



The Yarrow Field

*Where Stillness Grows
and
Stories Root*

By
Davilyn Atwood

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The Apothecary Press

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Dear Reader,

If you're reading this, it means you walked with us. Maybe only through these pages, maybe through something else that moved in you while you read. A flicker. A breath. A remembering.

That's how it begins.

When I first came to The Yarrow Field, I didn't know what I needed. I thought I needed rest. Or maybe clarity. But what I found wasn't an answer. It was a rhythm. A way of moving slower through the world. A way of listening again.

Calla once told me that we each make our own medicine. I used to think that meant teas and tinctures and jars lined up in rows. But now I think she meant something deeper. The medicine we make is the way we come home to ourselves. The way we choose to stay inside our own story, even when it's messy. Especially then.

If something stirred in you while you were here, don't ignore it.

If your body leaned a little closer when the field hummed or when Tula's ink met skin, if your breath caught in your throat during Calla's words by the fire, if you found yourself thinking, *Maybe this could be me*, let that be enough.

Let that be the start.

You don't need to know where the path leads. You just need to notice what's calling your feet forward. Even if it's small. Even if it's quiet.

Go tend it. Go turn toward it.

And when you do, when you begin to make your own medicine, in whatever way it takes shape, know this: you're not alone.

We are all walking fields like this, somewhere. We are the ones who return. And return again.

With stories.

With roots.

With the medicine we make.

... Elara

It was the third death that week.

I sat beside her bed, hands folded, trying not to think about how familiar this posture had become. Her breathing was shallow, barely there, like her body had already decided to go and was just waiting for permission. The light in the room had that late-afternoon softness, the kind that makes shadows stretch long and quiet. A monitor blinked in the corner, muted. I'd already silenced the alarm. She didn't need it anymore.

Her name was Evelyn. I remember that. I always remembered their names, even when I forgot to eat. She was eighty-nine. A retired math teacher. Her daughter had visited earlier that morning but couldn't stay - too much, she said, and I understood. People only think grief comes after the end. They forget it starts long before.

I held Evelyn's hand gently, her fingers pale and cool, papery-soft like a forgotten letter. I'd learned how to hold hands without needing anything back. It was one of the first things palliative care taught me. You don't grasp. You offer.

I watched her chest rise, slow... then fall again. And then it didn't.

No drama. No gasping last breath. Just a quiet exit, like slipping out the back door of a crowded room.

I waited. I always waited. Sometimes I whispered something, sometimes I sang if the family had asked. This time I just said, "You can go now," like I was giving her my blessing. Like she needed it.

And maybe she did.

I pressed the call button, stood up, and smoothed the blanket over her chest.

When the nurse came in, she paused by the door, gave me a nod. We didn't say much. You learn not to.

I walked back to the staff lounge and washed my hands. That was the ritual. Hand sanitizer. Gloves off. Wash. Soap. Water. Scrub. Rinse. Dry. As if death could be rinsed away at the sink.

I stared at myself in the mirror above the basin. My eyes looked dull. My mouth didn't know how to smile anymore. I'd forgotten what my face looked like when it wasn't tired.

Outside the window, traffic moved. Life went on. I stayed there a little longer than I meant to, letting the hum of the overhead lights fill the silence I didn't want to go home to.

I didn't cry.

Not that day.

That came later...

That night, I didn't sleep.

I tried. I went through all the motions. Hot shower. Soft clothes. Herbal tea I couldn't taste. I turned down the sheets on the bed I never fully unmade and lay still, like a patient waiting for something to be administered.

But my mind didn't stop. It buzzed, electric and relentless. I saw Evelyn's hands. I saw the green blinking of that silent monitor. I heard my own voice saying, *You can go now*, and wondered who I had really been speaking to.

I got up just after three and wandered barefoot to the kitchen, opened and closed cabinets I wasn't hungry for. The refrigerator hummed. My shoulders ached from holding so much for so long.

I caught my reflection in the oven door - loose braid over one shoulder, pale skin, dark circles like bruises. I looked like someone who hadn't been living in her body.

And I hadn't.

I'd been living in other people's endings.

The next morning, I didn't call in sick. I didn't call at all. I sat on the edge of my couch, hands limp in my lap and stared at the corner of the rug where a thread had come undone. I should've gotten up. I should've gone in. I should've been stronger.

That word had followed me for years - *strong*. Patients used it. Families. Colleagues. "You're so strong."
"I don't know how you do this work."
"You're a gift."

I wanted to scream. Not because they were wrong. But because I had believed them. I had believed that my worth was my ability to carry. To hold grief like a professional. To be calm in the chaos. To smile while death took the room.

But my hands were shaking. Even empty, they were shaking.

I finally opened the window, needing air. The outside world looked normal - people walking dogs, kids in backpacks, a cyclist yelling at traffic. No one knew that I was slowly unraveling inside a second-floor apartment that smelled like lavender and ghosts.

That afternoon I tried to read. Something simple. A novel someone had given me months ago. I got as far as the dedication page before I shut it and tossed it gently to the side. I couldn't even take in fiction. I couldn't suspend reality long enough to let myself feel anything that wasn't mine.

I swept the floor. Then I swept again. I watered the plants even though the soil was still damp. My hands needed something to do, something that didn't require a stethoscope or gloves or silence.

Then I found the stethoscope.

It was in the drawer by the bookshelf. I'd tucked it there one weekend, trying to separate my work self from the rest of me. I pulled it out, turned it over in my palms. The rubber tubing, the metal chill of the diaphragm. I pressed it against my chest and listened.

My own heartbeat sounded unfamiliar. Like it didn't quite belong to me.

I dropped it into a box. Along with my ID badge. My favorite pen. A few notes I hadn't been able to throw out.

I didn't know what I was doing yet. But I knew I was done.

Later that evening, I went to the bathroom and opened the medicine cabinet. I wasn't looking for anything in particular. Just... looking. On the second shelf was a small jar of dried lemon balm leaves. A gift from a former patient's daughter. She'd grown it in her garden and pressed it into my hands on the day her mother passed. "For when you need a little softening," she'd said.

I made a cup of it. It tasted faintly of citrus and old sorrow.

And for the first time in weeks, I let myself cry.

Not the quiet kind, either. Not the tears that slide down while you're still trying to stay composed. No. These were the cracked-open kind. The body-weeping kind. Curled on the couch, mug forgotten, arms wrapped around my own ribs like I could hold myself together.

Grief is a strange thing. You can carry it for so long it starts to feel like part of you. But when it finally spills, it doesn't ask permission. It just comes.

And I let it.

For hours.

Until the dog upstairs started barking. Until my throat ached. Until my skin felt raw and my chest felt... light. Not healed. Not even close. But like something had moved inside.

A quiet shift.

... There was a small café tucked between a used bookstore and an abandoned florist's shop. Mira and I had met here dozens of times over the years - on lunch breaks, after

night shifts, between patients, between life changes. It had brick walls, uneven wooden floors, and windows that caught the late afternoon light in that soft, forgiving way. I always sat facing the window. I don't know why. Maybe I liked pretending I could disappear into it.

I stirred honey into my tea long after it had dissolved, watching the slow circles I created in the cup. The clink of the spoon was rhythmic, grounding. I hadn't said much since we sat down. Neither had she. That was the thing about Mira - she knew how to sit with silence without trying to fix it.

"I miss you," she said finally. Her voice was gentle, not accusing. "Even though you're right in front of me."

I glanced up, met her eyes for half a second, then looked back down. I didn't know how to respond to that. I didn't even really know where I'd gone.

"I'm just tired," I offered, the same way you might offer a half-truth to a child who's too young to hear the real reason.

"You're something deeper than tired," she said. "You're soul-tired."

The word landed like a whisper against bone. I didn't even argue. I just sat with it.

My hands were trembling again. A subtle quiver, but Mira noticed. She always noticed. I lifted the mug to my lips and caught the shimmer of the tea shaking. I set it down too quickly and it sloshed over the side. The napkin she slid toward me felt like an offering, not an obligation.

"You're not holding your grief anymore," she said, almost to herself. "It's holding you."

I pressed the napkin to the spill, pretending I hadn't heard her. But I had. I heard every word.

"It's been months," I said, quietly. "I should be further along."

She shook her head. "There's no map for this."

I looked outside. A bus rolled by, a woman with a red scarf stood at the corner waiting to cross. The world kept moving. It didn't ask for permission. It didn't wait for anyone to catch up.

"I feel like I'm walking underwater," I whispered. "Like I'm moving through something thick and invisible, and no one else can see it."

Mira reached for my hand. She didn't hold it. Just rested her fingers lightly against mine. "I've been there."

The music shifted - some soft acoustic song I didn't recognize, but it had a kind of ache in it. A kind of hush. The kind of song that reminded you, you were still here.

"I have this friend," Mira said after a moment. "We used to work together. A few years ago, she had this breakdown - different from yours, but it cracked her open just the same. She ended up at this place... a retreat of sorts. In the mountains. Called The Yarrow Field."

I turned my head slightly. "Yarrow?"

"It's an herb," she said. "One of those ancient ones. Known for stopping bleeding. Physical, emotional... spiritual. That's what she said anyway. She swore by it."

I gave her a look. "You want me to go to a field of flowers and heal?"

She smiled softly. "It's not like that. There's a woman who runs it. She trains people in herbalism, healing through plants, touch therapy. Stillness. Silence. It's not therapy. It's something older than that. Maybe wilder."

"Sounds like running away," I said.

"No," she said. "It's returning."

I didn't say anything.

She let the silence fall again, just for a moment. "I'm not trying to push you. I just think - maybe you don't have to carry all this alone. Maybe there's a place where the grief doesn't get louder... it gets understood."

I felt a lump forming in my throat. I pressed the napkin against my mouth like that might stop it from rising. A place like that sounded impossible. Or imaginary. Or maybe... maybe necessary.

"You don't have to decide right now," she said. "I can give you the contact if you want. Or not. You don't even have to go. Just... think about it."

"I'll think about it," I murmured.

But I already knew.

... The light came soft through the curtains, pale and uncertain like a question. I sat on the edge of my bed, the quiet stretching around me like a thin skin. Packing was slow - deliberate in its smallness. I wasn't bringing much. Just a few pieces of clothing I could move in, the ones that had already softened to my shape; a pair of worn shoes I could trust to carry me forward.

I folded each item carefully, the fabric cool and familiar beneath my fingers. The scent of faded laundry and dust rose with each breath, mingling with the faint trace of lavender sachets I'd tucked into the drawers. My hands trembled slightly, but I didn't stop.

On the dresser lay my journal, its leather cover scuffed, and edges softened from years of use. I closed it gently and slid it into my bag, the one compartment left empty for whatever this journey might fill it with. Beside it, I found the delicate silver necklace I wore, a slender chain holding a small pendant, something I had kept close to my heart since before everything fell apart. It had belonged to someone I lost. Sometimes I fingered with it when words failed me.

I stared at the necklace, the memory of their smile flickering behind my eyes like a candle flame. Then, carefully, I fastened it around my neck.

Before leaving, I wrote a note on a simple piece of paper, my handwriting unsteady but sure:

Gone to find the parts of me I left behind. Please don't worry.

I left it on the kitchen counter, where anyone would find it, but no one would need to read it aloud.

The door clicked softly behind me as I stepped out into the morning air. The city hummed quietly, traffic distant, voices muffled, and I carried none of it with me. The cab was waiting, engine low and steady. I settled into the seat, the leather cool against my skin, and let my bag rest on the floor at my feet.

The ride was quiet. Trees blurred past like slow-moving shadows, their leaves whispering secrets in the wind. I watched, breathing in the weight of the moment, the ending and the beginning folded into one breath.

As the city faded behind me, so did the noise inside my head. The silence was different now. Not the absence of sound, but the presence of something new, a space to grow, to heal, to simply be.

I was alone again.

But this time, the silence felt like a beginning.

Journal Entry – Day 1

There is a moment, just before the threshold, when your whole body recognizes you're about to begin again, even if your mind hasn't caught up.

That's where I am now.

I haven't unpacked everything, but the lemon balm is already steeping in the corner. The window doesn't close all the way, and the breeze smells like crushed leaves and faraway rain. There's a fire crackling somewhere outside. I can hear it, soft, steady, like it knows more about arrival than I do.

I want to believe that healing isn't something you chase down. That maybe, like tea, it happens in hot water, when you let things steep and breathe.

But I'm still unraveling. Still coming down from the noise, the responsibility, the weight of holding up a life that no longer fits.

I didn't come here for clarity, not really. I came because I didn't know what else to do.

I am not sure what I expect. But tonight, I stood at the edge of a field of yarrow, acres of small white blooms waving like they knew me, and for the first time in a long time, I didn't feel like I had to explain myself to anything, or anyone.

Maybe this is what Hope feels like.

Not loud. Not clean. Not whole.

But here.

Elara

Chapter 1: The Yarrow Field

The gravel path crunched softly beneath my boots as I stepped out of the vehicle, one hand tightening around the worn strap of my duffel. The driver had already pulled away without a word, the dust of his tires settling back into silence as if I'd imagined the whole ride.

I stood at the edge of a field I had only seen in photographs, ones I had stared at late into the night, when grief turned the ceiling above me into a screen for my what-ifs and what-nows. The images hadn't done it justice. They never do. Not the way the wind actually moves through the yarrow, tall and untamed, bowing like rows of pale wildflowers pressed into prayer.

The road behind me disappeared as quickly as the last months had. No fanfare. No ceremony. Just a goodbye that didn't need to be spoken aloud. I didn't wave. I didn't look back. I'd already said my goodbyes too many times in too many ways. And still, none of them had stuck.

This was The Yarrow Field.

And I had come here hollowed out, not whole. Not quite broken but certainly unraveling.

The air held the scent of something green and crumpled. Crushed leaves, late summer light, and a trace of woodsmoke or memory, I couldn't tell which. It brushed across my face like a question: *Can you still feel?*

In the distance, a line of trees stood quietly watching. Their stillness reminded me of hospice rooms, how the air always softened around the edges when something sacred or sorrowful hovered. The trees didn't need to speak to be clear about their presence. They were boundary and welcome at once.

I tried to breathe it in. The place. The hush. The fact that no one expected anything of me in this exact moment. But my breath snagged in my chest like it didn't quite believe it yet.

There were bees hovering low over blooming herbs, lavender, calendula, something I couldn't quite name. Their movement was steady, purposeful. A rhythm I'd forgotten. Somewhere beyond the garden was a brook, I'd been told. A voice in my memory, maybe my husband's, maybe Calla's email, had mentioned it briefly. I couldn't remember anymore. My mind had been fog, and static for months.

The bag on my shoulder felt heavier than it should have. I shifted it to the other side, then back again. The weight wasn't in the belongings, I knew. It was in everything I hadn't put down.

I took a step forward. Then another.

My knees weren't trembling, exactly. But they felt... cautious. Like they hadn't agreed to belong here yet. Like they wanted to make sure this place wasn't another version of *trying too hard to be okay*.

My boots crunched again. And again.
The sound was grounding. Small. Real. And oddly kind.

As the farmhouse came into view, my breath slowed. It was low and made of weathered wood, its porch shaded by climbing vines and scattered potted rosemary. Mismatched chairs sat like they'd been gathered from other lives, each with a story I didn't need to know yet.

It didn't look like a retreat center.
It looked like someone had chosen to stay here a very long time ago, and never stopped choosing.

A woman stood at the top of the steps. She didn't wave. Didn't rush down. She simply stood there. Watching. Not in a way that made me shrink. Just... witnessing.

Her stillness unnerved me more than a greeting might have. She didn't seem like someone trying to impress me. She seemed like someone who had nothing to prove.

I hesitated at the base of the steps. My hand curled tighter around the strap of my bag.

The woman tilted her head slightly, then spoke in a voice that felt like wool and lavender and moonlight.

"You made it," she said.

I opened my mouth, but nothing came out. The words were there, I could feel them waiting behind my teeth, but they didn't make the leap.

She didn't seem to mind.

"I'm Calla," she added, her smile soft and unhurried. No edges. No bright performance. Just presence. "Come in. We'll start slow."

Slow. The word moved through me like a balm. A language I used to know.

I followed her up the steps, one at a time, my fingers trailing briefly along the railing. The wood was worn smooth by weather and touch, maybe from people like me who came here needing to feel the earth again with their hands.

And just like that, I crossed a threshold.

Into something I couldn't name yet, but already trusted more than most things.

Inside, the retreat house welcomed without fanfare. No scent of lemon-scrubbed tile or commercial air fresheners. Just light. Golden, slanting in through gauzy windows like it had been waiting there all morning.

The first thing I noticed wasn't the furniture or the walls, it was the scent.

Herbs. Real ones. Drying in thick bundles that hung from the ceiling beams. Chamomile, I thought. Maybe sage or nettle. I caught the edge of lavender and something slightly resinous, possibly cedar.

It smelled like a place that remembered things.

Like somewhere time had learned to stretch and slow down.

I stepped carefully over the threshold, unsure if I needed to ask permission aloud or if my silence counted.

The wooden floor gave a gentle creak underfoot. Not scolding. Just noticing. Everything here felt like it was paying attention, but not in a way that expected anything of me.

Calla walked ahead, quiet-footed, unhurried. She didn't fill the space with her voice. She let the place speak for itself.

To the left was a shelf of glass jars, roots, leaves, barks, powders, all labeled in looping script. There were books too, their spines faded, some with corners folded like dog ears. Titles I recognized. Others I didn't. I paused for half a breath, letting the scent of dried valerian root drift toward me like a question from a distant dream.

We passed through a sitting room, where a fire crackled low in a hearth made of stone. Its warmth reached for my skin like something alive. I glanced at the rocking chair beside it. A shawl had been tossed casually over one arm, as if someone had only just stepped out.

It felt lived in. Not staged. That mattered.

"There's no orientation," Calla said, not turning back. "The land will do most of the introducing."

Her words settled on me like mist. Unexpected. True. I didn't want another set of instructions anyway. I wanted to be met by something older, something I could listen to without needing to respond.

We moved slowly, as if fast movement would break something sacred.

She nodded toward the hallway. "The apothecary wing is that way," she said gently, "and the tea room is just before it. Drying barn's out the back. You'll find your rhythm."

I wanted to ask *what if I don't have one anymore?* But the words stayed curled in the corner of my throat. Instead, I nodded, as if pretending I might remember how.

Through the wide back windows, I could see figures in the garden.

Outside, a woman in a linen apron was stringing bundles of lemon balm along a beam, her fingers sure, her gaze lowered, moving as though she were praying. Not the kind of prayer you say out loud, but the kind your hands know.

Nearby, a tall woman carried glass jars on a wooden tray, her steps firm and sure, even on uneven ground. She looked up, met my eyes, and offered a quiet smile. It held no judgment. Just welcome, soft as a nudge.

Closer to the tree line, a girl, barely twenty, sat curled like a fern, knees to chest, sketching something with charcoal. Her hair was dark, cropped just below her ears, and her fingers smudged with ash. She didn't look up. But I could feel her awareness, taut as thread. Like someone who saw more than she let on.

And by the calendula beds, a man knelt, pencil in hand, sketchbook balanced on one thigh. He looked up briefly, met my gaze, and gave a small, wordless nod before returning to his drawing. A gentle nod. Like an unspoken agreement: *We're all trying, too.*

The garden shimmered in that moment, light catching in bee wings, lavender stalks swaying gently.

Somewhere beyond the hedge, wind chimes rang, soft and uneven. Not perfectly tuned. Just... honest.

I let my eyes trace the shape of the herb beds, the gentle architecture of care. I used to know what care felt like. I used to know what it meant to tend something.

"Your room's upstairs," Calla said, guiding me toward a staircase tucked beneath an arch of ivy. She didn't ask questions. She didn't fill the silence.

The steps creaked beneath our feet. Each one a small reminder of gravity. Of presence. Of being here.

At the top of the landing, sunlight filtered through a round window. Dust floated in the air like tiny spirits of pollen and quiet. I reached out without thinking and ran my fingertips along the sill. It was warm from the sun.

Calla stopped outside a door near the end of the hallway and turned the knob with a gentle click.

“Here,” she said simply.

I stepped in.

The room was small. Simple. Full of light.

Wooden floors, smooth and worn. A woven rug lay near the bed, frayed slightly at the corners in a way that made it feel loved. The quilt on the bed was hand-stitched, patterns of faded greens and sky blue, like someone had sewn a memory into every panel.

I didn't speak. Didn't move.

Beside the bed sat a low nightstand. On it: a cotton bag filled with dried lemon balm, and a small journal with my name gently pressed into the cover.

A note lay underneath, written in delicate, looping script.

Lemon balm for the nerves. A journal for the layers. May both meet you gently.

The muscles in my shoulders slackened before I even realized I'd been bracing.

I touched the muslin bag. It crackled slightly beneath my fingertips. I held it to my nose. The scent rose into me like something I hadn't known I needed, sharp, sweet, and almost citrus-soft. It reminded me of my grandmother's garden. Of cool June mornings. Of calm, when calm was still something I trusted.

Calla didn't hover. She just stepped back, nodded once, and closed the door behind her.

The latch clicked shut.

And I was alone.

But not in the old, heavy way. This solitude felt like possibility, not punishment.

I sat on the edge of the bed. I didn't unpack. I didn't lie down.

I just held the bag of tea and breathed.
Letting the scent remind my body that I still had one.
Letting my thoughts catch up to the fact that I was safe.

Outside the window, the garden moved like a watercolor. Bees danced between petals. Shadows shifted gently across the ground. Someone down below laughed, a soft, startled laugh like they hadn't done it in a while.

It made my chest ache. But not in a bad way.

I sat there a long time, just breathing.

Letting the light find me.

Letting myself begin.

That evening, a table was set outside the tea room, beneath the vine-laced pergola that stretched like a gentle archway between the old stone steps and the garden's edge. Long shadows stretched across the field, softened by the gold-amber light that comes only at the close of a warm day.

The table itself was long and worn smooth by time, covered in a cloth the color of dried rose petals. On it were pitchers of herbal infusions, lemon balm, chamomile, rose, and a scattering of mismatched cups in clay and stone. Some had cracks that had been mended with gold. Others were chipped, their imperfections quietly celebrated, not hidden.

I stood at the edge for a moment, unsure if I was supposed to wait or help. My hands hovered near the pitchers. I didn't reach for one. Not yet. I was still learning how to be here.

Calla moved through the group slowly, pouring each person a drink as if it were a ritual, not a task. When she reached me, she offered the faintest smile and held out a cup.

The cup was clay, pale green with a thumb-sized dent in the side. When I wrapped my fingers around it, the dent cradled my hand perfectly. It felt like it belonged to me.

"Cold infusions settle the system," Calla said, her voice low and sure. "They invite the body to arrive."

I wasn't sure if mine had fully arrived yet. But I sipped.

The tea was cool, floral, and slightly citrus at the edges. Lemon balm, rose, maybe just a whisper of mint. It slipped down my throat and into something deeper, something long-tired.

I found a seat near the edge of the gathering, where I could watch but didn't have to participate too much. Beneath the pergola, vines curled like loose braids overhead. There were candle jars scattered across the table, with flames flickering gently as dusk leaned in.

Across from me, the man with the sketchbook, Theo, I'd heard someone say, sat cross-legged, his knees dusted in soil. He held his cup close to his face, breathing it in deeply before each sip. He had the kind of presence that felt like a leaf turned toward the sun, quiet, intentional, slightly unsure.

To his left, the woman who'd smiled at me earlier, Briony, scribbled into a leather-bound notebook between sips, her lips moving as if tasting the words she was writing. She tucked her hair behind her ear with an absent hand and smiled into the page.

Junie, the one I'd seen stringing herbs earlier, sat back in her chair with her eyes closed, her face tilted toward the last warmth of the sun. Her cup rested on her stomach like she trusted it to stay there. She breathed deeply, rhythmically, like someone who had fought hard for that kind of stillness.

And Tula, curled again near the tree's edge, held her cup with both hands, unmoving, gaze fixed on a knot in the wood table. Her presence was soft, almost evaporating at the edges, but there was something about her stillness that felt deliberate, not passive. Like she was listening to something none of us could hear yet.

I curled my fingers tighter around my cup. The tea was still cool.

The scent of herbs drifted up with the dusk. Rosemary. Faint yarrow smoke. Honeysuckle from the trellis. Every inhale felt like a balm.

Then, as the light turned violet and the first stars began to whisper into the sky, Calla stepped into the center of the gathering.

She carried a small woven basket. It looked hand-made, sturdy, but soft at the edges, like it had been passed between many hands.

She didn't raise her voice. She didn't need to.

"We begin not with what you bring," she said, looking around the small circle, "but with what is given."

Her eyes met each of ours, not rushed, not forced. Just presence.

"Tonight, I offer each of you a gift. Not because you need it, but because something in you already understands it."

I felt something shift in my chest. A quiet cracking, like a thaw.

Calla reached into the basket.

To Tula, she offered a bundle, turmeric ink wrapped in cloth the color of river stone, a hand-bound journal with speckled paper, and a folded mandala print pressed in bright ochre.

"From Bali. You can learn with them and from them. There's an empty space above the apothecary," Calla said. "It's full of light. You're welcome to use it as your studio, if you like."

Tula blinked. Her fingers closed slowly around the bundle like she was afraid it might vanish.

To Theo, she handed a stitched tea journal and a delicate set of tins. Four were filled, roasted barley, shiitake, yuzu peel, ginger leaf. Two were left empty.

“From Japan, a special herbalist that owns a tea house there. To be filled when you’re ready,” she said. “The plants will find you.”

Theo traced the edge of one tin with reverence, then nodded, almost to himself.

To Briony, a glass vial of rose oil and a narrow journal wrapped in silk.

“Rose oil from Morocco. For the hard days,” Calla said. “For softness, when it’s easier to go rigid.”

Briony let out a soft, surprised laugh. The kind that holds back tears. “Thank you,” she whispered.

To Junie, a small stone wrapped in indigo cloth. When her hands closed around it, the scent of myrrh bloomed upward like smoke. A small, lined notebook accompanied it.

“Myrrh from Egypt. This is for the stillness between everything,” Calla said. “When nothing makes sense, and yet something holds you.”

Junie exhaled, slowly. Her eyes stayed on the stone for a long time.

And then Calla turned to me.

For a moment, the world went quiet.

She placed a bundle in my hands, wrapped in soft muslin. The cloth was warm, as if it had absorbed sun and story.

Inside: a wooden spoon, whittled smooth from juniper. The grain of the wood curved like river lines. The surface smelled faintly of oil and something more, something like memory.

Beside it: a chipped porcelain cup.

The tag read: Juniper from Nepal.

Stir slowly. Begin again. Let your hands remember the way.

I stared at the spoon. At the cup.

Neither were flashy. Neither were new. But both felt like they had known me long before I ever arrived.

Calla said nothing. She didn't need to. Her gaze was steady. She nodded once and then stepped back.

I wrapped my hands around the cup. It had a small crack, mended with a glint of gold, a kintsugi seam. My thumb rested against it. The warmth of the tea, the texture of repair.

Not broken. Just carried.

Around the circle, no one spoke. Theo cradled his tins like they were sacred. Briony had dabbed oil on her wrists and closed her eyes. Tula gently turned the corner of the mandala print between her fingers. Junie had tucked the stone against her heart and leaned into the warmth of the fire.

And me? I held a spoon.

And something in me softened.

Not in surrender.

But in remembering.

That maybe healing didn't begin with fixing.
Maybe it began with holding what was already here.
And stirring it gently.

The fire flickered.

Its warmth spread in small pulses, like a second heartbeat beneath my skin. Sparks lifted into the deepening night sky, curling toward the first stars like offerings. Someone had tucked rosemary and yarrow into the kindling, when the wind shifted, the scent swirled around us, half-medicine, half-memory.

We didn't sit in a perfect circle. There were gaps between us, spaces of silence, of grief, of not-yet-knowing. But somehow, that made it feel more honest. More human.

I turned the wooden spoon over in my hands. Its shape was simple, no decoration, no flourish, but the grain of the juniper moved like water. I traced its edge with my thumb and thought about all the things I'd stirred in my life. Soups and worries. Medicines and disappointments. Dreams that simmered too long and turned bitter.

This felt different. This felt like an invitation to stir without fixing. To stir just to be with what was.

The chipped porcelain cup rested beside me, its gold-filled crack catching the firelight. I thought of my own fractures, the ones I never named out loud. The ones I smoothed

over with work, with care for others, with a kind of efficiency that looked like strength but was really just armor.

I didn't know it yet, but that night, the armor began to slip. Not fall off entirely. Just... loosen.

Across the flames, Theo leaned forward, adding a small twig to the fire. It caught quickly, crackling with light. His eyes were shadowed, but open. Beside him, Tula sat cross-legged, her cup empty now, her lips slightly parted as if on the edge of song.

Then, softly, Theo began to hum.

The tune was unfamiliar, a slow, searching melody, like a question being asked without words. His voice was low, slightly rough, but full of gentleness. It caught me off guard. I hadn't expected song. Not from him.

Tula's head tilted. And then, without lifting her eyes, she began to hum too.

Their voices braided in the air, two threads weaving something fragile and luminous.

The sound washed over us all, and I saw it: Briony closing her eyes and resting her forehead against her knees. Junie rubbing the indigo cloth between her fingers like a prayer bead. Calla sitting still at the edge, not guiding, not correcting, just witnessing.

I breathed in slowly. The firelight flickered against the worn wooden beams above. I could hear the wind in the trees. The clink of a cup being set down. The creak of a chair shifting.

And underneath it all, something else.

Not noise.

But space.

The kind of space that allows a person to feel what they've been holding at bay.

I felt it then, grief, yes. Exhaustion, certainly. But also, something quieter. A flicker I hadn't felt in a long time.

Hope.

It didn't rush in like a flood. It arrived like steam. Subtle. Rising. The kind that fills a room before you realize you're breathing differently.

Later, when the fire had faded to embers and the stars had taken their full places above, I climbed the stairs to my room.

Inside, the small lamp still glowed. The bed looked exactly as I'd left it. The journal and lemon balm pouch waited on the nightstand like they'd always belonged there.

I sat on the edge of the bed again, but this time, I let my body exhale into the mattress. I picked up the pouch, held it to my nose. The lemon balm was warm, sweet, earthy. I pressed it to my chest and closed my eyes.

My fingers reached for the journal. I opened the first page.

Blank.

No pressure. No demand.

Just a space to begin.

I didn't write anything that night. But I held the journal open for a while. Let the quiet enter me. Let the presence of this place write itself into my bones.

And as I curled beneath the quilt, hand-stitched, soft with age, I whispered something to the ceiling beams, to the night air, to no one at all:

Please let this be a place I can stay.

Then I closed my eyes.

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

...I didn't dream of leaving.

I dreamed of roots.
Of earth and breath.
Of hands remembering the way.
And of staying.

I didn't know you could feel a place before you understood it.

But I did.

I felt it before I unpacked a single thing. Before I spoke more than a few words. Before I remembered how to exhale without checking the room first.

It wasn't dramatic, just subtle enough to start undoing me.

The scent of lemon balm drifted out of the linen bag before I even opened it. The fire snapped like someone who wasn't in a hurry. The air tasted like rosemary and something more ancient, maybe patience. Maybe grief that had learned how to sit still.

I watched the others from a soft distance: a boy who moved like he knew the names of things; a woman who had the calm posture of someone learning how to breathe again; an artist whose silence felt thick with beauty... and something broken.

And Calla, who never filled the space with explanations, just stood there, steady and open. She looked at people the way some people look at trees, with reverence, not requirement.

I didn't know what I expected. But I didn't expect this much quiet. Or this much care.

I'm not used to being still without guilt. Or resting without needing to earn it first.

But something about this place asks nothing. It just keeps offering.

I don't know what I'm becoming here. I only know I'm not rushing it.

Maybe that's the first step in healing: letting the senses arrive before the story does.