

What We Never Were

TRACING THE SHADOWS OF
A LIFE UNLIVED

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Chapter 1

The Way We Were Almost Something

She hadn't seen him in nine years.

Not in person. Not even by accident.

And in a city like Delhi, where lives intersect over the same broken pavements, under the same peeling billboards and through familiar bookstores that, in itself, was almost poetic.

She had imagined this moment more times than she cared to admit.

At night, while brushing her teeth.

During metro rides with strangers pressed too close.

Sometimes while stirring her son's daal, the kind that took just enough time to let her mind wander.

She'd always pictured it with some cinematic flair. A bump of the shoulder. A clatter of books. The rustle of wind carrying his name before he turned.

Instead, it happened like most real things do quietly, inconveniently, without music or permission.

It was a Thursday. Late afternoon.

The air carried the warmth of an autumn sun reluctant to leave.

She had stepped into a tiny bookstore nestled between a dusty stationery shop and a shawarma cart whose scent clung to her dupatta.

She wasn't looking for anything in particular. She rarely was these days. But her hands always found the poetry section. They always had.

And then, there he was.

He was standing by the poetry shelf, his hand resting on the spine of *The Prophet*, as if it belonged to him.

The other hand was casually tucked into his jeans. He looked older but not older in the way age makes you look tired. Older in the way stories make you look deeper. His hair was longer, messier than she remembered. His shirt sleeves rolled up, just like in college revealing forearms that once made her wonder how something could look strong and kind at the same time.

She froze, a book half-pulled from the shelf, her fingers still resting on its cover. Her breath caught not in panic, but in that quiet, suspended way memories sometimes return: uninvited and undemanding.

He hadn't seen her yet.

And in that half-second that impossible slice of time she thought about walking away.

Not out of shame. Not fear.

But because she wasn't sure she could meet his eyes without becoming someone she no longer was.

She had spent years burying that version of herself the one that waited for messages, that memorized meanings in silences, that called his name in her prayers without ever saying it aloud.

But it was too late.

He looked up. Their eyes met.

It took less than a second to unravel nine years.

"Hey," he said, his voice low, careful like the past needed to be spoken softly.

"Hi," she replied, heart louder than her voice.

They stood like that for a few seconds not awkwardly, but in a kind of stunned stillness.

Two people who had once been part of each other's every day, now standing like footnotes in their own story.

He smiled first.

"You still haunt poetry shelves," she said, breaking the silence.

"And you still wear sweaters two sizes too big," he replied.

She looked down at the navy sweater wrapping around her like comfort.

She smiled. "Some things stick."

"Yeah," he said. "They do."

They ended up in the café tucked at the back of the bookstore.

It hadn't changed much.

Same chalkboard menu with uneven writing.

Same sleepy cat curled under the counter, suspicious of movement.

Same cracked tabletop that used to wobble when they leaned on it too hard.

He ordered without asking lemon tea, no sugar.

When it arrived, she stared at the cup, unsure whether to laugh or cry.

"You remember," she said softly.

"You used to say it helped you think," he shrugged.

She nodded. "I switched to green tea now."

He made a mock-wince. "That's almost betrayal."

And she laughed an unguarded laugh, the kind that echoed like something had opened.

They both looked slightly startled by it.

Conversation flowed too easily.

They caught up on jobs and places, mutual friends and lost contacts.

She told him she was freelancing now writing content, editing manuscripts.

He told her he was working with a creative agency. Still writing songs sometimes.

Still playing guitar.

Still refusing to call himself a musician.

They didn't talk about the years they missed.

They didn't mention the relationships that came and went.

The heartbreaks, the therapy, the days that began in silence and ended the same way.

Some silences are too sacred to fill.

Some wounds are visible only between the lines.

"So... you're still here?" he asked, stirring his coffee.

"For now," she said. "Moved back a few months ago. Needed a change."

He didn't press.

She didn't offer more.

"And you?"

He looked down at his cup. "Still married."

There was a pause. A long one.

"To someone you love?" she asked gently, not as a woman, but as an old friend.

He exhaled slowly. "She's a good person. Kind. Steady."

That was all he said.

That was all she needed to hear.

He wasn't wearing a ring.
But she knew about his life in fragments.
Photos she had stumbled upon accidentally.
Wedding pictures framed in mutual timelines.
A tagged post at a hill station.
A birthday celebration with smiling faces and curated captions.
She never stalked.
But she had seen just enough to know.

They finished their drinks slowly.
"I didn't think I'd run into you," he said.
"Same," she replied.
"You look the same," he added after a moment.
"I feel different," she said, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear.
He looked at her, as if seeing her for the first time. "That's not a bad thing."
They walked out together into a sky that had turned silver.
Clouds hung like unfinished thoughts.
He hesitated at the edge of the pavement.
"We should do this again."
She tilted her head. "This?"
"Coffee. Talking. Not pretending we don't know each other."
She didn't answer right away.

She had learned not to trust moments that arrived too gently.

But then, she nodded.

And sometimes, that's enough.

That night, after she'd put Kabir to bed, read him his favorite bedtime story twice, and kissed the crown of his head more times than necessary, she sat by the window and looked at her phone.

It lit up with a message.

I forgot how easy it was. You haven't changed.

She stared at it for a long time.

She typed:

Some of us survive by staying soft. Some of us change to survive.

Then she deleted it.

What she sent instead was simple:

It was good to see you too.

She lay awake longer than usual.

Not because she was excited.

But because she was unsettled.

There are people who belong to a version of you that doesn't exist anymore.

But when they return even for a moment that version peeks out, asking if it's safe to breathe again.

She closed her eyes and tried to anchor herself.

Not to the memory.

Not to him.

But to the life she had built after.

The next morning, she made lemon tea for the first time in months.

It didn't taste the same.

But she drank it anyway.

Because maybe remembering wasn't about sweetness.

Maybe it was about learning how to live with the aftertaste.

Chapter 2

When You Don't Say Goodbye Properly

The second meeting wasn't an accident.

He messaged her two days after the bookstore.

"Coffee again? Or are we pretending the universe didn't nudge us?"

She had stared at the message longer than necessary.

Not because she didn't want to say yes but because she knew saying yes was a door.

A door that didn't belong to her to open.

But some doors don't knock twice.

"Fine. But I'm choosing the place this time."

And so they met. Again.

It was a Thursday afternoon at a café tucked into a narrow street in Nizamuddin East the kind with leafy plants in brass pots and soft jazz humming from somewhere no one could locate. The walls were a dull blue, the kind of blue that always felt like dusk, even in sunlight.

He arrived first.

He always did.

She walked in five minutes later, in a pale green kurta and no makeup, her hair tied back carelessly. She looked like comfort. Like someone who had forgotten to be seen and wasn't sure if that was a strength or a wound.

"You're late," he said.

"You're early," she countered.

They smiled.

She ordered chamomile tea. He stuck to black coffee.

There were no mentions of spouses, or exes, or the line they both knew they were toeing. Just talk. Easy, warm, low-pressure talk. But between the laughter and the memories was something neither of them admitted: the silence that lives inside marriages that run out of words.

He asked her what she'd been reading. She asked him if he still played the guitar. They argued about old movie soundtracks and childhood board games. They remembered the small things, the specific things her love for stationery, his habit of doodling in margins, the time she had cried during a college play for reasons no one else understood.

It wasn't nostalgia.

It was a remembering of who they were before they forgot themselves.

Outside, the sky turned silver with the promise of early winter. They walked in companionable silence, pausing when they reached a turn.

"I should go," she said. "I have work."

He nodded. "So do I."

But neither moved.

There it was that hesitation again. That quiet clumsiness of not wanting to leave but not having a reason to stay.

Finally, he said, "I missed this."

"You didn't even know it was missing," she replied.

He smiled. "Did you?"

She hesitated. Then nodded. "Yes."

That night, she didn't sleep easily.

Not because of guilt that would come later.

But because her mind kept replaying the way he looked at her when she spoke.

Like he had never heard her voice before.

Like he wanted to listen now.

And that was dangerous.

Because her heart had never learned to forget the sound of being wanted.

The next meeting was quicker.

A walk in Lodhi Garden on a Saturday afternoon.

She brought a flask of spiced tea. He brought samosas.

They sat under a gulmohar tree and watched people pass by families, runners, an old couple with matching walking sticks. It was quiet, even in the noise.

“I don’t know what I’m doing,” she said suddenly.

He didn’t ask what she meant. Just handed her a samosa.

“You’re here,” he said. “That’s something.”

She noticed the way he looked at her when she wasn’t speaking.

Not like someone revisiting the past.

But like someone noticing her for the first time.

He didn’t ask about her loneliness. But he saw it.

She didn’t ask about his wife. But she knew.

Some truths live between people before they’re ever spoken.

As they walked back toward the gate, he brushed his hand against hers.

It wasn’t accidental.

And she didn't pull away.

Later that evening, she wrote in her journal:

This is not an affair. Not yet.

But it is something that has no name.

And things without names grow wild.

Chapter 3

A Room with No Windows

They didn't meet every day.

But they started speaking every night.

It began with a message or two something about a film she'd watched, or a poem she'd read. Sometimes, just a photo of the sunset outside her balcony.

He would reply late. Sometimes with words. Sometimes with a voice note. His voice was always softer at night. It wrapped around her like warm breath on glass brief, foggy, tender.

She began to look forward to 11 p.m.

It wasn't about flirtation.

It wasn't even about loneliness.

It was about how he listened. How he stayed.

How he asked:

“What made you smile today?”

“When was the last time someone held your hand without needing something?”

“Do you ever feel like you’re watching your life happen from the outside?”

Questions like doorways.

And she walked through every one of them.

One night, as she lay on her side, staring at the ceiling fan circling above like a tired thought, he asked:

“Do you think there’s such a thing as the right person at the wrong time?”

She closed her eyes.

“I think sometimes the timing is the answer. Even when the person feels right.”

“So what does that make us?”

She didn’t reply.

Some truths are too heavy to type.

Their meetings grew longer.

Less planned.

More comfortable.

Once, he brought her an old book he found in a second-hand store a poetry collection she had loved in college. Her name was scribbled in the front, from years ago.

“You underlined this,” he said, pointing to a line.

“I want to be the kind of silence that doesn’t ache.”

She smiled. “I was dramatic.”

He smiled too. “You were honest.”

They started sharing little things.

He showed her a painting he was working on, something abstract and dark and unfinished. She read him her journal entries carefully choosing which ones to skip.

He told her he hadn’t felt this version of himself in a long time.

She didn’t say it, but she felt the same.

This was the version of her she missed the most present, curious, visible.

But visibility has a cost.

And one afternoon, it came.

They were walking through Khan Market, arguing about whether pickles belonged in sandwiches, when she casually reached for his hand.

And he pulled away.

Not roughly.

Just quickly. Instinctively.

Like guilt had muscle memory.

She said nothing then.

But later that evening, as they sat in his car beneath a parking lot tree, she asked:

“What are we doing?”

He turned the ignition off but didn’t look at her.

“I don’t know.”

“Are you cheating on her?” she asked.

Silence.

“Because I’m starting to feel like I’m cheating on myself.”

He finally looked at her. Eyes tired. Honest.

“This wasn’t planned. You weren’t planned.”

“Neither was the silence in my marriage,” he added. “Neither was feeling alone in a house that looks perfect from the outside.”

She watched him, her throat dry.

“And me?” she whispered. “Am I a relief? A detour?”

“No,” he said, too quickly. “You’re the part I forgot I needed.”

She wanted to believe him.

God, she did.

But she also knew how soft words can turn into cages when spoken inside a lie.

She got out of the car that night with a kiss on her forehead and silence between her ribs.

Back home, she stood by her window for a long time. The moon was half-hidden, like it was unsure of its role.

She didn't cry.

She just wrote in her notebook:

We're not in love.

We're just slowly becoming a room with no windows.

And I can't breathe here forever.

Chapter 4

The Middle of Everything

The first time she went to his studio apartment, it rained.

Not the kind of rain that dramatizes everything no lightning, no roaring clouds just that soft, persistent drizzle that seemed to hush the world. The kind that made Delhi's winter feel like it was quietly inching its way into the season. The kind that asked no questions but waited at the edge of silence.

Her scarf clung to her shoulders as she climbed the stairs, damp and slightly frayed at the ends. She hesitated before knocking not out of fear, but from the weight of knowing that some doors, once entered, could never quite be exited the same way.

Before her knuckles could reach the wood, the door swung open.

"I saw you from the balcony," he said, a faint smile on his lips. "I was wondering if you'd walk away."

"I still might," she answered, managing a lightness she didn't feel, shaking the moisture from her scarf as she stepped in.

But she didn't walk away.

She walked in.

The apartment was small. A single large room with a kitchenette, a modest bed pushed to the far side, and a few pieces of furniture that looked like they'd been carried up the stairs by one determined man. It wasn't a space designed for entertaining. It was a space for breathing. For pausing. For solitude.

A woven rug in earthy tones sat curled at one end, half-folded. Books dozens of them were stacked in deliberate chaos across the floor. A half-burnt sandalwood incense stick curled smoke near the window. A tea mug with faded paint sat beside a journal with a frayed spine. The guitar, leaning against the wall, looked like it had stories it hadn't told in years.

She stood near the door for a moment, taking it all in.

"This place looks like you," she said finally.

He raised an eyebrow as he shut the door behind her. "What does that mean?"

"Like someone who stopped trying to impress people a long time ago."

He laughed, rubbing the back of his neck. "Guilty."

She slipped off her shoes and stood by the window, watching droplets gather and slide down the glass.

"You want something warm?" he offered, moving toward the tiny kitchen corner. "I can manage tea."

She turned to look at him. "Only if it's actual tea, not that disgrace you made in college."

He grinned. “Wow. Still holding that against me?”

“I have taste buds that survived your hot-water trauma. They remember.”

He chuckled and reached for the kettle, pulling out cardamom pods and a stub of ginger. She noticed his movements unhurried, precise. The way he crushed the spices, boiled the water, poured the milk. No sugar.

He remembered.

As they sat across from each other, warming their hands on ceramic mugs, she let her eyes wander around the space again.

“You live here now?” she asked.

“For now,” he said. “It’s quiet. I needed quiet.”

She didn’t ask why. But he continued anyway.

“We’ve been... separate. For months. We pretend for the families. The festivals. The photos. But inside the walls it’s hollow.”

She looked at him carefully. “And you’re telling me this now because...?”

“Because it’s the truth. And because I didn’t want you to think this ” he gestured between them, “ was happening behind a curtain. It’s not hidden. Just complicated.”

She looked down at her cup. “Everything worth feeling is complicated.”

There was no flirtation. No seduction. Just a strange kind of honesty sitting between them fragile, but real.

Later, they moved to the floor near the window. A couple of cushions. A blanket tossed nearby. She leaned her back against the wall, pulling her knees to her chest.

They talked about music how he still played when the world felt too loud. About poetry how she had stopped writing after her divorce, how words once saved her but now sometimes stayed away for months.

“Maybe they’re not gone,” he said. “Maybe they’re just waiting for you to come back.”

She smiled, sad and fond all at once. “You always say things like that.”

“Like what?”

“Like the version of you I used to imagine when I was nineteen.”

He was quiet for a moment. Then said, “Maybe I’m still that version, just more tired.”

She laughed softly.

“I was a mess back then,” she admitted. “A romantic. And terribly naive.”

“And now?”

“Still a romantic. Just more silent about it.”

He reached out, slowly, almost uncertainly, and placed his hand on hers.

She didn’t flinch.

It wasn’t a romantic gesture.

It was a recognition.

Of something shared. Something unnamed. Something that neither of them could walk toward but couldn't walk away from either.

They didn't kiss.

Not that night.

No lines were crossed. No boundaries spoken aloud. But something shifted.

Not loudly.

More like a tide that had crept in quietly, and now refused to retreat.

The weeks that followed found them carving out a strange rhythm.

Friday chai at her place.

Sunday morning walks in nearby parks, with headphones in one ear and conversation in the other.

Texts exchanged throughout the day links to songs, a paragraph from a book, an old photograph she had found of them sitting in the back of a bus on their last college trip.

She sent him a photo of a honey-colored shawl once and said, "This reminded me of that poem you wrote."

He replied: "I didn't know I wrote anything worth remembering."

She didn't say it, but she thought it anyway *You did. I just didn't know how to listen back then.*

Their friendship if that's what it still was began to live in the in-betweens.

In the way he remembered how she liked her tea.

In the way she could tell when he was spiraling, even over text.

In the comfort of shared silences. In the ache of goodbyes that happened too quickly.

And yet, there was no label. No conversations about what this was or what it could be.

Unspoken things tend to grow roots fast.

It was during one of those walks that he asked about her marriage.

They were sitting on a low stone bench, the winter sun soaking their shoulders.

"What happened?" he asked quietly.

She looked away, into the branches.

"There's no one thing," she said. "No big betrayal. Just... erosion. Like wind over stone. We lost each other in the details."

He didn't interrupt.

"I kept waiting for it to feel like love again," she continued. "But it just turned into survival. Then silence. And then parenting. We were better co-parents than partners. And when that became the only thing holding us together, I knew I had to leave."

He nodded slowly. "That takes courage."

"No," she said. "It takes exhaustion."

They sat quietly.

“And you?” she asked.

He hesitated. “I married someone who was perfect on paper. But over time, we started living like polite strangers. I kept telling myself it was just a phase. But phases don’t last six years.”

She turned to him. “Why stay?”

“Guilt. Comfort. Familiarity. Family expectations. The usual ingredients of slow-burning misery.”

She let out a long breath. “We’re a cliché, aren’t we?”

“Maybe,” he said. “But at least we’re aware of it.”

But for all the emotional intimacy, she began to feel an ache she couldn’t name.

It arrived subtly a skipped reply, a rushed goodbye, an invisible line she kept bumping into without knowing where it was drawn.

One evening, they had dinner in her car chole bhature from their favorite stall. Laughing, messy, nostalgic. He wiped her nose with a napkin and called her a five-year-old.

It felt like something real.

But when he dropped her home, she said instinctively: “Text me when you reach?”

He smiled, “Of course.”

But the text never came.

Not that night. Not the morning after.

Just a brief message the next afternoon: “Sorry, crazy day.”

No warmth. No explanation.

And in that moment, she realized something sharp and sudden.

She was not part of his actual life.

She was an escape. A softness. A pause.

But not a name that could be spoken aloud in the spaces he inhabited.

That night, she sat on her kitchen floor, sipping water that had long gone warm.

She whispered to the ceiling:

“I need to stop before this becomes something I can’t leave without breaking.”

But she didn’t stop.

She picked up her phone.

Typed: *“When are we meeting next?”*

He replied: *“Whenever you want.”*

That night, she dreamt of a home. Not a mansion, not a fantasy. Just a home with light filtering through pale curtains, two bedrooms, a little balcony, and a dinner table where people told the truth.

He was there. So was she.

There were no secrets. No guilt.

Just *enough*.

She woke up with a strange pressure in her chest like longing had taken physical form.

She lay still, tracing the curve of her collarbone, as if trying to remember the version of herself that still believed in quiet love and soft mornings.

And then, she got up.

She ironed Kabir's school shirt. Packed his lunch. Made toast. Tied her hair.

Because life, as always, made no room for broken timing.

Chapter 5

The Quiet Between Our Names

They had stopped pretending this was coincidence.

By now, there was a rhythm. Messages flowed in like morning light not overwhelming, but steady. A soft check-in. A shared link. A mid-day thought. It was beginning to feel like a private world they both stepped into when no one was watching.

And in that world, the silences were never awkward. They were thick, meaningful, and almost necessary like resting between deep breaths.

One Sunday morning, they met for a walk in the park near Sundar Nursery. It had rained the night before, and the earth still smelled of crushed leaves and clean regret.

She wore a rust-coloured shawl. He brought her coffee in a thermos.

“You brought me coffee?” she asked, smiling.

“You don’t take sugar. Almond milk. One cinnamon stick,” he said, proudly.

She laughed. “Show off.”

But her heart it noticed.

They sat on a bench near the water body, watching children toss crumbs to ducks that barely seemed interested.

“I sometimes wonder,” he said, “if this is what peace feels like.”

She didn’t reply.

Because she was wondering the same thing.

But the kind of peace that lives in shadows is never really peace.

It’s just a quiet before clarity arrives.

“I told my sister I’ve been meeting someone,” she said suddenly.

He turned to her, careful. “You did?”

She nodded. “She asked if it was serious. I said no. Because I’m not allowed to call this anything.”

He looked away. “Do you want it to be something?”

Her silence wasn’t indecision. It was conviction tangled with consequence.

“You’re married,” she said plainly.

“You live with someone, eat dinner with them, share a name. Even if your marriage is falling apart, it’s still a marriage. And I can’t I won’t be the reason something breaks.”

He looked at her, and for once, didn't argue.

"I respect that," he said.

She turned to him. "Do you?"

He nodded slowly. "More than you know."

There was a brief moment heavy, unsaid where his hand moved slightly toward hers.

But he didn't hold it.

And she didn't offer it.

Because sometimes restraint speaks louder than longing.

In the days that followed, they kept meeting. Quiet cafés. Long drives. Evening walks. Always public enough to feel safe, private enough to feel honest.

She drew her line gently, but firmly.

And he never crossed it.

Once, he brought up a memory their college farewell, how she wore white and stood at the back of the auditorium, arms crossed, laughing at a terrible speech.

"I wanted to tell you something that day," he said.

"Why didn't you?"

"Because I thought I'd have other chances."

She smiled sadly. “That’s the lie we tell ourselves. That people wait.”

One evening, they sat on the hood of his car, parked near a flyover where the city lights blurred into fog.

She rested her head briefly on his shoulder just enough to feel his breath stilling.

“I don’t want to be someone’s escape,” she whispered.

“You’re not,” he said.

“Then what am I?”

“The only part of my life that feels real.”

Her chest tightened.

She almost pulled away.

But he didn’t touch her. Didn’t try to hold her.

He just let the sentence hang, like a picture in a room no one lives in.

That night, she wrote in her journal:

There’s something holy about holding space without touching skin.

But I fear one day, I will forget how to walk away.

And by then, it might be too late.

Chapter 6

In the Margins of a Life That's Not Mine

She hadn't planned to see him that day.

In fact, she hadn't planned anything.

The sky outside her window was a washed-out grey, the kind that offered neither promise nor warning. It just hung there, listless. The trees barely moved, the wind didn't hum. It was as if the whole city had decided to wait for what, she didn't know.

She had taken the day off. Not for rest. Not for Kabir. Not even for errands.

But because her chest had started to feel too full with things unsaid. Because her mornings had begun to taste of disappointment, and her nights carried the ache of a presence that didn't belong to her life.

She brewed tea and left it untouched.

She sat at her desk, pen poised above her favourite soft-bound journal, the pages eager and empty.

But no words came.

It wasn't writer's block.

It was deeper than that.

A kind of internal paralysis like if she put something down in ink, it would stop being just a feeling and become a fact. And she wasn't ready for facts.

She was tired of truths that demanded conclusions.

Just then, her phone vibrated.

A single message.

Him: *Can I see you today?*

No pretext. No emojis. Just that.

Just the kind of message that came when he was unraveling. When the quiet in his own life became too sharp, too cutting.

She stared at the screen for a full minute.

She didn't want to say yes.

Not today. Not when she didn't have the strength to keep her guard up.

But her fingers moved before her heart could stop them.

Her: *Okay. My place. 4 PM.*

He arrived at exactly four.

Not a minute early, not a second late.

She wasn't surprised. That's how he always was when he needed her precise.

He brought two coffees. And a brown paper bag.

She didn't have to ask. She knew it was walnut cake from the tiny bakery she once mentioned in passing a place tucked between a chemist and a toy store. She had only been there twice. Once alone. Once with Kabir.

She had never taken him. But somehow, he remembered.

She opened the door wearing an oversized cotton kurta, her hair still wet from the shower. She hadn't dressed for him. And he didn't look at her like she should've.

He handed her the coffee without a word, like it was a ritual. A peace offering.

They walked to the living room. No greetings. No explanations. Just that same quiet rhythm they always fell into.

Untitled. Unnamed. Familiar.

They sat cross-legged on the floor, on the rug Kabir had spilled juice on a week ago. The stain was faint now, but she remembered the moment clearly the giggle, the apology, the hug that followed.

Now, the room smelled of coffee and cake.

No plates. No ceremony.

Just the two of them, the storm inside her, and the quiet that filled the spaces he didn't.

He looked around. He always did like her home was something he needed to memorize. His eyes paused on the lamp her sister

gifted, the plants near the window, the watercolor Kabir had painted that she'd framed like it was priceless.

"You always manage to make quiet feel safe," he said.

She smiled faintly. "Quiet should be the safest thing."

"But it rarely is," he said, almost as if to himself.

For a few minutes, they sipped and chewed in peace. The kind of peace that pretends to be enough until one person breaks it.

She noticed it before he spoke something in the way his fingers tapped the cup, the way his eyes stayed on the rug.

"What is it?" she asked softly.

He took a breath. Then another.

"She knows."

The words dropped into the room like glass shattering.

She didn't need to ask who.

But she did. "Your wife?"

He nodded. "She found something. A screenshot. That poem you sent... the one about silence being loyal and cruel."

Her stomach turned. "What did she say?"

"Nothing. That's what scared me. She just looked at me... like she already knew who you were."

There it was the dread. The guilt. The slow trickle of consequence.

She leaned back, drawing the soft beige shawl tighter around her shoulders.

“And now?” she asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. She hasn’t brought it up since. But the air has changed.”

“And what do you want?”

It wasn’t an accusation. Just a question she had asked herself too often.

“I want to stop hurting people,” he said. “You. Her. Myself.”

She stared at him, her voice steady. “I’ve never asked you to lie. I’ve never asked you to choose.”

“I know,” he said quickly. “That’s what makes it worse. You gave me space to be honest, and I still...”

He trailed off.

She sighed. “Even when we do nothing wrong, we become someone’s secret. And eventually, we carry that shame like it belongs to us.”

He didn’t reach for her hand.

She didn’t move closer.

But the tension between them was no less intimate.

He spoke again. “I’m not in love with her.”

She flinched, just slightly.

“I thought we were right for each other when we married. But maybe we were just... convenient.”

“You had a choice,” she said.

“I thought I made the right one.”

“And now?”

He looked at her, eyes tired. “Now I don’t know what the right one is.”

She stood up, walked to the window.

Outside, kids were playing cricket. Someone honked. A dog barked. Life carried on, indifferent to theirs.

“You know,” she said, without turning, “I didn’t leave my marriage because of a big betrayal. I left because the silence in my home had become unbearable. We were two good people living parallel lives. Raising a child, sharing a space, exchanging polite kindness. But there was no emotional presence. No witness to my becoming.”

She turned to face him.

“We were not partners. We were passengers. And at some point, I realized I was teaching my son that this was normal. That love was supposed to feel like endurance.”

He looked at her then truly looked at her.

As if seeing a strength he hadn’t earned the right to lean on.

“How is Kabir?” he asked gently.

She smiled. "He's... everything. Loud. Curious. Sensitive. He asks questions I don't always have answers for. But he reminds me what love feels like when it doesn't demand proof."

He nodded slowly. "You've built something beautiful here."

"I've built something honest. Even in its loneliness."

There was a long pause.

"I think about you," he said suddenly. "More than I should."

She inhaled sharply.

"Sometimes I imagine an alternate version of my life. One where I had the courage to choose you when I had the chance."

She didn't answer.

"I make up these small fantasies," he continued. "Us in a small house. You writing. Me playing guitar. Maybe Kabir calling me by name..."

She cut him off gently. "Don't. Don't give me futures I can't live."

He looked away. "I'm sorry."

"I want you to know," he said, "I've never touched you because I respect you. Not because I didn't want to."

"I know," she replied. "And I've never asked for more than you could give. But you gave me just enough to keep hoping. That's the part that hurts."

He swallowed.

"I care about you deeply," he said.

“But you don’t choose me,” she said simply.

She walked to the kitchen and poured herself another cup of tea. The kettle hissed as it boiled, the sound oddly comforting. Her hands moved automatically finding the mug, dropping in the tea leaves, straining it muscle memory that didn’t require thought. That was the thing about survival. It lived in the rituals.

He followed her with his eyes, but didn’t move from the rug.

She returned, sat across from him, the steam from her cup curling like questions that would never be asked.

“I meant it,” he said, softly. “When I said I think about you. It’s not just longing. It’s... missing what we never had.”

She smiled, but it didn’t reach her eyes.

“I know that space well,” she said. “It’s where I’ve been living.”

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees. “What do you want from me? Honestly.”

She looked at him carefully.

“I want you to stop pretending that what you give is love. It’s not. It’s fragments. It’s pauses between guilt. It’s affection that only arrives in private.”

“That’s not true ”

“It is,” she interrupted. “And that’s okay. I’m not angry. But let’s not call this more than what it is. You text when you can’t breathe. You visit when your silence becomes unbearable. And then you return to a life that has no space for me.”

He closed his eyes. She could see the weight of her words settle on his chest like dust on untouched shelves.

“But I see you,” he said. “With you, I feel understood.”

She sighed. “But you don’t *choose* me. There’s a difference.”

There was a moment, suspended between them, where the truth settled too loudly. She could feel her heart pressing against her ribs, aching for softness, but also for release.

He stood up then, slowly, like he didn’t want to startle the moment.

“I don’t want to lose you,” he said.

“You never had me,” she replied. “Not really. Not the way I needed to be held.”

He stared at her not angry, not pleading, but something softer. A sadness that had aged in silence.

She stood too, walking past him to pick up the empty cups, brushing past his shoulder lightly.

“I need to say something,” he said.

She paused.

“I wanted to tell you... I’ve thought about what it would be like. Leaving. Starting over. With you.”

She turned, meeting his gaze. “And?”

“I don’t know if I can.”

She nodded, as if he had just confirmed something she already knew.

They didn't speak for a few minutes. She put the dishes in the sink. He watched her move through the space like she belonged to herself graceful, quiet, tired.

"I made a promise to myself when I left my marriage," she said finally. "That I would never again shrink for someone. That I would never sit in corners, waiting to be acknowledged. That I would never call silence love."

He took a step closer. "But this... us... it's not nothing."

"I know," she whispered. "It's almost something. And that's the most dangerous kind of love."

He walked toward the window, gazing out at the street below.

"You don't know how complicated it is," he said.

She shook her head. "I do. That's the problem."

He turned to her. "She's pregnant."

The words sliced the air.

Time stilled.

The cup in her hand slipped, fell to the carpet not shattering, but spilling its warmth in quiet betrayal.

She didn't speak.

She sat down.

Then looked at him.

"How long have you known?"

"A week. I wasn't sure how to tell you."

She exhaled, slow and trembling.

“So, while you’ve been sending me poems and what-ifs, you’ve been building a family?”

He flinched. “It wasn’t planned. It just... happened.”

Her voice cracked for the first time. “So did this.”

She stood, suddenly needing space. Oxygen. Anything that wasn’t this.

“I let myself believe,” she said, her voice rising, “that maybe for once, someone wouldn’t treat me like a layover between their truths. That I could be a destination. Not just an escape.”

“I didn’t mean to ”

She held up her hand. “Don’t. Just... don’t.”

She walked into Kabir’s room.

Not to check on him.

But to remind herself of where her center truly was.

He was on the floor, building a tower with wooden blocks, mumbling a made-up story about a bear who hated rain.

She sat beside him without a word.

He smiled up at her and said, “The bear finally made a tent out of clouds.”

She smiled, tears stinging her eyes. “Of course he did.”

He leaned on her shoulder. “Are you sad?”

She kissed the top of his head. “Just remembering.”

“Can I help you forget?”

She wrapped her arms around him.

“You already are.”

Back in the living room, he waited. Still.

But something had changed.

The air was different.

She returned after ten minutes.

“Please leave,” she said gently. “Not out of anger. But because I can’t be the footnote in someone else’s story anymore.”

He stepped forward, desperate. “Let me explain.”

She shook her head. “You’ve already told me everything. And I heard it.”

He paused. “What if... I still leave? What if I still come to you?”

She smiled sad and soft. “Then I won’t be here.”

That night, she wrote in her journal:

“Some people make you feel like the whole world is quiet just for you.

And some people are the reason you forget what your voice sounds like.

I can no longer be both.

I choose to be loud. Even if it means being alone.”

Her phone buzzed again at 1:12 a.m.

Him: *I'm sorry. I didn't know how to tell you. I still care. I always will.*

She read it.

Then deleted it.

And went to sleep holding Kabir's drawing of a sun that never stopped shining.

The next morning, sunlight poured into the room in thin gold strands warm, indifferent, oblivious to heartache. She stood on the balcony holding her mug, wrapped in a loose cotton shawl, the air tinged with the smell of cardamom and memory.

Below her, the world carried on. A vegetable vendor shouting in rhythm, a school van honking impatiently, a child crying everything so mundane, and yet it felt like she had been dropped into a parallel world where no one knew what had shifted inside her.

She checked her phone. No new messages.

Not from him.

Strangely, she felt relief. Because sometimes the absence of a message is the clearest answer you'll ever get.

Kabir was ready for school. He stood by the door in his oversized backpack, smiling.

"Did the bear win?" he asked.

She blinked. "What?"

"The bear and the rain," he clarified. "Did the bear win?"

She crouched down to his level, fixed his collar, kissed his forehead.

“He didn’t win,” she said, “but he learned how to dance in the rain.”

Kabir thought about that, nodding seriously. “That’s better.”

And just like that, he ran out to catch the bus.

She spent the day cleaning. There was something healing about wiping down shelves, folding laundry, organizing old papers. Her hands moved with purpose while her mind loosened its grip on the ache.

In the middle of rearranging the bookshelf, she found a letter.

An old one.

One she had written to herself three years ago when she’d first signed the divorce papers.

The handwriting was crooked, rushed.

“You are not leaving because you are not enough.

You are leaving because shrinking is not the same as love.

You are leaving because silence is not safety.

You are choosing peace.

Even if it doesn’t clap for you.”

She read it aloud.

Then folded it neatly and placed it back where it belonged not in the trash, not in her desk, but in her heart.

He called that evening.

She stared at the screen as it rang.

Let it ring once. Twice. A third time.

She didn't pick up.

Instead, she went to her prayer mat. Sat down. And wept.

Not because she missed him.

But because she missed the version of herself who once believed his words would eventually turn into actions.

She wept for every woman who had waited in hidden inboxes. For every message deleted. For every plan never made in daylight.

She wept. And then, she wiped her face. And stood.

That weekend, she met an old friend for coffee.

Rhea.

They hadn't spoken in months, but when they hugged, it felt like no time had passed.

"You look... different," Rhea said, studying her.

"Lighter or heavier?" she smiled.

"Lighter," Rhea confirmed. "Like someone who stopped carrying someone else's shadows."

Over coffee, they spoke about their lives, their children, their work.

Eventually, the conversation turned.

"Are you... seeing someone?" Rhea asked gently.

She paused. Stirred her drink.

“I was,” she said. “But it wasn’t love. It was... a remembering. Of what I used to crave.”

Rhea nodded. “Did he make you feel safe?”

She smiled. “He made me feel seen. But not safe. And that’s the difference I forgot to look for.”

Later that night, she sat with her journal again.

She wrote a letter.

Not to him.

But to every woman who had ever been almost chosen.

*“To the woman waiting in someone’s silence

You are not an intermission.

You are not a shadow.

You are the whole sun.

And you don’t need someone else’s guilt to glow.

You deserve a love that doesn’t apologize after.

You deserve a name that isn’t hidden.

Walk away. Not because you stopped loving.

But because you finally started loving yourself.”*

She closed the book.

Tucked it under her pillow.

And slept deeply for the first time in weeks.

She would see him again of course she would. The world was small, and some stories didn't end cleanly. But she knew now:

Next time he came to her door, she would not open it with longing.

She would not open it with pain.

She might not open it at all.

Because she had finally remembered the one thing he always made her forget:

She was whole.

Long before he arrived.

And far after he left.

Chapter 7

The Sound of Stepping Back

She didn't end things with a dramatic goodbye.

No blocked numbers, no scathing texts. No deleted photos from her phone. No angry voice notes sent in the middle of the night.

Instead, she began stepping back quietly, like someone exiting a room mid-conversation. Not to be noticed, not to cause a stir. But to finally make space for herself in a life that had begun to shrink.

It started with small things.

She no longer opened his messages the moment they arrived. The eagerness that once lived in her fingertips had faded. She would glance at the notification, let it sit there like an unopened letter, sometimes for hours, sometimes all day.

She wasn't punishing him.

She was remembering herself.

Kabir noticed first.

One evening, as she tucked him in, he looked at her sleepily, thumb resting near his cheek as it had since he was little. "You're not on your phone as much these days," he said.

She smiled gently. "Was I on it too much?"

He nodded with the quiet honesty only children can carry. "Sometimes it felt like you were here... but not here."

Her throat tightened.

She kissed his forehead, held him longer than usual. "I'm here now," she whispered. "And I'll keep being here."

The next day, her phone buzzed around noon. His name lit up the screen.

She didn't open the message.

Instead, she placed the phone facedown on the windowsill, warmed some leftover dal, and ate in silence. No music. No scrolling. Just the sound of the ceiling fan, the occasional honk from the street below, and the simmer of her own presence returning.

When she finally opened the message an hour later, it read:

"Missed talking to you today."

She closed it.

Not because she didn't miss him. But because she was finally learning to miss herself more.

That week, she started something new.

Each night, after Kabir had fallen asleep, she'd sit on the balcony with her journal. One candle. One pen. One question:

"What do I keep postponing in the name of love?"

Some nights the answers came in fragments.

- Peace.
- Being seen.
- Laughter that didn't have to be quiet.
- A love she didn't have to edit.

Other nights, the page stayed blank.

But even that was an answer.

On Thursday, another message.

"Are you okay?"

She replied after a while.

"I'm trying to be."

Then silence.

Then a voice note.

His voice came through soft and low. Not broken but uncertain, like someone reaching through a fog.

"I know something's changed. And I don't blame you. But I miss you even if I have no right to. I don't know how to be in this without hurting you. Just... say something. Anything."

She listened.

Twice.

Then once more, eyes closed, palms open.

That night, she dreamt of walking barefoot through an enormous library. Shelf after shelf of unread books, all with her name on the spine. She pulled one down, then another. Every page was blank. She ran, searching, hoping, until the dream dissolved into light.

She woke with a gasp, chest heaving.

She sat up in bed and whispered aloud:

“I want to be the main character in my life. Not a pause in someone else’s.”

In the morning, she texted:

“I miss you too. But I miss myself more.”

The reply didn’t come for hours.

When it did, it simply said:

“Can I see you? Just once. Not to fix anything. Just to sit.”

She stared at it.

Then typed:

“Okay. Tomorrow. The garden behind my building. 6 PM.”

The next evening, she arrived a few minutes late.

The small community garden was nearly empty. A few children ran toward the swings. A woman in a shawl read a paperback by the bench.

He was already there standing near a neem tree, hands tucked into his pockets, head tilted toward the sky.

He turned as she approached.

“You look peaceful,” he said.

“I’ve been trying,” she replied.

They sat on the wooden bench, a safe gap between them.

She’d brought two cups of tea in a flask and a thick shawl she draped around her knees.

The air was cool, laced with the scent of jasmine and soil.

For a while, they said nothing.

Just sat, letting the wind do the talking.

“I won’t ask you to explain,” he said finally. “But if you want to... I’m here.”

She sipped her tea. The warmth calmed her.

“I was waiting,” she began. “For you to fight for this. For me. For us. I kept telling myself we were different. That we hadn’t done anything wrong. That it was all okay because it was just words. Just tea. Just conversations.”

He didn’t interrupt.

She continued.

“But words are powerful. So is time. And the more I gave, the less I recognized myself.”

He turned toward her. “You think I didn’t want to choose you?”

She looked at him for a long moment.

“I think you *did* want to. But you didn’t.”

The words settled between them like pebbles dropped in a still pond.

He looked away, blinking hard.

“She asked me,” he said after a pause. “My wife. She asked me last week if I was in love with someone else.”

Her breath caught.

“What did you say?”

“I didn’t say anything. And that was my answer.”

She closed her eyes.

There it was.

The truth wrapped in silence.

Not spoken. Not defended. Just... swallowed.

That was the worst kind of forgetting when someone doesn’t deny your presence, but refuses to claim it.

“She’s a good woman,” he whispered. “I never meant for any of this to happen.”

“You didn’t plan to feel what you felt,” she said. “But you chose not to stop.”

He didn’t deny it.

“And me?” she asked quietly. “What was I?”

He shook his head, voice cracking.

“You were... light. Breath. A mirror. A second chance I didn’t earn.”

She looked at her hands.

“I don’t want to be someone’s mirror. I want to be the person you walk toward, not the reflection you escape into.”

A silence followed, thick and final.

Then he asked, “Can I hold your hand? Just for a moment?”

She nodded.

He took her hand gently like someone holding a memory.

No grasp.

No promise.

Just warmth.

When he stood to leave, he kissed her forehead.

A farewell.

A thank you.

A silent apology.

She didn't cry.

She didn't chase.

She looked at the bench after he left still warm on one side and whispered to herself:

“This chapter ends with me choosing myself.”

That night, she made pancakes for dinner.

Kabir added too much chocolate syrup and told her a joke that made no sense.

She laughed harder than she had in weeks.

Later, as she turned off the lights, she walked past her phone without touching it.

She didn't need to check.

The silence now felt sacred not empty.

Because for the first time, she wasn't waiting for anyone to arrive.

She had already come home to herself.

Chapter 8

The Quiet After Goodbye

The hardest part wasn't the letting go.

It was what came after.

Not the silence but the space. The strange, echoing width of her life without him in it. For so long, her days had a hidden rhythm: his messages, his voice notes, their stolen moments. And now, it was just... her.

She didn't cry much. She didn't replay voice notes or scroll through photos or reread conversations. She didn't even draft unsent messages. Because there was nothing left to say. What had needed to be said was said not perfectly, but honestly. And she was learning to make peace with the difference.

But the quiet? The quiet was louder than she had expected.

It showed up in places she hadn't invited it to. While slicing apples. While folding laundry. While standing in front of the mirror trying to decide whether to wear kajal or not.

And yet the quiet wasn't cruel.

It was just honest.

She started waking up a little earlier.

At first, it was unintentional. Her body, no longer pulling itself out of sleep with a rush of worry or anticipation, found a natural rhythm. She'd wake before Kabir, sometimes with the first birdsong, and sit on the balcony wrapped in a shawl, a mug of tea in her hands, watching the sky change.

It felt... sacred.

Not holy in a performative way, but in the way solitude sometimes feels when it's chosen.

She didn't check her phone. She didn't scroll. She just sat.

And slowly, the ache turned into air.

One morning, Kabir padded into the balcony in his pajamas, rubbing his eyes. "You're always out here now," he said, yawning.

She smiled, ruffling his hair. "It's my thinking spot."

"Thinking about what?"

She paused, then said truthfully, "About who I want to be."

He looked thoughtful. "Like... a superhero?"

She laughed. "Kind of."

He leaned on her shoulder. "Then you need a cape."

She wrapped the shawl around them both. "This will do."

He nodded solemnly. "Best cape ever."

At work, she began writing again.

Not for clients. Not for briefs or deadlines.

For herself.

Late at night, after Kabir slept and the world quieted, she'd open her laptop and let the words come. Sometimes they poured like monsoon rain fast, relentless. Other times, they trickled. But they came.

And they weren't about him.

They were about her. The girl she used to be. The woman she was now. The in-betweens.

She wrote about her mother's almond-scented hands. About school mornings and wet socks and the way grief sometimes lives in closed jars. About falling out of love with her ex-husband long before she admitted it. About raising Kabir. About raising herself.

Each piece was a fragment. But together, they felt like a becoming.

One evening, while clearing old drawers, she found the journal she had started the year before.

Its pages were mostly empty except for one entry, written in messy handwriting.

"I hope I never have to choose between being loved and being free."

She sat with that line for a long time.

And then, slowly, wrote underneath:

“Next time, it won’t be a choice. It will be a given.”

The phone buzzed again.

His name.

A single message.

“I hope you’re doing okay.”

She didn’t reply.

Not because she was angry.

But because there was nothing that needed to be re-opened.

She had already bled enough over a story that didn’t belong to her.

In the weeks that followed, small things began to feel new again.

She rearranged the furniture in her living room. Painted a wall in her bedroom a soft shade of green. Signed up for a short online course on stationery design something she had dreamed about but never given herself permission to pursue.

Kabir helped her name her new project: “Leaf & Line.”

“It sounds like something peaceful,” he said.

“It is,” she replied. “It’s about creating something soft in a world that sometimes forgets softness.”

They spent weekends doodling on the floor, playing with fonts, sipping nimbu paani, arguing over logo colors.

It wasn’t a business yet. But it was a beginning.

And that felt enough.

Occasionally, doubt crept in.

It always did.

There were nights she lay awake, wondering if she had imagined all of it. The connection. The intimacy. The way he looked at her like she was the answer to a question he didn't know how to ask.

But then she would remind herself she hadn't imagined the confusion. The hiding. The waiting.

That was real too.

And the reality of being someone's secret always outweighed the fantasy of being someone's escape.

One morning, while buying groceries, she ran into an old friend.

Rhea.

They hadn't spoken in over a year life had pulled them in different directions, gently and unnoticeably, as it does.

They hugged awkwardly, then warmly.

"You look... lighter," Rhea said.

She smiled. "I think I am."

Over chai at the corner stall, Rhea asked gently, "Was it him?"

She didn't pretend to misunderstand.

"Yes," she said. "And no. It was me, finally choosing myself."

Rhea raised her cup. "To that."

She started wearing earrings again.

Just studs at first. Then little silver hoops. Nothing loud just enough to feel like a version of herself she used to love.

She wore sarees to work twice that month.

She bought herself a small ring not expensive, just beautiful. She wore it on her index finger, a reminder that her hands were hers alone.

There was a day one of those achingly perfect spring days when she saw a couple on the street that reminded her of them.

The man was leaning in to say something. The woman laughed, turning her face away in that shy, familiar way.

And for a moment, her throat tightened.

Not from pain.

But from memory.

And then, like a slow exhale, she let it go.

Because some memories aren't meant to be carried forever. Some are just meant to pass through.

One evening, Kabir asked her, "Do you ever feel lonely?"

She paused.

"Yes," she said. "Sometimes."

He nodded, like he understood. "But not all the time?"

“No,” she said, brushing his hair from his forehead. “Not all the time. Because I have you. And I have me.”

He grinned. “You’re pretty cool to have.”

“So are you,” she said, pulling him into a hug.

That night, after he had gone to bed, she sat on the balcony again.

The sky was clear. The moon was sharp. The wind carried the smell of someone making rotis nearby.

She thought of the life she almost had.

The could-have-beens. The promises. The poems.

And then she whispered to the air not with anger, not with sorrow, but with peace:

“Thank you. But I’m choosing different now.”

And with that, she picked up her journal, opened to a new page, and wrote:

*This is what it means to rise.
Not with noise. Not with revenge.
But with grace.
And gentleness. And the slow, quiet knowing
that I will never again shrink myself for love.
And I will never again mistake longing for belonging.*

Then she closed the journal.

And walked back inside.

Chapter 8: A Name for the Light

The mornings had started to feel different.

There wasn't a singular moment she could point to no dramatic sunrise, no pivotal event but something inside her had shifted. It was as if her life, once dimmed by the weight of what-ifs and half-lived stories, had finally begun to glow in its own rhythm.

The silence in the house no longer echoed with ache. Instead, it hummed with presence.

She woke before the alarm most days, wrapped herself in her soft cotton robe, and walked barefoot to the kitchen. The clink of the kettle. The slow bloom of tea leaves. The warmth of the cup in her hands these had become rituals of peace.

Kabir, now more observant than ever, noticed the change.

"You hum when you cook now," he said one morning as he watched her flip parathas.

"I do?" she smiled, pretending not to know.

"Yeah. It's like the house is happier."

She kissed his head. "Maybe it is."

She had started writing again not the hesitant journaling of past months, but full, fierce sentences. Essays. Short stories. Pieces that held weight, carried pulse. She found herself awake past midnight, fingers moving faster than her thoughts, heart spilling onto the page like it had been waiting for years to exhale.

There was one night in particular a night when the electricity had gone out. She sat by candlelight at the dining table, Kabir fast asleep in the next room, the silence of the house holding her like a cradle. She wrote for hours, her hand cramping by the end, but she didn't stop until the story was done. It was a piece about

invisible heartbreaks that didn't have names but shaped people's lives just the same.

She submitted it the next morning. A week later, the magazine published it.

Then another piece was picked up. And another.

Friends began forwarding her work. People she hadn't spoken to in years reached out with kind words and quiet applause.

"This healed something I didn't know was broken," a reader messaged on Instagram.

She read it twice. Then turned off her notifications, heart full.

She wasn't writing for applause.

She was writing because it reminded her who she was before she waited on someone else's courage.

It reminded her of the time in college when she had broken down after a presentation went wrong, and Kabir only a toddler then had handed her a crumpled paper with a sun drawn on it and said, "This is you, Mama. You make light." That image stayed with her. It returned now, clearer than ever.

She remembered submitting secret pieces to student magazines under a pseudonym. She remembered the first time her words appeared in print how she'd folded the page into her diary, afraid to let anyone see. Especially the boy she was dating then, who believed her writing was a hobby, not a future.

Now, she left those memories unhidden. They were part of her spine, each sentence a vertebra in the life she was reclaiming.

It reminded her of evenings spent scribbling poems in college, of submitting secret pieces to student magazines under a pseudonym.

She remembered how proud she'd been the first time she saw her words in print, and how she had hidden the magazine from her then-boyfriend because he hadn't believed in her writing.

Now, she left those memories unhidden. They were part of her spine.

There were still hard days.

There were mornings she would hear a song that tugged too deeply, or a scent sandalwood, usually would pull her into a memory she hadn't invited. But she let them pass through her now. Like weather.

No resistance.

No drama.

Just presence.

It was a rainy Tuesday when she rearranged the bookshelf. Not because it needed organizing but because she wanted the books to breathe in a different order. She dusted each spine like it held a secret. Removed old post-its. Found a photo tucked into a poetry collection.

It was from college.

Her. Him. Rhea. Another friend. All laughing.

She stared at it.

She didn't cry.

She didn't smile.

She just placed it back between the pages. Some memories were better kept folded.

Later that night, she shared the photo with Rhea. They hadn't spoken in months.

Rhea replied almost immediately: "I still remember that day. You were wearing the earrings we made from that flea market. You kept saying you felt like a character in a film."

She smiled at the message. Maybe she had been one. Maybe she still was.

That night, Kabir curled next to her during their movie night and said, "I like this version of us."

She paused the film.

"What do you mean?"

"You laugh more. And you don't stare at your phone waiting for someone to text. I used to see you do that, you know."

Her eyes softened.

"I didn't know you noticed."

"I notice everything," he said with a grin, then buried his face in her arm.

She held him tightly.

He had been her mirror, her anchor, her reason.

And for so long, she had forgotten to see herself the way he saw her whole, brave, enough.

That weekend, she visited her favorite café alone. Took her laptop, a notebook, and a pen that felt too expensive to use but just right for this moment.

She sat in the corner by the window and began to write not fiction this time, but a letter.

To all the women who had ever loved in silence. To those who had been someone's maybe, someone's almost, someone's relief.

It read:

"You are not a secret. You are not a pause in someone else's marriage. You are not a reflection of their inability to choose.

You are thunder. You are sky. You are a story that doesn't need another person's name to make it worth telling.

Never forget restraint is power. Integrity is grace. And walking away with your dignity intact is the most courageous thing a woman can do.

You didn't lose. You left. And there's a difference."

She closed the notebook, fingers trembling just slightly. It wasn't sadness. It was release.

When she returned home, she placed the letter in a wooden box with other keepsakes a charm Kabir had made in school, a postcard from her sister, a photo of her parents from their youth.

This too, was a memory. But it belonged to her.

Fully.

Later that night, she sat by the window and thought about the different versions of herself that had existed over the years. The

girl who had begged for clarity. The woman who had wept in silence. The mother who feared she wasn't enough.

All of them had carried her here.

And she was grateful.

She started planning a short trip. Not to escape. But to celebrate.

Just three days. Somewhere with hills. Trees. A stream.

As she sat with her laptop open, researching cabins, her fingers hesitated for a moment. This was the sort of thing she used to ask his opinion on a simple "what do you think?" or "would you come?" but the question didn't rise this time.

Instead, she smiled and clicked 'Book Now' on a tiny pinewood cabin tucked beside a forest stream. It had large windows, no Wi-Fi, and a fireplace. It felt like a place where she could hear herself again.

She pulled Kabir into the plan immediately. They spread out a sheet of paper on the dining table and made a packing list together his crooked handwriting beside her neat cursive.

"Take this," he said, placing her red scarf in the pile. "It makes you look like a superhero."

She looked at him with soft surprise. "Really?"

He nodded solemnly. "You look strong in it."

That one sentence filled her with something indescribable love, certainly, but also a renewed confidence she didn't know she'd lost.

As she packed that night, folding sweaters and placing her journal into the side pouch of her bag, her mind remained clear. Not once did she think of messaging him. Not once did she wonder what he would say. Not once did she look at her phone expecting a 'what's up?' or 'when are you back?'

This wasn't a trip she was taking against something. It was a journey she was taking toward herself.

Her life was no longer paused in his indecision. It was moving. Finally.

Her life was no longer paused in his indecision.

The cabin was surrounded by pine trees and silence. On the second morning, she sat by the window with a blanket wrapped around her legs and a cup of cinnamon tea. The valley stretched wide in front of her.

She wrote in her journal: "Today I watched the sky change from blue to gold and didn't wish anyone else was there to see it with me. Maybe this is what healing looks like knowing the moment is beautiful, even if it belongs only to you."

That evening, she dipped her feet into the cold stream and sang a song her mother used to hum while cooking.

She didn't cry. She didn't ache. She simply existed. And that was enough.

One evening, while journaling, she wrote:

"I am not waiting for closure anymore. I am living in the opening."

A friend invited her to speak at a small gathering of writers. She almost declined the old hesitation creeping in, the familiar echo of self-doubt whispering that her voice might tremble, that her story was too soft to matter. But then she said yes. And that yes felt like a door opening inside her.

At the event, held in a sunlit corner of a local library, she read a piece about boundaries about loving without disappearing, about walking away with grace instead of guilt. Her voice shook at first, but as the words left her mouth, something within her steadied.

Afterward, a woman approached her. Probably in her late forties. Soft eyes. Weathered palms.

“Thank you for saying what many of us feel but never say,” she said. Her voice cracked. “I wish I had heard this twenty years ago.”

They hugged not politely, but deeply, like strangers who shared the same wound.

That night, she cried.

Not out of pain. But because she had touched someone. Because she had spoken her truth out loud. Because she had made it to the other side the side where her voice didn’t echo back as silence.

And not everyone does.

And not everyone does.

It had been months now. Since he’d left her doorstep. Since the last message. Since the last whisper of hope.

She thought about him sometimes.

But not with longing.

With clarity.

He had been a mirror. But she was the light.

And she had finally learned to name it.

That evening, she walked on the rooftop with Kabir. The sky was streaked with gold. He pointed to a star.

"Do you think stars miss each other when they move apart?" he asked.

She looked at him, then at the sky.

"Maybe they do," she said. "But they still shine."

He nodded. "You're shining, Mama."

And for once, she believed it too.

Later that night, she sat alone on her bed and reread her letter the one she wrote to the women like her. She added a postscript:

"Healing isn't a straight line. Some days you'll feel powerful. Other days you'll crave the very thing that broke you. But every step forward, even the quiet ones, are part of the return. Keep going."

She folded it gently and placed it back in the box.

And then she turned off the light.

Not to end the day. But to begin again.

Chapter 9

What Love Leaves Behind

She didn't delete his number.

Not because she was waiting. But because erasing it would suggest that her memory could be scrubbed clean and that wasn't the kind of healing she wanted. She wasn't trying to forget. She was learning how to remember without reopening the wound.

The days that followed were simple. Intentionally so. She made soup from scratch. Read poetry aloud to Kabir before bed. Sorted through old clothes and made a donation pile. Watered her plants with more presence. Some mornings, she missed him. Not the chaos. Not the guilt. But the way he used to look at her like she was the calm in his storm. It took her a while to admit that even manipulative love can sometimes feel like safety until you realize it's actually keeping you from being free.

She began journaling more deeply. This time, not about him. But about herself. "When did I learn to overstay where I'm undervalued?"

“Why do I call silence peace when it’s just avoidance?” “What kind of love do I now refuse to accept?” Each question was a thread she gently untangled.

Kabir had started asking more questions too. “Why don’t you talk to that uncle anymore?” he asked one evening while coloring at the table. She smiled gently. “Because I needed space.” “Did he do something bad?” “No. He just didn’t do enough.” Kabir seemed to think about that seriously. Then he nodded. “That makes sense.”

There was something about children that made truth simpler. They didn’t need justifications or apologies dressed up in explanations. They just wanted honesty that didn’t hurt to hold.

After days of not speaking to him, she received a message. “Just wanted to know how you are. I think about you every day.” She read it without reacting. Then put the phone face-down and turned back to her book. Because now, she was finally choosing what she fed her heart. And crumbs weren’t on the menu anymore.

She started attending a weekend painting class. Not because she wanted to become an artist but because she wanted to remember what it was like to create without being watched. Rhea, and her began having chai after class, speaking about everything and nothing. It reminded her of herself before she became so tangled in someone else's emotional crisis.

Her therapist once told her that leaving someone who didn't hit you or scream at you is often harder because you have to trust the quiet ache that tells you something still isn't right. And now she understood that. It wasn't the drama that broke her. It was the absence of effort. The way he could sleep soundly knowing she was hurting.

Weeks passed. The ache dulled. She no longer waited for his name to appear on her screen. When it did, once in a while, she didn't feel anger or longing. She felt nothing. And that was the miracle.

One evening, while walking with Kabir, they saw a couple arguing near the florist. The man was gesturing too much. The woman looked exhausted. Kabir looked up and whispered, "They don't look happy." She nodded. "No one deserves to feel small in love." "Did you ever feel small?" he asked gently. She smiled. "Once. But I remembered how big I really am."

That night, she lit incense, played soft music, and made a list. Things I Deserve: • To be chosen in the daylight • To be told the truth without asking • To feel safe in someone's presence • To grow without apology • To love without being hidden • To be my own peace

The phone buzzed again that week. "If I ever asked you to meet, would you?" She stared at it. Then typed back: "No. I wish you well, but I don't live in maybe anymore." And that was that. No more loops. No more cycles.

One
Saturday, Rhea invited her to an open mic event. She hadn't planned to read anything. But the host called for spontaneous readers, and something in her stood up before she could stop herself. She walked to the mic. Heart steady. Hands open. And read a poem she'd written the night before. "You made a home in me Without asking for rent And I, too kind to evict you, Let the walls rot quietly." "But now I've rebuilt. And the foundation is mine. So if you ever pass by Wave. Don't knock." The crowd clapped softly. And she smiled. Not for the applause. But for the freedom that followed.

Chapter 10

The Things She Once Paused

It started with a dream not the heavy kind filled with symbols and metaphors, but a light one. She was in a sunlit café, sketching in a notebook. No drama, no shadows, no names. Just the clink of spoons, the rustle of a newspaper, a breeze through linen curtains. She woke with a smile on her lips. Because for once, the dream didn't include anyone else. It was just her present, quiet, whole.

That morning, she made herself a strong cup of coffee and pulled out an old list she'd written three years ago. The paper was crumpled at the edges, a few words faded with time. "Things I'll Do Someday" She read through it slowly. • Learn to swim • Take a solo trip • Start a handmade stationery line • Live near mountains for a month • Perform at an open mic • Send letters, real ones She had forgotten half the list. Life had pulled her in other directions. Love had paused her. Responsibility had reshaped her. But now, she had time again. And more importantly intention.

She started small. Step one: the open mic already done. Step two: letters. She bought a stack of handmade envelopes from a local paper store and sat on her floor that evening writing three letters. One to her past self. One to her future self. And one to someone she once loved that she would never send. It was a ceremony. Ink as closure. Paper as grace.

At work, things had started picking up again. Her energy was more stable. She was no longer distracted during meetings, no longer checking her phone between tasks. Her colleagues noticed. “You’re glowing lately,” one of them said during a coffee break. “I think I just stopped borrowing storms that weren’t mine,” she replied with a soft laugh.

Kabir, too, had grown lighter. They played word games in the evenings. Read poetry by candlelight. On weekends, they painted he made wild abstract pieces with dragons and suns, and she sketched quiet homes in the hills. One Sunday, as they were cleaning brushes, Kabir looked at her and said, “You smile more now.” She blinked. “Do I?” He nodded. “Your eyes smile now too.” And just like that, her heart cracked open with love a love she hadn’t compromised, hadn’t begged for, hadn’t lost herself inside.

A few days later, she got an email about a writing retreat in the hills. Five days. Just outside the city. Mornings of silence. Afternoons of guided workshops. Evenings by the fire. She read the brochure twice. Closed her laptop. Then opened it again. And signed up.

It wasn't an escape. It was an arrival. To a version of herself she'd always delayed the one who believed she could belong to more than someone's someday. The retreat was held in a quiet estate nestled among pine trees. She took the train there. Alone. No one was waiting at the destination. No one texting, "Have you reached?" And still she felt seen. The first night, she stood on the balcony of her little room, a shawl around her shoulders, sipping tea while watching the dusk descend. There were no memories to outrun. No calls to ignore. Just wind, stars, and herself. She hadn't known that peace wasn't loud. It was just consistent.

The days at the retreat unfolded like silk. In the mornings, they wrote with prompts: "What have you unlearned about love?" "Who are you when no one is watching?" "What are you still afraid to want?" She filled pages. Some of the writing was raw. Some poetic. Some honest in ways she'd never been even with herself.

One afternoon, a fellow writer named Arman read a piece about loneliness. It wasn't dramatic. It was precise. And it made her realize that not all companionship needs to come wrapped in romance. Sometimes, it's in being seen truly seen even if just for a moment. After the reading, Arman said, "You write like someone who's lived many lives." She smiled. "Maybe I have. Or maybe I've just died a few times and come back softer." He didn't ask more. He just nodded. And for once, she didn't need to explain her softness.

On the last night, they lit a bonfire. Everyone wrote a note to themselves and burned it not as a ritual of letting go, but of remembering. She

wrote: “I forgive myself for waiting. I honor myself for walking away. I celebrate myself for returning to me.” The flames took it gently.

When she returned home, Kabir ran to her at the gate. He hugged her tight. “I missed you!” “I missed you more,” she whispered. Later that night, he fell asleep in her lap as she told him stories of misty pine forests and yellow wildflowers. And she realized she didn’t need a partner to feel full. She had herself. She had her son. She had a future unburdened by maybes.

She didn’t hear from him again. Not for months. And by then, she didn’t want to. Because love is not proven by how someone reaches out after losing you. It’s proven by how they hold you when they have you. And he never really held her. Not with both hands. Not with honesty.

Now, she held herself. Every day. Without flinching.

Chapter 11

A Life of Her Own Making

The first card she designed wasn't for sale. It was for herself. A square piece of recycled ivory paper. A hand-painted tulip in the corner. And in the center, a quote written in delicate lettering: "I am no longer waiting for the light. I am learning how to glow in the dark." She stuck it on the wall above her desk not as a business plan, not even as a goal. Just a quiet affirmation. A reminder that the version of herself she had now become wasn't born in love, or pain but in the stillness that followed both.

The stationery line had been a thought years ago an idea scribbled into a notebook somewhere between grocery lists and parenting schedules. But now, it began to take shape, slowly, lovingly. She named it "Papered Soul." Handmade journals. Letterpress cards. Bookmarks with poetry on one side and wildflower illustrations on the other. Everything was infused with intention. Nothing rushed. Nothing outsourced. Each piece held a part of her that once felt too quiet to matter. Now, it spoke in ink and texture.

Rhea was her first customer and her loudest cheerleader. She had become more than a friend. She was the kind of woman who celebrated small wins like festivals turning every milestone into a reason to share chai and laughter. “You don’t realize it,” Rhea said one afternoon, “but your joy is contagious now.” She paused, wiping her paint-stained fingers on her apron. “It’s like you’ve built yourself back but softer. Wiser.” She smiled. “That’s the plan.”

She didn’t post about the business online right away. Instead, she sold her first ten journals through word of mouth. People she knew. People who had once watched her dim. Now holding pages filled with her rebirth.

Kabir helped her pack orders. He loved sticking the wax seals on envelopes, asking her what each design meant. “This one looks like a moon,” he said once. She nodded. “It’s for those who find peace in phases.” He thought for a moment. “Like you?” She laughed softly. “Yes. Like me.”

She also started waking up earlier. Not because she had to. But because she wanted to. Mornings were no longer heavy. They were full of rituals. Chai in a ceramic mug. A linen robe. Music that felt like memory. Ten minutes of stretching. And a quiet, whispered prayer that didn’t ask for anything only gave thanks.

One morning, she opened her email and found a message from a poetry magazine. They wanted to publish one of her pieces. Not for fame.

Not for claps. But because her words made someone feel less alone. That was enough.

Sometimes , he still crept into her thoughts. Not as a wound but as a lesson. There were days she'd hear a song he once shared. Or walk by a cologne that reminded her of him. But there was no ache. Only a small nod to a past that helped shape her and that she no longer lived in.

She began making new connections. Writers. Artists. Makers. People who lived with open hearts and boundaries. People who didn't confuse longing with loyalty. And in their presence, she found ease. The kind she never had to earn.

She hosted her first small pop-up on a Sunday at a cozy book café. Five people showed up. Then ten more. And by the end of the afternoon, she'd sold out her stock of journals and had a waitlist for the next batch. Kabir stood beside her the entire time handing out free bookmarks and telling people, "My mama made these!" She laughed, heart full. Not with pride but with peace. Because for the first time in years, she was building something that didn't rely on anyone's inconsistency. Just her own courage.

That night, after tucking Kabir in, she sat by the window with her journal. She didn't write about grief. Or love. Or endings. She wrote about now. "There's joy in not needing rescue. There's beauty in making your own morning. There's freedom in a room where no one else decides your worth."

A new chapter of her life had begun. Not dramatic. Not loud. But rooted. Soft. Real. The kind of chapter that doesn't need an audience only intention. And she was writing it, one slow page at a time.

Chapter 12

No Longer the Same Door

The envelope arrived on a Thursday. Cream-colored, no return address. Her name handwritten in the same style he used to write on little notes he'd leave on her books. She stared at it for a moment. The ink didn't smudge, but her heart stuttered slightly. She didn't open it right away. Not out of fear. But because she knew she could now choose her timing. That, in itself, felt like victory.

She made her tea. Answered a few emails. Let Kabir tell her about his science project in full detail something about magnets and magic and a paperclip train. Then, when the house was quiet, she sat by the window, lit a stick of sandalwood incense, and carefully opened the envelope. Inside was a single letter. His handwriting, as familiar as breath once was.

"I've started this letter many times." "You probably don't want to hear from me. Maybe you're even angry reading this. Or maybe, and I

hope this more than anything, maybe you're just doing okay." "I won't ask for anything. I don't deserve to." "I just wanted to tell you that there hasn't been a day I haven't thought about you. About the way I let you down. About how I kept reaching for you while holding on to a life I didn't have the courage to change." "You were right I made you a secret. Not because you were small, but because I was." "She knows now. Everything. It was hard. Messy. But honest, finally." "And you? You were always honest. Even when it cost you comfort." "I don't know if I still exist somewhere in your memory. But if I do, I hope it's not with bitterness." "You taught me what love should look like not wrapped in guilt or stolen hours, but in showing up fully." "I didn't deserve that kind of love. But I'm trying to become someone who someday might." "I hope you're well. I hope you're free." "I hope you've created something beautiful maybe with paper and words and gold foil." "Forgive me. Not for you. But for yourself. So your story doesn't carry my shadows anymore." "Always in quiet gratitude, A"

She

folded the letter gently and placed it in a drawer. Not in rage. Not in sadness. But because she didn't need to carry it anymore. He had arrived too late to a door that no longer opened.

That

weekend, she and Kabir went to a craft fair two towns over to showcase her new stationery line. She now had twenty designs. Three journal collections. Bookmarks that were selling faster than she could stock. She'd even begun adding affirmations on the inside cover pages: "Be proud of the bridges you burned some were never meant to be crossed again." A woman at the stall picked up that very journal. She looked up at her and said, "Did

you write this?” “Yes.” The woman smiled. “I’ve been needing this for a long time.” And in that moment, she knew her pain hadn’t gone to waste. It had turned into something that helped someone else rise.

That night, she returned home exhausted but content. Kabir had fallen asleep in the car. She carried him inside, tucked him in, and kissed his forehead. Later, she sat on the floor of her room, surrounded by ribbons, twine, paper scraps. She held a soft grey journal and, without thinking, wrote on the first page: “This is no longer about healing from him. This is about celebrating me.”

She never wrote back to him. Because some stories are not meant to be reopened. Not even for closure. Especially when you’ve already closed the book.

Chapter 13

The Woman Who Chose Herself

She looked at herself in the mirror and didn't flinch. It wasn't the softness of her skin or the faint lines near her eyes that caught her attention. It was the steadiness. The stillness that had once belonged to storm survivors people who had walked through chaos and come out carrying calm like a crown. She touched the side of her neck gently. Her pulse was even. It had taken a long time to arrive here. But she was here. And this time, she wasn't leaving herself.

There had been many moments when it would've been easy to fall for him fully, physically. When his eyes softened. When he brushed hair from her face. When the world around them blurred and it felt like the universe had paused, just for them. But she had held back. Not because she didn't feel. But because she knew. Knew that love built on stolen touches and secret corners cannot grow in the sunlight. Knew that no kiss was worth the shame of self-betrayal. Knew that she had nothing to prove by giving her body in exchange for borrowed affection. And today, as she looked at

herself, she felt it clearly: “I am proud. Not because I was untouched, but because I was unshaken.”

The world often mistook restraint for fear. But she knew it had taken more strength to say no with trembling hands than it would’ve taken to say yes with longing. She didn’t judge other women. She didn’t pretend virtue was a shield. But she knew what her own line was and she had never crossed it. Not even when love whispered its most convincing lie: “Just this once... no one will know.” Because she would’ve known. And that was enough.

That afternoon, she went to a quiet tea house and sat in a sunlit corner. She ordered saffron tea and opened her journal. And there, she began writing what would become her offering to the world: A Letter to All Women Who Are Trying to Rise Dear You, I know what it’s like to ache quietly. To be wanted but not claimed. To be needed but never chosen. I know what it’s like to sit with someone who touches your soul, but doesn’t show up in your life. To feel beautiful in the shadows, but invisible in the light. But hear me now, as someone who almost settled and didn’t. You are not meant to be loved halfway. Not in borrowed hours or in excuses dressed as poetry. You are not a secret. You are a sunrise. Your worth is not tied to who wants you, or how badly. Your body is not proof of love. Your silence is not peace. And when you say no even when your heart is breaking that is not weakness. That is power. You are allowed to walk away from love that asks you to shrink. You are allowed to mourn someone who never gave you all of them. But never forget: You are also allowed to rise. And rise again. With dignity. With softness. With fire. Because the most

sacred love story you'll ever live... is the one you write with yourself. With all my heart, A woman who finally chose herself.

She read it twice. Not to check for errors. But to feel the truth in it. She knew there were women hundreds, maybe thousands who were holding on to people they knew they should let go of. Women confusing crumbs for banquets. Women who mistook longing for love. And if even one of them read this letter and walked away from a man who couldn't choose them fully her pain would not have been in vain.

That evening, she emailed the letter to a magazine that had asked her for a feature weeks ago. They replied within an hour. "This isn't an article. This is a revolution. We'd be honored to publish it."

She closed her laptop and stepped outside into the evening. The breeze caught the edges of her dupatta. A slow smile rose to her lips. She was no longer grieving. She was claiming. Her joy. Her skin. Her truth. Her story.

She walked without hurry, hands free, eyes lifted. Not looking back. Not looking forward. But looking within. And for the first time in years, what she saw there was enough. Chapter 14: Standing in Her Own Light The hall wasn't grand. Just a small, airy room above a quiet café, with warm lights strung across wooden beams and chairs arranged in a gentle semi-circle. The event was called "Letters to Rise." Organized by a local women's collective, the idea was simple women reading letters they'd written to their past selves, to daughters, to anyone who needed to remember their

power. She hadn't planned to speak. She was only there because Rhea had insisted. "You've written something the world needs," Rhea said, clasping her hand. "Don't keep it locked in your journal." She hesitated at first not out of fear, but out of reverence. Because truth, once spoken aloud, cannot be unseen.

When her name was called, she felt calm. Not the calm of numbness. But the calm that comes after a storm has finally passed. She walked to the mic, letter in hand. The same one she had written at the tea house the letter to all women trying to rise. The room was quiet. She unfolded the page. Her voice, steady. And she began to read.

The words carried themselves. Line by line, she saw faces soften. Eyes glisten. Shoulders release a tension they hadn't realized they were holding. When she read: "You are not a secret. You are a sunrise." A woman in the second row closed her eyes and placed her hand on her chest. By the time she ended with: "The most sacred love story you'll ever live... is the one you write with yourself." The room exhaled as one. No claps yet. Just silence the holy kind. Then came the applause. Not loud. But full. She didn't cry. She just smiled. Because for once, her words weren't about pain they were about power.

After the event, women came to her some hugging her, some too moved to speak. One young girl whispered, "I almost went back to someone who keeps hurting me. But not anymore." Another said, "I've never heard someone say 'your body is not proof of love.' Thank you." And just like that, she knew. Her story was no longer just hers. It had become a mirror helping others see themselves more clearly.

Later that night, she sat at her desk and added a new page to her journal: “This is the beginning of something holy.” She didn’t know where it would take her this voice, this platform, this quiet revolution of women choosing themselves. But she was ready. Ready to teach. To write. To rise.

She looked around her room the shelves lined with her handmade journals, Kabir’s painting pinned above her desk, the faint scent of lavender from the candle still burning. There was no man in her life. And yet, she had everything.

That week, she was invited to speak at two more gatherings. She was asked to do a podcast episode on “choosing dignity over desire.” And her stationery line got a feature in a small magazine under the title: “Where Women Heal in Ink.”

She didn’t chase any of it. She simply lived. And that living, that truth, was drawing the world in.

Rhea brought her flowers one evening not roses or lilies, but wildflowers in a ceramic jug. “You’re different now,” she said. She smiled. “I’m finally the woman I was meant to be before I got lost trying to be loved.”

That night, she wrote a new letter. Not to him. Not to herself. But to the version of her that never gave up. “You could’ve hardened. You could’ve built walls. You could’ve turned bitter. But you softened and you turned the pain into light.” “You stayed kind. You stayed awake. You stayed true.” “And now, you are free.”

Chapter 14

The Morning She Didn't Need Anything

She woke up without an alarm. There was no urgency. No list waiting to be ticked off. The sun filtered through the sheer curtains, brushing the walls with a honeyed glow. The air was cool, quiet. Kabir still slept in the next room. She turned her face to the window and closed her eyes again not to go back to sleep, but to feel what it was like to begin a day without carrying anything heavy.

Not a memory. Not a hope. Not a man.

Just breath.

She didn't check her phone. Not because she was avoiding something but because there was nothing to check that held power over her anymore. No unread messages that made her stomach twist. No longing for an apology that never came. No thread of maybe that she still clung to.

The phone sat there, turned face-down on her bedside table. It didn't buzz. She didn't expect it to. And even if it did even if his name appeared again after all this time she knew she wouldn't tremble.

Her peace no longer depended on someone else's noise.

She brewed her tea and sat by the window. The same window she once stared through wondering if she was asking for too much. This time, she looked out with stillness in her bones. The mug in her hands was warm cinnamon, cardamom, and a pinch of ginger like her mother used to make on winter mornings. She breathed it in deeply.

She had become the peace she was once begging for.

She wasn't in love. Not romantically. But she was in love with how far she'd come. With the way she could now hold her own gaze. With the way her heart no longer jumped for crumbs. With the gentleness she extended to herself in her routines, in her rest, in her refusal to settle.

The journal she opened that morning didn't start with pain. It started with a line:

"Today, I begin with nothing to prove."

She wrote slowly, like a prayer:

"No man made me whole. No goodbye destroyed me. No touch defined my worth."

“I have learned the difference between loneliness and solitude. Between being chosen and being claimed. Between being seen and being held.”

“And I now know I don’t need to be in someone’s arms to feel safe.”

She paused, pen still in hand. The silence in the room wasn’t empty it was full. Of breath, of memory, of becoming.

She flipped back through older entries. Pages smudged with tears. Scribbled midnights. Rewritten hopes. And then she landed on a page where she had once written:

“I just want to be someone’s yes.”

Now, she smiled.

She had become her own.

Kabir shuffled into the room, still half-asleep.

“Morning, Mama.”

She smiled, setting her journal aside.

“Morning, jaan.”

He curled up beside her on the sofa, and they shared the blanket. The kettle hissed gently in the background.

“Are you happy?” he asked suddenly, looking up at her with sleepy eyes.

She didn’t rush to answer. She looked around. At the books, the papers, the soft glow of a candle she forgot to blow out last night.

At the quiet in her chest. At the weight that no longer lived in her body.

And then she said it, simply.

“Yes. I am.”

He nodded and closed his eyes again against her shoulder.

Later that day, she mailed three packages from her stationery line. Each envelope had a handwritten note, sealed with gold wax. She wrapped the journals in soft tissue and tied them with twine. There was a quiet joy in it sending something of herself into the world, not needing applause, only connection.

She wrote an article titled “How To Rebuild Yourself Without Needing Revenge.” It poured out of her not in anger, but in relief. The kind of truth that doesn’t scream, but settles.

And then she responded to a message from a woman who said her letter helped her walk away from a five-year affair. She typed:

“You are not selfish for choosing peace. You are brave. And I’m proud of you.”

It wasn’t loud success.

It was earned peace.

She passed a couple arguing on the street. She didn’t flinch. She didn’t turn away. She simply whispered, “May she find her way sooner than I did.” And walked on.

In the evening, Kabir was drawing dragons.

She was drafting a new workshop outline: *The Art of Starting Over: Writing Through the Wreckage*.

The scent of cinnamon and clove filled the kitchen. She had baked banana bread and forgotten to take off her apron. Music played low in the background old ghazals, the ones she used to listen to with her grandmother.

This was her after.

Not a love story.

Not a heartbreak.

Not a redemption arc.

Just a life crafted quietly, lived fully.

She remembered the girl she once was the one who had waited by the phone, who had cried silently into her pillow, who had written texts she never sent.

And she whispered to that girl:

“We made it. Without breaking. Without settling. Without forgetting who we are.”

She lit incense before bed. Wrote her affirmations. Drank warm water. Read a poem by Mary Oliver.

She didn't dream of him. She didn't need to.

The story didn't end with him choosing her. Or with him leaving her. Or with her finding someone new.

It ended with her choosing herself. Every single day.

And knowing that was enough.

That night, as she tucked Kabir in, he held her hand a little longer than usual.

"I like it when you're like this," he whispered.

"Like what?"

"Like you're not carrying anything heavy."

She kissed his forehead.

"I like it too."

And in the stillness that followed, she realized: this was freedom.

Not the absence of feeling but the presence of herself.

And that, finally, was the ending she'd been searching for all along.

Chapter 15

Letters to the Women Who Stayed Too Long

She sat at her desk just after dawn. The world was still quiet, wrapped in soft gray light. Kabir was still asleep, and the only sounds were the kettle beginning to bubble and the creak of the old wooden floor beneath her bare feet.

Today felt different. Not dramatic. Not life-altering. Just quietly important. The kind of morning that doesn't shout, but still manages to shift something inside you.

She opened her journal, but not to write about herself. Not today.

Today, she was writing letters.

To the women who stayed too long. To the women who shrank themselves so someone else could shine. To the women who confused pain for passion. To the women who were never chosen, but kept choosing anyway.

She began:

"Dear you,

I know what it feels like to stand at the edge of yourself, waiting for someone to pull you back in. I know the silence of a message that never arrives, the ache of wanting to be seen without asking.

You told yourself it was timing. That he was different. That what you shared was unnameable and therefore sacred. And maybe it was to you.

But love, no matter how poetic, cannot thrive in secrecy.

You do not have to be a secret. Not to him. Not to the world. Not to yourself.

I know you carried the conversations, held the space, softened your truth so he could feel less afraid. I know you cried in bathrooms, rewrote texts a dozen times, and played his favorite songs hoping they'd reach where words couldn't.

But there is a version of you that doesn't flinch. Who walks into a room and doesn't hope he's noticed your hair or your silence. A version that lives her truth out loud.

And I hope, when you're ready, you meet her.

Because she's not gone. She's just waiting.

With love, Someone who made it out."

She sat back, sipping her tea. A memory surfaced one that used to sting but now felt distant, like an old song playing softly from another room.

It was a rainy evening months ago. She had just returned home from a meeting, soaked and exhausted. She checked her phone, and there it was: a message from him. Not to ask how she was. Not to meet. Just a song link. No words.

And she had listened to it. On repeat. Looking for hidden meanings.

That version of her would have waited for a reply. Would have read and reread the lyrics, wondering if they meant something. But now, that moment felt like watching another woman's life. A woman she loved, but no longer was.

She began writing again.

"Dear woman in love with a ghost,

I know he touched something in you that felt ancient, sacred, rare. I know he looked at you like you held the universe, and for a while, you believed you did.

But you deserve a love that doesn't disappear when it gets inconvenient. A love that meets you in daylight. In honesty. In action.

You don't have to romanticize confusion. You don't have to stay in the almost.

Sometimes the most loving thing you can do is leave before your soul begins to dim.

With gentleness, A woman who once mistook crumbs for a feast."

The sun had risen higher now, casting golden light across the desk. Kabir stirred in the next room. She smiled, her heart calm.

There was a time she would have deleted these letters. Called herself dramatic. Erased her feelings because they made others uncomfortable.

But not anymore.

Now she believed in truth. In clarity. In the power of naming things so they no longer held you captive.

That afternoon, she posted one of the letters on her blog. It wasn't something she planned to do, but her fingers moved with certainty.

Within an hour, the messages began pouring in:

"I feel seen." "Thank you for saying what I couldn't." "I didn't realize how much I needed this."

She didn't reply to all of them. But she read every one. And with each message, she felt the threads of womanhood stretch across time and distance, connecting them all in their quiet heartbreak, their bold reclamation.

That evening, she and Kabir walked to the park. He raced ahead, pretending to be a warrior, sword drawn with a stick. She laughed, the sound open and full.

On a bench nearby, a woman sat with tear-streaked cheeks, holding a phone in her lap. Her eyes met hers briefly. They didn't speak. But there was a knowing.

Before leaving, she walked over and handed her a folded piece of paper from her pocket. It was a printed copy of one of the letters.

No name. No explanation. Just a letter.

The woman took it with trembling fingers.

Later that night, Kabir slept beside her. Not because he was scared, but because sometimes, he still liked the comfort of her warmth. She looked at his sleeping face and whispered:

"I will teach you what love looks like not in words, but in how I rise."

She turned to her journal again, and this time, wrote:

"Dear me,

You didn't fail because he couldn't stay. You succeeded because you did. You stayed long enough to learn. You left before you disappeared.

And now, look at you.

Writing. Walking. Breathing. Helping other women do the same.

You made it. You made you.

And that's enough."

The candle on her desk flickered. Outside, the moon rose slowly, a steady witness.

This chapter wasn't about closure. It was about continuation.

Of her voice. Her truth. Her story.

And the stories of the women who would read her words and remember:

They are not alone. They are not foolish. They are not broken.

They are just learning how to return home to themselves.

One letter at a time.

Chapter 16

The Spark, the Storm, and the Sea

It began with an email. A simple subject line: *"We loved your piece are you open to speaking engagements?"*

She blinked at the screen. The sender was a women's collective hosting a regional summit on emotional healing and storytelling. They had read her blog, particularly the letters she'd written to women, and wanted her to speak on "resilience and rewriting your story."

Her first instinct was to close the tab.

But something stopped her.

She reread the message. Three times.

And then she smiled.

Two weeks later, she stood backstage at the summit, holding a mic in one hand and her breath in the other. The room was buzzing.

Over two hundred women, some young, some older, all with notebooks, coffee, and eyes full of questions.

She hadn't worn anything dramatic. Just a soft cotton saree, minimal makeup, and the ring her mother had given her when Kabir was born. Her hair was open, her voice calm, but her heart her heart was doing somersaults.

When she stepped onto the stage, she didn't begin with a quote. Or an introduction. Or even a greeting.

She said:

"I stayed too long."

Silence. A collective inhale.

"I thought staying meant loyalty. That waiting meant faith. That endurance would earn me love."

She paused, looking around.

"But sometimes, leaving is the most honest thing you can do."

They listened. Not just politely, but *leaned in*. Heads nodded. Pens froze mid-sentence. Some eyes glistened.

She spoke about heartbreak, but also about rebuilding. About mornings that came after nights she thought she wouldn't survive. About raising Kabir with one hand on his back and the other on her own heart.

She didn't speak like a victim or a warrior.

She spoke like a woman who had *returned to herself*.

When she finished, the applause was soft at first. Then rising. Not thunderous, but *deep*. Like a river finding its rhythm again.

Backstage, a young woman hugged her, whispering, "I left last month. I thought I was the only one. Thank you."

She held her, tightly. "You're never the only one."

The excitement didn't end there.

That night, she received another message. A publishing house had come across her blog and summit video. They were interested in developing a book with her a collection of essays and letters on emotional healing and the quiet courage of women.

She stared at the message, stunned. Then she laughed. Not from disbelief, but from *relief*. As if life had been nudging her all along, waiting for her to say yes to herself.

And now, the world was saying yes too.

She told Kabir about the book offer while they were baking cookies.

"Will your name be on a cover in a bookstore?" he asked, licking chocolate off his fingers.

"Looks like it," she smiled.

"Can I tell everyone you're famous?"

"Only if you make me a mug that says 'Cool Author Mom'."

He beamed. "Done."

With this momentum, she made a decision. One she had thought about for years but never dared act on.

She was going to the sea.

Not to escape. Not to mend.

But to *begin*.

She booked a small writing retreat by the coast. Just her, her journals, and the sound of waves. Rhea offered to keep Kabir for a week, turning their home into a fort of popcorn, movie nights, and pizza.

"He'll be spoiled," she warned.

"Good. He deserves it," she said, hugging her best friend.

The sea was not what she expected.

It wasn't calm.

It was *wild*. Relentless. Honest.

Each wave slammed into the shore like a truth that refused to be silenced. She walked barefoot on the sand, letting the saltwater sting her skin clean.

She wrote. Pages and pages.

She cried. Not out of pain, but from the sheer *magnitude* of being fully alive.

She met another woman there a sculptor from Himachal. They drank tea and shared stories. She told her about the love that almost was. The sculptor listened and said, "Some men are

mirrors, not partners. They show us what we long for, but they cannot hold it."

She nodded. "But I held it. And I hold it still."

"Exactly," the sculptor said. "And now it's yours."

One evening, she stood by the rocks, wind whipping her hair, and whispered into the sea:

"Thank you for not choosing me. Thank you for breaking me where I was bent. Thank you for making me walk away. Because I found her The woman who walks toward light. The woman who never begs again. The woman who saves herself."

When she returned, Kabir hugged her like he hadn't seen her in years.

"Did you find the ocean?"

"Yes. And I think I found me too."

"Cool. Can we go together next time?"

"Absolutely."

She placed her hand on his head and smiled.

She wasn't just surviving anymore.

She was *sparking*.

Storm-tested. Salt-cleansed. Soul-awake.

And the next chapter of her life?

It would be written not from waiting, or wounds.

But from the deep, roaring, unapologetic center of her *own voice*.

The sea had whispered it best:

"You are not what they left behind. You are what rises after

Chapter 17

The Spark, the Storm, and the Sea

The morning after her letter went viral, she felt something shift in the universe not because of numbers or comments, but because she didn't check for either. She made her tea. She watered her plants. She took Kabir to school. And she breathed. Without urgency. Without ache.

She was standing at her window, watching the neighborhood slowly wake up, when her phone buzzed.

It was him.

The message was simple: "Can we talk?"

She stared at it for a moment. Not with dread. Not with hope. Just quiet curiosity.

After a pause, she typed: "If you need to."

He called. His voice broke before he spoke. "I don't know where to begin."

She didn't interrupt. She let silence stretch until he filled it himself.

"I... I haven't slept. I've been thinking of everything. Of us. Of you. Of what I did. What I didn't."

He was crying. She could hear the snuffle, the hesitation, the rawness.

"I made a mess of everything. I lied. I hid. I didn't fight. But I never stopped feeling. And now... now I want to set it right. I want to be with you. I want to marry you. I will leave her. I just... I can't live with this regret anymore."

She stayed still. Let the words pass through her like wind.

Not because they didn't matter. But because they no longer controlled the tides inside her.

"You sound like you're hurting," she said softly.

"I am. I'm lost without you. I keep seeing you everywhere. Reading what you wrote. I didn't know how much you meant to me until I felt what it's like to not have you. Please... please come back."

She could've cried. But she didn't. She could've said "I waited," but she didn't.

Instead, she exhaled. "Let's talk tonight," she said.

That night, after Kabir fell asleep, they stayed on the call for hours. There was no tension. No pretenses. He spoke. She listened.

He confessed to the times he told her he was away on work, when he wasn't. The moments he said he didn't see messages when he had. How he kept her at arm's length not because he didn't feel, but because he was afraid of the feelings being real.

"I wasn't brave," he whispered. "I thought I could live without you, manage the guilt, hold on to both sides. But I was wrong."

He spoke about his marriage. How it had become a ritual, not a relationship. How he and his wife hadn't spoken openly in years. How he envied the way she the woman on the other end of the call could still love, still write, still forgive.

He admitted something he had never said before that his wife was expecting. That when he first heard the news, he didn't feel joy. He felt trapped. Like the child would bind him further into a life he wasn't sure he wanted.

"I was going to tell you," he said. "But I couldn't. I didn't know how. I thought if I said it, I'd lose you."

She let him pour it all out. She didn't interrupt. She didn't fix. She didn't promise.

"You need to sit with your wife," she finally said. "Not to blame. Not to end. Just to listen. She deserves that. And so do you."

"But I want you."

"And I want peace."

Silence.

"I can't be the woman who breaks someone else. Even if that someone is already broken."

He cried again. She didn't flinch.

She stayed with him. On the call. Through the night. As a presence. Not as a possibility.

Because for once, she wasn't reacting as a lover. Or a woman hoping to be chosen. She was simply responding as a human being who once loved him deeply and had now healed.

There was no pain. Just compassion.

She realized then: the ache was gone. The longing had faded.

She could see him. All of him. And still choose herself.

Before the call ended, she said: "You are not a villain. You are someone who's afraid. But that fear is not mine to fix."

He whispered her name. Soft. Broken. Beautiful.

She smiled, tears in her eyes not for the love lost, but for the woman found.

"We were a moment," she said. "A beautiful, complicated moment. But my life is not meant to pause there."

He didn't argue. He just listened.

And for once, that was enough.

The next morning, she woke up lighter. There were no messages. No ache. Just a soft gratitude.

She brewed her tea. Sat by the window. And whispered: "This is the after."

She opened her laptop and titled her next blog: "When He Finally Comes Back and You No Longer Need Him To."

Because sometimes closure doesn't come in silence. It comes in the full circle. In the knowing. In the staying but for yourself.

Later that week, she hosted her first women's retreat. In a cottage nestled between hills and silence. She stood in front of a room full of women with different stories and one shared ache. She taught them how to breathe again. How to write. How to feel safe in their own company.

On the second day, during the storytelling circle, a woman named Isha shared her truth.

She was soft-spoken, with eyes that seemed to carry the weight of an entire sea. She paused often, choosing her words carefully.

"I was the other woman," she said, her voice cracking. "For seven years. I kept believing he'd leave. Every birthday, every New Year, every tear I thought it was the last. I was wrong."

The room held its breath.

"When I finally walked away, I didn't feel strong. I felt hollow. Like I had lost years of my life to a maybe that never came."

She looked around the circle, then directly at her the retreat host and said, "But then I read your letter. The one you wrote about choosing yourself. It felt like someone had walked through my heart and turned on a light."

They sat together later that evening, beside the fire.

"I always thought healing meant forgetting," Isha said.

"It doesn't," she replied. "It means remembering without pain."

They drank cinnamon tea and stared into the stars.

"I'm not angry at him anymore," Isha whispered. "Just at myself for waiting so long."

"You were learning," she said. "Learning the kind of love you won't settle for again."

That night, Isha read aloud a poem she had written:

*He said he loved me in whispers But kept her in frames I became
a shadow Till I found my name.*

The women clapped softly, their hearts aching and healing in rhythm.

On the final day of the retreat, they wrote letters to the women they used to be. Folded them into envelopes. Burned them gently in a clay bowl.

The ashes rose like blessings.

She stood there, watching the smoke curl into the sky, and thought maybe this is what rebirth looks like. Quiet. Honest. Earned.

She read the letter she wrote to herself the night he cried on the phone.

They cried with her.

One woman whispered during lunch, "I think I'll finally leave."

Another said, "I don't want revenge anymore. Just peace."

It wasn't loud healing. It was quiet reclamation.

That night, she walked outside. The sky was full of stars. She looked up and whispered, "Thank you. For the heartbreak. For the lesson. For the letting go."

It was the first time she could thank him without hurting.

Months later, a package arrived.

Inside: a letter from him.

"I spoke to her. We're working on things. I'm sorry for all the ways I failed you. But you helped me find my truth. And I hope one day you write the love story that doesn't leave."

She smiled. Not because of the words. But because they didn't move her anymore.

She wrote back: "Thank you. Be kind. To her. And to yourself."

The chapter didn't end with flames. It ended like the tide. Steady. Certain. And pulling her back to herself.

And in that, there was the greatest love story she could ever write.

Chapter 18

The Whole Sky Was Hers

It began with the sky. Not a grand gesture, not a revelation. Just the quiet noticing of how blue it was. That day, she looked up and it didn't feel like it was caving in. It felt endless.

She was sipping honeyed lemon tea, barefoot on the balcony, the smell of eucalyptus drifting from the diffuser inside. Kabir was still asleep, the early light pooling across the wooden floor. She had no calls to return, no ache she needed to nurse, no yearning that sat like a rock in her chest.

She had, for the first time in years, *arrived*. Not to a place, but to herself.

The retreat was over, but the echoes of it remained. The women, their voices, their letters folded and burned, their quiet strength now woven into her days like a second skin. Isha messaged her once a week now. One of the others, Meher, had started her own podcast titled *Soft Power*.

She was no longer just healing. She was guiding.

Her stationery line, once a modest side dream, was now expanding. Orders were flowing in through the website, and her new collection was called *Dear Me*. Handwritten affirmations, journal prompts, and art inspired by wildflowers and broken hearts.

Kabir helped pack the boxes. He liked adding tiny notes: "You matter." "Breathe, beautiful soul." "You're not behind."

They laughed more now. Cooked together. Sometimes danced in the kitchen to old Bollywood songs.

One evening, as they stuck stickers on parcels, he looked up at her. "Mama... you look different now. Like, lighter."

She smiled, brushing his hair back. "That's because I am."

She had planned it in a quiet moment between two emails. A solo trip. Not for escape, not for healing. But for celebration. She chose Greece. The whitewashed houses of Santorini, the sea she'd never seen, the idea of walking somewhere she didn't need to explain herself.

Kabir would be with her parents for ten days. He was excited, already packing games and asking his grandfather if they could build a birdhouse.

On the flight, she didn't think of him. Not once. Instead, she thought of her.

The girl she used to be. The woman she had become. The one in between who survived the storm.

She landed to the scent of salt and sun. Her Airbnb had a terrace that faced the sea. That first evening, she lit a candle, opened her journal, and wrote:

"Day 1: I didn't come here to heal. I came here because I'm whole."

Each morning, she walked barefoot to the beach. She collected stones, not because they were rare, but because they felt like metaphors. Some were smooth, some jagged. All had endured waves.

She swam in the Aegean. She read Rumi under a fig tree. She spoke to an old Greek woman who ran a bookstore and had once been left at the altar.

"It took me ten years to love again," the woman said, pouring her chamomile tea. "But in those ten years, I became someone I love."

She understood.

Back at her terrace one night, under a sky dusted with stars, she replied to an email from a reader who said: *Your story helped me walk away. I was waiting for him to choose me. I never thought I could choose myself.*

She closed her laptop and whispered, "That's why I wrote."

When she returned, Kabir ran into her arms. He had a sunburn on his nose and a new bird fact for every minute. "Did you know crows remember faces?" he said, grinning.

"I'll never forget yours," she said, holding him.

He looked at her suitcase and asked, "Did you bring me something?"

She opened it to reveal a small stone. Smooth. Round. Etched with a single word: *Freedom*.

"This," she said, placing it in his palm, "is from the sea. It reminded me of us."

Weeks passed. She was invited to speak at an event called *Women Who Rebuilt*. She wore a soft indigo kurta, no makeup, just kohl and confidence. On stage, she spoke about silence. About writing letters she never sent. About the difference between holding on and holding space.

"Sometimes," she said to a room full of women, "closure isn't a door slammed shut. It's a window opened wide."

After the event, a young girl approached her. Trembling, tearful.

"I thought something was wrong with me. Because he left. Because I stayed. Because I couldn't let go. But after hearing you... I think I can try."

She hugged her gently.

"You're not broken. You're becoming."

In her writing studio, beside a candle and a clay lamp Kabir made, she began her second book: *What I Built After I Broke*.

She wrote of hope. Of stillness. Of cinnamon tea and womanhood. Of Kabir's laughter. Of letters and healing retreats and the first morning she didn't wait for his message.

She wrote of all the love she had given away like spare change.
And how she now gave it to herself, like a feast.

One afternoon, she and Kabir painted a mural on their balcony wall. Waves. Stars. And a line in gold: *The whole sky is yours.*

He dipped his brush in yellow and added a small sun beside it.

"It's us," he said. "Me and you. And the sky."

She smiled, eyes brimming.

"Yes, jaan. All of it."

That night, as she sipped tea under fairy lights, her phone buzzed.

A new message.

It wasn't from him. It was from a publishing house.

"We read your blog series. Would you be interested in a book deal?"

She laughed. A full-bodied laugh that filled the room.

Not because it was unexpected.

But because it was deserved.

She replied, "Let's talk."

She didn't know what the next love would look like. She didn't chase it.

For now, she had cinnamon tea, a growing tribe of women, a son who saw her joy, and a sky that no longer frightened her.

And for the first time in years, the story she was writing wasn't about heartbreak.

It was about flight.

Prologue

This book isn't about heartbreak.

It's about what comes *after*.

The quiet.

The reckoning.

The rediscovery.

There was a time I would've given everything time, energy, even dignity for a man who could never give me all of him. I thought love meant waiting.

Holding on.

Understanding more than I should have had to.

But now I know:

Love isn't proven by how long you stay in pain.

It's proven by how deeply you choose peace.

This is not a confession.

It's a reclamation.

And if you're holding this book, maybe you're ready too
To rise.

To soften.

To remember the sound of your own name said kindly by *you*.