herself back together with poetry, people, chai, and kindness.

Her mother called from the kitchen, "Aira, come taste the raita. I've added pudina this time."

Aira walked in to see the countertop full — mutton biryani, chicken korma, parathas, dahi vada, and three

kinds of sweets. Her mother's eyes were glassy, but her hands kept working. She wiped them on the corner of her dupatta and turned to Aira with a soft smile.

"You'll eat properly there, na? I know foreign food is all weird."

Aira nodded, her throat suddenly too tight to speak.

Her mother reached up and tucked a stray strand of hair behind Aira's ear, something she hadn't done in years. "Tum bohot badal gayi ho," she whispered. "Par phir bhi mere liye wahi chhoti Aira ho."

Aira hugged her. Tightly. Like she could hold onto her warmth forever.

Every ten minutes, Aira found herself back in her room, just standing there, touching the walls, running her fingers along the bookshelf. This room had been her battlefield. And now it would wait quietly for her return.

That evening, everyone gathered for dinner in the courtyard. The fairy lights Noor had insisted on were strung across the trees, and someone had brought a portable speaker that was playing old Kaavish songs. Tanya sat beside Aira, squeezing her hand now and then, while Rhea kept making jokes to keep everyone from crying.

But even in the laughter, there were pauses. Long silences where eyes met and said everything words couldn't.

Aira looked around, at the family who had once misunderstood her, at the Friends who had carried her through the dark, at the friends who had never left, and she knew something deep inside her heart was being sealed.

This wasn't just a goodbye to a house.

It was a goodbye to the version of herself who had barely survived within its walls.

But tonight, she was leaving not as a broken girl, but as a woman who had found her fire.

She opened her journal and started writing,

"Why is it always us?

The women who must fold.

Who must explain, apologize, justify.

Why are we the ones asked to choose between our dreams and love, between our hearts and our homes?

Why must we carry the burden of both desire and duty, like two suitcases we are never allowed to drop?

I've seen it too often, the girl who wanted to study abroad, but said yes to marriage because her parents said, "what will people say?"

The woman who gave up writing poetry because her partner called it "a hobby."

The one who loved fiercely but left the boy behind because he couldn't carry her dreams without cracking.

And I wonder, do men ever have to choose like this?

*Does anyone ever tell them their ambition is too loud?
That love will walk away if they don't kneel fast enough?*

Do they lie awake wondering whether becoming who they are means losing who they love?

But I didn't bend this time.

I didn't shrink myself to fit into someone else's comfort.

I stayed.

With my words.

With my stubbornness.

With the version of me I've been trying to grow into.

And this is not just for me.

This is for every woman who was told she was asking for too much when all she asked for was everything she deserved.

To the girl who still dreams in silence, to the woman reading rejection letters and holding tears behind her teeth

Don't give up.

Don't marry the silence when your voice was meant to be thunder.

We were never too much.

We were just never given enough space.

So, take it.

Take the plane, take the page, take the life that feels like yours.'

And if they call you selfish, smile gently.

You are not selfish.

You are becoming free."

Chapter 52

The morning was strangely quiet.

The bags were zipped. The passport safely tucked in. Her favorite book of poetry sat in her backpack, just next to a tiny journal Dadi had insisted to carry, “for when the world gets too loud.”

Outside, the sun was rising slowly, as if it, too, didn’t want her to go.

Everyone was still asleep. Or pretending to be. Except Dadi.

Aira sat on the floor by her bedside, her head on Dadi’s lap, just like she had done all her life. Dadi’s fingers moved through her hair gently, like a rhythm she never forgot.

“You’ll write to me?”

“Every week,” Aira whispered.

“And you’ll keep your chai addiction alive?”

“Of course.”

They both smiled, that small, quiet, knowing kind of smile.

When the taxi came, the house slowly began to wake up. Sameera hugged her first, tightly, her voice breaking.

“I know this is huge for you,” she said, “and I’m proud. But... it hurts, Aira. It really does.”

“I know,” Aira whispered, “me too.”

Her father carried her suitcase down the stairs in silence. Her mother pressed a warm paratha into her hand, wrapped in foil. "Eat it on the plane," she said. "Or cry into it, whatever suits you." Then she kissed her forehead. It wasn't dramatic. Just real. Just her.

Tanya, Rhea, Sameera, Noor, Anya, all there, waving, crying, teasing her to "come back with a gora boyfriend" and then telling her not to come back at all unless she's famous.

As the taxi pulled out, Aira looked back once - at the narrow lane, at the balcony, at the pale blue door that had seen her at her worst, and she smiled.

Because this wasn't running away anymore.

This was leaving with purpose.

At Delhi Airport

Rayyan's voice rang out just as Aira was wheeling her suitcase toward Gate 7.

"Wait!"

She turned, and there he was, slightly breathless, holding a brown paper bag and a copy of *The Prophet* by Kahlil Gibran.

"I had to come," he said, stepping closer. "I couldn't let you leave without a goodbye."

She smiled. Her eyes stung. "Rayyan, how did you even know?"

"My poetic instincts," he grinned, then sobered. "I also brought you chai. Not airport chai. Tapri wali."

He handed her the paper cup like it was something sacred.

They sat down on a nearby bench. The silence between them was warm, like shared sunlight.

“You’re going to be brilliant there,” he said.

She looked down at the cup, then up at him. “You taught me how to see the world in metaphor. I’ll write about you. One day.”

“And I’ll read every word like it’s mine.”

She hugged him. Tight. It wasn’t dramatic. It wasn’t theatrical. But it was full, of everything unsaid.

Inside the Departure Lounge

She sat by the window, the city slowly shrinking behind the glass. Her fingers reached into her backpack and pulled out her journal. She flipped open to a blank page and began writing — not for herself this time, but for every woman who’d ever sat where she was sitting.

Letter to Every Girl Who Dared to Dream

“To the girl hiding poems under her pillow,

To the one holding back tears in staff meetings,

To the woman who wants more than survival —

You are allowed.

To want oceans, and not kitchens.

To wear silver Jhumki's and speak thunder.

To kiss, to cry, to question.

To exist , not as a sacrifice, but as a spark.

They will tell you that ambition is too sharp for a woman.

That dreams have expiry dates.

That liberation is a phase.

Let them talk.

You have mountains to move.

And skies to choose.

Go.

Loudly. Softly.

But always —Go”

As the flight was announced, Aira typed one last message on her phone and sent it to her family group chat.

“Boarding now. Thank you for choosing me over fear. I promise to make you proud, not as your obedient daughter, but as the woman you helped to set free”.

Love, Aira.

On the plane, she took out the tiny journal and wrote:

> To the girl I was —

You made it.

I know how much you wanted to give up. I know the nights you screamed into pillows, how you thought healing would never come. I know how much you hated yourself.

But look , we made it.

We didn't just survive. We found joy.

We fell in love with ourselves again.

We forgave. We grew.

And we still carry everyone we love with us , in words, in smells, in soft biryani-colored memories.

You were never weak. You were just tired.

And now , we begin again.

Love,

Aira.

She folded the page, slipped it into the back pocket of her journal, and looked out of the window.

Somewhere in the sky between two continents, a girl was writing a new story.

And this time, she was the one holding the pen.

Epilogue

Somewhere in a quiet dorm room overseas, a girl wakes before the sun.

She brews tea , the way her Dadi taught her , letting it steep, dark and slow.

The windows are fogged. The sky, soft and grey.

And yet, her heart feels warm.

The world outside is foreign ,new faces, accents she's still learning to understand, streets that don't carry her name.

But within her, there's a city she built herself.

One of memory. One of survival.

She still thinks of home when she sees jasmine flowers.

She still saves funny memes to send to Sameera and Noor.

She still hears Rhea's voice when she's mad at the world.

Tanya's laughter lingers in her ears whenever she discovers a cozy café.

And Rayyan ,

He still texts her now and then.

Simple, quiet things.

"Did you eat today?"

"Saw a bookshop that reminded me of you."

"How's the sky on your side?"

Sometimes he calls. Just to ask if she's lonely. If the silence there is too wide.

He never asks her to return. Never asks for more.

But in his voice, there's a steadiness.

A thread that never pulled tight, never snapped. Just stayed.

Soft. Present. Real.

Sometimes, when no one is watching, she cries.

Not out of sorrow — but out of softness.

Because she knows now: it's okay to feel deeply and still be strong.

She's writing again.

She's reading things that feel like home.

She's learning — not just from books, but from being alone.

From falling apart, and gently, patiently, putting herself back together.

This is not the end of her story.

It never was.

Because healing is not a straight line.

It is a spiral —

You may return to the same ache, but each time, you rise with softer eyes.

With more wisdom.

With more grace.

To the girl she was —

She sends a prayer every night.

And to the woman she is becoming —

She offers gentleness, laughter, and an open sky.

Acknowledgment

First, I want to appreciate myself for surviving, for choosing to stay, and for turning my pain into something meaningful. For every moment I wanted to give up but didn't. This book exists because I kept going, even when it felt impossible.

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And finally, to you, the reader, thank you for holding these words with me. If you found a piece of yourself here, know that you are not alone.