

Wild GRACE

A Story of Heartbreak, Healing, and Becoming

Written by:

PRIYAM MECH



BlueRose ONE^{.com}
S t o r i e s M a t t e r

New Delhi • London

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

India | U.K.

Copyright © Priyam Mech 2025

All rights reserved by author. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the author. Although every precaution has been taken to verify the accuracy of the information contained herein, the publisher assumes no responsibility for any errors or omissions. No liability is assumed for damages that may result from the use of information contained within.

BlueRose Publishers takes no responsibility for any damages, losses, or liabilities that may arise from the use or misuse of the information, products, or services provided in this publication.



For permissions requests or inquiries regarding this publication,
please contact:

BLUEROSE PUBLISHERS

www.BlueRoseONE.com

info@bluerosepublishers.com

+91 8882 898 898

+4407342408967

ISBN: 978-93-7310-170-5

Cover design: Daksh
Typesetting: Tanya Raj Upadhyay

First Edition: November 2025

WILD GRACE

~ 27, 268

By Priyam Mech

Email: priadrianamech@gmail.com

Phone: +916909316600

Dedication

To my family and friends —
for believing in me long before I believed in myself.

For holding space, for cheering quietly,
and for trusting that one day, I'd make you proud.

This is for you.

Thank you for never letting go of my story — even when I
almost did.

Prologue

Wild Grace

Three years. Still waiting.
Not for him to return—
but for the ache to finally leave.

Some nights, Aira forgot the sound of his voice.
Other nights, it curled around her spine like smoke—
low, careful, cruel in the way it lingered.

People said she was doing well.
They didn't know she still woke at 3:17 a.m.—
the hour he once held her hand and said nothing,
but meant everything.

There was a girl she used to be.
Softer. Wilder. Loud with laughter and untamed hope.
She wore red lipstick like armour, and love like a vow.
She believed in forever.

In first kisses beneath rain-soaked skies.
In promises whispered on balconies.

But life...

life has its own weather.

It doesn't always ask before it storms.

This is not a story about the men she loved.

This is about the woman who rose from her silence.

Who stitched her soul back with salt and sunlight.

Who chose herself—again, and again.

Because healing isn't gentle.

It is wild. Relentless. Beautiful.

And sometimes, it writes itself in fire.

Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Pretty, Broken, Brilliant	1
Chapter 2: Strangers with Sunsets	10
Chapter 3: The Man I Couldn't Read.....	15
Chapter 4: Pieces of Him	20
Chapter 5: Mornings I Didn't Know I Needed.....	25
Chapter 6: The Kind of Love I Thought Didn't Exist.....	30
Chapter 7: Too Good to Be True.....	34
Chapter 8: Unravelling in Silence	38
Chapter 9: The First Time He Said It	43
Chapter 10: I Was Never the Only One	49
Chapter 11: Rising Doesn't Always Look Like Strength	55
Chapter 12: The Version of Me I Never Knew	60
Chapter 13: The Spark Comes Back	65
Chapter 14: Not That Girl Anymore	71
Chapter 15: A Woman in Her Element.....	76
Chapter 16: Torn Between What Was and What Could Be ..	81
Chapter 17: The Woman She's Becoming.....	85
Chapter 18: The News That Shatters	90
Chapter 19: A Beautiful Kind of Numb	96
Chapter 20: The Girl She Forgot	101

Chapter 21: The Rise Within	106
Chapter 22: The World Sees Her Again	112
Chapter 23: The Home Beneath Her Skin	118
Chapter 24: Her Story, Her Voice	123
Chapter 25: When the World Begins to Listen	129
Chapter 26: The Key and the Voice	136
Chapter 27: Where the Wildflowers Will Grow.....	141
Chapter 28: The Book of Her Becoming	146
Chapter 29: The First Tree	151
Chapter 30: The Goodbye That Freed Me.....	156
Chapter 31: Falling in Love with Life.....	162
Epilogue: The Wild Within	168
Acknowledgements.....	171
About the Author.....	173

Chapter 1: Pretty, Broken, Brilliant

It was a late monsoon afternoon in Delhi; the sky flushed violet and copper, the light slipping soft and golden through the clouds. The air pressed warm and close, carrying the scent of rain-darkened earth and marigolds heavy with dew. There was a stillness to the moment, a fragile, expectant pause, as though even the city knew something was about to change.

Aira stood barefoot in her apartment, her toes sinking slightly into the cool tile, a towel still wrapped loosely around her. In her hand, a lipstick, Ruby Blush.

The kind she used to wear to shoots, castings, premieres.

The kind of red that turned heads before heartbreak ever did.

Now, it just sat there in her hand like a question she couldn't answer.

She had been someone once.

She still was—technically. But some mornings, even her own reflection looked like a stranger she hadn't forgiven yet.

That girl had felt too much. Believed too hard. Trusted the wrong hearts in the name of love.

“Aira, you’re going to be late,” Mari called from the kitchen, popping open a Coke. “And you haven’t even curled your hair.”

“It’s not a date,” Aira murmured, setting the lipstick down like it might burn her.

Mari appeared in the doorway; brows raised. “It’s dinner with a man who flew 8,000 miles to see you. Curl your damn hair.”

Aira rolled her eyes, but her fingers reached for the curling wand.

Ten minutes later, she sat at the vanity, eyes half-lidded, sectioning strands with lazy fingers.

“Do you think I’m one of those women who always chooses the wrong men?” she asked, too casually.

Mari peeked in. “You’re seriously asking that while holding a hot iron?”

“Just answer.”

“You fall fast. Love deep. Forgive too easily.”

Mari paused, then added, softer this time:

“But no, I don’t think you choose wrong. I think they just don’t know how to love someone who shines like you do.”

Aira stilled. Her chest tightened.

That was the thing about Mari — she never sugar-coated the truth.

WILD GRACE

That night, Aira lay in bed, dressed but going nowhere. Dinner had been rescheduled. Ryan had texted — something about a delayed flight. He promised to make it up to her when she landed in Bali.

She stared at the ceiling fan spinning slow, sleepy circles.

Her phone buzzed.

Ryan:

Flight okay?

I still can't believe you said yes.

Thank you. For trusting me.

She typed slowly.

Aira:

I didn't say yes for you.

I said yes because I needed to breathe.

A pause. No reply.

Then,

Ryan:

Good.

Then let's make sure you do.

The next morning, while zipping up her suitcase, she remembered the last time she packed for love. The faint rasp of the zipper sounded louder than it should have in the quiet room, like a secret being sealed away. She could still recall how hurried

her hands had been back then — clothes shoved in without thought, perfume bottles wrapped hastily in scarves, heart thrumming with a heady mix of hope and fear. This time felt different. The suitcase lay open on the bed like a confession, neatly folded dresses smelling faintly of lavender from the drawer sachets. Sunlight slanted through the half-drawn curtains, dust motes swirling in the air like tiny planets, and for a fleeting moment she could taste the old ache of goodbye lingering at the back of her throat. She paused, fingertips brushing the cool metal teeth of the zipper, wondering if love always felt this fragile when it was packed into a suitcase.

Flashback — Three Years Ago

She had crossed half of India — a long train from Delhi to Lalgarh Jattan, a quiet village in Rajasthan nestled near the Pakistan border.

Out of the window, dry plains stretched endlessly. The wind carried the scent of earth and smoke as the train rolled through forgotten towns.

She held a warm cup of chai in her hands, but it was the thought of him — Kabir, the Army officer — that sent the real warmth through her. She wasn't nervous. Just alive with anticipation. With hope. The ache that blooms when you're about to see someone your heart hasn't stopped remembering.

He stood waiting on the platform in uniform, sunlight catching the edge of his shoulders. There was something magnetic about him—tall, broad-shouldered, with a strong, disciplined physique shaped by the demands of army life. He was handsome—undeniably so. His deep brown eyes calmly scanned the crowd, and when they landed on her, they softened instantly. Light tan

WILD GRACE

skin glowed in the golden light, and his smile—so effortless, so disarming—curved like it had been meant only for her. He looked every bit the soldier. Aira couldn't help but be drawn to him; he looked like he belonged in a uniform, but somehow, he fit perfectly into her world too.

When he saw her, his smile deepened, and he opened his arms like he'd been holding the space for her all along. She walked into him without a word.

"I missed you," he whispered against her hair.

And in that fragile moment, she let herself believe him.

They spent the late afternoon driving aimlessly through the quiet roads of the small town, windows down, the breeze tangled in her hair and his hand resting gently on the gearshift. Old songs played softly between them, filling the silences with something tender and familiar. With every turn, the world outside blurred, and it felt like they were chasing time—stretching it just a little longer.

When the sky began to blush with sunset, they parked and wandered on foot, hand in hand, through lanes wrapped in golden light. The fields rolled out beside them, lush and green, as if painted just for this moment. It felt like they belonged here—two old souls catching up where they'd left off.

He stopped at a roadside stall and bought her Gol Gappa, grinning as she tried not to spill the spicy water. She laughed, carefree and unguarded, and he couldn't take his eyes off her. Their laughter rose into the amber air, warm and unhurried.

For a moment, everything felt simple. Light. Like something they could hold onto—no matter what came next.

That evening, after dinner, he kissed her forehead and stepped into the bathroom to shower. She sat on the edge of the bed, still smiling faintly, watching the night settle outside the window.

Then his phone buzzed beside her.

Once.

Then again.

She hesitated.

She wasn't the kind to snoop. She hated how that felt but something gnawed at her. A soft voice in her gut she couldn't quiet.

She picked it up.

A name she didn't recognize. Flirty emojis. A message: *"Wish you were here instead."*

Her smile faded.

She tapped the thread.

Photos. Intimate ones. A conversation trail that stretched back weeks.

He wasn't just chatting.

The shower ran in the background like static.

Her fingers trembled as she set the phone down, careful — too careful as if gentleness could undo what she'd just seen.

When he stepped out, towel wrapped around his waist, hair damp, still humming the song they'd laughed about earlier, she was already standing by the door with her suitcase half-zipped.

He stopped mid-step.

“Aira?”

She turned, voice quiet. Steady.

“You let me come all this way... while texting someone else?”

He froze. Guilt in his eyes. No excuse on his lips.

“I didn’t mean—” he began.

“You never do,” she said. “But you always do it anyway.”

She didn’t cry.

She didn’t scream.

She just walked out into the warm night not because she stopped loving him, but because she finally started choosing herself.

She stayed one more night — not for him, but for pride. Slept on the couch.

He didn’t speak.

She never saw him again.

Then came Dev.

Charming. Effortless. The kind of man who could make a room shift its mood with a single glance, or make the world feel lighter with one raised eyebrow and a half-smile that seemed to know too much. He had a way of making the ordinary feel electric like everything was part of a secret only he could let you in on.

She had believed in that. In him. In the way he made her laugh like she hadn’t in years and forget the weight she’d been carrying. With Dev, it hadn’t felt like falling — but felt like floating. And

maybe that was the danger. Because nothing that untethered could stay grounded for long.

Flashback — Two Years Ago

The café was crowded, but Aira heard nothing but the silence in her chest.

Dev sat across from her, stirring a cappuccino he hadn't tasted yet. He wore the navy-blue shirt she'd gifted him — the one he called his lucky charm.

She didn't smile. She already knew.

"You've been distant," she said flatly.

"I've been busy," he replied too fast.

She blinked. "Don't insult me."

He looked up, eyes flickering.

"I know about her," she said. "The girl your parents adore. The one you're marrying."

His hand paused mid-stir. No denial.

"How long?" she asked.

"A few months before I met you," he muttered. "It was rocky. Then I met you. I didn't mean to fall for you, Aira. But I did."

Her stomach twisted.

"You don't get to say that" she whispered. "You don't get to love two people and pick the richer one."

He swallowed. "It's what my parents want," he muttered. "She fits."

WILD GRACE

“So, I was just convenient? A detour?” Her voice cracked, sharp and bitter. “Too risky to introduce the middle-class girl to mummy and daddy?”

He looked away.

Aira stood, hands trembling. “You don’t have to text me again. Not even to apologize. Just... don’t.”

He did, months later.

Dev: *I still think of you when I hear our song.*

She didn’t reply.

She’d deleted the playlist.

But Ryan...

Ryan was different.

He didn’t promise the stars.

He didn’t flood her with love-bombs.

He just showed up like a slow sunrise that was unannounced yet consistent and she didn’t see it coming.

She didn’t know what to expect in Bali.

Closure. Chaos. Or something else.

But somewhere inside her, something whispered—

Maybe this time, it won’t end in pieces.

Chapter 2: Strangers with Sunsets

The airport was loud, but she barely heard it. Aira rolled her suitcase past the glass doors of Ngurah Rai International, her heart thudding beneath the thin cotton of her travel shirt.

She hadn't seen him in person in nearly four months.

And yet, there he was—leaning casually against a pillar like time hadn't dared touch him. His sunglasses were tucked into the neckline of a faded grey tee that clung softly to his frame, hinting at the lean strength beneath. Fitted jeans sat low on his hips and worn-in boots grounded him like he belonged nowhere and everywhere all at once.

His dark hair was tousled just enough to look accidental, though she knew better. But it was his eyes—those striking, ice-blue eyes—that stopped her mid-step. Clear and unreadable, they met hers across the space, pinning her in place without a single word.

"Hey," Ryan said, his voice low, almost lazy.

Aira tilted her head, letting her eyes flick over him, taking in the subtle smile that always threatened to break free but never fully did.

"Hi," she replied, a little breathless. "So... you're real."

He chuckled. "Last I checked."

They stood there for a bit too long, two people who had been everything and nothing to each other for a year. Strangers. Pen pals. Something in between.

"You hungry?" he asked, grabbing her bag handle before she could argue.

"Starving."

The drive to the villa was quiet. Aira sat in the back seat of the cab, the driver humming softly up front. Ryan sat beside her, one arm draped casually along the edge, fingers tapping a silent rhythm against the leather. Her eyes flicked between the window and the faint reflection of him in the glass.

Outside, the world blurred past in rich, humid greens—banana leaves, blooming frangipani, the occasional shrine draped in marigolds. Everything felt unfamiliar and dreamlike, like she had landed in someone else's life.

She noticed how he rested his hand on his thigh, fingers tapping gently, a habit she remembered from his late-night videos. Aira's phone buzzed. A memory from last year — a screenshot of his message: "If you ever visit Bali, let me show you sunsets that don't ask questions." She hadn't replied then. But she had saved it.

Now, here she was.

The villa was something out of a dream—nestled on a quiet cliffside in Bali, wrapped in the hush of ocean air and soft golden light. All around her, whitewashed walls glowed in the sun, curved archways opened into wide, airy rooms, and sheer curtains danced lazily in the breeze. Every window framed the sea like a living painting, and just beyond the edge of the infinity pool, the water melted seamlessly into the sky.

Aira stepped inside barefoot, the cool tiles grounding her even as everything else felt impossibly surreal. Frangipani petals floated in a bowl near the entrance, and the faint scent of jasmine hung in the air like a promise. It was achingly beautiful. Quiet. Private. The kind of place made for love, for long silences and soft touches and slow mornings wrapped in the care of linen sheets.

She had never experienced anything like it. Not just the beauty but the way it made her feel. Weightless. Wanted. Completely his.

"You picked this?" she asked, spinning slowly in the living room.

He didn't answer immediately. She watched him open the fridge, pull out two drinks, and close it with the kind of grace that comes from knowing someone's watching.

"It reminded me of you," he said finally. "Not just the chaos."

She paused, her breath catching a little.

"Then what?"

Ryan handed her the coconut water. "It's honest. And it has light in all the places people don't expect."

"That's either a compliment or a very expensive insult."

Ryan smirked and handed her the drink. "Let's call it an accurate observation."

She took a sip. Cold. Sweet. Refreshing. God, she hadn't realized how tightly wounded she'd been until that first taste of stillness hit her throat smoothing its way down her chest.

"So, are we pretending to be lovers now?" she asked, half-joking.

Ryan raised an eyebrow. "Do we need to pretend?"

That stopped her for a second. The old her would've smiled and flirted back. But this version — the version held together by fragile threads and unspoken disappointments — wasn't so sure.

"Let's just... be," she said finally. "No labels. No pressure."

He nodded. "Good. I'm better at being than pretending anyway."

Later, while unpacking in the bedroom, Aira found a single white hibiscus tucked beside her pillow. No note. Just the flower.

She stared at it for a long moment, unsure whether it was meant to say hello, I missed you, or don't be afraid to feel again.

She left it untouched. Let it speak in silence.

That night, they sat at the edge of the pool, their feet drifting lazily in the warm water, toes occasionally brushing beneath the surface like a secret. A small speaker played low jazz between them, the music curling into the night like a whisper.

The sky above was ink-blue and endless, stars scattered like soft confessions, and the sea beyond seemed to hum in time with

their quiet laughter. He handed her a glass, their fingers brushing—slow, unhurried, as if the night belonged only to them.

There were no grand declarations, no need for them. Just stolen glances, easy smiles, and the kind of silence that felt full. Soulful. Like maybe, in that moment, they were exactly where they were always meant to be.

"Why Bali?" she asked.

Ryan leaned back on his palms. "Because it's far enough away to feel like the past can't reach you."

She turned to him. "And are you running from something?"

He didn't answer right away. Just stared out into the black sea where the sky met water in a seamless blur.

"Maybe," he said softly. "But I'd rather just be running toward something better."

And in that moment, under the stars, with salt on her skin and a half-drunk coconut in her hand, Aira felt something dangerous.

Hope.

And maybe something worse than hope—desire for something she couldn't define. A need to believe that this trip wouldn't end in heartbreak. That maybe, just maybe, the universe owed her something soft.

Chapter 3:

The Man I Couldn't Read

The sound of the ocean was softer in the morning — not crashing, just breathing.

Aira wrapped a silk robe around her and stepped out onto the villa's terrace, barefoot. The stone was warm under her feet. The infinity pool shimmered like liquid glass, and just beyond it, the sea stretched endlessly.

He was already out there.

Ryan sat at the edge of the lounge chair, shirtless in white linen pants, sipping his black coffee like it was the only thing keeping him tethered to this planet. His eyes were on the horizon, far away from her, far away from everything.

He hadn't noticed her yet.

Or maybe he had and just didn't react.

She couldn't tell. That was the thing about Ryan Carter. You never could.

She had spent months holding onto his words not because they were scarce, but because they were generous. Thoughtful. He

always replied, always showed up. And yet, for all his presence, there were pieces of him she could never quite touch. He gave everything but his past, everything but the part that explained why his eyes sometimes went quiet.

He was charming, yes.

Magnetic in that expensive, effortless way only men with generational wealth and emotional wounds could be.

And God, he was intelligent. He talked about world economies, science, politics and obscure books, yet also knew the best places in Bali for Bubur Injin (Black Rice Pudding) at 2 a.m.

But there was always something... missing.

Sometimes she wondered if he had forgotten how to speak about himself. Like he had buried something so deep inside that even he no longer knew where it lived.

Most of the time, Ryan looked like he was in another world. Zoned out. Lost in a memory he never spoke of.

And yet – when he looked at her...

He saw her like no one else ever had.

“Morning,” he said, finally turning to her. His voice was a little raspy, like he hadn’t spoken to anyone in hours.

She gave a soft smile. “Do you ever sleep?”

He shrugged. “Not really. Dreams are overrated.”

That answer shouldn’t have made her heart flutter. But it did.

She sat next to him, their knees nearly touching.

“You zone out a lot,” she said gently.

Ryan tilted his head. “Do I?”

“You do,” she said, watching him. “But you also say very little about yourself.”

He smirked, not denying it.

“Are you this mysterious with everyone?” she asked, cocking an eyebrow.

“Only with women who scare me.”

Aira blinked. “I scare you?”

He looked at her then — really looked. Eyes dark, intense, holding something she couldn’t name.

“You’re not just beautiful,” he said softly. “You’re the kind of woman people never get over.”

Her breath hitched.

“Is that a line?” she asked, trying to keep it light.

“No,” he said. “That’s the problem.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. So, she stood and walked toward the pool, dipping her toes in the water.

“I still don’t know you,” she said after a long pause. “You’ve seen so much of me, Ryan. My past, my pain, my stupid WhatsApp rants at 2 a.m. But I don’t even know what your favourite colour is.”

“Black,” he said simply.

“Of course it is,” she muttered. “Mysterious and moody.”

He laughed with a deep low voice . “Okay, fine. Midnight blue. Like my eyes when you’re pretending not to fall for me.”

She rolled her eyes, but she smiled too.

Later that afternoon, they went exploring.

He took her to a hidden waterfall. They hiked through jungle paths and uneven stone steps that twisted through thick, humid air and the sharp scent of wet earth. The sound of the falls grew louder with each turn, roaring like an ancient heartbeat.

At one point, she slipped – not dramatically, just enough to let out a gasp.

He caught her waist in a flash, fingers firm, steady.

“You’re safe,” he said, eyes locked on hers.

In that moment, something shifted. Not in him – in her.

She felt seen. Not admired from afar or desired with a gaze but witnessed. Like her soul had reached out, and he hadn’t flinched.

She had never felt this swept off her feet before. Not even when she was winning crowns or being flown across the country for love.

This felt... dangerous. And impossibly good.

That night, as she stepped out of the shower in a satin slip, she paused in front of the mirror, fingers lingering at the strap on her shoulder.

She looked different. Softer. Not from the trip or the lighting — but from being looked at like she mattered.

When she walked into the room, he looked at her like she was a work of art. Like she was something rare.

“You’re absolutely stunning,” he said. “You don’t even know, do you?”

Aira’s voice was small. “Know what?”

“How you look. How you move. What you do to people.”

He stepped closer, pausing just a few inches away.

“You’re exotic,” he said. “But not in a cliché way. It’s in your energy. You make everything feel alive.”

She swallowed hard.

And then she did the one thing she swore she wouldn’t do.

She let him kiss her.

And the world — her heartbreaks, her walls, her carefully guarded heart — went quiet for a moment.

Chapter 4: Pieces of Him

They had just come back from a beach dinner that looked like something out of a movie — fairy lights, acoustic guitar, the soft crash of waves nearby. The air had smelled like grilled seafood and jasmine, and their toes were half-buried in warm sand as they ate.

But Aira couldn't stop thinking about something she had noticed earlier.

Ryan had gone silent — mid-sentence, mid-smile — when a small girl ran past them on the sand, chasing a balloon that kept slipping from her grip.

He'd looked... lost.

Not wistful. Not romantic.

Just — somewhere else.

And the moment passed quickly, like a shadow crossing sunlight. He laughed again, poured her more wine, and tilted his head in that effortless way he did. But something had dimmed behind his eyes, and Aira felt it before she even understood it.

Now they were back in the villa.

The salt-kissed breeze slid through the open terrace doors, stirring the gauzy curtains like they were breathing too. Aira was curled up on the lounge chair, her damp hair resting against a cotton cushion, the silk tie of her robe barely knotted at her waist. Her legs were pulled up beneath her, warm against the cool fabric.

The cocktail glass in her hand had begun to sweat, leaving a faint ring on the side table. It smelled faintly of pineapple, coconut, and something sharp — like lime and unspoken questions.

Ryan was standing by the bookshelf, pretending to skim through a book he'd picked up earlier. He hadn't turned a page in fifteen minutes.

"You okay?" she asked softly, her voice nearly lost beneath the soft whirr of the ceiling fan.

He turned, slow. "Yeah. Just tired."

"You're not," she said. "You've got that faraway look again."

He smiled faintly. "You're good at reading people."

"No," she replied, eyes steady. "I'm just trying really hard to read you."

Even the air between them felt dense — like it carried the weight of everything he wasn't saying.

He didn't speak for a long moment.

Then he set the book down, deliberately and walked over, barefoot on the cool tiles, the soft pads of his feet almost silent.

He sat across from her, close enough to reach, but with a deliberate sliver of space between them. Like a respectful pause. Like he wasn't sure if he deserved closeness just yet.

"I have a daughter," he said quietly, like the words had been waiting to exhale.

Aira blinked. "What?"

"She's seven. Her name's Lily."

The name felt like a key turned inside the room. Something shifted in the atmosphere — not colder, just heavier.

"She loves space documentaries," he added with a soft, almost bashful smile. "And peanut butter on everything. Even apples. Even pasta."

Aira's lips twitched. "Sounds like someone with a strong sense of identity."

"She is. She got that from her mother."

That made Aira pause. Her heart softened, even as her guard folded upward a little — instinctive, protective.

"You're divorced?" she asked gently.

He hesitated. "In the process. It's... complicated."

"Isn't it always?" she said, her voice barely a whisper.

She watched him lean back, arms resting on his thighs, fingers threading together like he was trying to keep something from spilling. His eyes drifted upward, scanning the ceiling like he might find answers in the plaster patterns.

"She was amazing when we met," he said. "Smart. Beautiful. Funny in this dark, sarcastic way that kept me on my toes. But over time... we stopped being teammates."

"And started being strangers?" Aira asked.

"No," he replied. "Worse. We started being competitors."

The fan hummed above them, and Aira could hear the distant sound of waves again, quieter now — like they, too, were listening.

He looked away.

"I didn't cheat," he said quickly, as if needing to speak it aloud before it grew heavier. "It wasn't like that. We just... grew into people who didn't know how to love each other anymore."

"But you still love your daughter," Aira said.

"God, yes." His voice cracked — not loudly, just a faint tremor at the edge. "She's the only thing I've ever gotten right."

The room held still. Even the breeze seemed to pause for him.

Aira stayed quiet, absorbing it all.

This wasn't the Ryan who flirted under fairy lights. This wasn't the man who said all the perfect things at dinner.

This was the man behind the armour. The man who wasn't selling a version of himself — just trying to understand it.

And for the first time, she didn't want to run.

She didn't want to save him either.

She just wanted to stay. And see.

“Thank you for telling me”, she said, her voice warm and low.

He looked at her then, really looked and this time, his blue eyes weren’t cold or unreadable. They were full of something gentle, something bruised. And honest.

“I don’t want to lie to you,” he said. “Even if I don’t always know how to tell the truth.”

Something in her stirred – that old instinct to reach across, to touch his hand. She almost did.

But instead, she let the silence stretch between them.

And Aira, whose heart had been broken by boys pretending to be men, realized something:

Ryan wasn’t pretending.

He was just healing.

Chapter 5:

Mornings I Didn't Know I Needed

The sunlight spilled into the villa like it belonged there — gold, quiet, gentle. It kissed the edge of the bed, warmed the tiles, and stretched across the linen curtains. Aira stirred under the soft sheets, her skin warm and her body wrapped in that rare in-between space — half-asleep, half-alive. The distant crash of waves echoed from the coast below, steady and rhythmic like breath. She could smell sea salt in the air... and something else.

Warmth. Familiar. Beside her.

She turned her head slightly.

Ryan was already awake, propped up on one elbow, just... watching her. His hand cradled the side of his face, and the sunlight caught in his eyes in a way that made them look almost silver - blue.

She blinked sleepily. “Staring is creepy, you know.”

His lips curved. “I wasn’t staring.”

“You were.”

“I was admiring.”

Aira groaned and pulled the blanket over her face. “God, you’re so American.”

“And you’re breathtaking in the morning.”

She peeked out. “With panda eyes and bed hair?”

“With all of it,” he said, dead serious.

She couldn’t look at him for a moment after that. Something about the way he said it — without hesitation, without teasing — cracked a space open inside her that she hadn’t known was still closed.

They stayed there like that for a while — limbs tangled, breaths slow, a kind of silence that didn’t feel empty.

She studied him as he stared at the ceiling, his chest rising and falling gently. His bare shoulder was just close enough to touch, and she let her knuckles brush against it. His skin was warm and still slightly salty from last night’s swim.

His blue eyes looked softer today. Less distant. Still thoughtful, but not sad.

“You know,” she said, brushing a finger along his jaw, “you surprise me.”

“How?”

“You look like the type who’d break hearts for fun.”

“I used to,” he admitted. “Or maybe I just wasn’t trying hard enough not to.”

“And now?”

He turned to her fully. “Now I’m trying not to ruin something that finally feels real.”

Her breath caught — not because of the words, but because of the way he said them. Low. Gentle. Like a confession. Like the kind of sentence someone says once in a lifetime and means it.

They had coffee in bed.

She wore his oversized T-shirt, the sleeves falling over her hands. It smelled like his cologne and soap — something fresh, clean, masculine. She hugged her knees as he sat beside her, one leg stretched lazily across the bed.

He made her laugh by trying to imitate her accent.

“Say ‘water,’” he teased.

“Waa-tuh,” she mimicked with an eye roll.

“Sexy,” he said.

“Stop.”

“Never.”

He kissed her shoulder. Light. Unhurried. His lips lingered just long enough to make her heart stutter.

Aira had been touched before. Desired. Even adored. But this — this was something quieter. And far more dangerous.

Later, while he showered, she walked out to the balcony with her coffee and her thoughts.

The morning air was warm but forgiving. The ocean below shimmered like a secret, and birds called out from the trees like they were announcing the day. Somewhere in the distance, a motorbike passed, and the sound faded quickly like life outside this moment didn't quite exist.

She wasn't used to this — waking up next to someone and not immediately questioning everything. There were no alarms in her head. No tension in her chest. Just... peace.

And it terrified her.

Because peace, to her, had always felt like the beginning of loss.

She sipped her coffee and stared at the waves, whispering under her breath.

"Please don't let this be another almost."

He joined her moments later, towel slung low on his hips, hair damp and unruly. He wrapped his arms around her from behind and rested his chin lightly on her shoulder.

"You okay?" he murmured into her hair.

She nodded. "Just thinking."

"Dangerous habit."

"You're one to talk," she said, leaning into him. "You live in your head half of the time."

He didn't argue. Just kissed the top of her head and tightened his hold.

WILD GRACE

She could feel the beat of his heart against her back. Could feel the way his breath slowed to match hers, like they were syncing without meaning to.

And in that quiet moment, with the waves crashing in rhythm and his heartbeat pressed against her, Aira allowed herself a fragile kind of hope.

Maybe this time, the story wouldn't end in goodbye.

But a tiny voice inside her whispered: "Even if it does... let this be the one that was worth it."

Chapter 6:

The Kind of Love I Thought Didn't Exist

He wasn't just a lover.
He was a force. The kind that wraps around your life like silk, like the soft, luxurious, undeniable fabric— and suddenly, nothing before him makes sense anymore.

Ryan made Aira feel things she had long buried under ambition, betrayal, and disappointment.

She had been in love before. But never like this.

After Bali, everything changed.

She had just quit her job because life had demanded it. The politics, the lies, the way her spirit was being dulled behind glass doors and fake smiles.

For the first time in years, she had space to breathe.

And he filled it with presence.

"You pick the next country," he said over a late breakfast one morning.

Aira blinked. "What?"

"You heard me," he grinned, stirring honey into her tea. "Anywhere in the world. Just say the name, and we'll go."

She laughed. "Ryan, I was thinking Goa. You're thinking globe."

"Same thing," he said with a wink. "One has coconut water, the other has mojitos."

He was insane. And she was slowly falling for his kind of crazy.

They met in Italy the next month — kissed beneath the fading amber light in Lake Como, where the still waters mirrored the sky, and every alley felt like a secret. They shared pasta in a lakeside trattoria, the wine rich, the silence between them softer than ever.

Later, in South Africa, they stood hand in hand atop Table Mountain, the wind tugging at her hair as the city shimmered below them like scattered jewels. At Boulders Beach, they laughed watching penguins waddle across sunlit rocks — unbothered, endearing, oddly poetic.

Then Norway — where they chased the Northern Lights across frozen skies, breath visible in the midnight air, wrapped in layers and laughter. They soaked in steaming fjord side hot tubs, snowflakes melting on their noses, cheeks flushed from both the cold and each other. In the quiet of Nordic nights, with only firelight and the hum of silence between them, she began to understand that love didn't have to be loud to be unforgettable.

Then Croatia — where they danced barefoot on cobbled streets after a thunderstorm, the scent of lavender and rain thick in the air.

Then the Maldives — where they woke to the sound of ocean waves crashing against stilts, their bodies tangled in linen sheets, tasting salt on each other's skin before coffee.

One country after another, like chapters in a story she never wanted to end.

Ryan handled everything — flights, hotels, meals, even her little whims.

He would hand her a camera and ask her to take photos because “she saw beauty in a way most people missed it.”

When she forgot sunscreen, he packed it the next time.

When she tripped on cobblestones in Dubrovnik, he knelt and kissed her scraped knee like it was precious.

When she fell asleep on long drives through Tuscany, he let her rest — one hand on the wheel, the other always resting gently on her thigh.

He never complained. Never made her feel like a burden.

If anything, he treated her like she was his gift.

They rode scooters through rice paddies, sipped wine by castle ruins, made love in hammocks and hotel balconies and ferry cabins. Every place added another layer to their story.

She'd look at him across tables, beaches, train stations — and it always hit her the same way.

WILD GRACE

How did I get here? And how do I make this last?

One night in a quiet cove in Montenegro, after a long walk along the cliffs, Aira curled up beside him by a fireplace.

The room was quiet. The world, quieter.

Outside, the sea murmured low against rocks, and inside, her heart was louder than ever.

She turned to him, heart full.

“You’ve ruined love for me,” she whispered.

He looked over, brow raised. “What?”

She smiled. “Because if this doesn’t last... nothing will ever feel good enough again.”

He pulled her close, resting his forehead against hers.

“It will last,” he said simply. “I’m not going anywhere.”

And somehow, she believed him.

For the first time in years, she didn’t just love —

She trusted.

Chapter 7: Too Good to Be True

They were best friends now.

The kind of lovers who knew when the other was spiralling, even through a single emoji.

Who sent playlists instead of apologies. Memes in place of regret. Silences filled with meaning. A glance that said, *“Don’t leave,”* and a laugh that whispered, *“I’m still here.”*

They’d shared hotel beds in six countries, sipped their favourite coffees across three time zones, fought over flight delays, made up over gelato, and built a rhythm that was almost too beautiful to question.

Almost.

Because beneath all the inside jokes, lazy morning kisses, and spontaneous train rides, one truth quietly loomed between them:

Aira had never known a love like this.

But the one thing she wanted most — he couldn’t give.

They were walking along the Seine in Paris, early spring. Cherry blossoms shivered in the breeze. Boats drifted by with slow, sleepy grace. His fingers were laced in hers, warm and steady.

It should have been perfect.

But perfect has a way of hiding its cracks until the light hits just right.

“Do you ever think about... what comes next?” she asked softly, eyes scanning the water instead of his face.

Ryan kept walking, but she felt the slight pause in his step. A hesitation, subtle but unmistakable.

“You mean after this trip?”

She shook her head. “No. I mean... in life. With us.”

He slowed. His grip on her hand tightened, just barely.

“Aira,” he said after a beat, “don’t ruin a beautiful afternoon.”

Her heart sank. “Is that what I’m doing?”

He looked at her then — not angry, not cold. Just tired. Like he’d been running from this moment longer than he’d admit.

“You want the truth?” he asked.

She nodded.

“I try not to think about what comes next. Because I’m not sure I can give you what you want.”

The words didn’t explode.

They settled — heavy, sharp — like stones in her chest.

They had danced around the topic before. Future. Family. Forever.

But this was the first time he'd said it without disguise.

"I'm not asking for a ring tomorrow," she said, trying to keep her voice even. "I just want to know if there's a door open. Even a little."

Ryan exhaled and rubbed his thumb along her knuckles — the same way he always did when he didn't know how to soften a blow.

"I've already built a life once," he said. "And I'm still fixing what broke. I love my daughter. She's everything. I don't know if I have it in me to start over again — not with marriage. Not with more kids. Maybe not even with a real future."

"So what are we doing then?" Aira asked, stopping abruptly.

He turned to face her fully, his expression unreadable. "We're living. We're loving each other the best we can, right now."

She stared at him, stunned. "That's enough for you?"

"Yes," he said simply. "Because I don't know how to give more."

That hurt more than any betrayal ever could.

Because he wasn't lying.

He wasn't cheating.

He wasn't cruel.

He just... couldn't.

And somehow, that made it worse.

Later that night, she curled up beside him in bed, her back to his chest, his arm draped around her like a shield that couldn't stop the ache inside her.

He kissed her shoulder softly, then rested his chin near her neck.

"You mean a lot to me," he whispered, voice barely audible.

She closed her eyes. "But not enough."

He didn't reply.

Because there was nothing left to say.

And in that silence — the kind that hurts more than shouting ever could — Aira felt something shift inside her.

Not an explosion.

Not even a break.

Just a quiet unravelling of all the hope she'd stitched together in his arms.

But her heart was already somewhere else — in the space between the life they had and the one she'd always dreamed of.

She didn't know what would happen next.

But she knew this:

Even the most beautiful love can begin to hurt... when it has nowhere to go.

Chapter 8: Unravelling in Silence

A ira was back home, but her soul hadn't arrived yet. The apartment felt foreign, like a hotel room she didn't remember checking into. Her suitcases were still half-unpacked in the hallway, clothes spilling out like echoes of another life. Her favourite perfume bottle — the one he used to compliment with a kiss behind her ear — stood untouched on the dresser, its scent was a veil of vanilla cream, orchid petals, and cashmere woods, curling through the still air like a love letter left unread.

Her laptop blinked open on the dining table, casting a cold blue light against the beige walls. A dozen emails waited, all marked unread. Each subject line felt like another life calling and she didn't have the strength to answer any of them.

After two years of flying across borders, watching sunrises from cliffside balconies, and sipping coffee in cities that spoke different languages — this silence felt like a scream.

The air was heavy.

The kind of heavy that presses against your chest even when you're standing still.

"Are you okay?" Mari's voice came through the phone one night. Aira was curled beneath a blanket, the fabric soft but failing to comfort.

"No," Aira said honestly. "But I'm trying not to fall apart."

Outside, rain tapped against the windowpane in a slow, steady rhythm, like a lullaby she couldn't surrender to.

Mari didn't rush her. She never did.

"I think he really does love me," Aira whispered, her voice catching in her throat. "I just... don't know if love is enough anymore."

Later that week, she met Julia for coffee. The café smelled like roasted beans, old books, and cinnamon. It was raining again — Parisian rain, steady and elegant — and it clung to her coat as she stepped inside, damp curls framing her tired face.

Julia watched her quietly as she stirred her cappuccino in slow, sad circles. The spoon clinked against the ceramic with soft, repetitive taps.

"You've been quiet," Julia said gently.

"I think I've forgotten how to speak without checking if he's listening," Aira replied, her voice trembling. Her fingers shook as she set the spoon down. Tears brimmed at the corners of her eyes but didn't fall.

Julia reached across the table and took her hand — Her hand was warm and her grip firm.

“You gave him your world,” she said. “And now you don’t know how to live in it without him.”

Aira nodded slowly, a single tear breaking free and trailing down her cheek.

“I don’t know who I am anymore,” she whispered. “I used to be so sure. I had goals. Dreams. Now all I want is to not feel this heavy.”

Ryan still messaged her.

Every day.

Little things:

“Made your favourite tea.”

“Saw a woman at the airport with your laugh. It wrecked me.”

“I miss you. But I’ll never pressure you.”

And that was the hardest part.

He wasn’t cruel. He wasn’t distant.

He still loved her.

But just not in the way that could hold her future.

And that made walking away feel like breaking her own ribs — without a sound.

WILD GRACE

She tried focusing on work, updating her portfolio, browsing job listings, half-heartedly editing her resume. But the words on the screen blurred together.

Her mind kept circling back to passport stamps and plane tickets, laughter in foreign streets, quiet mornings tangled in linen sheets. The smell of his cologne on shared hotel robes. The warmth of his hand at her waist in crowded train stations. The way he'd brush her hair back and say, "You don't even know how beautiful you are."

The life they had built had no permanence and yet it had consumed her completely.

Now, she was left trying to rebuild from dust.

One night, after tossing in bed for hours, she texted Mari:

I'm not strong enough to walk away.

But staying feels like I'm losing myself too.

Mari replied almost instantly:

You're stronger than you think.

And when it's real love, it doesn't ask you to choose between it and yourself.

Aira stared at the screen, the glow lighting her face in the dark.

Her chest ached. Her eyes burned.

Ryan still hadn't stopped loving her.

But neither had she.

PRIYAM MECH

And that was what made it all so hard.

Love was supposed to save you.

Not leave you in pieces trying to save yourself.

Chapter 9: The First Time He Said It

The air outside the consulate was thick with late afternoon heat, but Aira barely felt it.

Her passport trembled in her hand — still warm from the clerk's fingers.

Stamped. Approved.

Her vision blurred for a second.

Not from tears. From shock.

She had just been told she got the visa.

And for the first time in years, her hands weren't shaking from heartbreak or fear but from victory.

From the weight of choosing herself.

Moving to the United States had always been her quiet longing, a dream scribbled between to-do lists and unspoken prayers.

It was the version of her life she only dared to imagine late at night when Mari's voice echoed on the phone, telling her she was meant for more than survival.

She saw it in flashes —

neon diner lights, bookshops with bell chimes, fresh starts wrapped in unfamiliar street names.

And now, she held it in her hand.

In the thin rectangle of paper tucked into her passport.

It hadn't happened alone.

Ryan had stepped in when she wasn't even sure she was allowed to ask for help.

"I know the system," he'd said weeks ago, pulling up articles and embassy checklists on her laptop.

"Let me walk you through it."

She'd hesitated.

But he didn't hover.

He didn't push.

He just showed up repeatedly with answers, reassurance, and iced coffee during her worst breakdowns.

Forms. Interview prep. Embarrassing moments she wanted to forget.

He sat with it all.

Without demand. Without drama.

Just... presence.

By then, Ryan had projects in India that kept him around more than before, though Aira never asked too many questions. He booked flights the way most people booked taxis, moving through that life with an ease she sometimes envied.

So when the knock came three days after her approval and she opened the door to see him standing there, jeans worn-in, navy jacket zipped halfway, hair still messy from travel — she froze.

In his hand: her exact iced coffee order.

No straw. Extra vanilla. No sugar.

“Ryan?” she breathed.

He smiled — the small, uneven one that always made her heart ache.

“I figured you might need a reminder of who’s rooting for you,” he said.

Her fingers curled around the doorframe. She couldn’t find her voice.

The city outside blurred.

The scent of her favourite coffee. The rustle of his jacket.

The quiet between them humming like a held breath.

“I wanted to be here,” he added, softer now. “When you step into your new life.”

He looked nervous. Not performative. Not casual.

Real.

As if he’d spent hours rehearsing and still didn’t know how to land it.

She stared at him; torn between every memory they’d built and every wall she’d rebuilt since.

He stepped closer.

“I never said it,” he whispered. “And maybe that’s my biggest failure.”

Her throat tightened.

“Said what?”

Even though she already knew.

She just needed to hear it.

His voice didn’t waver this time.

“I love you, Aira.”

Three words.

Three years.

And finally, they were real.

The breath caught in her chest like a skipped heartbeat.

She had felt it in every unspoken kindness.

In the sunscreen packed before she remembered.

WILD GRACE

In the photos he took of her when she wasn't looking.

But hearing it...

Hearing it unravelled her from the inside out.

Not painfully.

Just... profoundly.

Because now she didn't know what to do with it.

She loved him.

God, she loved him.

But how do you build a life with someone who can't promise to build it with you?

He reached for her hand, calloused thumb brushing the inside of her wrist.

"I don't expect anything," he murmured. "I just needed you to hear it. From me. For real."

Her eyes brimmed. "Why now?"

A silence passed between them like a wave.

He gave her the faintest smile sincere enough to make something stir within her. .

"Because you're leaving.

And I've realized something... I'd rather have you across the world knowing you're loved

than next to me — wondering if you ever were."

PRIYAM MECH

That night, Aira lay awake in the dark.

The fan above whirred.

Outside, a stray dog barked once, then silence.

Her visa was approved.

Her future was waiting.

But her heart...

her heart was still at the door.

Caught between a plane ticket and a man she could never fully hold.

Freedom had never felt so heavy.

Because the love she'd waited years to hear
had finally arrived.

Too late.

Too tender.

Too much.

And yet... not enough.

Not for the life she now knew she deserved.

Chapter 10: I Was Never the Only One

The room was scattered with open suitcases.
Soft piles of clothes.
Folded letters.

Chargers and chap sticks, and shoes that had travelled continents.

But this time, Aira wasn't just packing for a trip.

She was packing a life.

Carefully wrapping up parts of herself she hadn't touched in years —

ambition, hope, fragments of a girl who had once believed in big cities and bigger dreams.

The visa was in her hand.

America was waiting.

A new beginning was finally real.

And Ryan had been there for all of it.

Helping.

Smiling.

Holding her hand through paperwork and panic.

He had even told her he loved her.

And she had believed it.

She needed to believe it.

Because without that belief, what had all of it been?

He came over that evening just as the sun slipped below the skyline and the

orange light filtered through the curtains, painting her walls gold.

But Ryan wasn't carrying coffee today.

No teasing. No easy grin.

Just that unreadable look in his eyes.

The one that always came before he said something that changed everything.

She noticed it immediately – the way he hesitated at the door, the way he didn't kiss her cheeks like usual.

Her stomach dropped.

"What's wrong?" she asked, her voice barely above a breath.

He walked in slowly, almost reluctantly, like every step was a confession.

WILD GRACE

"I need to tell you something," he said, sitting down at the edge of her bed —

the one they had once shared on nights he promised he didn't want to sleep anywhere else.

"And I want to be honest. You deserve that."

Her heart began to pound.

In her ears. Her chest. Her throat.

"Okay..." she said cautiously, sitting across from him.

He inhaled, then spoke:

"My divorce is final."

She blinked. "That's... that's good, right?"

There should've been relief. Closure. A turning point.

But his face didn't soften. He didn't smile.

"I'm free now," he said quietly. "Legally. Emotionally. In a way I haven't been for years."

Her palms went cold.

"Okay... and what does that mean for us?" she asked.

The room fell still.

Even the traffic outside seemed to hush.

Ryan looked at her like someone who'd already decided.

Someone rehearsing how to hurt without being cruel.

And then he shattered her.

"It means... I want to explore. I don't think I can be with just one woman anymore."

The air in her lungs vanished.

“I tried,” he added quickly, his voice cracking. “With you. And I loved you. God, I loved you. But that part of me... it doesn’t exist anymore.”

Her entire body stilled.

Like stone.

Like ice.

“You’re kidding.”

He didn’t flinch. Didn’t blink.

“I’m not.”

He exhaled slowly, as if saying it was the release he needed.

“There’s someone I’ve been seeing. Just recently. She knows about you.”

The words hit like impact — sudden, sharp, sickening.

“You’re seeing someone else?” she whispered. “After everything? After all this time?”

“I never lied to you,” he said. “Not about how I felt. But I never promised you forever either. I just... didn’t know how to say it until now.”

Aira didn’t cry.

Not right away.

She stood perfectly still —

hands balled into fists at her sides,

WILD GRACE

lip trembling but unbroken.

“I thought I was the only one,” she whispered.

Ryan’s eyes closed briefly.

“You were,” he said softly. “For a while.”

And somehow, that hurt even more.

Like being handed love with an expiration date.

He left without asking if she was okay.

No hug.

No apology that felt true.

Just the soft click of the door closing behind him.

And then silence.

The kind of silence that sounds like glass shattering beneath your skin.

She slid to the floor, the edge of the suitcase digging into her thigh.

She had walked this road before —

heartbreak after heartbreak —

but this felt different.

This wasn’t just being left behind.

This was being replaced.

This was betrayal wrapped in tenderness.

Abandonment disguised as self-discovery.

This was almost love.

And it burned in a way no real love ever should.

Later, as night swallowed the last of the golden sky,

Aira sat beside her half-packed suitcase,

legs pulled to her chest,

tears finally falling into the folds of the T-shirt he had once left behind.

She didn't know how to start over again.

But she knew one thing for sure —

She was never going to beg to be the only one again.

Chapter 11: Rising Doesn't Always Look Like Strength

The flight to New York was booked.
Not because she felt ready.
Not because she felt healed.

But because staying felt like choosing him all over again and she couldn't afford to do that one more time.

Outside her window, the sky was the colour of smoke. The monsoon rain tapped against the glass, soft and unrelenting, like the ache that had settled in her chest and refused to leave.

Aira sat cross-legged on her childhood bed, the one with fading floral sheets and corners filled with memory. This was the room where she had once scribbled dreams into notebooks, whispering promises to the stars: success, travel, a love that would stay.

Now, she was packing those dreams into a suitcase, folding them beside grief she had never asked for.

Grief didn't roar this time.

It hovered — quiet, constant, suffocating in its silence.

There were no sobs shaking her body. No shattered photo frames.

Just a numbness that filled her lungs and made every breath feel borrowed.

She moved through the days like she was underwater, detached, slow, heavy.

She ate only because her mother left food outside her door.

She slept only when exhaustion forced her eyes shut.

She stared at Ryan's last message for two full minutes before replying with a single word:

Goodbye.

No essays. No explanations.

Just a period. A full stop at the end of a story she no longer knew how to tell.

Mari came over the night before the flight, umbrella dripping by the door, arms full of samosas and lemon soda.

They sat cross-legged on the floor of Aira's room — surrounded by half-folded clothes, old journals, tangled cords, and a pair of heels Aira didn't even remember buying. The fan hummed overhead, moving warm air in slow circles.

"I should be excited," Aira whispered, folding and unfolding the same T-shirt until its seams lost shape. "This is everything I ever wanted."

Mari reached for her hand. Her palms were warm, grounding.

“You’re allowed to want something,” she said softly, “and still mourn what it cost you to get it.”

Aira didn’t cry. Not then.

She just nodded, holding on to Mari like she was the last piece of the life she was about to leave behind.

The morning of her flight, the sky was streaked with rose and silver — that quiet, aching kind of beauty that belongs only to daybreak, when the world is still deciding whether to weep or shine.

Aira dressed in silence.

She pulled on a pair of soft black joggers and a fitted white tank layered under an oversized beige trench that hung open, casual yet composed. Clean white sneakers grounded her — practical but sleek. A leather tote slung over her shoulder carried her passport and the scattered pieces of a life she hadn’t yet rebuilt. Her long, dark hair was tied in a loose low bun, with a few strands falling free to frame her face.

No make-up. No armour.

Downstairs, the house smelled faintly of toasted bread and cinnamon tea, but she had no appetite. Her mother pressed a foil-wrapped bundle of tuna sandwiches — the kind Aira had loved since she was a child — into her hands, as if that small, familiar comfort might shield her from everything waiting on the other side of the ocean.

There was no farewell ceremony.

No dramatic send-off.

Just quiet hearts breaking behind strong faces.

At the airport, her father hugged her in his usual way — one arm steady around her shoulders, his chin resting against the crown of her head like it had when she was a child. He didn't say much. He never did. But in that long, lingering pause before he let her go, she felt his quiet pride wrap around her like a second skin.

Her mother cupped her face with both hands, eyes shining but refusing to spill.

"Call when you land," she whispered. Her thumb brushed across Aira's cheek, lingering as though memorizing the texture of her daughter's skin. Her hand trembled — the only betrayal of the storm inside her.

Aira nodded, forcing a smile that broke at the edges.

And then she turned away.

One step, then another — each one pulling her further away from everything she had ever known, closer to a future she wasn't yet sure she believed in.

When the plane lifted from the runway, she didn't look out the window.

She kept her eyes forward, hands folded in her lap, heart heavy but steady.

Somewhere between the clouds and the rising sun, a sentence formed in her mind — clear, calm, resolute:

He may have broken me. But I will rebuild in a place he can't reach.

Her first night in New York felt like a rebirth and a funeral all at once.

WILD GRACE

The Airbnb smelled faintly of old books and lemon-scented cleaner. She dropped her bags, peeled off her shoes, and sank onto the hardwood floor in silence.

She ordered Chinese takeout, ate dumplings from a paper box, and poured herself a glass of cheap white wine.

Outside, the city pulsed — cabs honking, laughter echoing from the street below, a siren wailing somewhere in the distance. Aira sat in the middle of it all, invisible and alive.

She walked to the window, pressing her forehead against the cool glass. Neon bled across the wet streets, painting strangers in shades of blue and red as they hurried under umbrellas. A man with a saxophone played under a flickering streetlamp, his music rising like smoke into the night air.

The city didn't wait for her. It didn't notice her arrival. But its energy — chaotic, raw, unrelenting — seeped into her bloodstream, stirring something that had been dormant too long.

Loneliness. Liberation. Both lived in her chest that night.

She raised her glass to the cracked ceiling.

"To the girl I used to be," she whispered.

And then, quieter still, like a vow spoken only to herself:

And to the woman I'm becoming.

Chapter 12:

The Version of Me I Never Knew

The streets of San Diego smelled like salt and summer. Aira wheeled her suitcase past surf shops and palm trees, dodging cyclists and backpackers, her cheeks pink from the sun and her heart thrumming with something she hadn't felt in a long time — possibility.

Her hostel in Ocean Beach was tucked between a surf shop and a taco stand, its sun-faded walls painted with waves, dream catchers, and poetry in six languages.

Inside, it smelled like sea salt, coconut sunscreen, and someone's late-night burrito. The air buzzed with old guitars, tangled conversations, and the soft creak of bunk beds holding strangers who somehow felt like friends.

She wasn't running anymore.

She wasn't waiting for anyone to text her back.

She was just... moving.

And for the first time in a long while, it felt like freedom.

WILD GRACE

The kitchen smelled faintly of oatmeal and strong black coffee, sunlight spilling in through the cracked blinds. Someone was playing a Fleetwood Mac song from a Bluetooth speaker. That's where Aira first saw them — Rita perched on the counter with a chipped mug, and Mia barefoot, flipping pancakes with a mischievous grin.

Rita, from Berlin — Attractive, with high cheekbones and a sculpted face. Always in oversized leather jacket or combat boots that had seen too many music festivals. She had a no-nonsense vibe, laughed loudly, swore casually, and carried herself with the kind of confidence that didn't beg for approval. She always brought ginger shots instead of tea, rolled her eyes at drama, and said things like, "You're not broken, you're just tired — big difference." Rita didn't sugarcoat life. But when Aira was quiet, she'd show up with chocolate, sit beside her without talking, and somehow make the silence feel like armour.

Mia, from New Zealand — magnetic, bold, with eyes like sea glass and a mind that didn't miss a thing.

She was the kind of woman who could roast you with one eyebrow raise and make you laugh so hard you'd forget why you were sad. Her humour was quick — sharp one-liners, perfectly timed sarcasm, and a knack for breaking tension like it was a party trick.

She saw through people instantly but never made them feel exposed — just understood. Mia didn't try to fix anyone. She just made the mess feel a little lighter.

They welcomed Aira like they had been waiting for her.

That night, the three of them lay side by side on the rooftop in sleeping bags, the California breeze curling around them as stars blinked above. Rita played soft indie music from her phone. Mia

lit sage. Aira stared up at the sky and whispered, “I think I’m starting to feel alive again.”

By the weekend, they were on the road — second-hand maps, shared playlists, and backpacks stuffed with dreams.

In San Francisco, they got caught in the fog, huddled under one umbrella as Mia snapped candid photos of Aira laughing against the backdrop of the Golden Gate.

In Los Angeles, they stayed in a hostel near Venice Beach.

One night, they stumbled into a street party near the boardwalk — food trucks lined the road, neon lights flickered above vendors selling handmade rings and tie-dye tees, and a local band played salsa under hanging lanterns.

They danced near the edge of the crowd, laughed, shared greasy fries and watermelon popsicles, and later lay on the cool sand until 3 a.m., wrapped in oversized sweatshirts, watching the tide breathe in and out like the city’s heartbeat.

They spoke about everything they wanted, and everything they were afraid to admit — their voices hushed, like the ocean might overhear and hold their secrets too.

In Austin, Rita taught Aira to eat tacos without spilling salsa on her jeans. They listened to street performers, wrote their names on the bathroom walls of a bar called “Moonshine,” and cried over Mia’s heartbreak — the boy back home who said forever and meant three months.

They shared one mirror, one bottle of dry shampoo, one big dream: to live a life they didn’t need to escape from.

WILD GRACE

Some nights, Aira lay in bed staring at her phone screen, Ryan's name lighting up in blue.

"How's LA treating you?"

"Let me know if you need help with anything in NYC."

"Proud of you. Really."

She didn't always respond.

But she always read them.

There was no malice in his presence — no guilt-tripping, no selfish need. Just a quiet, lingering affection. It confused her. Comforted her. Hurt her.

Because sometimes, letting go doesn't look like slamming doors or cutting ties.

Sometimes, it looks like reading his message and choosing not to reply.

By the time they reached New York, Aira was different.

Her skin had darkened with the sun, her limbs felt stronger, her laugh had grown louder. She had stories now — real ones — about missed trains and stolen French fries and singing along to Fleetwood Mac in hostels that never slept.

She had Rita's quiet wisdom, Mia's unapologetic strength, and her own voice, finally returning to her in full.

She still thought of Ryan sometimes.

But he was no longer the main character.

She was.

And for the first time in her life, she wasn't surviving love.

She was living *herself*.

On their second morning in New York, the girls woke up before dawn and took the subway in near silence, still half-asleep, wrapped in hoodies and mismatched scarves.

The city hadn't woken yet.

They walked to Brooklyn Bridge, coffee cups in hand, the river below glimmering in pre-sunlight stillness.

The air was crisp. Aira's nose stung from the cold, her fingers curled tightly around the paper cup. But her heart... her heart felt strangely warm.

They stood at the edge, the skyline stretching out like a promise.

The first blush of sunlight touched the tips of the towers, painting everything gold — even the water, even the cracks in the pavement.

Rita leaned her head on Aira's shoulder.

Mia snapped a photo — the three of them silhouetted against the rising light.

None of them said much.

They didn't have to.

Because in that moment — wind in their hair, the world slowly waking — Aira realized:

She had made it.

Not just to a new city, or a new chapter.

But to *herself*.

Chapter 13: The Spark Comes Back

The city didn't sleep — it blazed.

Taxis tore down avenues like wild things unleashed, headlights slicing the night. Steam hissed from underground grates, curling around ankles like restless ghosts. Neon signs sputtered and flickered, winking with secrets that belonged only to the bold.

New York wasn't waiting for anyone.

But Aira?

She was catching up — heels striking the pavement in sharp rhythm, her pulse syncing to the city's chaos like it had been waiting for her all along.

She no longer moved like a girl in recovery.

She moved like someone who had remembered who the hell she was.

After weeks of cross-country nights, bitter hostel coffee, and heart-healing laughter with Mia and Rita, the fog inside her had begun to lift.

And in its place: fire.

Not content.

Not curated.

But creation — raw, messy, electric.

It started with a ping.

Carmen.

Lavender-haired, espresso-fueled, forever in oversized boots that looked stolen from a rockstar's closet. They had met in a creaky Brooklyn hostel — the kind with flickering hallway bulbs, chipped paint, and the smell of someone else's reheated noodles always lingering. Carmen had swept into Aira's orbit like a thunderstorm: loud, sassy, impossible to ignore.

One night, crammed on a bunk bed with takeout cartons between them, Carmen had smirked over her bubble tea straw.

"You've got that thing," she said, gesturing vaguely at Aira's face. "Like... you look like you could command a room. Why you hiding in hostels?"

Aira had just laughed then, too weighed down by old heartbreak to explain. But Carmen had clocked her silence with a side-eye sharp enough to cut.

Now, weeks later, her message lit up Aira's phone:

Carmen:

Need backup Friday night. Fashion x film collab in SoHo. V chaotic. V cool. You in or soft girl quitting?

Aira smirked. Her thumbs hovered, then flew.

Aira:

I'm in. Just tell me where to show up.

Something inside her stretched awake — like muscle memory cracking open after too long asleep.

The event was a fever dream.

Flashes burst from hidden corners like paparazzi. Music thumped through concrete walls, bass rattling the bones of the old loft. Velvet drapes shivered whenever the back door slammed in the wind.

There were supermodels in borrowed heels wobbling like newborn deer. Interns cried in bathrooms over botched makeup. Someone spilled champagne on a rack of silk gowns, and a stylist threatened to quit for the third time that night.

Perfume, sweat, stress, and ambition all clung to the air, thick as smoke.

Aira didn't wait for instructions.

She moved.

Pinned scarves in place with hands steady as steel. Redirected a lighting stand before it crushed someone's toes. Chased a missing earring across a marble floor, skidding to catch it just as the curtain call began.

A top ripped on a model's shoulder, and without thinking, Aira grabbed safety pins, knelt in a blur of fabric and nerves, and tied

it back into art. The designer, who had been seconds away from hyperventilating, exhaled like she'd been saved.

No job was too small.

No fear. No hesitation.

Just adrenaline and instinct — the kind only people with real experience carried in their bones.

For the first time in years, Aira felt utterly alive.

That's when she appeared.

Sasha Verneau.

The Sasha Verneau.

Oversized sunglasses at night. Red lips as sharp as a blade. A silk shirt that probably cost more than Aira's entire suitcase. She moved through the chaos like a general, her voice cutting cleaner than the music.

"You."

Aira froze, mid-fix on a crooked hairpiece.

"You new?" Sasha asked, pointing through a rack of tulle like Aira was the only clear thing in the room.

"Sort of," Aira said, heat rising to her cheeks. "Helping out a friend."

Sasha watched her hands, steady and precise, twisting a pin into place.

"You have a sharp eye," she said slowly. "You see things. Most people miss the moment. You don't."

Aira blinked. The words hit deeper than they should have.

“I used to work in fashion,” she admitted, breath catching. “In India.”

Sasha smirked, pulling a card from somewhere inside that silk shirt. She slipped it into Aira’s palm like a secret.

“Well, come work in New York now. Email me. We’re building a team. We need wolves – not followers.”

And just like that, she vanished into the chaos.

Later that night, the city’s noise pressed against Aira’s fire escape like a heartbeat.

She leaned against the cold railing, Sasha’s card between her fingers. The print was embossed, expensive, and real.

It didn’t feel like a coincidence.

It felt like a beginning.

Below her, the streets buzzed with endless energy – yellow cabs flashing like lightning, strangers laughing too loudly, subway grates sighing steam into the night.

Above her, stars fought their way through the haze, stubborn enough to shine.

For the first time in a long time, Aira wasn’t someone’s heartbreak story.

She wasn’t an aftermath.

She wasn’t waiting for someone else to choose her.

She was the damn main character.

Her phone buzzed again. She opened their group chat.

Aira:

Just got handed a card by a fashion legend. Might've blacked out. Might be back.

Rita:

NO WAY. SCREAMING. THIS is what we came here for – told you it was only a matter of time!

Mia:

You've always been it. Welcome back to your era, queen.

Aira smiled. Their voices echoed in her head, alive with joy.

And for once, she didn't check if Ryan had texted.

Didn't scroll for his name.

Didn't wonder what he'd say.

For the first time in forever...

She didn't need his words to feel seen.

Because she wasn't just healing anymore.

She was rising.

And this time – it was for herself.

Chapter 14: Not That Girl Anymore

There was something intoxicating about walking into a room where no one knew who you used to be.

In New York, Aira wasn't the heartbroken girl anymore. She wasn't someone's almost or anyone's secret. She was Aira Sharma — efficient, elegant, sharp. A woman with an eye for detail and a voice that people had started listening to.

Her first few days at Sasha Verneau's production house were intense — the kind of beautiful chaos only fashion could produce. Clacking heels across concrete floors. Garment bags brushing her arms. Models half-dressed behind curtains. Aira thrived in it.

Within a week, Sasha was calling her by name. Within two, the assistants were deferring to her before finalizing looks. Her instincts were quick, her feedback sharper. She wasn't just helping anymore.

She was becoming essential.

That Friday night, the gallery opening in SoHo felt like a scene straight out of a modern fairytale.

The gallery shimmered in clean whites and sculpted modernism; the kind of space that made every guest feel curated. From the far end, a tall arrangement of white orchids stood like sentinels, their petals catching the same golden light that brushed Aira's skin. Glasses clinked softly, champagne fizzing in crystal flutes, while faint jazz from hidden speakers curled through the air like a secret. Perfume lingered in the corners — notes of oud, iris, and ambition as if the room itself had dressed for her.

She stood at the bar in a black silk slip dress that skimmed her frame like it had been designed in conversation with her body. Gold hoops caught the light each time she turned her head, and her hair fell in soft waves down her back, dark and glossy, as if it had secrets of its own. A touch of bronzer kissed her cheeks; her lips painted in a soft, matte rose.

She wasn't seeking attention, but the room kept glancing her way as though power had a scent, and tonight, it was hers.

That's when she noticed him.

Tall. Effortlessly put together.

Fair skin kissed by the sun, dark hair neatly styled, and a presence that didn't demand attention, rather owned every eye. He stood by the café counter, stirring his coffee with slow precision, like he had mastered the art of unbothered elegance. A navy tailored suit, no tie. Crisp white shirt, sleeves casually pushed up, a luxury watch peeking from beneath.

There was no mystery. No arrogance. Just quiet command.

Aira watched him for a moment, pretending to study the sculpture behind him. But then he moved slowly, with intent, toward a cluster of guests near the modernist installations.

When he turned again, his eyes met hers.

A pause.

Steady. Measured. Electric.

He walked toward her.

Not with swagger. With certainty.

“Let me guess,” he said, voice low and smooth. “You’re not from here.”

Aira raised an eyebrow, amused. “What gave it away?”

“You don’t look lost,” he said. “But you don’t look bored either. That’s rare in this city.”

She smirked. “And what are you? The local welcome committee?”

“Close,” he said, extending a hand. “Mark Bennett. I work in real estate development — we design residential spaces around the world. Nothing too flashy... just places that feel like home.”

Aira shook his hand. Cool palm, confident grip.

“Aira Sharma,” she replied. “Production, styling, and occasionally, damage control.”

Mark’s smile deepened. “Sounds like my kind of woman.”

She tilted her head. “So... you build dreams for a living?”

“Only for those who know how to live them,” he said, eyes holding hers. “And you strike me as one of them.”

They talked for a few more minutes about nothing, and everything.

Champagne chilled her fingertips as she lifted her glass. His cologne – subtle, musky, with hints of cedar – lingered in the air between them. Her heels clicked softly against the marble floor when she shifted her weight, every movement elegant, composed.

She didn’t lean in. She didn’t giggle.

She didn’t need to.

This version of her watched chemistry burn and waited to see if it stayed lit.

The night ended with Mark offering to walk her out.

She declined not coldly, just deliberately.

He handed her a card. Sleek. Minimalist. Black with embossed initials.

“When you want rooftop views, better wine, and worse flirting,” he said, with that lazy, dangerous smile.

She tucked it into her clutch. “We’ll see.”

And she walked away slowly, silk brushing her legs, heels clicking like punctuation marks on marble.

WILD GRACE

In the Uber home, the city flickered past her window like film reel memories.

She opened her phone.

A message from Ryan:

“Just checking in. You’ve been on my mind today”.

Aira stared at it.

And then... locked the screen.

Tonight wasn’t about who missed her.

It was about who would never get to know the version of her she had become.

And that, finally, felt like winning.

Chapter 15:

A Woman in Her Element

The office carried the scent of ambition — warm espresso mingling with polished leather and a trace of expensive perfume. Light poured through tall glass panels, softening the edges of steel and wood. Even the air seemed carefully tended, cool enough to sharpen focus but never harsh, a curated calm that invited discipline. It was success wrapped in stillness, orderly and composed.

Aira stepped in, her nude heels clicking on polished concrete. Her presence carved its own quiet space — not loud, not flashy, but impossible to ignore. She wore high-waisted mocha trousers that hugged her waist with quiet authority, and a caramel silk blouse that shimmered like golden hour — elegant, understated, unforgettable. Her hair was pulled into a sleek, precise bun. No loose strands. No margin for error.

In one hand, her phone and tablet; in the other, a rhythm of purpose. She was no longer walking into rooms to prove herself — she was here to lead.

Sasha had just promoted her.

Officially: Creative Consultant.

Unofficially: The one who made everything better.

And people noticed.

She was building campaigns that sparked whispers in elevators. Styling editorials with her fingerprints on every mood board. Walking into meetings once reserved for higher-ups and holding her own — even when talks turned to margins and metrics and million-dollar clients.

That morning, in fact, she'd been summoned into a pitch meeting with a notoriously sharp-tongued client. The air had bristled with impatience as designers fumbled through mock-ups. Aira had quietly stepped forward, sliding a revised concept across the polished oak table. Her voice had been calm, deliberate — pointing out how the campaign wasn't just about aesthetics but about storytelling that lingered. The client had leaned back, eyes narrowed, then finally nodded. "She gets it." The tension had dissolved. Just like that, the meeting was hers.

The nerves still came sometimes, like a tremor in her chest. But they didn't stay long.

Because Aira had changed.

She had been shattered. She had wept on unfamiliar floors and packed her life into a suitcase that smelled of salt and courage. She had loved men who couldn't hold her. Trusted moments that betrayed her.

But here she was not just surviving. Reigning.

And she was beginning to love the sound of her own voice in a boardroom. It was low, certain. Calm. She didn't have to raise it, still people listened.

It was at the launch party of *Obscura*, a luxury lifestyle magazine, that she saw him again.

Mark Bennett.

The gallery was drenched in minimalist grandeur — black-and-white photography, mirrored walls, and curated laughter rising like champagne bubbles. Aira stood near the bar, fingers wrapped around a coupe glass, skin kissed with soft highlight, lips painted in a rich cocoa nude.

She felt seen even before she noticed him.

Same dark blazer. Same disarming grin. Same calm beneath the charm, like he never had to try too hard.

But this time — she wasn't the girl blending into the backdrop.

This time, she expected to be seen.

He walked up, holding a glass of champagne, and tilted it toward her.

"Let me guess... you're running this show now?"

Her smile was practiced but playful. "Just the part that matters."

He laughed, eyes scanning her face like it was a map to somewhere new. "You've levelled up."

"I tend to do that," she said, tilting her head, the silk blouse catching light with the movement.

There was a pause — not awkward, but charged. Around them, the crowd blurred into background hum. His gaze lingered, the weight of it both flattering and unsettling, as if he was trying to reconcile the memory of her with the reality in front of him.

They talked. Not small talk but actual talk. The kind that curled around the air between them and refused to float away. Smart, flirtatious, emotionally aware without being needy.

He asked if she ever thought about that night they met.

She shrugged lightly. “I rarely have time to think these days.”

“Busy building a life?”

She looked at him for a moment. Not through him. Into him.

“Busy becoming someone worth knowing.”

There was a flicker in his expression. Like something inside him shifted.

He wasn’t just attracted to her — he was intrigued. Not by her looks, though she knew those still turned heads. But by the way she spoke. The way she moved. Like every part of her had been rebuilt with intention.

Later, he asked if she wanted to leave early. Grab a drink. Pick up where their spark had left off.

She didn’t say no.

But she didn’t say yes either.

“Maybe another night,” she said, her voice warm but firm. “One where I’m not still catching up to my dreams.”

He looked at her like she was a riddle wrapped in velvet.

And that's how she liked it.

That night, back in her apartment, she kicked off her heels, the cool wooden floor grounding her as she walked to the full-length mirror near the window.

The city lights shimmered behind her reflection. She stared.

Not perfect.

But powerful.

Her eyes didn't carry sorrow anymore. Only clarity. Her body no longer sought permission to take up space — it owned it. The woman looking back at her wasn't waiting for love or validation or rescue.

She was her own arrival.

And yet, for the briefest moment, a shadow flickered across her thoughts. The men who hadn't stayed. The love she had once begged for. But the ache no longer pierced — it only reminded her of how far she'd climbed.

She traced the rim of her glass with a fingertip and whispered softly to herself — not a declaration, just a quiet knowing:

“I'm not chasing anything anymore.”

And with that, she smiled.

Chapter 16:

Torn Between What Was and What Could Be

The city skyline glowed like a crown of fractured jewels against the night, each light a promise, each shadow a secret. Aira leaned against the rooftop railing, the hum of New York beneath her. The party had blurred into background noise — laughter, glasses clinking, a distant bass line. She needed air.

And then she heard him.

“Aira.”

Her body froze before her heart did. Ryan.

He stepped out of the shadows, hands in his pockets, shoulders carrying that same old gravity. His blue eyes caught hers, and for a second, time folded in on itself. The years, the distance, the bruised love — all of it surged back like a tide she had never fully escaped.

“You look...” he paused, searching, “...like the world finally knows who you are.”

She forced a smile, though her chest tightened. “And you look the same.”

“Not the same,” he said quietly. “Older. Tired. But still... wanting.”

The word hung between them, unfinished.

Silence stretched, heavy with all the words they had never said. He stepped closer, the rooftop wind threading between them.

“I can’t stop caring about you,” he confessed. His voice was low, raw, stripped of the careful ease he wore with everyone else. “Even when I tried. Even when I told myself I couldn’t give you what you wanted... I still can’t let you go.”

Her breath caught. He was the same Ryan, the man who steadied her through storms, who knew her laughter by heart, but who also left her waiting at doorways that never opened.

“Then why?” Her voice cracked before she steadied it. “Why give someone else the one thing I asked you for? Why her, and not me?”

He flinched, but didn’t look away. “Because I’m not built for more than this. Not anymore. I can’t give you a future. I can only give you... me. As I am.”

Her heart fractured all over again. Because even here, beneath the glow of the skyline, even with his honesty bleeding through, it was still the same story.

She held his gaze, her throat tight, and whispered:

“You broke my heart quietly. And now you want to stay in my life quietly. But I’m not living quietly anymore.”

He blinked, as if she had struck him. For once, Ryan didn't have a reply. He only lowered his eyes, the silence between them louder than any fight could have been.

She turned, heels clicking against the rooftop, leaving him alone with the skyline.

She walked home in silence.

Every step felt heavy, as though the city itself was pressing down on her. The streets blurred, neon lights bending into streaks through her unshed tears. By the time she reached her apartment, her hands were trembling too much to fit the key in the lock.

When the door finally clicked open, she didn't bother with the lights. She kicked off her heels, stumbled toward the couch, and collapsed.

The sobs came sharp and sudden — violent in their release. They tore through her like something breaking loose after years of restraint.

For the first time in months, maybe years, she let herself unravel.

Every memory, every almost, every promise he had never made but she had clung to — it all came crashing back, flooding her chest until she thought she might choke on it.

Her body shook with it. Her breath caught with it.

She pressed her face into the pillow, her voice a hoarse whisper against the fabric.

“Why wasn't I enough for you?”

The city outside kept glowing, indifferent.

And inside her quiet apartment, Aira broke all over again.

Hours later, when the tears had finally dulled into exhaustion, her phone lit up on the coffee table.

A single message.

Mark: *Are you home safe?*

Her chest tightened. She reached for the phone, but her fingers froze before the screen.

For now, she let it glow unanswered in the dark — a quiet reminder that the story wasn't finished yet.

Chapter 17: The Woman She's Becoming

The gallery buzzed around her — a hum of voices, the click of camera shutters, the delicate clink of crystal glasses — but Aira stood still.

Her breath caught somewhere between awe and disbelief as she took in the space.

Her space.

Only last night, her body had shaken with sobs into her pillow. And yet tonight, she stood here — unbroken, rebuilt in light and texture.

The walls, once bare and industrial, now bore the weight of her imagination and her healing. Photographs in stark contrasts softened by unexpected light. Sculptural textiles draped like memory and desire. A short fashion film — looping against exposed brick, shadows flickering across the high ceilings like whispers.

Her first full concept showcase — *Urban Sensual* — was alive.

Every element carried her fingerprint. Her eye. Her voice. Her story.

And people weren't just passing by.

They were leaning in.

They were staying.

Fashion editors from indie zines and glossy publications circled her like moths drawn to something unfamiliar yet magnetic. Not just beauty — but truth, wrapped in silk and edge.

"You're the creative mind behind this?" One asked, pen poised midair.

"Who styled the lighting in the film? It feels cinematic," said another.

"You have a language — fresh, but emotionally fluent," murmured a third, almost to herself.

A client from Sasha's network pulled her aside, offering a solo project with full autonomy. A venture capitalist in vintage Dior tilted her glass and asked if she'd ever considered launching her own label.

Aira smiled graciously, accepting compliments with a practiced poise. She laughed at the right moments. She made eye contact. She thanked them sincerely.

But inside?

She was trembling — not from fear, but from fire.

This wasn't doubt. This wasn't luck.

This was ignition.

This is what it felt like to belong to yourself.

Later that night, Manhattan stretched wide above her. Stars faint but present, the wind warm and alive with rooftop energy. Fairy lights swayed overhead, casting soft golden shadows across flushed cheeks and champagne flutes.

Rita and Mia flanked her on either side, tugging her toward the rooftop bar with champagne in hand.

“You did it,” Rita whispered, her German accent curling like velvet. “You actually did it.”

“You created something no one else can take credit for,” Mia added, already tipsy and glowing. “That’s power, babe.”

They clinked glasses. Bubbles rose like everything else around Aira — fast, dizzying, beautiful.

The bass thrummed beneath her feet. The skyline glittered like it was applauding her in secret.

Aira tilted her head back and laughed — really laughed. Not the kind that was polite or planned.

It felt like oxygen.

And then she saw him.

Not Ryan.

Mark.

He stood near the rooftop’s edge, drink in hand, mid-conversation. His silhouette cut sharp against the city’s glow, posture relaxed but alert. When their eyes met, she felt it. That shift. That quiet magnetism.

His words trailed off. His body turned.

Her pulse quickened.

He walked toward her, slower than usual. No swagger. No performance. Just a gaze that lingered as if he'd been watching her longer than she realized.

"So this is the world you've built," he said, gesturing to the lights, the art, the buzz.

"Still under construction," she replied. "But the foundation's solid."

He smiled at her honesty — the kind of smile that saw through people and liked what it found.

"You're... electric tonight," he said, voice dropping into something meant only for her.

His hand brushed her lower back — respectful, not possessive — and her skin tingled. This time, she didn't hide it.

"You know," he added, eyes steady, "I've met a lot of women in this city. Models. Actresses. Founders. Some unforgettable... most not."

Aira arched a brow. "And what am I?"

"You?" He leaned in, close enough for her to catch the scent of vetiver and something darker, like dusk on expensive skin. "You've got a softness you guard like a secret... and a strength you don't even realize you carry."

She looked at him then. Really looked.

His eyes weren't searching for weakness. They weren't asking for entry.

WILD GRACE

They were simply there — present, ready, curious.

This wasn't a rebound.

This wasn't even a spark.

This was something new. Quiet. Undeniable.

At midnight, as the rooftop celebration blurred into soft music and loosened ties, her phone buzzed in her clutch.

Ryan:

Saw the reviews. I'm proud of you.

I'll never stop being proud of you.

Wish I could've been there — like old times.

Aira stared at the message.

The words were familiar. Tender. A part of her still ached when she read them.

But she didn't reply.

Not out of bitterness.

Not because she didn't care.

But because tonight wasn't about what used to be.

It was about what was finally beginning.

And she was ready for it —

ready for the woman she was becoming.

Chapter 18:

The News That Shatters

The city outside Aira's window pulsed with indifference.

Lights flickered on the glass like distant memories — soft, scattered, unreachable. Rain streaked down the panes in quiet rivulets, turning the skyline into a blurred watercolour. Aira sat curled on the couch, shawl wrapped around her shoulders, the faint hum of the heater the only sound in the room.

Her laptop glowed beside her, open to a half-finished pitch deck. A fashion proposal she'd been working on for weeks — sharp, clean, brilliant. But tonight, even the cursor blinking on the screen felt too loud. She hadn't touched it in an hour.

She'd poured everything into her career lately. Her work had become her heartbeat. It was the one thing that didn't lie, didn't disappear, didn't tell her she was too much or not enough.

Until now.

Her phone buzzed.

WILD GRACE

She glanced at it, expecting a reminder, a work text, an update from Mia about their weekend brunch.

Mari.

Just a message.

A single link.

No context.

No emojis.

No warning.

Aira clicked it — barely thinking.

And her world cracked.

It was Instagram.

A post. A photo.

There he was.

Ryan.

Standing in a quiet, snowy lane — Toronto, it looked like the snow around him soft and untouched, like life hadn't dared to mess with this moment.

He wore a black tuxedo. Clean-shaven. Smiling — really smiling.

Beside him, a woman in ivory and gold. Her hand laced into his, manicured fingers clutching his lapel like she belonged there. Like she always had.

The caption read:

“She said yes. 🍷 After everything... I finally found my home.”

Aira didn't move.

Her thumb hovered above the screen like her body refused to register the betrayal. The blood drained from her face. Her lungs refused to fill.

She blinked.

Closed the app.

Reopened it.

But the photo was still there.

The words still screamed.

And the man she had loved like oxygen — still smiling like he never knew what it cost her.

The man who once told her, “Marriage? I don’t think I can ever do that again.”

The one who said he couldn’t handle another commitment.

Who swore he wasn’t capable of giving more.

Who looked her in the eyes and said, “You deserve the world... I just don’t know if I’m the one who can give it.”

Now offering it — all of it — to someone else.

Her fingers trembled as she set the phone down.

Her throat felt raw, like she’d been screaming even though she hadn’t made a sound.

The candle on the table flickered, the wax dripping steadily — a quiet death she suddenly couldn’t look away from.

Aira stared at it.

The flame.

WILD GRACE

The slow unravelling.

And she didn't move.

Not for minutes.

Not for hours.

There's a silence that stretches between betrayal and understanding – a silence that doesn't comfort.

It consumes.

She sat in it. Alone.

Rita came home around midnight. She called out Aira's name, laughing about something she saw on the subway.

Then she saw her.

Still on the couch. Still wrapped in the same shawl. Still staring at nothing.

Rita's smile fell.

"What happened?"

Aira didn't speak. She just held out her phone.

Rita read the post. Her breath caught.

She looked at Aira, mouth parted in disbelief. "Oh my God..."

"He gave her everything I begged him for," Aira said quietly, her voice splintered and small. "Everything I waited for. Everything he said he didn't believe in... He just needed a different woman."

The tears didn't come all at once.

They came in waves.

Soft. Unsteady. Terrifying in their stillness.

Not wild sobs — not the kind that can be comforted.

This was deeper.

A heartbreak that trembled through her spine.

A grief that settled in her gut and refused to leave.

Like her soul had been shattered into glass and handed back to her bare-handed.

“Was I just... the rehearsal?” she whispered.

“No,” Rita said, kneeling in front of her. “You were the reason he became ready. But that doesn’t mean you were meant to be his ending.”

But it didn’t help.

Nothing could touch this ache.

Because Aira knew...

The betrayal wasn’t just his.

It was hers.

It was in the lie she told herself every day she stayed:

“If I love him enough... he’ll choose me.”

He didn’t.

That night, she lay in bed staring at the ceiling, the shadows moving like ghosts across the plaster.

Her eyes were swollen. Her chest ached with a quiet kind of devastation. She felt stripped — like someone had taken the most vulnerable parts of her and walked away.

She didn’t want revenge.

WILD GRACE

She didn't want closure.

She didn't even want answers.

She just wanted peace.

Not the kind that came from someone else's arms.

The kind that came from never having to beg for love again.

Chapter 19: A Beautiful Kind of Numb

It was a golden Sunday in SoHo — the kind of morning New York dressed up for.

The streets glimmered with sunlight that spilled between brownstones and fire escapes, warming the pavement in soft gold. Street musicians played jazz beneath striped awnings. A child laughed somewhere. And the breeze carried the smell of roasted coffee and city dreams.

Aira walked beside Mark, her fingers loosely intertwined with his. His hand was warm. Steady. He wore a crisp white shirt, sleeves rolled to the elbow, the sun kissing his forearms with casual elegance. His charcoal trousers, tailored to fit him just right, moved with the easy confidence of a man who knew how to carry stillness as strength. Beside him, her chiffon dress — a muted rose that seemed to breathe with the light — swayed with each step. Her hair was tucked behind one ear, her makeup soft and radiant, almost too perfect for how hollow she felt inside.

WILD GRACE

They had brunch reservations at a rooftop café in SoHo — a place known for its skyline views, endless mimosas, and the kind of aesthetic that lived on Instagram under #effortlessbliss.

Everything looked perfect.

But inside?

She felt... nothing.

No butterflies. No weightless joy. No rush in her chest when he looked at her and smiled like she was the best thing that had happened to his week.

Just a quiet hum. A distant ache. A dull echo of the fire that once lived in her heart.

Mark talked as they climbed the narrow staircase to the rooftop — about a new client, a gallery opening, his sister's engagement. He gestured with his hands, always expressive, always present.

Aira nodded. Smiled when appropriate. Responded just enough to keep the illusion intact.

She wasn't being cold.

She was trying.

But her heart felt padded — as if wrapped in gauze, protected from any real feeling.

Mark reached across the table and poured her coffee.

"You're quiet today," he said, his voice gentle.

"I'm just tired," she replied, eyes drifting toward the skyline.

"Work?"

"Life."

He nodded slowly, his thumb brushing the edge of her wrist like he wanted to anchor her.

He leaned over and kissed her cheek. She didn't flinch. She didn't pull away. But it didn't warm her either.

It only reminded her of what she used to feel — before heartbreak built walls she wasn't sure how to take down.

Mark was kind. Steady. Smart.

He remembered her favourite songs. Took photos of her when she wasn't looking. Texted her good morning and goodnight. Always held her hand when they crossed the street like it meant something sacred.

But he didn't see her soul.

Not the way Ryan once did.

Ryan saw through her silences. Understood her in between her words. Read her sadness in the way she stirred her coffee or walked too fast on days she couldn't face her thoughts.

Mark... tried. But he didn't reach her.

Not really.

And not in the way she needed anymore.

That night, they lay side by side in bed. The apartment was quiet, lit only by the orange glow of a bedside lamp and the rhythmic hum of the fan. Outside, the city moved on without them — cars passing, sirens singing in the distance, New York breathing its eternal breath.

Aira stared at the ceiling.

WILD GRACE

“Maybe this is it,” she told herself. “Maybe love isn’t supposed to feel like magic anymore.”

Mark turned over, his voice low, almost afraid of its own vulnerability.

“I think I’m falling for you.”

She didn’t say it back.

She smiled faintly. Kissed his shoulder. Closed her eyes.

And pretended to fall asleep.

But inside her chest, her thoughts stirred like wind in an empty room.

She was wide awake.

The next morning, Aira stood in front of the mirror, wrapped in her robe. The soft light of dawn painted her face in cream and gold.

Flawless skin. Sculpted cheekbones. Eyes dark and still, like deep water.

She looked like the kind of woman men chased – the kind they bragged about. The kind who seemed untouchable, magnetic, graceful.

But inside?

There was a quiet ache.

“How can someone so loved by the world,” she wondered, “feel so unloved in the ways that matter?”

PRIYAM MECH

Her phone buzzed with new notifications — praise, admiration, brunch invites, compliments.

But none of it filled the space that Ryan had cracked open and walked away from.

She had been ripped apart by men who didn't stay.

And now, she stood beside one who did — and still didn't reach her.

The hope she once carried like fire in her chest.

It had dimmed to a flicker.

Small. Tired. Flickering in the dark.

Chapter 20: The Girl She Forgot

It was raining in New York.
Not the kind of rain that made you want to curl into
someone's arms, drifting off to the rhythm on glass and the
soft glow of streetlights pooling below.

This was the other kind.

The grey kind.

The relentless kind.

The sky looked bruised.

Windows wept in steady lines.

The whole city sagged as though it was carrying too much.

Aira stayed in.

Her apartment was dim, lit only by the hazy blue-grey light that
seeped through her curtains. She wore an oversized sweater, no
makeup, her hair knotted lazily at the nape of her neck.

Mark was away for the weekend on a networking retreat upstate.
He'd offered to FaceTime. She'd declined.

For once, she welcomed the silence.

She lit a candle — sandalwood and fig — and put on Nina Simone. The low, aching voice drifted through the rooms like a memory she wasn't ready to name.

Her eyes landed on the cardboard box in the corner. It had sat there for months, sealed, patient.

The last of her things from India.

She hesitated, then knelt. The tape lifted with a tired sigh; the softened cardboard yielded under her fingers.

Inside:

Old journals tied with fraying string.

Dog-eared scripts from theatre school.

Messy doodles on envelope backs.

A chipped mug from her favourite Delhi café.

And then —

A letter.

Delicate folds. Faded edges. Ink blurred by time. Her own handwriting scrawled across the back: For later. When you forget.

Dated: six years ago.

Her breath caught.

Cross-legged on the floor, candlelight flickering beside her, she opened it with trembling hands.

Dear Aira,

If you're reading this, I hope you've made it.

I hope heartbreak didn't turn you bitter.

WILD GRACE

I hope you're still dancing barefoot and chasing stories.
I hope you're still the girl who wanted to change the world, not
just survive it.

And if you've forgotten any of that — it's okay.

Just come back. I'm still here.

The words blurred as tears rose. She pressed the paper to her chest, the ink smudging faintly against her damp fingers.

She had completely forgotten writing it.

And yet, she had written it for this version of herself — too polished on the outside, too tired on the inside. A woman who had survived so much that pieces of her had simply... slipped away.

Something cracked open in the quiet.

Not grief.

Not pain.

A quiet remembering.

When the storm softened to a drizzle, Aira slipped into a trench coat and stepped outside.

No umbrella.

The rain met her face in sharp, cool bursts — startling, grounding, real. She let it soak her hair, her sweater, her bones, as if it were rinsing away everything she no longer wanted to carry.

She walked without direction until a warm rectangle of light pulled her in — a small bookstore tucked off Lafayette.

The bell above the door chimed. Air thick with paper and cedarwood wrapped around her. Wooden shelves leaned with age; a sleepy cat stretched on the windowsill, tail flicking lazily.

She wasn't searching.

But her fingers paused on a slim, dog-eared poetry book wedged between glossy hardcovers. Its spine was cracked, its cover soft from being loved too much. She opened it carefully; the pages sighed like they'd been waiting.

And then a line stopped her:

She wasn't waiting for a saviour.

She was waiting for herself

to remember

who she was

before they dimmed her light.

Her throat tightened.

She closed the book, held it to her chest — and for the first time in weeks, she cried.

Not for Ryan.

Not for Mark.

Not for what she thought she'd lost.

But for the girl she used to be.

As tears slipped down her cheeks, memory flickered through her mind in dreamlike cuts:

— A Delhi café, her younger self laughing too loud, hair spilling into her eyes, steam curling up from a chipped mug.

— Bare feet on polished wood, spinning until the world blurred, dropping to the floor breathless with joy.

WILD GRACE

— A red lipstick kiss on a napkin beside the looping scrawl of a half-finished poem.

— A rooftop sky, dark and endless, her voice lifted freely into the night as if the stars were listening.

The images weren't whole. They came like whispers, hazy at the edges — aching bright against the dull hush she'd been living.

The one who deserved more.

More than crumbs.

More than half-hearted maybes.

More than love that never stayed.

That night, Aira walked home barefoot, shoes in hand, poetry book tucked against her ribs like a pulse. Her coat clung damp to her skin, hair plastered across her cheeks.

Inside, she lit another candle — lavender and honey this time — changed into her oldest T-shirt, and curled by the window, knees drawn close. The city lights blinked through the raindrops on the glass like distant constellations.

And she began to write.

Not for love.

Not for work.

Not even for healing.

Just for herself.

Chapter 21: The Rise Within

The plane touched down on Indian soil just past midnight, skimming the tarmac with a gentle thud — like an exhale that had waited too long to be released.

Aira closed her eyes.

And for a moment, time folded.

Not just because she had returned.

But because something within her had.

After all the heartbreaks, the almosts, the longings — she was finally home.

Not just in geography.

But in spirit.

The scent of the night welcomed her like an old friend — damp earth still holding onto the monsoon, distant jasmine wafting from somewhere unseen, the smoky undertone of incense and airport diesel. It was thick. Familiar. Alive.

And something in her chest softened.

This time, she wasn't arriving as someone's lover, someone's second chance, someone's fading dream.

She was arriving as her own.

Outside, Mari and Julia waited — their faces pressed against the railing, eyes wide and wet and joyful. They spotted her instantly, waving like wild things in the glow of yellow streetlamps, two pieces of her heart she had left behind but never lost.

The moment Aira stepped through the gates, they wrapped her in a hug that wasn't just reunion.

It was return.

It was repair.

"You look like you've seen the world," Mari whispered against her hair.

"And come back wiser," Julia added, eyes gleaming.

Aira smiled, tears clinging to her lashes.

"I've seen myself," she said. "For the first time."

Back home, the nights were warmer, slower — the way she remembered them before life became something to outrun.

Cicadas chirped in the distance, the sky above her home a dark velvet scattered with familiar stars. Her mother lit a brass diya in the kitchen window, the flame swaying gently as if blessing Aira's return.

She sat on the porch wrapped in a shawl; her hands curled around a mug of cinnamon chai. The steam kissed her face. The scent — cardamom, cinnamon, honey, familiarity — wrapped around her like an old lullaby.

Her mother sat beside her in silence, no questions, just presence.

Inside, her father worked quietly at the broken wheel of her old suitcase — fixing what he could, the way he always did. Sid walked past humming, teasing their mother about how much food she had cooked, sneaking spoonful before dinner.

Later, a warm plate appeared before Aira. The delicate aroma of steamed hilsa wrapped in banana leaf rose first, earthy and fragrant, carrying the scent of smoke and green fields. Beside it, chicken simmered with bamboo shoots, its sharp tang softened by the slow heat of ginger and herbs. A bowl of roasted tomato chutney glistened red, smoky and bright against the pale mound of soft white rice. Fresh stir-fried greens glistened with garlic, still crisp, like a touch of the garden on her plate.

It was a Northeastern feast — familiar, grounding, prepared not just with skill but with love and waiting. Every dish spoke in silence, saying what words could not. They had known she was coming, known what comfort she would crave. She didn't need to explain or fill the room with her heaviness. The food itself carried the message: *you are home, you are held, you are understood.*

Here, silence wasn't loneliness.

It was sacred.

She didn't have to smile when she didn't feel like it.

She didn't have to pretend she was okay.

She could simply be.

But even as her body rested, her spirit stirred — not with longing for love, but with the ache for meaning.

WILD GRACE

Days later, she followed Mari to a small women's collective on the edge of town. It was nothing glamorous — a dusty room with paint peeling from the corners, filled with sewing machines, tangled threads, and women with tired eyes and quiet strength.

At first, Aira simply watched.

Then listened.

Then, slowly, began to speak.

She told them her story — the glamorous parts, the painful ones, the messy truth of building and breaking and rebuilding again.

She talked about rejection. About survival. About standing tall even when you feel like sinking.

And they leaned in.

Like her words were water in a drought.

She didn't speak to impress.

She spoke to connect.

Then came the questions.

Then the laughter.

Then the trust.

She taught them how to present themselves, how to design more confidently, how to pitch to local boutiques, how to walk into a room and say *I belong here* without flinching.

"You don't need permission to matter," she told them one afternoon, her voice firm. "You already do."

One day, as the group wrapped up, a quiet girl named Paro — no older than twenty — stood up.

“Didi,” she said softly, “Before you came, I thought girls like us were born just to survive. But now I think maybe... we were born to shine too.”

Aira’s breath caught.

The tears came uninvited, slipping down her cheeks in silence.

But for the first time in years — they weren’t tears of pain.

They were release.

And she didn’t feel weak.

She felt whole.

That night, alone on her terrace under a sky blushed with pinks and purples, Aira opened her journal. The pages smelled faintly of ink and rain — the kind of scent that made her believe in second chances.

She wrote slowly:

“I used to think love was about someone choosing you.

Now I know love is choosing yourself — over and over again — until it stops hurting.”

“I thought I needed a man to save me.

But all I really needed was to remember who I was before the world convinced me I wasn’t enough.”

A laugh floated up from the courtyard below. Sid was trying again to charm their mother into letting him have dessert before dinner, his voice full of playful mischief. Their mother swatted him away with a spoon, pretending to scold, while their father chuckled from his chair.

WILD GRACE

For a moment, Aira just watched.

This was the home she had missed — the small, ordinary, luminous moments that had kept her alive even when she'd forgotten how to live.

She smiled, closed her journal, and pressed her palm against its cover as if sealing a promise.

She wasn't healed.

But she was healing.

Not by erasing the past,

But by turning it into a bridge —

One she could walk across

To lift other women, and to lift herself.

And for the first time in a long, long time...

She wasn't just surviving.

She was alive.

Chapter 22: The World Sees Her Again

The afternoon sun hung low over the plains of Assam, draping the village in a soft gold that caught on rooftops and rusted tin sheets. The air smelled of damp earth, mustard flowers, and woodsmoke from distant kitchens.

Aira stood behind a rusted podium in a small school building outside Guwahati. The ceiling fans above groaned slowly, stirring warm air. Rows of women filled the open-air hall – some sitting cross-legged on woven mats, babies sleeping against their chests, others with cracked glass bangles, cotton saris, and hopeful eyes fixed on her.

She wasn't wearing makeup.

Her hair was tied back in a low braid.

Her white kurta was wrinkled from the car ride, and her voice was hoarse from speaking too long in places that needed her story more than her polish.

But none of that mattered.

Because when she spoke – the room leaned in.

“No one is coming to save us,” Aira said, her voice clear, slow, unwavering. “But maybe... that’s a good thing. Because we are no longer waiting.”

There was a pause.

Then — applause.

But not the loud, impersonal kind.

It was warm. Familiar.

The kind you give a sister. A mirror.

She stepped down from the podium, hands lightly brushing the women as they reached for her — not to worship her, but to connect. To thank her. To tell her that she mattered in ways the world rarely tells women like her.

And for the first time in years, Aira didn’t feel like a woman caught between old dreams and new disappointments.

She felt useful.

She felt seen.

She felt rooted.

Back in the city, something subtle — and irreversible — had begun.

Her story, once kept private and stitched between heartbreaks and hesitant beginnings, was now blooming outward. Quietly. Organically.

Not through glossy magazine spreads or viral hashtags.

But through whispers.

Through blog posts.

Through the kind of testimonials that women leave on forums at 3 a.m. when their hearts are too full and the world feels too quiet.

Women who had heard her speak.

Girls she had mentored in passing.

Designers she'd inspired without even realizing.

It began like rain — a few gentle drops of recognition.

And then... it poured.

A month later, she was invited to speak at a women's entrepreneurship summit in Mumbai. Her segment was tucked between two corporate panels — twenty minutes, midday.

She didn't arrive with a PR team.

She didn't wear a power suit or press kit glam.

Instead, she wore a handwoven sari — ivory cream with bronze motifs — draped by her mother that morning. The fabric felt like silk and strength, soft against her skin but rooted in heritage. As she stepped onto the stage, it moved with her like breath — graceful, composed, unshakable. She didn't need shimmer or spotlight. She was the light.

She looked out at the room of women — some taking notes, some scrolling, some sipping coffee and began softly, adjusting the mic with steady hands.

"I spent years believing my worth depended on who chose me," she said, her voice intimate, as though speaking to one woman

instead of hundreds. “But love that needs proof will always leave you empty. Purpose doesn’t. Purpose stays. And when you choose yourself first... the world finally begins to listen.”

A silence followed — thick, alive.

Then the applause rose, not frantic, but tidal, rolling through the hall until it became impossible to ignore.

From her seat in the front row, her mother’s eyes shone wet with pride. Her father sat straighter than usual, arms crossed, expression unreadable but softened by a quiet satisfaction only she could recognize. Sid grinned, clapping loudest of all, leaning toward their mother to whisper, “That’s my sister.”

And Aira — standing tall, sari pleats brushing her ankles, breath steady — realized something. She wasn’t chasing anyone anymore. The world was chasing her.

The clip went viral within days.

Not because it was polished — but because it was real.

Suddenly, her inbox was full.

Podcasts wanted interviews.

Fashion houses wanted collaborations.

Young women sent handwritten letters, asking how they could learn from her.

But this time, Aira didn’t chase it.

She replied when it felt right.

Said yes only when her soul stirred.

The hunger to prove had disappeared.

She was no longer seeking validation — only resonance.

Mari noticed the shift first.

“You’re glowing differently,” she said over coffee one morning, her eyebrows arched with curiosity. “It’s not the highlighter.”

“It’s peace,” Aira replied, stirring her spoon through cinnamon-dusted foam. “Peace I gave myself.”

That night, back in her family home, she sat cross-legged on the floor with her shawl wrapped around her shoulders. Her mother hummed softly in the kitchen, folding away freshly ironed saris. Sid teased her from the doorway, waving his phone.

“You’ve gone viral. Don’t forget us when you’re famous.”

Aira laughed, tossing a cushion at him.

Her father sat silently in his corner armchair, glasses balanced on his nose, a book open but unread in his lap. He didn’t say much, but when she looked up, she caught it — the faintest smile tugging at his lips, the quiet gleam of pride in his eyes. A kind of pride that didn’t need words.

It warmed her more than any applause.

Later that night, her inbox pinged.

From: Silverline Studios, Los Angeles

Subject: We'd like to develop your story. Have you ever considered a film?

She stared at it for a long moment.

The old Aira would've jumped.

Would've replied in seconds.

Would've worried about being chosen.

But this Aira...

This Aira smiled. Quietly. Unshaken.

And whispered aloud to herself:

"Maybe I will. But I'll be the one telling it."

Later that night, she carefully folded the ivory sari back into her wardrobe. Her fingers lingered on the pleats her mother had tucked that morning. Strength, she realized, wasn't something she had created alone.

It was something she had inherited.

And for the first time, she felt not just seen by the world – but carried by it.

Chapter 23: The Home Beneath Her Skin

It happened on a quiet morning.

The kind that doesn't ask for attention — it simply arrives.

The sky was pale and still, cloaked in mist. No birds yet, no rustle of trees. Even the dogs that usually barked at sunrise had fallen into silence, as if the world was holding its breath.

Aira stirred before dawn.

She opened her eyes with a jolt — heart racing for no reason, breath shallow, as if her soul had been dreaming something it wasn't ready to forget. The room was still. Her bedsheet tangled. Her skin damp with an ache she couldn't place — not fear, not grief, but something older.

She slipped out of bed and padded barefoot through the house — passed Sid's closed door where her brother's steady breathing carried through, past her parents' room where their quiet lives hummed, into the kitchen where the kettle had not yet hissed.

She opened the back door.

And stepped into the dew-soaked garden.

WILD GRACE

The grass kissed her feet with cold tenderness. The air was heavy with Tulsi leaves, damp soil, and a trace of last night's smoke from the chulha. Down the lane, a cousin's bicycle leaned against a gate, abandoned after yesterday's laughter. Two stray dogs nosed the earth by the bamboo fence, lifting their heads as if they too sensed something stirring.

Something was pulling her.

She followed the whisper to the old neem tree – crooked trunk, wide arms, its shadow standing guard for decades. The same tree her grandmother once sat beneath, chewing betel leaves, humming lullabies into the wind.

Aira sank at its base, folding her legs beneath her. The bark pressed into her back. Her breath fogged the morning air.

She closed her eyes.

And for the first time in years... she prayed.

Not to gods made of marble or smoke.

She prayed to the women who came before her.

To her grandmother, whose silence taught more than sermons.

To her mother, who carried strength in the meals she cooked and the things she never said.

To her father, whose quiet pride had steadied her more than applause ever had.

To her brother, older and protective, her anchor even when heartbreaks carried her too far.

To the girl she used to be – who believed in forever, in fire, in softness that didn't have to harden to survive.

And to every version of herself that had stayed quiet just to be loved.

Her lips trembled as the words rose like confession:

“I’ve been loved. And left.

I’ve been powerful. And afraid.

I’ve built dreams with broken hands.

But I’m tired of only surviving.

Please... remind me who I am when no one is watching.”

A gust of wind moved through the branches above — sure and gentle. Leaves rustled like unseen hands brushing across her skin.

And in that stillness, something inside her exhaled.

It wasn’t a miracle.

It was memory.

It was bloodline.

It was answer.

Later that afternoon, still stirred, Aira opened her grandmother’s teakwood trunk — the one that smelled of turmeric, sandal, and camphor. The lid creaked like a story being reopened.

Inside:

A torn ivory sari, faintly scented of lime and smoke.

WILD GRACE

Faded black-and-white photographs with names written in graceful ink.

A yellowing notebook wrapped in string, its pages soft with age.

She untied it reverently.

The pages held poems in Assamese, written in an imperfect but intentional hand, as though each word had been whispered by the bones. One line made her breath catch:

“Amibor ketiyao rajkumari noho’lo...

kintu ami jibonor canvas-to amar aghatere rongin korim.”

(“We were never born to be princesses...

Yet we’ll paint life’s canvas radiant with our scars.”)

Aira clutched the page to her chest.

Her grandmother — who had no stage, no recognition — had been a poet. A rebel in silence. A woman who turned pain into language. Who bled art without ever being seen.

“I’m yours,” Aira whispered.

“I come from you.”

That evening, she lit a brass lamp in the prayer room.

Not for ritual.

For remembrance.

She placed the notebook beside it, kissed its cover, and sat cross-legged with her own journal.

And she began to write.

Not her story.

Their story.

The women who were never asked how they felt.

The women who never had the chance to dream out loud.

The women who passed down strength in silence — through food, lullabies, endurance.

And in that moment, Aira understood.

She hadn't just returned to India.

She had returned to her root.

To the woman she was before heartbreaks, before stages, before the need to be chosen.

And that woman?

She was not broken.

She was ancestral fire.

A daughter of women who never waited for crowns —
because they already carried the throne in their spine.

Chapter 24:

Her Story, Her Voice

The offer came on a sun-heavy afternoon.

The kind where even the ceiling fan couldn't keep up with the heat, and the cicadas outside sang like they knew something was about to change.

Aira sat at her desk in her parents' house, the window cracked open just enough to let in the scent of ripe guavas and distant incense. Her hair was tied in a loose bun, no makeup, a simple cotton kurta clinging softly to her skin still warm from the afternoon sun.

Her hands smelled faintly of turmeric and sandalwood — remnants of the village workshop she had just returned from, where she'd helped women photograph their handmade goods with old smartphones and cardboard reflectors.

The notification chimed. She clicked into the Zoom call.

Three Hollywood faces appeared on the screen — glowing under ring lights, sleek in muted neutrals, their voices dripping with rehearsed enthusiasm.

“Aira!” the creative director beamed. “We’re so honoured to be meeting you. We love your story. It’s got everything — heartbreak, emotion, fashion, reinvention... exactly what audiences crave right now.”

Aira smiled politely, adjusting her laptop. Her voice was calm, but her eyes did not flinch.

“Thank you,” she said. “But... which part of my story are you planning to tell?”

The smiles dimmed. Just a fraction.

Then came the pitch.

They wanted her heartbreak — yes — but softened.

Her success — but glossier.

Her culture — but “visually digestible.”

Her voice — filtered through a Western lens of redemption and aesthetics.

“You’d still be the main character,” one of the writers insisted, “but we’d make some creative edits. Cut out the slower bits, the darker stuff. Add more romance, more fashion. Think *Emily in Paris* meets *Eat Pray Love*, with a modern Indian twist.”

Aira’s heart sank. And yet, she wasn’t surprised.

She had spent years being cropped, retouched, and redrawn — her truth repackaged into fragments that made others comfortable.

She nodded, thanked them, ended the call.

WILD GRACE

Later, the follow-up emails arrived — promises of big screens, polished scripts, glamorous premieres. She hovered over them for only a second before clicking *delete*.

Then she sat very still.

Not angry.

Not even sad.

Just... clear.

That night, she climbed to the rooftop of her childhood home, draped in her grandmother's old shawl. The city below pulsed in shadows — dogs barking in the distance, a temple bell ringing faintly across the hills, the smell of wet earth lingering after the evening rain.

Above her, the stars shimmered, quiet and steady — like witnesses.

She tilted her face to the sky and whispered:

“I didn’t survive everything I did just to let someone else tell my story.”

The words didn’t fall like a whisper. They cracked open inside her like lightning.

The next morning, she cleared out the small sunlit room at the back of the house — once storage, now radiant with golden haze from its east-facing window.

She swept the floor. Dusted the shelves. Carried in an old wooden desk.

On the sill, she placed a tiny oil lamp. On the wall, she pinned photographs, poems, and forgotten notes. She lit her jasmine-and-vetiver candle and sat down.

The wooden desk creaked under her elbows. Her fingers hovered, then dove onto the keyboard.

“This book is not about happy endings.

It’s about finding beginnings inside brokenness.”

She wrote like a woman possessed.

With fire.

With trembling hands.

With tear-streaked cheeks that burned under the lamp’s glow.

Some days she pressed her forehead to her wrist, drained by a single sentence. Some nights her hands cramped, but she typed through the ache, like blood demanding to be spilled.

Because the story wasn’t just hers.

Her mother sometimes peeked in, leaving fruit by her side.

Her father lingered quietly at the doorway, never intruding, his eyes carrying a pride word couldn’t hold.

Sid teased — “Don’t forget to blink, novelist” — but later he slipped her extra tea when the nights grew long.

The house seemed to bend around her rhythm; the air charged with something unspoken: she was making something that mattered.

WILD GRACE

Every night, she draped her grandmother's faded sari around her shoulders like armour. Every morning, she returned to the desk as if to battle.

It wasn't easy.

There were pauses, breakdowns, doubts so sharp they tasted metallic on her tongue. Some nights she cried under the lamp, asking the empty room if the world even needed her story.

But the words came back.

Because they weren't just hers.

They were the voices of women silenced, abandoned, betrayed, told they were too much or not enough.

This wasn't just a memoir.

It was a mirror.

Weeks later, Mari walked in with a tray of tea. She stopped at the door.

Aira was on the floor, barefoot, sari pooled around her, papers scattered like fragments of her soul. Her eyes were rimmed red, but they shone.

Mari bent down, picked up a page, and read aloud. Her throat tightened.

"Aira... this—this isn't just your story. It feels like mine. Like every woman's I know."

Aira looked up, exhausted, her lips trembling into a small, real smile.

PRIYAM MECH

“You’re really doing it,” Mari whispered, her hand warm on Aira’s shoulder. “You’re becoming your own ending.”

And Aira smiled again.

Not the smile that performs.

But the one that arrives when peace no longer feels like a stranger.

Chapter 25: When the World Begins to Listen

It began with a message.
No subject line. No sender name.
Just a single voice —
fragile and brave —
spilling across the screen in raw, unfiltered lines:
“I found your blog when I was searching for ways to disappear.
Not to die... just to stop existing.”
“I’ve been invisible for years.
To my parents. To the man I thought loved me.
Even to myself.”
“But you... you wrote the ache I couldn’t name.
The ache of being left behind and pretending you’re okay.”
“Your words made me cry.
And I hadn’t cried in years.

They made me feel real again.”

“Thank you for choosing to live.

Because now... I might try too.”

Aira stared at the message.

Read it again.

And then again.

The world around her blurred – the quiet hum of the fan overhead, the soft clink of Mari making tea in the kitchen, the faded music playing from someone’s phone outside.

Her hands hovered over the keyboard.

She didn’t reply.

Not yet.

Instead, she closed her eyes, pressed her forehead to her knees, and let the tears fall – warm, quiet, relentless.

Not grief. Not sadness.

Just a wave of knowing.

This...

This was why she stayed.

Not for publishers.

Not for prestige.

Not for the men who once held her heart like it was temporary.

But for this.

For the woman on the other end of that message.

WILD GRACE

For every woman who ever felt like silence was the only language they were allowed to speak in.

Days later, she stood at Delhi airport.

Terminal 3. Departures.

Her leather bag weighed more than usual — not from clothes, but from the weight of a manuscript she still wasn't sure was worthy.

Her boarding pass was tucked inside the back cover.

Her name — in ink.

Her story — in scars.

The air was cold with recycled chill. Voices echoed through speakers. Somewhere in the distance, a child cried softly while wheels rolled over polished tile.

Aira sat near Gate 3C, sipping masala tea from a cardboard cup. The scent of clove and cardamom rose into her face like memory.

Her blog had recently been featured in a piece titled “Voices of Quiet Rebellion.”

And now...

Her manuscript had been shortlisted by a small, stubbornly authentic indie press in Europe.

No promises. No glitter.

But someone had seen her.

Someone had read the pain between the lines and hadn't flinched.

She was just finishing her tea when a familiar energy pulled her gaze.

Ryan.

He hadn't seen her yet.

He stood near the escalator, checking his phone, headphones slung around his neck, a black coat folded over one arm. He looked older. A little more worn at the edges. But still — unmistakably him.

And Aira... froze.

She could've looked away.

Could've turned, tucked her bag beneath her feet, and disappeared like she used to.

But she didn't.

Not this time.

He looked up.

Their eyes met.

And for a long, stretched moment — the airport around them slowed.

No anger. No ache.

Just... recognition.

Of a story that had ended, and the silence that survived it.

He walked toward her with careful steps.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she replied, her voice steady but soft.

WILD GRACE

His eyes dropped to the brown envelope she held close.

“Is that your book?”

“Yes.”

A pause.

“My story.”

Something flickered in his expression — a mix of pride and guilt, maybe.

“Are you writing about me?”

She looked at him —

Not with resentment. Not with longing.

But with a kind of mercy only healing can offer.

“No, Ryan.

I’m writing about me.

Finally.”

He blinked.

Like he had waited years to hear her say it.

“You look... free,” he said quietly.

“I am.”

She smiled — not wide, not performative.

Just sure.

“And I didn’t need saving after all.”

That night, alone in her hotel room in Frankfurt — city lights soft and gold through rain-spotted glass — her phone buzzed.

Aira opened the email without expectation.

Subject line:

“We believe in your voice. Let’s bring it to the world.”

She blinked.

Then read it again.

It was from a publishing house in Amsterdam.

They had read her manuscript.

All of it.

And they wanted to publish it — globally.

No rewrites.

No diluted endings.

No “Can we make it sexier?”

Just her.

As is.

Unfiltered. Unapologetic. Unforgotten.

Aira curled up by the window, knees to chest, the city breathing quietly beneath her.

Her fingers rested on the glass, tracing nothing.

Tears slid down her cheeks — but these weren’t from sorrow.

They were the kind of tears that come when the storm inside you finally settles.

When your voice, once buried under doubt, rises.

When the world —

WILD GRACE

the very one that once asked you to shrink —
finally leans in to listen.

She thought of that girl.

The one who once begged a man to choose her.

The one who shrank herself into love letters and late-night
apologies.

She didn't live here anymore.

Aira had chosen herself.

And somehow, that had been enough.

Now the world was listening.

Not because she screamed.

But because she survived.

And turned her wounds into words.

Chapter 26: The Key and the Voice

Aira hadn't expected anything that day.
No revelations. No miracles.
The sky above Guwahati was slate-grey, the kind of overcast that made the world feel wrapped in wool. Rain threatened but didn't fall. The scent of ginger and crushed cardamom curled from her teacup. Somewhere in the distance, temple bells chimed faintly.

She sat cross-legged on the floor, manuscript open in front of her, editing the final chapter by hand. A single candle flickered on her desk, its wax puddling like breath slowed.

Then her father walked in.

Quiet. Hesitant.

In his hand: a faded white envelope, worn at the corners, sealed with red thread.

"She left this with the lawyer," he said, voice low. "Your grandmother. She said it was only to be given... when you were truly ready."

WILD GRACE

Aira didn't speak.

She reached for it slowly, reverently, like it might disintegrate if touched too fast.

The paper felt fragile. Soft from years of waiting.

Inside: a folded letter, yellowed with time. And a key — small, metal, threaded with crimson silk.

She unfolded the note.

The handwriting — graceful, looping — stopped her heart before she even read the words.

“You were never meant to just chase dreams, my child.”

“You were meant to plant them.”

“When the noise fades, and your heart is clear, go.”

“This land is yours — build something that will outlive us all.”

Beneath the letter was a deed.

A plot of land.

In Assam.

In the same village where her grandmother once taught little girls to read under banyan trees.

Aira's breath caught.

She didn't know what undid her more — the gift, the responsibility, or the quiet truth that someone had seen her future before she could.

Not as a performer.

Not as a muse.

But as a builder.

That night, sleep didn't come.

She lay curled beneath her old cotton quilt, the key resting warm against her palm like a promise.

The room was still. Ceiling fan spinning slow, the air thick with unfinished sentences.

Then — her phone buzzed.

A notification.

Voice note.

Unknown number — Canada.

Her heart stuttered.

She tapped play.

A girl's voice.

Soft. Nervous. Young.

"Hi... I hope it's okay I'm reaching out. My name is Lily. I'm Ryan's daughter."

Aira sat up straight. The air shifted.

"I found your book blog. I've read everything — twice, actually."

"He didn't tell me much about you. But I saw messages. Pictures. And once... when he thought I was asleep, he said your name out loud."

"You were the only woman he never stopped missing."

"I just wanted to say... thank you. I think you made him better. Even if he didn't know how to show it."

WILD GRACE

“I think he loved you more than he ever learned to say.”

Aira closed her eyes, hand to her chest.

Then came the whisper:

“You were never invisible.”

The tears came — not sharp.

Not grief.

Not sorrow.

Grace.

Like a soft monsoon at midnight — falling without thunder,
healing without demand.

At dawn, the sky cracked open.

The rain returned — steady now, certain.

Aira packed her bag in silence.

No messages to Mari. No calls to Julia. No posts.

She just went.

A train north.

Through fog-draped fields and soaked valleys, past stations that
smelled of coal and cardamom. Her window fogged with breath,
her hands steady.

The key stayed in her pocket.

The letter — over her heart.

By afternoon, she arrived.

Assam greeted her like memory.

PRIYAM MECH

Mango trees heavy with fruit.

Children laughing barefoot through puddles.

A bicycle bell echoing down the lane.

She stepped off the rickshaw and walked the last stretch alone.

There, beyond the bend – wild and unshaped – was the plot.

The land her grandmother had left behind.

It wasn't much.

But it breathed.

And it remembered her.

She stood barefoot in the wet earth, the air full of hibiscus and history, rain trailing down her back like a blessing.

She closed her eyes.

And whispered:

“Let's build.”

“Let's begin.”

Not for closure.

Not for love.

But for legacy.

Chapter 27: Where the Wildflowers Will Grow

The land was quiet.
Overgrown.
Sun-drenched.

Forgotten by most — but not by her.

Aira stood at its edge, bare feet pressing into warm soil, the scent of wild lemongrass rising with the breeze. A clipboard rested in her hands, pages fluttering gently beneath her fingers as if the wind was reading too.

Behind her: rustling trees, slow clouds, a woven basket of field notes.

Before her: possibility.

She breathed in the scent of earth and distant woodsmoke. The late afternoon light turned everything gold.

“No marble,” she whispered to herself.

“No glass. Just earth. And soul.”

This wouldn’t be a resort.

Not a boutique escapes for tourists.

Not luxury masked as healing.

This would be sanctuary.

A place for women to arrive with broken pieces still visible.

Where silence wasn't demanded, and strength wasn't performative.

She closed her eyes and let the vision come:

— A long, shaded veranda draped in Gul mohar petals, the yellow ones that fall like sunlight

— Rooms filled with cotton saris, old books, second-hand laughter

— An open-air studio where dance and painting and stories bled freely across the floor

— A kitchen that smelled of turmeric and roasted chillies, always humming with warmth

— A small reading library, lined with soft cushions and pots of Tulsi, where time unravelled gently.

And at the centre — a Tree of Listening.

Where no one interrupted.

Where no one needed to be brave to be heard.

At first, the village was sceptical.

A city girl in branded kurta sets, carrying clipboards and blueprints, walking through weed-choked land with barefoot conviction?

They watched her from windows. Whispered over fences.

Curious.

But Aira didn't arrive with plans.

She arrived with questions.

She sat with the women — not above them, but among them.

She asked about their daughters. Their injuries. Their songs.

She listened more than she spoke.

Slowly, the doubt faded.

They began to call her Didi.

She taught them how to write their names in capital letters.

How to journal without shame.

How to look into a camera and say, "I am still here."

In return, they taught her how to heal like women do —

Not loudly. Not all at once.

But with hands kneading grief like dough.

With slow barefoot dances in sudden rain.

With firewood stories told while plucking coriander leaves.

One morning, a familiar honk broke the quiet.

Aira turned — and gasped.

Mari and Julia stood at the edge of the field, wearing sunglasses too big for the village, holding a sack of mangoes and chaotic joy.

"So this is where you've been hiding?" Mari called out.

"I brought SPF," Julia added. "But it feels like we're on holy ground."

Aira laughed – a full, rising sound she hadn't made in weeks.

She ran to them, arms wide, laughter catching in her throat as they collided in a hug that smelled of perfume, sweat, and belonging.

"I'm not hiding anymore," she whispered, her chin resting on Mari's shoulder.

"I'm planting."

That evening, the stars came out brighter than usual – sharp and ancient, as if carved into the sky just for her.

Aira stood alone in the field, wind lifting the edge of her dupatta, the earth still warm beneath her.

She thought of her grandmother –

Of the letter. The key. The long-ago trust.

She thought of Lily –

The voice that reminded her she had never been invisible.

And she thought of herself –

This version.

This woman.

Standing not on stages, not in borrowed hotel rooms or city lights –

But here. On land that knew her name.

She didn't have all the answers.

She wasn't perfectly healed.

But for the first time, she was rooted.

She had not been planted in pain –

WILD GRACE

She had planted herself in purpose.

Chapter 28: The Book of Her Becoming

The launch wasn't a spectacle.
No red carpet. No velvet ropes.
No buzz of paparazzi or curated backdrops stamped with brand logos.

It happened on a warm spring evening, in a quiet garden tucked behind a tea estate in Assam — the kind of place where silence spoke louder than applause.

String lights draped through branches blinked like fireflies.

Handwoven dhurries covered the lawn.

Low wooden tables overflowed with marigolds, old books, and tiny clay lamps flickering in the dusk.

Guests arrived barefoot. Tea was served in handmade terracotta cups. The only soundtrack was birdsong fading into the rustle of trees, and the soft clink of spoons against saucers.

At the heart of it all stood Aira.

WILD GRACE

She wore a white linen dress, the kind that carried its own quiet poetry. Sleeveless, with a square neckline that framed her collarbones like delicate sculpture, it draped with effortless grace — clean, minimal, and impossibly soft against her sun-kissed skin. The hem kissed her ankles as the breeze played with her hair, which fell in loose, undone curls like stories finally released.

No labels. No shimmer.

Just mascara.

A trace of rose on her lips.

And eyes that had seen too much — and forgiven it anyway.

There was no performance to her beauty now.

Just presence.

A kind of grace you couldn't imitate.

The kind that made a room fall silent — not out of awe, but respect.

In her hands, she held her book:

Wild Grace: A Memoir

The cover showed a lone woman walking through a sunlit field, her linen dress catching the wind, her back turned toward the camera, face unknown. There was no title across the image — just warmth, breath, and freedom.

No name. No destination.

Only the invitation to begin.

Rita and Mia arrived first, weaving their way through the lamps with mangoes in hand and their laughter trailing behind them.

“You look like peace,” Mia whispered, holding her hand a second longer than usual.

“Like someone who survived something no one else could,” said Rita, kissing her cheek.

Aira didn’t cry.

She didn’t need to.

This night wasn’t about who left.

It was about the women who stayed.

The ones who held space.

The ones who reminded her how to come home to herself.

When it was time to speak, Aira stepped barefoot to the microphone.

Her voice was steady. Low. Unpolished.

Like truth always is.

She didn’t read from a page.

She didn’t rehearse.

She spoke the way she wrote —

From somewhere unguarded.

“This book isn’t about heartbreak,” she began.

“It’s about coming back to yourself after you’ve given everything away.”

“It’s about the silences between the chapters...

The questions that didn’t get answers.

WILD GRACE

The parts of your story that felt too quiet to matter.”

“It’s about grace.

Not the kind that floats in ballet shoes.

The wild kind.

The kind that rises from ash and grief and says —

‘I’m still here.’”

No thunderous applause.

Just breath.

And the sound of someone quietly wiping their eyes.

That was enough.

Two weeks later, the email arrived.

From a women-led global storytelling initiative.

They’d read the book.

And they didn’t want to acquire her voice —

They wanted her to lead others back to theirs.

She was invited to co-host a series of creative healing workshops

—

Across Southeast Asia.

South America.

Rural towns in Eastern Europe.

“We believe your story is not just yours,” the message read.

“It’s ours too.”

Aira said yes.

She packed light:

— A blush silk dress

— A fresh notebook

— Her grandmother's old silver anklet

— And her book.

Not for display.

But as a map.

To remember what it took to become.

At the airport, she sat near a wide window, watching the sky shift from indigo to pink-gold. Planes ascended like quiet prayers. Her coffee cooled slowly beside her.

She wasn't waiting for a man.

She wasn't chasing a dream.

She was walking into purpose.

She traced her finger along the spine of her book.

Then smiled to herself.

"Let's begin again," she whispered.

And this time...

She wasn't afraid of the ending.

Chapter 29: The First Tree

The seasons had turned.

Rain gave way to dust. Then to light. Then to promise.

Months had passed since her book first left her hands and entered the world like a prayer whispered between pages.

And in that time, Aira had travelled farther than she thought her heart could go.

She had stood in sun-scorched village courtyards, surrounded by women who couldn't read but told stories with eyes that had memorized generations.

She had listened beneath rusted roofs where the smell of turmeric and charcoal curled in the air.

She had taught young girls to write their names — then speak them aloud like spells.

She had laughed. Cried. Danced.

And slowly...

The weight she carried wasn't a wound anymore.

It was a bridge.

She was no longer just the girl who survived heartbreak.

She was the woman who turned it into soil.

Now, she stood barefoot on her own land in Assam.

The grass beneath her feet was soft, still damp from last night's rain. The air smelled of hibiscus, clay, and distant woodsmoke. Somewhere in the distance, a cowbell clinked, and birds argued sweetly in the mango trees.

In her hands: a small neem sapling.

Delicate, green, and stubbornly alive.

The building plans were complete — a sanctuary of earth and breath waiting to rise. But before the first wall, before the first nail, she wanted to begin differently.

Not with steel.

But with roots.

Mari and Julia stood beside her, quiet for once.

Their eyes glassy. Their sandals kicked off.

Aira's parents watched from the porch, her father's hand resting on her mother's shoulder, pride tucked silently between them.

Aira knelt.

The soil gave without resistance.

WILD GRACE

Warm. Damp. Willing.

She dug with her hands — slow and steady — feeling every crumble, every root, every earthworm that reminded her this land was alive.

Then, with care, she placed the neem sapling in the hollow.

Not symbolic.

Sacred.

A ceremony not for show — but for the girl she once was.

The girl who gave too much. Waited too long. Loved without safety.

This was for her.

A beginning she didn't have to earn.

A softness that didn't need permission.

She pressed the soil around the roots gently, as if tucking the past into bed.

Then exhaled.

The wind picked up slightly, lifting her hair, brushing her cheek like a blessing.

Later that evening, the light softened into gold. The porch was quiet except for the hum of insects and the distant call to prayer.

Aira sat curled on the old cane chair, barefoot, her journal in her lap. The neem sapling swayed gently in the breeze — a silhouette against the horizon.

She flipped to a fresh page.

No title. No pressure.

And began to write.

But not to a man.

Not to a reader.

Not to the world.

To the girl inside her.

The one who once whispered, “Pick me. Love me. Stay.”

“You did good,” she wrote.

“You broke. You bled. You wandered.

But you never lost your heart.

You just had to stop giving it to people who didn’t know what to do with it.”

“You made it home.

You are the home.”

She paused.

Then signed it the only way that made sense now:

Love,

Me.

She closed the journal slowly.

Held it to her chest for a breath.

Then let the wind carry the moment —

pages fluttering gently like wings that no longer needed to hold weight.

WILD GRACE

This wasn't a fairytale ending.

There was no prince waiting at the gate.

No perfect closure wrapped in ribbons.

Only the rustle of trees.

Only the scent of new rain on warm earth.

Only a sapling, and a sky full of stars beginning to rise.

Only grace.

Only roots.

Only a woman —

wildly, softly,

finally,

free.

Chapter 30: The Goodbye That Freed Me

New York pulsed outside her window, golden and alive. Skyscrapers glowed like they had stories to tell, and traffic below moved like blood through a city's beating heart. The hum of ambition pressed gently against the glass.

Aira stood in her suite barefoot, heels kicked off, her body tired but buzzing with quiet satisfaction. The evening had been a blur — her last major event on the tour. The ballroom had shimmered in candlelight and praise. Interviews. Flashbulbs. Applause that echoed louder than she expected.

Her book was selling in three continents.

Translations had begun.

They called her voice necessary.

But here, in the silence of her hotel room, she didn't feel famous.

She felt full.

WILD GRACE

Not loud, not triumphant.

Just... complete.

Then — a knock.

Soft. Intentional.

Not room service.

Not Mari.

Not Julia.

Even before she opened the door, she knew.

Ryan.

He stood in the hallway like a memory that still knew how to find her.

Hands in the pockets of a navy coat, hair slightly tousled, a little older, maybe even softer.

But his presence was the same — magnetic, oceanic, impossible to ignore.

His eyes met hers.

And for a moment, the noise of the city fell away.

“I hope I’m not too late,” he said, voice low, like something remembered in a dream.

She didn’t speak.

Just stepped back.

And let him in.

They sat in silence for a while — side by side on the suite’s velvet sofa, framed by floor-to-ceiling windows that made Manhattan look like a painting still drying.

Neither reached for the wine on the table.

Nor filled the space with small talk.

Finally, he said, "I read your book."

She turned to him slowly. "Why?"

He looked down at his hands. "Because I needed to hear your voice again. Unfiltered. Free."

A pause. Then—

"I never realized how much of yourself you were shrinking... to fit into my love."

Her throat tightened. "I didn't realize either."

"I'm proud of you," he said. "And I'm sorry."

She didn't answer right away.

"For what?" she asked quietly.

"For being too afraid to love you the way you needed. For thinking I had to earn love through struggle. And for making you question your worth when you were the only truth I ever really knew."

Her fingers curled into the hem of her dress.

Not from pain. From memory.

"You knew what I needed," she whispered. "You just didn't want to give it."

He nodded. Slowly. "I told myself I wasn't enough for you. But really... I wasn't ready for the woman you were becoming."

There was no anger in her.

Just understanding.

WILD GRACE

And the deep, aching peace that follows survival.

“I used to imagine this moment,” she said. “You showing up. Saying all the things I waited years to hear. I thought it would heal me.”

He leaned forward, eyes searching. “And does it?”

She met his gaze.

“No,” she said.

“Because I’m already healed.”

He smiled, barely.

Like something in him finally surrendered.

“I’m leaving tomorrow,” he said. “For good this time. I just... wanted to see you. One last time. Not as the man you waited for. But as the one who always loved you — in his own broken, unfinished way.”

She stood beside him at the window.

The lights below shimmered like stars learning to rise from the ground.

He reached into his coat pocket and placed something gently in her hand.

A photograph.

Candid. Faded at the edges.

Bali.

She was laughing in the sun, hair tangled by sea breeze, eyes closed, face tilted toward the sky like she’d never known sorrow.

“I kept it,” he said.

“To remind myself what real love looks like.”

Aira closed her fingers around it.

Held it for a moment.

Then let it go to the table.

“Goodbye, Ryan.”

He leaned in.

Pressed his lips gently to her forehead — not possession, not regret.

Something softer.

Almost sacred.

“Goodbye, wild girl,” he whispered.

And then he walked out.

No looking back.

This time, she didn’t cry.

This time, she didn’t run after him.

This time... she didn’t wonder what could have been.

She stood by the window long after he disappeared.

The city moved on below.

So did she.

The lights shimmered like a thousand doors quietly opening.

And somewhere deep inside her — the last one gently closed.

Not in sorrow.

In certainty.

WILD GRACE

Because sometimes love doesn't arrive to stay.

It arrives to break you open.

And in the pieces you collect afterward...

You finally find yourself.

Chapter 31: Falling in Love with Life

Somewhere on the Amalfi Coast, Aira sat at a quiet café terrace, barefoot on warm terracotta tiles. Her journal lay open across her lap, half-filled with loose handwriting and olive oil stains. The smell of lemons drifted from the trees above – ripe and golden – perfuming the breeze with something achingly familiar.

It reminded her of childhood.

Of freedom.

Of joy untouched by expectation.

She had no itinerary.

No meetings. No men. No performance.

Just time.

And herself.

She sipped her espresso slowly – It was one of those black and strong one and let its bitterness settle on her tongue like memory.

WILD GRACE

She closed her eyes and smiled.

It tasted like everything she had survived.

That morning, she had wandered barefoot through the village square, the cobblestones cool underfoot. Old women in patterned scarves smiled at her as though they knew her as if her story belonged here.

The air was salted from the sea, sweetened by baking bread and crushed basil from kitchen windows.

She had bought sun-warmed peaches from a crooked stall, their soft skins blushing rose and gold under her fingers. She tucked them into her bag like treasure.

She had paused to stroke the head of a stray dog dozing in the shade, his ears twitching in thanks.

And then, beneath the rusted awning of a trattoria, she heard a violin.

The music was wild — bright, playful, full of mischief.

Aira didn't think.

She just danced.

Right there, in the middle of the cobbled street — her linen dress fluttering, her arms open to the light, laughter escaping her mouth like a language she'd finally remembered how to speak.

She wasn't running anymore.

She wasn't proving.

She wasn't waiting to be chosen.

She had chosen herself.

Over and over.

Until it wasn't a choice — it was who she had become.

Later, she sat beneath a fig tree with a fountain murmuring nearby, the sun pouring through the leaves in dapples. Her journal pages fluttered in the breeze like they belonged to the wind now.

She wrote slowly.

Not for deadlines. Not for audience.

But for herself.

Maybe it would be a second book.

Maybe just letters to the woman she was still becoming.

Either way — for the first time in years, not knowing didn't scare her.

She had burned.

She had bloomed.

She had broken.

And she had risen.

And now...

She was blooming again.

Softer.

Stronger.

Quieter.

And this time, she didn't need anyone else to see it.

WILD GRACE

That evening, as the golden light softened into lavender, her phone buzzed softly on the table beside her wine glass.

A voice note from Mari:

“Promise me you’ll never settle again.

You’re Aira freaking Sharma.

You built an empire out of heartbreak.”

Then Julia:

“And if you ever forget who you are —
we’ll remind you.

Over cocktails and chaos, like always.”

Then Rita:

“I hope you know how proud I am of you.

You’ve become everything you once doubted you could be.

Keep choosing yourself — every single day.”

Aira closed her eyes.

Held the phone to her chest.

Let the words land — soft yet heavily with love.

She didn’t reply right away.

Just let herself feel it.

Minutes later, a quiet message appeared from Mark.

“Saw your book in a shop window in Florence.”

“I stood there like an idiot, smiling.”

“You’ve come so far, Aira.

And you did it without losing the softness that makes you... you."

"Wherever you go next —

I hope it's everything you once dreamed of.

And more."

She smiled.

No ache. No questions.

He wasn't trying to come back.

He wasn't chasing her story.

He was simply honouring it.

And as the waves whispered outside her open window, Aira whispered back:

"I was never meant to be saved.

I was meant to rise."

She climbed into bed, her skin warm from the sun, the stars spilling quietly above her.

No ghosts.

No maybes.

No waiting.

Just this:

A life that finally felt like hers.

Wild.

Brave.

And free.

PRIYAM MECH

Epilogue: The Wild Within

Months passed.

Seasons blurred.

The world spun onward — louder, faster, relentless.

And so did she.

But differently now.

Deliberately.

Softly.

Aira lived by the ocean now — not to escape the past, but to stay loyal to the present.

She wrote in the mornings with sea salt in her hair and bare feet pressed to cool tile.

She danced in the kitchen when it rained.

She took long walks beneath lemon trees and read poetry under the sun.

But she still travelled.

She still gathered stories.

Sometimes Florence, sometimes Hanoi, sometimes the back of a dusty café in Chile.

WILD GRACE

She carried only notebooks, silver anklets, and a hunger for unfiltered lives.

She had a cottage by the sea.

But her heart carried a passport.

Back in Assam, the sanctuary still bloomed.

The building she once dreamed into being now echoed with women's voices — some soft, some unshaken.

Mari helped oversee it.

Local women she had once mentored now ran the programs themselves, teaching, creating, healing each other in ways that no curriculum ever could.

Aira didn't need to be there every day.

Because she had built something that didn't depend only on her physical presence.

She had made herself unnecessary —
which meant she had truly led.

When she did return, they didn't greet her like a founder.

They greeted her like a sister.

She sat in the circle like everyone else —
listening, learning, leaving something behind again.

Her heart still carried echoes —

Ryan's stillness, Dev's lies, Kabir's silence.

But they no longer hurt.

They simply reminded her she had lived.

PRIYAM MECH

That she had loved boldly.

And still... survived softer.

Sometimes, when the moon dipped low over the ocean and the tide crept close, she would whisper to the water — not to be heard, but to be released.

When strangers wrote her letters, thanking her for her book, calling her brave —

she smiled.

Not out of pride.

But peace.

Because only she knew—

Wild Grace is not about being fearless.

It is about being steady after the fall.

And still choosing to rise.

Over and over again.

Acknowledgements

To every heartbreak that cracked me open — thank you.
You didn't just break me.
You carved space for something deeper.
For the words I never dared speak — until now.
To my mother — the quiet force behind every soft victory.
To my father — your unwavering belief steadied my steps when I faltered.
To my brother — a silent strength,
a calm I could return to when the noise grew loud.
And to my cousins — for seeing the best in me even when I couldn't,
and for rooting for me with hearts full of unwavering love.
To the ones who came and went —
your absences lingered.
Your echoes became chapters.
Some wounds became wisdom.
Some turned into pages.
To the friends who stayed — without fixing, without judging —
your presence was the hand on my back when I couldn't breathe.

PRIYAM MECH

To every woman who was almost chosen, nearly loved, quietly overlooked —

this story holds a piece of you too.

May you find a grace that doesn't shrink for anyone.

And to the girl I used to be —

who stitched this story together in fragments,

in silence, in shadow —

You were healing the whole time.

Even when you couldn't see it.

WILD GRACE

About the Author



Priyam Mech is an Indian author, creative entrepreneur, and former beauty pageant queen with a background in media and communications. She weaves her lived experiences across continents, careers, and emotional landscapes into narratives that pulse with heart.

Her debut novel, *Wild Grace*, is inspired by true events and written in a voice that is as raw as it is empowering, a quiet rebellion wrapped in poetry and truth. When she isn't writing, Priyam is building her beauty brand, mentoring young women in the creative arts, or pouring her lifelong love for animals into rescue and advocacy.

