

The Empty Chair

A BOOK BY
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Acknowledgement:

This book would not exist without the pain, the healing, the silence, and the voices that carried me through it all. This one would not exist without Chitra.

To the ones I lost—*Shikha, Abhishek, Olive, Uncle*—your presence, however brief, filled my life with love, laughter, and meaning. You are the colors I carry every day.

To my *mother and sister*, thank you for your resilience—for holding our world together when it was falling apart. I may not always say it, but I see you. I see your sacrifices. I see your strength.

To the friends who stayed, even when I couldn't speak—thank you for your quiet loyalty, your late-night messages, your belief in me when I forgot how to believe in myself. You reminded me that even the darkest shades belong in the palette.

To *Ms. Glashan, Mrs. Liddle* and all the teachers who looked beyond the assignments and saw the student—I owe you more than just grades. I owe you hope.

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To every woman who picks up this book searching for connection, for comfort, for a voice that understands—thank you. You are not alone. This book is yours as much as it is mine.

And finally, to the younger version of me—the boy who stood on the bridge, heart full of questions—thank you for staying. Thank you for choosing life.

We don't always get happy endings. But we can choose healing. One breath. One color. One empty chair of happiness. One day at a time.

With love and unspoken gratitude,

- Siddhartha Sinha

Foreward

There are stories we read and forget. And then there are stories that stay—like a quiet echo in a still room, like a chair someone left behind. *The Empty Chair* is one of those stories.

When I first encountered Chitra and Aaditya, I felt as though I was eavesdropping on two lives unfolding in real time: full of warmth, missteps, late-night calls, and silences that said more than words ever could. Their journey isn't about grand gestures or sweeping declarations. It's about the moments between—the kind we often overlook until they're gone.

This book is not a love story in the way we usually mean it. It's about the strange, delicate bond between two people who orbit each other through school days, college years, and the quiet chaos of adulthood. It's about the spaces we hold for someone even when we can't hold them, the way memory lingers long after a conversation ends, the way a single empty chair can carry the weight of an entire past.

What moved me most as I read was how familiar it felt. Not because I've lived the exact life of either Chitra or Aaditya, but because we all have our own empty chair—someone we wanted to stay, someone who shaped us simply by being, someone whose absence we can still trace in the air.

As you turn these pages, let yourself pause in the silences. Listen to the unsaid. Notice the quiet grief, the tiny joys, the stubborn hope. Let this book remind you that sometimes the most profound connections don't need a label, and sometimes the truest endings are the ones we never quite see coming.

- Siddhartha Sinha

Preface

This book began as a collection of fragments—scattered conversations, midnight thoughts, and diary pages that refused to stay hidden. At first, there was no plan to turn them into a novel. They were simply moments: a chai break after school, a late-night phone call, a quiet evening when words weighed more than silence.

But as the pieces grew, they started speaking to each other. Together they told a story about two people—Chitra and Aaditya—who drifted in and out of each other's lives, shaping each other in ways neither fully understood. Their friendship, their almost-love, and their quiet departures form the heart of *The Empty Chair*.

This isn't a tale of perfect timing or neat conclusions. Life rarely is. Instead, it's about the spaces we leave for the people who matter, even when they can't stay. It's about the way memories linger, the way a single empty chair can hold the weight of years of laughter, arguments, and unspoken feelings.

As you read, you may recognize a piece of your own story here: a person you once held close, a bond you couldn't name, a goodbye you never truly said. That is the gift these characters gave me while writing—they reminded me how universal those quiet, complicated connections can be.

I hope *The Empty Chair* finds you in a moment when you can sit with it, breathe with it, and maybe even remember the people who helped you become who you are—whether or not they stayed.

— *Siddhartha Sinha*

Prologue

An empty chair waits.

Silent, patient — a witness to stories whispered in the dark, to laughter lost in time, to promises that danced on fragile lips and vanished with the dawn.

It holds a space no one else can fill, a hollow carved by absence, yet heavy with presence. A place where memories linger like shadows, where the weight of what was and what might have been presses quietly against the soul.

This is the chair between two hearts — Chitra and Aaditya — whose lives entwined like tangled threads, frayed by distance, stitched with fleeting moments of connection.

They met beneath the simple skies of youth, when everything was supposed to be easier — but the heart knows no logic, only the dizzying pull of closeness and the sharp sting of being apart.

Their story is not one of grand gestures or clear answers. It is found in the silences, the near confessions, the ‘almosts’ that hover like mist, blurring the edges of friendship and something more.

There are ‘silly things’ — little sparks and misunderstandings — that carry the power to ignite or to extinguish, leaving behind a fragile glow or cold ash.

And somewhere, beneath the noise of everyday life, a question lingers like a ghost:

Who will fill the empty chair?

Will it ever be filled? Or is some emptiness meant to remain – a quiet reminder that not all stories find their endings, and not all souls find their place?

This is their story.

A journey through chaos and calm, laughter and tears, certainty and doubt.

A dance on the edge of something unspoken, where every step could bring them closer – or pull them forever apart.

Listen closely – in the spaces between the words, the truth waits.

The empty chair watches.

And it knows.

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Chapter 1:

The Girl from Kanpur

She wasn't everyone's cup of tea.

More like a strong cutting chai with a double shot of sass—too hot, too bitter, too real for the ones who preferred things mild and manageable.

She was from Kanpur—a city that didn't know how to stay quiet. And neither did she.

A self-declared drama queen, not in the petty, eye-roll-worthy way people use the word—but in the way storms announce their arrival. Loud. Unfiltered. But never without a reason. If she raised her voice, it wasn't because she loved noise. It was because silence had failed her too many times.

She argued—yes. But only when logic dared to take the backseat. Give her a reason, and she'd gift you a debate. A good one. Structured, thoughtful, often inconvenient. She wasn't someone you could silence with “Just do it.” If you didn't have a “why,” she didn't have a “yes.”

Opinions? Plenty.

But force her to follow? That's where she drew the line. She had a mind, and she liked using it—even when it meant walking alone.

Some called her difficult. Some called her rebellious. He—he called her *too much*.

But she wasn't too much.

She was just *enough* in a world that had grown far too comfortable with *less*.

While she was brought up in Kanpur, she was ultimately a product of middle-class India. Which meant—she had seen it all. The compromises behind closed doors. The celebrations that came in thalis, not hotels. The dreams that were big but had to fit inside monthly budgets. She grew up knowing how to wait, how to adjust, how to smile even when the fridge light flickered more than the city power supply.

It made her sharp, resourceful, and incredibly aware of everything people often chose to ignore.

She liked meeting new people. She genuinely did. There was something thrilling about stories that weren't hers. Faces she hadn't memorized. Names she'd probably forget but moments she would always remember. But trust? That was a different matter altogether.

She didn't hand that out in bulk.

Her energy was expensive—and she rationed it out like her mother used to ration out the good biscuits when guests came over. She believed in selective adventures—the ones where conversations didn't feel forced and people didn't wear masks made of politeness.

Give her an hour with someone genuine, and she'd open up like a well-worn diary. But throw her into a room full of

fake smiles and forced vibes—and she'd fold herself back into silence without apology.

It was one of her rare, sparkling traits:

She knew the worth of people, but she never forgot her own.

And maybe that's what made her both confusing and unforgettable.

You couldn't label her.

You couldn't predict her.

You could only experience her—and hope you didn't lose her trying to make her smaller.

While she is from Kanpur, she had been living in Prayagraj for the past three years—and somewhere along the way, it stopped being temporary. It began to feel like home. Not because of its streets or its skyline, but because it gave her a kind of peace her hometown never could.

In the quiet folds of the ancient city, she found spaces that didn't ask her to shrink.

One such place was the **Nag Vasuki Mandir**, tucked near the holy confluence at Sangam.

It wasn't crowded with noise like the rest of her world.

It wasn't chaotic like her thoughts.

It was hers in a way nothing else was.

Whenever life pressed too hard on her chest, when conversations became too heavy or silences too loud, she would go there—with a book in hand and her phone on silent. She didn't need company. Not there. She'd sit in a

corner near the temple walls, unnoticed, untouched, and unbothered.

Sometimes she read.

Sometimes she didn't.

Sometimes she just sat still and let the breeze carry away her worry, one breath at a time.

There was something divine in that stillness, something that didn't require words or rituals to feel real. The air there smelled of wet stone, burning incense, and quiet acceptance.

A calm in the chaos of life—

That's what it was to her.

Not an escape, but a return. Not silence, but understanding.

It was the only place where she didn't feel the need to prove herself, to argue, to explain, to fight. She could just exist.

And in a world that constantly asked her to be *less*, this place allowed her to be *nothing*—and that felt like *everything*.

She was no longer in Prayagraj. After three years, she had moved back to Kanpur—back to the familiar chaos and crowded streets she both loved and battled with. Living the college life wasn't always easy, but she made it hers. She is doing her post-graduation with Geography as her subject—mapping not just the world on paper, but her own paths and possibilities. Research was on her mind, big dreams

too—PhD, maybe even beyond. She wasn't just drifting; she was planning, building, chasing.

Sounds interesting, right?

She certainly had a few more interesting points tucked away—quirks and stories that would make you smile or scratch your head in equal measure. But hey, let's not spill all the beans at once. This isn't a magic trick.

C'mon, some things have to be saved for later in the story.

See, while she was so much above and beyond, there was another side to her—one she didn't advertise loudly but held close like a secret treasure.

She was a romantic at heart.

She loved old songs—the kind that made the world slow down, the kind where every lyric felt like a whispered promise. There was magic in the crackling vinyl and the faded voices, something timeless that spoke to the corners of her soul.

She believed in soulmates—not the fairy tale kind with instant sparks and perfect endings, but the kind that feels like coming home after a long journey.

And the best part? She wrote.

Not just notes or lists, but stories. Poems. Thoughts spilled out like confessions inked on paper. Writing was her refuge, her rebellion, her voice when words spoken aloud failed her.

A reader, a romantic, a writer, and an old song lover—all wrapped into one. An action-packed profile with layers that most people didn't get to see at first glance.

Because she was never simple.
She was always *everything* at once.

And this is what the story is about—
A little bit of her,
A little bit of him (maybe),
A little bit of drama,
Romance, friendships, socializing,
A little happiness,
A lot of complications—like, *too much*.

And, of course, along with all that comes sadness.
Because nothing worth telling is ever simple or easy.

This isn't just a story.
It's a mess of emotions, contradictions, and moments that make you question everything you thought you knew about love and life.

So buckle up.
It's going to be a ride.

Chapter 2:

And Then, There Was Him

He wasn't supposed to matter.

Not like that.

Not in *that* way.

But isn't that how it always begins? With someone walking in when you weren't even holding the door open.

He came into her life like a pause—not a full stop, not an exclamation. Just... a pause. Quiet. Undramatic. Unannounced. The kind of presence that doesn't make a grand entry, but still shifts the air around you.

She noticed him, of course.

Not because he tried to be noticed—he didn't.

But because she had this annoying habit of paying attention to the things other people missed.

He was the opposite of her.

Calm. Calculated. Quiet when he needed to be, clever when he chose to speak.

Not boring—never that—but... composed. Like the surface of a lake that hides the storm beneath. She could sense it.

That something. That *stillness with weight*.

They weren't friends at first.

They weren't even acquaintances.

They were just two people sharing time, space, and maybe a few eye rolls across a crowded room.

But something shifted the day he spoke her name for the first time.

Not mispronounced. Not mumbled.

Clear. Clean. Direct.

And somehow, that felt like the beginning of everything.

He didn't try to impress her.

Didn't try to decode her.

He just existed—honestly. And maybe that's what caught her off guard.

Because for a girl like her, used to reading between the lines,

he felt like a full stop in a sentence that had been running too long.

He wasn't the loudest in the room.

He didn't need to be.

There was a strange power in the way he existed—quietly confident, like someone who knew exactly who he was, and didn't need the world's validation to prove it.

He had that face—not the kind that made you stop and stare, but the kind that stayed with you long after the moment passed. Like a photograph you forgot you clicked, yet somehow find yourself going back to again and again.

He was observant. Dangerously so.

The kind of guy who noticed when you tied your hair differently, or when you laughed a little less on certain

days. But he never pointed it out—not out loud at least. He stored those things. Maybe to bring up later, maybe just to understand you better. No one really knew.

There was something oddly mature about him. Not in the boring, lecture-you-about-life way. But in the way he responded to chaos—with calm.

Maybe that's why she noticed him.

Because he didn't try to match her energy.

He held his own.

He had a past, but he didn't wear it like a badge.

And yet, when he did talk about it, there was depth.

Emotion. Stuff that told you—he's lived. He's felt. He's broken. And rebuilt.

And that makes a person magnetic in ways beauty never could.

He didn't flirt.

He listened.

And let's be honest, in today's world—that's rarer than roses on Valentine's Day.

He wasn't *mysterious* in a dramatic, brooding way.

He was simple. But real.

And sometimes, that's the biggest mystery of all—meeting someone who means what they say and says only what they mean.

He didn't interrupt her chaos.

He walked into it like he had time.

And somehow... made space for himself in it.

And above all,
he was a good friend to her.
Her **best friend**, actually.

The kind of friend you don't remember meeting—you just
look back one day and realize,
Oh. He's been there. All this time.

Their friendship wasn't perfect.
It was clumsy in the most beautiful ways.
Filled with half-finished conversations, accidental
matching playlists, inside jokes that made no sense to
anyone else, and those weird silences that didn't feel
awkward at all.

There was happiness, of course. A lot of it.
Laughter that echoed through chai stalls and late-night
phone calls.
They fought too—loudly, stubbornly, with full-body
frustration.
Over silly things, mostly.
Like who was worse at texting back. Or why she
overthought everything. Or why he never remembered
what she wore even when she wore it to impress *him*.

And sometimes...
Just sometimes...
They'd find themselves caught in these moments.

A brush of the hand too long.
A shared look that lingered past the punchline of a joke.
A conversation that dipped a little too deep, too suddenly.

Maybe even a night or two when the world melted away,
and the only thing that existed was the space between them.

But nothing happened.

Not really.

They never talked about those moments.

Because best friends, right?

But also... best friends and romance?

It *has* to happen someday, right?

Not always. Not between everyone.

But like—**99.99% of the time?**

There's always that *one moment*, that *one spark*, that makes
the ground shift just a little.

And maybe this was that story.

Or maybe... it was something else entirely.

It was a regular evening.

Well, as regular as it could be when you're sitting on a
rooftop in the middle of Kanpur, eating half-burnt Maggi
from a steel bowl, pretending like the world isn't slowly
shifting under your feet.

The sky was heavy with stars. Not city stars—the real ones.
The ones you see only when you're not looking for
anything.

They were sitting side by side. Close—but not close enough
to touch. Just enough to feel the warmth of the other's
presence.

She was ranting, of course.

Something about how the education system was flawed, how boys never understood female friendships, and why her chai never tasted the same when he made it.

He was listening—half smiling, half zoned out in that way he always did when he was enjoying her chaos more than her words.

Then it happened.

That moment.

That little shift.

She paused mid-rant to take a sip of her tea, looked at him, and said, “You know... sometimes I feel like you’re the only person who actually gets me.”

He didn’t say anything for a second.

Just looked at her, really looked.

The kind of look that makes time slow down—not dramatically, but enough to notice the air between them getting a little heavier.

“I do,” he finally said.

And it wasn’t just the words.

It was *how* he said it.

Low. Certain. Like it was a fact he’d been sure of for a long time.

She laughed it off. “Okay, don’t get emotional now. That’s my job.”

Back to playful. Back to normal. Almost.

But something lingered in the air that didn't leave.
Not when she passed him the last bite of Maggi.
Not when he wiped a bit of ketchup from her cheek
without thinking.
Not even when they said goodnight with their usual mock
insults.

That night, when she went to bed, she thought about how
his hand brushed hers.
And how she didn't pull away.

That night, when he lay on his mattress, he thought about
her laugh.
And how it sounded a little too much like home.

It was nothing.
It was everything.

One of those *almosts*.

One of those *what-was-that* moments.

One of those in-betweens that changed *everything*—
quietly, slowly, completely.

It was nothing.
It was everything.

And maybe that was *him* in a sentence.

Because how do you define someone who never fit into
one?

He wasn't the guy who stood out in a crowd.
But he was the guy who stood *by* you in one.

He wasn't the life of the party.

But he was the calm that held it together when everything went sideways.

He wasn't loud, but his silence was never empty.

It had meaning. Intention. And often, it said more than all her loud words combined.

He had this way of making you feel seen without making a show of it.

He'd remember the kind of chocolate you hated, the way your nose twitched when you were lying, the exact time you needed to hear a stupid meme to get through the day.

He didn't ask for attention.

He just earned it. Quietly.

To her, he wasn't just the guy who brought her books she didn't ask for, or dragged her to new cafés because “*you need a break, woman*”.

He was the guy who saw the version of her she often tried to hide—even from herself.

He saw the girl behind the chaos.

The softness behind the sass.

The vulnerability wrapped under layers of “I'm fine.”

And somehow, he made it all feel okay.

Like maybe, she didn't have to fight the world every day.

Like maybe, someone had her back without asking her to tone herself down first.

She wasn't sure when he went from being “that guy” to *her person*.

But somewhere between the bad jokes, the deep talks, and the quiet gestures, it happened.

He became her safe space.

Her mirror.

Her calm.

And that's the thing about him—he never demanded a place in her life.

But he carved one anyway.

And she let him.

Maybe too much.

And this...

This is what's part of the story, I guess.

The *too much*.

A lot of her,

A little bit of him (just a little),

A little bit of drama,

Unintentional romance,

Exploring friendships,

Random socializing,

A little happiness,

A lot of complications—like, *too much*.

And along with it comes sadness, of course.

Because some stories don't need a villain.

Sometimes, *too much* is enough to break something beautiful.

Chapter 3:

Her Name Was Chitra

Before she was *his best friend*,
Before he became *her safe space*,
Her name was simply **Chitra**.

And the first time he said it,
They were both wearing school uniforms,
Sitting three benches apart,
Passing notes that weren't love letters—just homework
answers and doodles of sleepy teachers.

They had known each other for a long time.
School, actually.

But it felt like more than a lifetime.
Because that's what happens when people grow up
together—
the lines between then and now begin to blur.

Both from the same city—Kanpur—
Which made things easier.
Easier to run into each other even when you weren't
trying.
Easier to grab a cold coffee after tuition and complain
about life.
Easier to say “see you soon” and actually mean it.

But here's the thing about Chitra—
She was never just “that girl from school.”

She was *the* girl.

The **topper**. The one with her hand always up.

The one who knew every answer and yet never made you feel small for not knowing yours.

Her brilliance made her stand out.

But standing out in school doesn't always make you shine.

Sometimes, it makes you a target.

People admired her, yes.

But from a distance.

They clapped when she won awards but whispered behind her back when she walked past.

Because jealousy?

That's just human nature—wrapped in teenage insecurity.

She was popular, technically.

But she knew the difference between *being known* and *being included*.

And most days, she wasn't.

She was the girl who had lunch alone more times than she admitted.

The one who buried herself in books not because she loved escaping—

but because the real world didn't always make room for her.

And yet, somehow, Aaditya did.

He didn't treat her like a gold medal in human form.

He didn't ask for help with homework or ride her academic coattails.

He just... talked.

Like she was a *person*. Not a prodigy. Not a nerd. Not a threat.

Maybe that's why she remembered him.

He met her where she was.

Not in the top ranks. Not in front of the class.

But somewhere in between—on school corridors, under banyan trees,
in the safe spaces where masks fell off and real conversations began.

Their friendship started before either of them had figured out who they were.

Before overthinking.

Before expectations.

Before the world made things *complicated*.

And maybe that's what made it so special.

Because some bonds are born not from magic or movies,
but from shared benches, stolen pens, untied shoelaces,
and the kind of silence only two old souls can sit in comfortably.

While everyone in class—
or at least most of her classmates—
thought she was *rude*,
at least they *knew* her nature.

Straightforward. Sharp-tongued. Quietly observant.

Not rude, really. Just... unapologetically herself.
And in a school full of filtered personalities, that didn't
always sit well.

Some thought she was full of herself.
Some thought she was cold.
But nobody could say she was fake.

And somewhere in between the judging and the distance,
Aaditya tried to know her as well.

Tried.

He asked questions that weren't about marks.
He remembered the book she carried for three weeks
straight.
He noticed when she stopped bringing lunch one month
and quietly started sharing his.

He saw more than the topper.
But still—only as much as *she let him*.

Because Chitra wasn't easy to *fully* know.
She was a bit like a crossword puzzle missing its clues—
you could guess, try to solve, but unless she gave you
something,
you'd always be a little off.

And maybe that's what happened over time.

Because somewhere in the future—
which is actually *now*—
he never really understood her properly.

Or maybe, somewhere along the way,
he just... got lost in the middle.

It's hard to say.

But anyway, coming back to school life—
he *found her*.

Or maybe... *she found him*.

Hard to tell, really.

Because while everyone else was too busy out casting her,
he was the one who sat beside her on the last bench,
shared his earphones, offered gum, and called her “boss
lady”
with that half-annoying, half-charming smile.

No grand moment.

No dramatic rescue.

Just quiet presence.

And sometimes, that's all it takes.

See, this girl—**Chitra**—

she's always been the type who avoids the loud.

Parties? Not her scene.

Drunken chaos, forced conversations, dancing to music
she couldn't connect with?

No, thank you.

Give her a road trip with two friends and a playlist full of
old Hindi songs,
and she's in.

She likes *adventure*—yes, but in **limited doses**.
The kind that didn't drain her,
the kind that had meaning,
and the kind where the wind whispered peace instead of
noise.

She isn't the "crowd" kind of person.
Never was.

She prefers small circles,
quiet corners,
familiar voices,
and people who *don't feel like effort*.

Whether it's home, college, or anywhere else—
the setting doesn't matter much.
What matters is peace.

Or more specifically—
where or **whom** she finds peace with.

Because for her, it was never about geography.
It was about energy.

It didn't matter if she was on the rooftop of her Kanpur
home,
on a bench in Prayagraj's NagVasuki Mandir,
or just sitting next to someone who understood her
silence.

If it felt *safe*,
if it felt *real*,
if it felt *uncomplicated*—even for a moment—
that was home.

And sometimes... that *someone* was Aaditya.

Even if he didn't always understand her,
Even if he never really *asked* all the right questions,
He was, for a time,
her little piece of quiet
in a world that often asked her to be loud, perform,
explain.

And that—
that was enough.

Until... it wasn't.

While being in the same class,
for years actually,
they never really *talked*.
Not in the way that counts.

Not beyond the occasional group assignment,
a polite nod,
maybe a shared joke someone else cracked.

They existed in parallel.
Two very different energies orbiting the same routine—
her, with her books and quiet pride;
him, with his casual ease and messy notebooks.

But somehow, the universe has a way of nudging people
when the time is right.
Or when it's *done waiting*.

So eventually—inevitably—they did talk.
Nothing dramatic.

No lightning.

No violins.

Just a random moment.

A shared project.

A sarcastic comment she couldn't ignore.

A smirk from him that made her roll her eyes,
but also respond.

And that was it.

The first thread in a bond that neither of them saw
coming,
but both of them quietly allowed to grow.

Fate didn't yell.

It simply whispered,
"It's time."

And the rest, as they say,
unfolded in between pages of textbooks,
under the dusty fans of classrooms,
and through the kind of conversations that start out
meaningless—
but end up meaning everything.

It was the middle of July.

The classroom fan was doing more noise than cooling,
and half the class was half-asleep over half-understood
algebra.

It was just another day—until it wasn't.

The teacher had announced a surprise group activity.
Four students per group, picked randomly.
Names were read out like a lottery.

And just like that—
Chitra and Aaditya were thrown together,
along with two other classmates neither of them
particularly liked.

She looked at him when his name was called—
just a flick of the eye, nothing more.
He looked at her,
grinned like it was some inside joke he hadn't shared yet,
and said,
“Well, this should be fun, *Boss Lady*.”

That was the first time he called her that.

She rolled her eyes, of course.
Classic defence mechanism.

But there was the faintest smile she didn't realize she was
holding at the corner of her lips.

They sat next to each other for the first time that day.
It was awkward.

He had bad handwriting.
She rewrote their notes.
He teased her for color-coding everything.
She teased him for spelling “ecosystem” wrong—twice.

He asked her what book she was always carrying.
She asked him why he never brought pens of his own.

They talked.
Really talked.
About geography, weirdly.
About music.
About how he thought Kishore Kumar songs were
“underrated therapy”
and she looked at him like he’d just passed a secret test.

And somewhere between the banter, the sarcasm,
and the unfinished project they mostly winged through—
something clicked.

Something shifted.

It wasn’t love.

Not yet.

But it was something.

Something that would grow slowly,
tucked between the layers of friendship and familiarity,
like a melody neither of them could name—
but both of them kept humming long after the school bell
rang.

[Classroom – mid-July afternoon | Randomly assigned
group activity]

Aaditya (grinning, sliding into the bench beside her):

“Well, this should be fun, *Boss Lady*.”

Chitra (raising an eyebrow, unimpressed):

“Boss Lady?”

Aaditya (shrugging):

“You’ve got that vibe. Like if I mess up this project, you’ll report me to HR or something.”

Chitra:

“Don’t flatter yourself. If I had HR powers, half this class would be unemployed.”

Aaditya (laughs):

“Fair. So, how do we start this thing?”

Chitra (opening her notebook):

“We start by *not* using your handwriting. That’d be the first step toward progress.”

Aaditya (mock offense):

“Excuse *me*. My handwriting has character.”

Chitra:

“It looks like a crow stepped in ink and did bhangra across the page.”

Aaditya (grinning wider):

“I like you. You’re scary.”

Chitra:

“Not scary. Just allergic to nonsense.”

Aaditya:

“Same thing.”

(They sit in silence for a second, pretending to focus on the project. Chitra flips a page, Aaditya notices the cover of the book she had placed beside her bag.)

Aaditya:

“You always carry that book around?”

Chitra (not looking up):

“Yeah. It’s my comfort read.”

Aaditya:

“Let me guess—romance?”

Chitra (finally looking up, slightly defensive):

“So what if it is?”

Aaditya (smiling softer now):

“Nothing. Just didn’t expect it. You don’t seem the type.”

Chitra:

“Because I don’t bat my eyelashes and sing in the rain?”

Aaditya:

“Exactly. You’d probably argue with the rain for being inefficient.”

Chitra (almost laughing):

“You’re not wrong.”

Aaditya:

“So what music do you like? Wait, let me guess again—Lata Mangeshkar and all?”

Chitra:

“Kishore Kumar, actually.”

Aaditya (grinning):

“No way. Same! See? We’re already halfway to becoming best friends.”

Chitra:

“Relax. We’ve barely survived ten minutes.”

Aaditya:

“Ten minutes is enough to ruin a first impression.”

Chitra (smiling despite herself):

“Yours was already ruined the day you wore those orange socks with black shoes.”

Aaditya (grinning, looking down at his socks):

“Ah. She *notices* things. I’m honoured.”

(The bell rings. The others start packing. But they’re still sitting, still talking—not about the project anymore, but other things. Random things. Important things.)

Aaditya (slipping his bag on):

“Hey, same time tomorrow?”

Chitra (without thinking):

“Yeah. I’ll bring the pens. You bring sense.”

Aaditya (laughs as he walks away):

“No promises, Boss Lady.”

And just like that—
it began.

Not love. Not magic. Not fireworks.
Just two people—talking.
For the first time.
And maybe... not the last.

Six Months Later

Same city. Different seasons. Same two people. Still figuring it out.

They weren't strangers anymore.

Not even close.

Six months had passed since that first conversation—the one about bad handwriting and Kishore Kumar. Since then, there had been many more.

Conversations in corridors.

Shared tiffins during break.

Mock fights over dumb things like *which chai stall was better*.

Passing scribbled notes in class with jokes only they understood.

And those odd silences that didn't feel awkward anymore.

They had grown into each other's days—softly, consistently.

But still—something about *them* was... unlabelled. Undefined.

They weren't in love.

At least that's what they told themselves.

But weren't just friends either.

Not in the way most people around them were.

It wasn't about grand gestures.

It was the little things. Always the little things.

Like—

[One random winter afternoon | School ground]

Aaditya (handing her a samosa):

“You forgot lunch again, didn’t you?”

Chitra (taking it, mock guilty):

“I didn’t forget. I just didn’t feel like eating the same old aloo ki sabzi.”

Aaditya:

“So starving was the better option?”

Chitra (teasing):

“I knew my emergency food supplier would show up. You’ve got me covered.”

Aaditya (smirking):

“Are you saying you depend on me?”

Chitra:

“Don’t get used to it.”

Aaditya:

“Too late.”

Or—

[Evening texts on a boring Sunday]

Aaditya:

Watching that old SRK movie you love. It's actually not that bad.

Still don't get the ending though.

Chitra:

That's because you don't feel things deeply enough, Aaditya.

Aaditya:

Maybe. Or maybe you overfeel things.

Chitra:

Maybe that's why we're friends. Balance.

Aaditya:

Hmm.

Chitra:

What?

Aaditya:

Nothing. Just... balance sounds nice.

They understood parts of each other now.

Enough to notice when something was off.

Enough to sit in silence when one of them needed it.

Enough to pull the other out of a bad day with a dumb joke.

But not enough to name what this was.

Maybe they were scared to.

Maybe they didn't want to break whatever fragile thing
they were building.

Or maybe—

just maybe—

they were too young to realise
that sometimes, even the best connections
come with *expiration dates*.

Chapter 4: Chai, Coffee, and Confessions That Never Happened

Chitra loves chai.

Doesn't matter if it's raining, burning hot outside, or the fog makes you feel like you're living inside a suspense thriller—

Chai is mandatory. Chai is love.

Strong. Kadak. Elaichi wali, preferably.

Sometimes ginger.

Sometimes just the plain comfort of a roadside kulhad.

Chai wasn't just a drink to her.

It was *therapy in a cup*.

A ritual.

And today was one of those days—
the kind of day where the rain made the city look like it
had a fresh coat of nostalgia painted over it.

Their board exams had just ended.

Aaditya was the first to walk out of the examination hall
with his usual grin,
as if he'd just solved world peace instead of a math paper.

Chitra followed a few minutes later—calm, composed,
mentally calculating every answer she may or may not have
gotten wrong.

They didn't say much at first.
Just exchanged that look.
The "it's over" look.
The "we survived" look.

In India, finishing your board exams feels less like
completing a phase of education and more like returning
from war.

A war fought with textbooks, sleepless nights,
parental pressure,
and your own maddening fear of *what comes next*.

Most people win this war.
Most people. Okay?

[Later that evening | A small chai-cum-coffee stall, near
their usual adda]

The rain hadn't stopped.
In fact, it seemed to be enjoying itself a little too much.
The tin roof of the stall echoed with every drop,
making their voices feel more personal, more wrapped in
their own world.

Chitra took a sip of her chai, blowing the steam off the
top like it was some sacred ritual.
Aaditya had a lukewarm cappuccino in a paper cup,
eyeing it like it had disappointed him on a spiritual level.

Aaditya (mock frown):

"Your chai has more character than my entire coffee."

Chitra (smirking):

“Chai is personality, Adi. Coffee is...mood swings.”

Aaditya:

“Oh? And you think you don’t have mood swings?”

Chitra:

“I *am* a mood swing. But at least I own it.”

(They laugh. The kind of laugh that feels unexplainably comfortable.)

Aaditya:

“So... we’re officially done.”

Chitra (nodding):

“Yeah. School’s over.”

Aaditya (quiet for a second):

“Feels weird, doesn’t it?”

Chitra:

“Weird good or weird scary?”

Aaditya:

“Both, I think. Like... something ended. And something else just started.”

Chitra (half smiling):

“Welcome to adulthood. It’s mostly just fake confidence and Google searches.”

(She dips her biscuit in chai, offers him one. He takes it.)

Aaditya:

“You ever think about what we’ll be like... say, five years from now?”

Chitra (leaning back):

“Honestly? I hope I’m still drinking chai on rainy evenings. That’s all I really want to hold on to.”

Aaditya:

“And me?”

Chitra (teasing, but eyes lingering a bit too long):

“You’ll probably still be asking questions you don’t really want answers to.”

(He doesn’t reply. Just sips his coffee. Looks out at the street. Then back at her.)

Moments like that didn’t ask for a label.

They just... happened.

And maybe they were more real because of it.

The rain continued.

And so did they—

two people figuring out who they were,

what they wanted,

and whether what they had

was just *friendship*

or something tiptoeing dangerously close to the edge of something *more*.

See, they both never thought of each other as *more than friends*.

Not seriously, at least.

Sure, there were moments that made people around them raise eyebrows—

those lingering glances, the way she remembered his favorite chips flavor,

the way he always carried an extra pen only for her (even when she swore she wouldn't forget hers this time).

But to them?

It was just *normal*.

Just... them.

They had even started giving this friendship a name—

Best Friends.

It wasn't declared officially with big words and dramatic promises.

It was the kind of name that grew on them quietly.

In between lunch breaks,

after-school walks,

silly jokes,

and too many "you won't believe what just happened"

texts.

I mean, they had known each other for almost more than a year now!

That's more than enough time to decode someone's *tiffin* choices, *music* taste, *stress* habits, and *post-exam meltdown* routines.

Their bonding was good. Solid.

They still fought, though.

God, did they fight.

Over silly things like—

“Why didn’t you wait for me after school?”

“Why would you sit with *her* in class when you know I was saving you a seat?”

“It was just a joke, why are you overreacting?”

“Because you never *get it*, Aaditya!”

Stupid, childish fights.

But that’s what school friendships are made of, right?

A little immaturity, a lot of inside jokes,
and fights that last an hour but leave echoes for days.

Still, they always came back to each other.

Because beneath the drama and the mood swings and the
ego clashes—

there was something deeper.

Something they didn’t have to name.

Yet.

They hadn’t said “I need you.”

But their everyday actions screamed it.

They hadn’t said “you matter more than the others.”

But it was in the way they remembered the smallest
things.

In the way she saved him a seat.

In the way he always waited a few extra minutes just in
case she showed up late.

In the way they teased each other but also stood like
firewalls when someone else did the same.

Their friendship wasn't perfect.

But it was *theirs*.

And that made it enough.

For now.

You read the four silly things mentioned above, right?

Let me take you deeper into those “silly” things—
one by one.

Not because they were life-changing,
not because they were some grand heartbreak-worthy
moments—

but because they mattered to *her*.

And if you want to understand this story,
you'll need to understand *her*.

You see, her fights were never just about the surface-level
stuff.

They were layered, full of unspoken expectations and
quiet disappointments.

Every argument had a “but you should have known...”
stitched into it.

So let's start.

1. “Why didn't you wait for me after school?”

It sounds small, doesn't it?

But to her—it wasn't.

She wasn't asking for the moon.

She wasn't even asking for effort.

She was asking for habit.

For presence.

For *consistency*.

You don't just walk away when someone becomes part of your everyday.

To her, waiting meant more than just standing near the gate.

It meant:

I remembered you. I looked for you. I cared enough to stay.

But he didn't.

Maybe he was in a hurry that day.

Maybe he forgot.

Maybe he thought she'd understand.

She didn't.

She asked, "Why didn't you wait?"

What she meant was:

"Am I no longer the person you automatically look for?"

2. "Why would you sit with *her* in class when you know I was saving you a seat?"

Again—childish, right?

But school desks are more than just wooden benches.
They're *territory*.
They're comfort zones.
They're where you build your world in 8-hour shifts.
That seat wasn't just a seat.
It was *their space*.
Their 40-minute bubble of jokes scribbled on rough
notebooks and exchanged glances during boring lectures.
So yes, when he sat elsewhere, it hurt.
Not because of jealousy.
But because he forgot the *unspoken reserve* she had placed
on that seat—
and maybe, on him.

3. "It was just a joke, why are you overreacting?"

Oh, this one?
This one *burned*.
She laughed at herself. Often.
She had thick skin.
She could handle sarcasm like a pro.
But there's a difference between laughing *with* her and
laughing *at* her.
He crossed that line one day.
Joked about something personal.
A moment she had trusted him with, turned into a
punchline in front of others.

And that stung.
Not because of what he said—
but because of who said it.

Sometimes, betrayal doesn't come wearing heavy armor.
Sometimes, it comes dressed like humor.

4. "Because you never get it, Aaditya!"

The most common line.
Her go-to frustration quote.

He tried.

She knew he did.

But trying and *understanding* were two different things.

He didn't always get why certain things mattered to her so much.

Why silence upset her.

Why canceled plans triggered a spiral.

Why overthinking was her default setting.

He'd just stare and say, "It's not that deep."

And maybe to him, it wasn't.

But to her?

Everything was *always* that deep.

So yes, they were "silly things."

But silly things are what relationships are made of—
Friendships too.

They build up quietly.
Like raindrops on a window.

And if you ignore them long enough,
they flood everything.

But then again—
what I've mentioned above,
it's still not *deep* enough.

It's a surface skim of something much more layered,
more *complicated*
and far less explainable.

Because each of those silly fights?
Each of those seemingly small moments?

They weren't just about ego, or bad timing, or growing
pains.

They were reflections of who they were—
two people learning how to be understood
in a world that rarely ever teaches you how to *understand*
others.

It's dressed in maybes and half-truths, filled with
assumptions and surface-level emotions. Because the truth
is, every "silly" fight had a backstory, a weight, a memory
only they knew, and peeling back those layers demands
more than scattered reflections. So, let's dig in deeper—in a
more fashionable and proper manner, shall we?

Chapter 5:

The One Where He Didn't Wait

It wasn't supposed to be a big deal.

But then again, most things that matter rarely announce themselves.

It was just an ordinary Wednesday afternoon—the kind where the sun scorches the school corridor tiles, and the final bell feels like a jailbreak alarm. Bags slung over shoulders, laughter echoing down staircases, students pouring out of classrooms like water finally let loose from a dam.

She had taken a little longer than usual that day—maybe a stop at the washroom, maybe just zipping up her bag while finishing the last line of a poem she was scribbling at the back of her notebook. It didn't matter. What mattered was—

He wasn't there.

Not at the usual spot near the second gate where he always stood, leaned casually against the red brick wall, pretending not to wait but always waiting.

That spot? That spot had become an unsaid promise.

A habit.

And it was empty.

At first, she thought maybe he was just late. So she waited.

Five minutes.

Ten.

Fifteen.

Still nothing.

The crowd began to thin, buses honking in the distance, cycles rolling away, and rickshaw drivers shouting for last rides. She finally walked out, headphones in, music on—but nothing could mute the ache in her chest.

Later that evening, he texted.

“Left early, had to rush. Sorry.”

That’s it.

No “Are you okay?”

No “Did you wait?”

No “I should’ve told you.”

And she?

She didn’t reply.

Not because she was angry.

But because she was disappointed.

See, it was never about the wait.

It was about *being thought of*.

It was about the unsaid rituals that form when two people matter to each other.

And when he broke that pattern,
she felt something break in her too—

a little strand of expectation that maybe, just maybe, she wasn't as important to him as he was to her.

But she brushed it off.

Laughed about it in front of others.

Called herself dramatic.

Because if she didn't... it would hurt too much.

And that, dear reader, was Silly Thing Number 1.

Or maybe not so silly after all.

But this is just **her** perspective, right? That he wasn't there this time. That he broke the habit.

What she didn't know—or rather, what she found out *later*—was **why** he wasn't there.

And that's where the story takes one of its first sharp turns.

Because while she was stuffing her notebook back into her bag, holding onto the small joy of finishing a poem, he was already halfway across the city. Nervous. Fidgety. Smiling stupidly at his reflection in a café window.

The reason?

Another girl.

Someone he'd liked for a while. The kind of crush that sneaks up on you when you least expect it. She had finally said yes—to a date. His first, actually. And so, without thinking twice, without even remembering the little ritual he shared with Chitra, he rushed. He ran toward something new, something exciting. Something that wasn't her.

She wasn't mad because he liked someone else.

She was mad because he forgot *her* in the process.

Because he didn't think it was important to say, "Hey, I won't be there today."

Because he didn't pause to realize that the girl who never asked much from him, *expected* him that day.

And expectations, no matter how small,
when broken by someone you care about,
can shatter like glass—quiet, sharp, and irreparable in
places.

So yes, she was mad.

Not because he had a date.

But because she didn't even cross his mind when he said
yes to it.

That was the thing about her—
she never asked for center stage.
Just a seat in the room.

And that day, he forgot to save it for her.

Now, you know how teenagers define or explain such silly
mistakes these days—
a half-hearted excuse, a delayed explanation, and the
classic "I'll tell you later."

That's exactly what he did.

He gave her a reason.

A stupid one.

A lie, basically—something like “*urgent family thing came up*” just to calm her down a bit. He thought he’d explain everything once things settled, once she wasn’t so angry, once she was ready to laugh about it with him.

Because in his head, this wasn’t betrayal. It was just bad timing.

But fate—
fate is a bitch, right?

Just when he was finally trying to fix things, when she had started softening a little and their conversation was crawling toward peace...

His friend—the *friend*— barged into the moment with all the timing of a wrecking ball and casually said,

“So, how was the date yesterday? The one you ditched Chitra for?”

Silence.

His heart? Stopped.

Her eyes? Changed.

And that was it.

The rest, as they say,
is history—
or maybe,
the beginning of everything that would eventually go
wrong.

Now, you know how teenagers define or explain such silly mistakes these days—

a quick excuse, a lazy half-truth, followed by a promise of “I’ll explain later.”

That’s what Aaditya did.

He didn’t want to lie, not really. But he didn’t want to lose her either.

So when she asked that evening, voice already colder than usual, eyes narrowed just enough to let him know she *knew* something—

he went with:

“Had to go home early. Something urgent came up. Sorry I forgot to tell you.”

Chitra stared at the screen.

Typing...

Not typing.

Typing...

Backspace.

Finally:

“You always have something urgent when it’s my turn to be remembered, right?”

That one stung.

He sighed, sitting on his bed, running a hand through his hair. He typed:

“Hey listen. I didn’t mean to upset you. Can we talk tomorrow? Properly?”

She left him on read.

But the next day, she showed up. At their usual chai stall.

Silent, but present.

That was his window.

He spotted her first—standing near the stall, arms crossed, tapping her foot, her brows furrowed in a way he knew too well.

He approached slowly, cautiously.

And the moment she saw him—

Chitra (raising her voice):

“Why didn’t you wait for me after school yesterday?”

It wasn’t even a question. It was a storm.

Aaditya flinched, caught off guard by the direct hit.

Aaditya:

“I—I was going to. Something came up, yaar—”

Chitra (cutting him off):

“You always say that. Something came up. Something’s urgent. Something’s more important.”

He lowered his gaze, sighed.

Aaditya:

“Okay... I messed up. I know. I should’ve told you. That’s on me.”

She crossed her arms tighter, jaw clenched.

Chitra:

“You keep doing this, Aaditya. You keep choosing people

and moments and everything else over me. And then you come back with chai and sorry like that fixes everything.”

He reached into his pocket, bought her a cup anyway, gently handed it over.

Aaditya (softly):

“I didn’t forget you. I just... I don’t know. I thought I’d explain today.”

She took the chai but didn’t say thanks.

Chitra:

“You always say sorry after. You never say ‘I’m thinking about you’ before.”

He was just about to speak—just about to tell her the truth. That yes, he had gone on a date, and no, it wasn’t what he thought it would be. That it felt hollow. That the conversation he had rehearsed all night was one he *wanted* to have with her—not the other girl.

But fate, as always, had different plans.

His friend, clueless and grinning, strolled right into the middle of it all and said:

Friend (with a loud laugh):

“Yo, Romeo! How was the big date yesterday? The one you ditched Chitra for?”

Silence.

The air cracked.

Chitra didn’t blink.

She just... went still.

Then, slowly, she placed the chai back on the cart—
untouched. Looked at Aaditya one last time.

Not angry.

Not shocked.

Just... tired.

Chitra (quietly):

“You were going to explain today, right? Looks like
someone beat you to it.”

And without another word, she turned and walked away.

Aaditya:

“Chitra... wait. Please. I was going to tell you—”

But she didn’t turn around.

And he didn’t chase her.

Because he knew—

he had already lost more than just her time.

So yeah—

The rest, from there on?

Is history.

Or more accurately—

a fracture.

The kind that doesn’t bleed,
but aches for a long, long time.

I think this was one of the turning points in their
friendship.

For Chitra, it wasn't just about being ditched after school.
It wasn't just about him choosing to go on a date. It wasn't even about the lie.

It was about the *priority*.

About being kept in the dark.

About realizing that maybe—just maybe—she didn't matter to her best friend as much as she thought she did.

That feeling of being *less important*? It stays.

It's quiet, but heavy.

It doesn't scream—it just settles in your chest like a permanent tenant.

And no, she didn't expect to be the center of his world. She wasn't asking for that.

But she did expect honesty.

Loyalty.

The courtesy of being *chosen*, even when the world offered distractions dressed as promises.

However—from Aaditya's point of view, it wasn't that deep. Not at all.

He thought she was just being plain stupid.

He thought she was overreacting over a small thing.

A harmless date. A little white lie. What was the big deal?

He didn't understand that sometimes the *small things* are the big things.

That sometimes, all someone wants is for you to show up when you say you will.

To not make them feel like a second option.

He didn't understand it then.

And maybe—
just maybe—
that's where it all began to break.

All guys have one thing in common—
we all have trouble understanding women.

Not always, not intentionally—
but somewhere between logic and emotion, between
what's said and what's *meant*,
we fumble.

And Aaditya was no different.
He wasn't a bad guy.
He was just... a guy. Young, clueless, and emotionally
under-equipped to read the silence behind Chitra's words.

Sometimes, boys like him fail to understand the basics.

Like how showing up matters more than saying sorry.
Like how honesty is not just about facts, but about
feelings.
Like how *trust* is built on the smallest moments of choice.

While we cannot expect such a young Aaditya to decode
all this,
Chitra—she surely thought he would understand it *for*
once.

Just this one time.

Without her having to spell it out.

Without another monologue. Without the need to carry
the emotional weight of both hearts.

Because honestly, it shouldn't be like that every time, right?

She shouldn't have to explain why she was hurt.

He should've known.

Or at least tried to.

And that, perhaps, was the real disappointment.

Not the lie.

Not the date.

But the fact that he still needed an explanation for something that should've been obvious.

If you remember, I mentioned earlier that Chitra mostly keeps to herself and interacts with very specific people, right? This guy—Aaditya—was definitely one of them.

So if he fails to understand even a small thing like this, obviously she's going to be mad.

Correct?

But then again, they were both young—
not everyone is mature or clever when it comes to these small, silly things.

It takes time.

And sometimes, a lot of mistakes.

Yet, after a point in any friendship, you start to expect your friends to at least *know the basics*—
the unwritten rules, the unspoken languages, the little things that make a person who they are.

And while Aaditya knew those basics—or let's say, he *thought* he knew Chitra very well—he still missed some obvious things.

The things that define her.

The complicated-to-understand parts, yes, but also the very obvious silly things.

Because sometimes, the hardest people to understand are the ones closest to us.

The ones we think we know the best.

And maybe, just maybe, that's where the real challenge begins.

Chapter 6:

Silly Thing Number 2

“Why would you sit with her in class when you know I was saving you a seat?”

Now this—this was one of those classic “small” things that wasn’t really that small.

It was just another regular school day.

Same boring lecture, same sleepy faces, same seating spots everyone had unconsciously claimed over the year.

Chitra walked in a little late but had mentally reserved *their* seat. You know, the one by the window, third row from the front.

The one where they usually sat, shared tiffin, passed comments during lectures, and occasionally fought over pens and attention.

She saw him walk in before her.

She thought he’d save the spot.

But there he was—already seated—next to *her*.

Not Chitra.

Not *his* best friend.

But *that other girl*.

She didn’t say anything at first.

She just walked past. Sat two rows behind.

Opened her notebook.

And scribbled on the margins something between hate and poetry.

Later, she asked him casually, almost jokingly,
“Why would you sit with her in class when you know I was saving you a seat?”

And he—he gave the dumbest answer ever.

“I didn’t see you.”

Like that made sense.

Like her seat didn’t exist unless she was physically sitting on it.

Like all the shared days in that spot didn’t count.

She laughed.

Then stayed quiet for a while.

But the damage was done.

Not because he sat somewhere else.

But because he *chose* not to think about her in that moment.

It wasn’t about the seat.

It was about being replaced—if only for 45 minutes.

That’s how it always starts, right?

The little replacements. The small silences.

The tiny moments where we expect someone to choose us—and they don’t.

Silly? Maybe.

But it mattered to her.

And that should’ve been enough.

See, what actually happened was—
Aaditya, in all his brilliance, decided to sit on the **first bench** that day.

Yeah, *first bench*. The very bench he'd once sworn never to sit on unless it was punishment or roll number tragedy.

Why?

Well, a *really pretty* and *very new* girl had joined school recently.

And our boy thought it'd be a good idea to help her out, make her feel comfortable, you know—do the “*nice guy*” thing.

Also maybe, just maybe, get to know her better.

Make friends. Possibly impress her with his ‘best friend of the year’ charm that worked so well on Chitra.

So he plopped himself right next to her, all smiles and self-claimed helpfulness.

Meanwhile, Chitra, who walked into class like every other day expecting *their seat* to still be *their seat*, paused for a second when she saw it occupied.

By someone else.

A stranger, no less.

And him, laughing at something she said.

And that one second—where her expectations weren't met, where her ‘everyday normal’ cracked—
That's what did it.

He wasn't trying to hurt her.

He was just trying to be kind, maybe even a little flirty,

who knows.

But Chitra didn't care about intentions.

She cared about how it made her feel.

Unimportant. Forgotten.

Replaced.

Again, silly, right?

But in that age, in that fragile space of friendships where every small moment feels magnified—

This wasn't just about a bench.

It was about *belonging*.

And for the first time, she wasn't so sure she belonged in his story anymore.

While all of this was happening, Aaditya was still on the first bench, busy helping the new girl settle in—pulling out an extra notebook, explaining which teacher taught what, laughing at her jokes that weren't even that funny. Oblivious, absolutely unaware of the quiet storm building two rows behind him.

You see, Aaditya has always been like that.

Friendly with pretty girls.

Chitra knew this about him.

She had rolled her eyes at it more times than she could count.

She had teased him for it, mocked his so-called “golden retriever energy” every time he switched to that charming version of himself. She was used to it.

But this time—it felt different.

This time, it wasn't about jealousy or attraction or insecurity.

It was about **comfort**.

Her *comfort zone*.

If you remember, there was a place in Prayagraj she loved—a temple by the Sangam, where she'd go with a book in hand and feel at peace.

It wasn't grand. It wasn't crowded.

It was just *hers*.

A quiet corner in the chaos. A space that didn't demand anything from her.

Aaditya was like that in school.

That one person who didn't see her as the "topper," the "outcast," the "too serious girl."

He saw her. Really saw her.

And made her feel like she mattered—even if the rest of the class chose not to.

But that day, when she saw him sitting with someone else in the seat that had silently become *theirs*, she felt something shift.

A new person, a new laugh, a new bond—however temporary—had invaded the one space that made her feel safe.

And that?

That hurt in a way she couldn't fully explain.

Because it wasn't about love.

It wasn't about attention.

It was about being **replaced** in the one place she never thought she'd have to compete for.

Even if just for a class.

Even if just for a moment.

That moment was enough.

And that is something Aaditya just... didn't get.

Not then, at least.

See, we guys—especially at that age—aren't exactly equipped with emotional user manuals.

We're still figuring out which shampoo to use and how to talk to our crush without sounding like complete idiots.

Feelings?

Understanding situations layered with unspoken expectations and quiet disappointments?

Yeah, we're barely functioning at 1% efficiency in that department.

So, of course Aaditya didn't notice the way Chitra's mood shifted the moment she walked into class.

He didn't see how she hesitated before sitting two rows back.

He didn't catch the tight smile, the cold silence, the way her voice dropped a note when she replied with, "Yeah, I'm fine."

Because for him, it was just a seat.

Just another class.

Just a new student who needed help.

But for her, it was something else entirely.

And that's the thing with young friendships—
They're full of unspoken rules you expect the other to
magically know.
And when they don't, it feels like betrayal.
Even when it's not.

So no, Aaditya didn't understand what he had done
wrong.

And Chitra?

She didn't know how to explain it without sounding “too
much.”

And that's how silly thing number two quietly carved its
space in their story.

Small in action.

But loud in feeling.

Aaditya noticed that day—late, of course—that something
was off.

She wasn't looking at him. Not the usual eye roll, not the
passive-aggressive sigh, not even the sarcastic remarks about
his horrible handwriting during class. Just... nothing. A
cold, calculated silence. The kind that doesn't scream but
echoes.

He noticed it by the end of the last period, when it was
already too late.

Because he had forgotten.

Forgotten that he was supposed to meet her outside
school—at their usual spot under the old peepal tree near
the canteen gate. The same place where she always waited,

earbuds in, bag loosely hanging off one shoulder, sipping on her chai from the nearby tapri.

But that day, the spot was empty.

Or maybe not.

Maybe she stood there for five minutes. Or ten. Or maybe she left before the bell even rang because she knew he wouldn't show up.

Because she'd seen him—again—laughing with the new girl.

Again, being lost in those wide-eyed conversations that made him forget everything else.

And this was becoming a pattern now.

Chitra wasn't angry because he talked to other girls.

She was angry because every time he did, he forgot a little bit of her.

Her presence, her place, her peace.

And that's what hurt.

Not the new girl.

Not the conversation.

But the forgetfulness.

The quiet replacement.

The "Oh shit, I forgot" text that never came.

So when Aaditya finally remembered, she had already left.

And when he texted her later that evening, she replied with a single word:

"Busy."

And he knew, even without her saying anything else—
He had messed up. Again.

The next day, he sat beside her in class—without asking,
without waiting, just like always.

But it wasn't *just like always*.

She didn't look at him.

Didn't smile.

Didn't nudge him to show her notes.

Didn't even sarcastically ask if he needed help with the
assignment—something she always did, even when she was
mad.

Instead, her replies were dry, clipped, mechanical.

“Hmm.”

“Okay.”

“Whatever.”

Each word landed like a full stop. A dead-end.

And for the first time, he felt what it was like to be on the
other side of her wall—the one she built for people she
didn't care to explain herself to.

The day passed in slow motion.

Every class, every bell, every side glance at her that she
never returned, chipped away at him.

By lunch, he knew it was bad.

By the final bell, he knew he had to fix it.

Somehow.

So he waited.

Not at their usual spot this time.

He knew she wouldn't show up there.

Instead, he headed straight to *her* place—her *real* safe space.

The chai stall.

The one just a few minutes away from school, tucked under the giant neem tree, where they often sat for hours talking about everything and nothing.

Where she ordered her chai with extra adrak, and he always said, "Too strong," but still took a sip from her cup anyway.

She was already there when he arrived, sitting cross-legged on the bench, flipping through a book, chai in hand, earphones in.

He approached slowly, cautiously, like someone stepping into a storm he should've seen coming hours ago.

He stood in front of her awkwardly for a second before she finally looked up.

She looked up the moment his shadow crossed her table.

"What?" she asked, expression blank.

"I... thought we could talk," he said, scratching the back of his neck. "Over chai?"

She narrowed her eyes, taking a slow sip.

"Didn't know you remembered where this place was.

Thought you only drink coffee now—with new people."

He sighed. "C'mon, Chitra..."

"I'm not joking," she said, placing the cup down. "Why did you come?"

"Because you're mad. And I wanted to fix it."

"Why now?" she challenged. "Why only when I stop talking to you?"

He paused.

Because she was right.

"Chitra..." he started.

"Why would you sit with her in class," she snapped, cutting him off, "when you *know* I'm always saving you a seat? Or that *you're* supposed to save one for me if I'm late?"

Her tone wasn't just angry—it was hurt.

Aaditya blinked. "What? I didn't think it was a big—"

"Exactly," she said sharply, "you *didn't think*. That's the problem."

He sighed. "She's new. She didn't know anyone. I was just helping her out."

"Right," she nodded, voice laced with sarcasm. "Because helping her out means laughing at her jokes, borrowing her pen, and acting like I don't exist."

"That's not fair," he defended. "I wasn't *ignoring* you."

"Oh, really?" she laughed bitterly. "Then what was that all day, Aaditya? I waved at you twice. You didn't even *look* my way."

“I didn’t see—”

“You *never* see!” she snapped. “Not when it comes to me.”

He rubbed his temples, frustration creeping in. “God, Chitra, can you just *tell* me what the big deal is? It’s just a seat.”

She stood up, grabbed her bag, and looked at him dead in the eye.

“No,” she said coldly. “Because you never get it, Aaditya.”

She stared at him, her eyes softening just a bit.

The anger hadn’t left—but it had loosened its grip.

“I’m not mad because you sat with someone else, Aaditya,” she said quietly. “I’m mad because you *knew* I don’t like it when you do this. And still, you chose someone else. Again.”

He nodded slowly.

No excuses this time. Just listening.

“And this chai?” she added, picking up her cup, “This doesn’t fix things.”

“I know,” he said. “But maybe it’s a start?”

A pause.

Then she slid her cup toward him just slightly—her signature peace offering.

He smiled, took a sip, winced at the strong adrak.

She rolled her eyes.

“Still too strong for you, I see.”

“Still better than coffee,” he replied.

And just like that, the silence cracked.

Not fully, but enough for the next conversation to begin.

There was silence for a moment after her words. The kind that settles like dust after a storm—thick, uncomfortable, and oddly quiet.

Chitra didn’t leave. Not yet. She just looked away, her eyes scanning the empty street, trying to swallow the lump in her throat. Aaditya, a little taken aback, tried to gather his thoughts.

“Look,” he said softly, “I know I mess up. A lot. And maybe I don’t get it like I should. But I never mean to hurt you, Chitra. Ever.”

She didn’t respond, but her grip around the chai glass loosened.

“I’m not great with... this emotional stuff,” he admitted. “I mean, half the time I’m just saying what sounds right. And the other half... I’m hoping it lands okay.”

She let out a small sigh, her expression softer but unreadable. “That’s the thing, Aaditya. You always *hope* it works out. But you don’t try to *understand* why something hurt.”

He nodded slowly, guilt crawling up his spine. “I’m trying. I really am.”

“I know,” she said finally, her voice quiet now. “And that’s the sad part.”

There was a small silence again. He offered a half-smile, and nudged the plate of samosas toward her like a peace offering.

She looked at it. Rolled her eyes. But picked one anyway.

Aaditya relaxed just a bit. “So... truce?”

She gave a faint nod. “Temporary.”

He grinned, pretending it was a win. They sat there for a while longer, talking about everything else—music, chai, the new movie coming out—everything except what truly needed to be said.

Because even though Aaditya tried his best to understand her that evening, he still failed to grasp what it was really about. He met words with more words, wrapped them in awkward honesty, and hoped it would be enough.

Surprisingly, it was. Enough to earn him a faint smile. A half-sipped chai. A quiet walk back.

But in Chitra’s heart, something shifted that day. A quiet realization.

He may be her best friend.

He may be kind.

He may try.

But at the end of it all—he was just another one of the many clueless males in the kingdom of life.

And with that thought, she tucked away a little piece of hope she'd once carried for him, right between sarcasm and disappointment.

Chapter 7:

Between Laughs and Tears

“It was just a joke, why are you overreacting?”

If there was a phrase that haunted every friendship, every relationship, every awkward conversation in history, it would probably be this one.

“It was just a joke, why are you overreacting?”

Simple words.

Lazy words.

Words that try to sweep feelings under the rug and pretend everything’s fine.

For Chitra and Aaditya, this line was like a recurring ghost—appearing when least expected, and causing the biggest mess.

Because for Chitra, things *weren’t* always a joke.

Because for her, feelings weren’t something you could just laugh off or brush aside with a careless smile.

But for Aaditya?

Well, sometimes a joke was just a joke.

And this difference?

This tiny, persistent gap between them?

It was about to cause one of the biggest fights they’d ever had.

A day before the board results.

A day soaked in uncertainty. Even the chai at their favorite stall tasted unusually bland.

Aaditya and Chitra were sitting silently, both pretending to scroll their phones, both knowing the nervous energy hanging in the air had little to do with the results. It was something else. A lingering tension. Words left unsaid. Feelings slightly bruised.

“So,” Aaditya said, breaking the silence, “everyone’s talking about that group trip after results. Are you in?”

Chitra looked up. “Which group trip?”

He shrugged, “You know... the one Aryan and everyone’s planning. Couple of days away. Chill scene.”

She blinked, slowly. “You never told me about it.”

“I thought you knew—everyone’s going.”

“Everyone?” she asked, voice quieter now.

He nodded, not noticing the shift in her expression. “Yeah. I mean, you never hang with the full group anyway, so I didn’t think you’d be into it.”

Silence.

“You didn’t think *I’d* be into it? So you didn’t even bother to ask?”

“Chitra, come on. It’s not that big a—”

“No, Aaditya,” she interrupted, voice rising. “It is a big deal. I’m not asking to be invited, I’m asking why *you* never told me. Why I had to hear about it like I’m just *anyone* else.”

Aaditya leaned forward, defensive now. “Why are you turning this into a fight? It’s just a trip.”

“No,” she snapped, “it’s not just a trip. It’s about inclusion. It’s about you being my best friend and not thinking I’d care. It’s always like this with you—‘oh I forgot to tell you’, ‘oh I thought you’d already know’.”

“You *don’t* like big groups!” he said, his tone rising to match hers. “I was trying to spare you the awkwardness.”

She laughed bitterly. “Wow. You’re so considerate, Aaditya. You get to decide how I feel, what I’ll like, and who I hang out with?”

“I didn’t mean it like that—”

“No. You *never* do. That’s the problem,” she said, getting up, collecting her bag, her tone ice cold now. “It’s always about what you *thought*, never about what you *knew*.”

He stood too, softer now. “Can we just—please—not do this today? It’s a stressful day anyway.”

“Exactly,” she said, pausing, “And on days like this, I thought I mattered more.”

A long pause.

Then Aaditya, in an almost defeated whisper, asked, “So what exactly did I do wrong?”

Chitra turned around halfway, eyes exhausted. “You didn’t think of me, Aaditya. That’s what you did.”

(Chitra's Perspective)

She didn’t cry.

Not immediately, at least.

Chitra walked away from the chai stall with her head held high and her heartbeat louder than her footsteps. She hated public scenes—hated the idea of anyone watching her, feeling pity, or worse, amusement.

But inside, something cracked. Not dramatically like glass shattering. No, it was more like the slow unravelling of a thread she'd been holding onto for too long.

She kept walking.

And walking.

Until she reached the little corner of the park where the grass met the broken cement bench. The same one she and Aaditya had once spent hours sitting on, making jokes about board exams, talking about their future like they had it all figured out.

She sat down. Finally. Alone.

This time, she let herself feel the ache.

It wasn’t about the damn trip. Not really.

It was the realization that despite all the laughter, the jokes, the secrets shared, he still didn’t *see* her.

He remembered what brand of coffee she liked, sure. He knew what books she read, what lines she underlined, what songs made her cry. But when it came to showing up in the small ways—telling her about a plan, remembering that she too might want to be a part of something, even if she wouldn't say it out loud—he forgot.

Every. Single. Time.

And that's what stung.

It made her feel replaceable. Not intentionally, maybe. But does intention always matter?

She picked up her phone. Typed a message. Deleted it. Typed again. Deleted again.

She wanted to scream: *I would've said no, Aaditya. You were right. I wouldn't have come. But I wanted to be asked anyway.*

But instead, she let the silence sit.

Not to teach him a lesson.

But because for the first time in a long time, she didn't know what else to say.

(Aaditya's Perspective)

She left. Again.

And he just stood there, staring at the half-finished chai cup she abandoned like it meant nothing. But it did mean something. Because she never left chai unfinished. Never.

"Yaar, what just happened?" he muttered to himself, rubbing the back of his neck the way he always did when

he was confused, or when the world felt a little too complicated for his boyish brain.

He hadn't expected that reaction.

A harmless plan with friends, a quick weekend trip with the guys before the results came in. Just some fresh air, some jokes, and zero emotional baggage. That's all he had wanted.

But now her words echoed inside him like a slow storm:
"No, *because you never get it, Aaditya.*"

Maybe she was right.

Maybe he didn't get it.

But not because he didn't care—he cared, dammit. Just not in the way she wanted him to. Or maybe not in the way she *needed* him to.

And that was the real problem, wasn't it?

Chitra wasn't like the other people in his life. She didn't ask for much. But when she did... she expected you to already know it.

Like a silent rulebook only she had read. And Aaditya? He was still stuck on chapter one, trying to figure out the damn index.

He sighed. Sat down on his scooter but didn't start it.

He knew she was hurt.

He also knew that if he texted now, she wouldn't reply. If he called, she'd reject it. If he showed up, she'd probably pretend he didn't exist.

And yet, he pulled out his phone anyway.

No typing. No calling.

Just stared at her name on the screen, hoping the guilt that crawled into his chest would write the apology he couldn't word yet.

He wished she'd just told him what she felt.

But deep down, he also knew—

She had been telling him all along.

He just wasn't listening.

Not properly.

See, while all of this might feel silly and stupid to you—like, why is she getting angry over something so small?—let's pause for a second and try to look through her eyes.

Remember when we said she's picky about who she lets in? The part where she keeps her circle tight, chooses her peace carefully? That's not just a quirk; it's her way of protecting herself from a world that often feels too loud, too fast, too careless.

From her perspective, Aaditya forgetting to tell her about the trip wasn't just a "whoops, I forgot."

It was like being pushed out of the small space she had carved for herself in his world.

A space she treasured. A space she thought was hers.

Now, flip the coin.

From Aaditya's point of view, he was right too.

He thought, *Why ask if you already know?*

Why bother including someone who's probably not interested?

It seemed obvious.

So when he didn't mention the trip, it was more about sparing her the awkwardness than excluding her.

But here's the catch—this story isn't about what *you* think. Or what *I* think.

It's about Chitra.

Her world.

Her feelings.

So, hush the inner voice trying to make this about your logic or mine.

Because the truth is—they're both right.

And at the same time?

It's all just getting *too* complicated for two young people still figuring out how to speak the same language of friendship and trust.

The next morning arrived wrapped in tension, like the whole world was holding its breath.

Board results day in India feels like judgment day—anxiety not just from within, but from every parent, neighbor, tuition teacher, and relative waiting to pounce with either praise or pity.

Chitra woke up early. Not because she was worried about the result—she knew she'd do well. But there was this strange heaviness in her chest. The conversation from the

day before played on loop in her head, the silence between them now louder than anything spoken.

Aaditya, on the other hand, hadn't slept much. He was more nervous about the result than he'd admit, and maybe, somewhere in between worrying about marks, colleges, and the future, he remembered Chitra again. He thought about texting her.

But what would he say?

"Good luck"?

"Sorry again"?

"Still mad?"

He stared at her chat for ten minutes.

Typed something.

Deleted it.

Typed again.

Deleted it again.

At school, they both showed up for the same reason everyone did: to pick up the printed copy of the results, exchange awkward glances with teachers, and fake confidence in front of friends.

Their eyes met across the hallway.

It wasn't like in movies—no dramatic music, no sudden rush of flashbacks.

It was... cold.

Uncertain.

Two people who once shared inside jokes now shared a silence that neither of them wanted but both contributed to.

Chitra looked away first.

Not because she was still angry.

But because she didn't want her eyes to betray her disappointment.

She thought—maybe he'll walk over. Maybe he'll try harder.

He didn't.

Aaditya stood frozen.

It wasn't ego, not this time.

It was fear.

Fear that he'd already messed it up beyond fixing.

Fear that maybe she didn't care anymore.

The results came in.

They both did well.

Really well.

But instead of celebrating it together like they once imagined—over chai and laughter and future dreams—they walked out of school separately.

Two victories.

One broken friendship.

And a silence that was growing deeper by the minute.

But then again, they are not best friends if they stay angry for a day and not end up talking again the next day.

Well, they did talk again the very next day—there was no broken friendship, relax guys.

It wasn't some grand reunion or emotional apology. Just a simple "Hey" from Aaditya as he slid into the bench beside

her during coaching the next morning, holding out her favorite orange candy—the kind he knew she couldn’t resist even in the most dramatic of moods.

She looked at him for a second, raised an eyebrow, and said,

“You think this fixes everything?”

He smirked, “Didn’t say everything. Just... a little bit maybe?”

She rolled her eyes but took the candy anyway.

That was the thing about them.

Fights? Plenty.

Ego clashes? All the time.

Silent treatments? Almost routine.

But walking away forever? Never even a question.

They were too stitched into each other’s lives now, woven with chai breaks, unspoken jokes, judgmental looks in class, and all those silly arguments that only made sense to them.

So yeah—was it silly? Maybe.

Was it complicated? Definitely.

But what friendship isn’t?

And this was theirs—imperfect, dramatic, slightly toxic at times, but real.

And that brings us to the next one, doesn’t it?

Silly Thing Number 4.

Ready?

Chapter 8:

Whatever-It-Is-Now: The Missing Pages Before the Next Silly Thing

Before you proceed with Silly Thing Number 4,
Let's fill in the gap, shall we?

Because life doesn't move from one dramatic incident to another like some overly edited TV show. There are gaps. There are pauses. There are moments that don't make it to the main storyline—but without them, the story feels incomplete. Like those calm scenes between two episodes of chaos.

And this was exactly that time for Chitra and Aaditya.
The in-between.

After the third silly fight and the minor patch-up, things didn't magically turn into a perfect friendship montage. Nope. They went back to being themselves—joking, fighting, competing in coaching classes, making fun of their tuition teacher's weird accent, sharing chai, avoiding conversations about results, and acting like none of the drama ever happened.

But something had shifted. Unsaid things were now just... lingering. Not heavy enough to bring a storm, but not light enough to float away.

Like when she sent him a meme and he replied with just a "hmm."

Or when he called and she cut the call, saying, “Busy” even when she was just reading an old book.
Small things. Micro-changes.

And yet, the friendship still stood strong—wobbly at times, sure, but not broken.

There were moments too.

- Like when Aaditya noticed Chitra started keeping a diary.
- Or how Chitra caught him staring at her for a few extra seconds during a group study session.
- How they both hesitated a bit before saying "best friends" now—as if that label didn’t quite fit anymore, but neither had a new one for it yet.

They didn’t talk about it. Not because they didn’t want to. But because talking about it meant accepting something was changing. And maybe neither of them was ready for that just yet.

So, before we dive headfirst into **Silly Thing Number 4**,
Let’s just hold this moment.

This calm before the next chaos.

This almost-normal that they both tried to protect.

Because even in a story built on overreactions, misunderstandings, and unspoken feelings, these quiet moments matter the most.

And now... you ready for the next wave?

Let's go.

It was one of those lazy post-tuition evenings. The sun was almost down, and the air smelled like rain that forgot to arrive. Chitra sat at their usual chai spot, half-distracted, scribbling into a little blue notebook that Aaditya hadn't seen before.

He leaned over the table, eyebrows raised.

Aaditya: "What's that? A diary? Are you journaling now, Miss Philosophical?"

Chitra (not looking up): "It's none of your business."

Aaditya: "Ouch. That hurt. I'm your best friend, remember? I'm supposed to be curious about everything you do, even your pen ink color."

She glanced at him, half-smirking, half-guarded.

Chitra: "It's just something I started recently. Helps me think. Process things."

Aaditya: "What kind of things?"

Chitra: (closing the diary): "Things."

Aaditya: "You writing about me in there? Like... 'Today, Aaditya was a complete idiot again!'"

Chitra (laughing slightly): "If I did that, I'd fill half the book in two weeks."

Aaditya (pretending to be offended): "Wow. That's rude. I thought I was the charming, supportive, slightly annoying best friend in your story."

Chitra (teasing): "You're the footnote. The guy who keeps interrupting the actual story."

Aaditya: "Wow. First a footnote. Next thing you'll say I'm the villain arc."

Chitra (softly): "No. You're the chaos in a calm day."

He went quiet for a second, caught off guard by the depth in her tone.

Aaditya: "That's... oddly poetic."

Chitra (shrugging): "Maybe the diary is rubbing off on me."

There was silence between them for a while—comfortable, thoughtful.

Aaditya: "You gonna let me read a page sometime?"

Chitra: "Nope."

Aaditya: "Not even a line?"

Chitra (smiling faintly): "Maybe someday. When you stop being the chaos."

Aaditya: "So basically... never."

She didn't say anything. Just opened her diary again and kept writing, as if that moment was being recorded right then.

And Aaditya? He just sat there, watching her write, wondering what part of him she'd leave out—and what part she'd never admit she wrote about.

-

It was during a particularly dull school assembly that Aaditya noticed her again — not just the way she always stood in the second row with her arms folded, but the way she wasn't really *there*. Not mentally.

Her eyes were fixed somewhere beyond the stage, but her fingers were fidgeting with the corner of a folded paper hidden in her sleeve.

After the assembly, he caught up with her by the cycle stand.

Aaditya: "Where did you go today?"

Chitra (slipping the paper into her bag): "Assembly."

Aaditya: "No, I mean *mentally*. You were zoned out like I usually am in math class."

Chitra (shrugging): "Nowhere special. Just thoughts."

He paused, walking next to her as they wheeled their cycles out. It was a warm day, too sunny for comfort.

Aaditya: "You know, you're really hard to read sometimes."

Chitra (half-teasing): "That's rich coming from you."

Aaditya: "Touché. But seriously, what was on the paper?"

She hesitated. Then, maybe trusting the moment, pulled it out and handed it to him.

In uneven cursive, it read:

"Sometimes I feel like I'm waiting for something that's already walked past me.

But then he turns around and smiles like nothing ever

changed.
So I stay.”

He looked up from the note, unsure whether to say something light or just... say nothing at all.

Aaditya: “Is this about...?”

Chitra (cutting in quickly): “It’s just something I wrote. Doesn’t matter who or what. Don’t overthink it.”

Aaditya: “Okay. But—”
(beat)

Aaditya: “For what it’s worth... I’d never walk past you.”

She didn’t answer. Instead, she smiled — not the usual sarcastic one, not the fake polite one she wore at school. A real one. Quiet. Heavy. Honest.

And that was it. They rode home together, no more words shared. But somehow, that silence between them said everything.

Later that night, she wrote again in her diary:

“He doesn’t always understand me. But sometimes... he says the one thing that makes me want to stay a little longer.”

-

It was a slow Saturday afternoon. The school was closed, but both Aaditya and Chitra had to come in for some extra practice sessions for the farewell preparations. She had volunteered for the backdrop decorations. He, of course, had been dragged in for “moral support” by his friends.

While the others were busy running around with thermocol and chart papers, Chitra had quietly slipped into an empty classroom. She often did that – vanish for a few minutes, away from the noise, to catch a breath or scribble something down.

Aaditya noticed. He always noticed.

He wandered off in the same direction under the guise of “looking for the scissors” and found her bag lying on the teacher’s desk, the flap wide open. A notebook peeked out – not the usual school one, this one was bound with brown paper and decorated with a sticker that said:
“Don’t Read. I mean it.”

Naturally, he read it.

Only a single page was open – maybe she had been writing just moments ago and got distracted.

“I miss dancing. I miss the version of me who could move freely without caring how I looked. I still dance sometimes when no one’s home, barefoot, to old Hindi songs. It feels like flying. I wish I could be that me more often.”

He was still holding the notebook when she walked in.

Chitra: “Are you serious, Aaditya?”

(her voice wasn’t loud, but it was sharp)

He froze mid-guilt.

Aaditya: “I—I wasn’t... I mean, it was open, I didn’t—okay, yeah, I read that.”

Chitra: “Of course you did.”

She snatched the notebook and stuffed it back in her bag, face flushed.

Aaditya (softly): “Why don’t you dance anymore?”

She didn’t answer right away. Instead, she stood by the window, looking out at the school ground, voice quieter this time.

Chitra: “Because people look. And judge. And comment.”

Aaditya: “So? Let them. You still do it at home, right?”

Chitra: “That’s different. That’s *mine*.”

There was a pause.

Aaditya (gently): “Maybe one day, when you’re dancing again... let me be in the room, okay? I won’t look. I’ll just be there.”

She turned to him, something unreadable in her expression – part surprise, part softness, and something in between that she wouldn’t name.

Chitra: “You’d ruin the song.”

Aaditya (grinning): “Only if it’s one of those depressing Lata Mangeskar ones.”

She smiled. Briefly, but enough.

And that day, when she reached home, she opened the same notebook and wrote underneath that entry:

He read something he wasn’t supposed to. But for once, he didn’t mess it up.

Maybe... maybe he gets it sometimes.

See, school was over already — technically speaking. The results were out, the boards were done, and the uniform had lost all meaning. They were just going now to enjoy the last stretch of school — farewell preps, random laughs, and those bittersweet moments that everyone pretends to be okay with, but deep down knows, it's all coming to an end.

The conversation you just read — that moment between Chitra and Aaditya over her diary, over her love for dancing — was a part of this very phase. That weird, hanging-in-the-middle space where everything feels softer, sadder, and sweeter at the same time.

This was also the last time they would be meeting properly — face to face, at least. Because Chitra was leaving. She was moving to Prayagraj for her post-school studies. She had cracked her entrance exams with flying colors, of course she did, and her bags were half-packed already.

And Aaditya?

Well, he was preparing for JEE.

The engineering dream. The coaching centers. The mock tests. The pressure of a thousand expectations bundled into a timetable of his own making.

But amidst all this, he was also... dating someone.

Yeah.

He never really told Chitra officially. It wasn't a secret either — just one of those silent realities that slip in between

conversations. The girl was sweet. Smart. Pretty. Chitra had seen her once or twice outside the coaching center.

She never asked him about it though.

And he never offered to explain.

Because what's there to explain, right?

They were best friends. And best friends don't owe each other those answers. Or do they?

Well, maybe that depends on the story you're telling.

In this one... it mattered.

More than Aaditya ever realized at the time.

-

The thing about **goodbyes** is — we often don't realize it *was* a goodbye until much, much later.

When Chitra said, *"I'll be shifting to Prayagraj next week,"* it wasn't dramatic. No tears. No sad music playing in the background. Aaditya had just nodded, smiled faintly, and said something like, *"You'll love it there. You always wanted a fresh start, didn't you?"*

And that was that.

But underneath her calm voice and that perfectly controlled smile, Chitra was carrying a **storm**. A quiet one, the kind that doesn't wreck things out loud — it just rains, a little every day, from the inside.

She wasn't upset about the move. She had planned it. She had dreamed of it. But she was upset that he didn't **ask her to stay a little longer**. Or at least **ask if it would be hard**.

Or even just say something stupid and sentimental like *"I'll miss seeing you every day."*

He didn't.

Because *that girl* was already in the picture.

He was with her now.

She was fun, lively, and always around.

Not complicated.

Not moody.

Not... Chitra.

So, Chitra packed quietly. Shifted cities. Shifted lives. And Aaditya? He kept showing up to school for a while for his coaching. Hung out with his new circle. Held someone else's hand while walking the same corridors where he used to wait for Chitra.

They still texted. Of course, they did.

"How's the city treating you?"

"When are your mock tests?"

"Did you watch that movie we talked about?"

But the replies slowed down.

First from her.

Then from him.

One day, she didn't reply at all.

One day, he forgot to ask how she was doing.

The distance wasn't just physical anymore. It had settled in between their words — quietly, like fog — and one day, it just became too thick to see through.

There were no fights. No explosions.
Just... a **slow silence** that took over everything.
And that's how it all began to end.

Not with a bang.
But with a *soft forgetting*.

-

Before we stay in the moment, let's pull back a little — into Aaditya's head, where the flashbacks are still scattered like old books on a dusty shelf.

The girl he was dating during his JEE prep...
Her name doesn't really matter now, does it?
But let's just call her "**the easy one**."

Easy, not because she was simple — but because *being with her* was easy.

She didn't expect him to understand her silences.
She didn't ask him to remember the exact way she liked her chai.
She laughed at his dumb jokes. She posted cute couple photos.
And in the beginning — it was what Aaditya thought he needed.

Distraction. Attention. Flirtation. Comfort.

But eventually, he started noticing things.

Like how she'd always have her phone upside down.
Or how she stopped replying when he told her about his exam stress.

Or how she started disappearing from the library early...
saying *"extra classes."*

You know how intuition works? It's not always loud.
Sometimes it's a slow tightening in your chest that says —
"Something's off."

And one day it was confirmed.

Not by her.

But by a mutual friend who casually said:

*"Bro... don't take it the wrong way, but I saw her with someone
else. And they weren't just studying, if you know what I mean."*

That night, Aaditya didn't sleep.

He didn't cry either.

He just kept thinking about all the times he had *ignored
Chitra's texts to be on a call with this girl.*

How he skipped meeting Chitra at their favorite chai stall
because *"I'm kinda busy with someone."*

The betrayal didn't just hurt because he got cheated on.

It hurt because he realized **he'd turned his back on the one
person who actually gave a damn about him — Chitra.**

And so, a few days later, he texted her.

"Hey, are you free to talk?"

She replied after a whole day.

"What happened now?"

And that single line?

It hit harder than any breakup ever could.

Because she used to say: *"I'm always here."*

And now it was: *"What happened now?"*

Still, they talked. Slowly. Awkwardly.

He didn't pour out everything at once. But she knew something was broken in him.

And he — he remembered how she had always been the quiet, stubborn constant in his otherwise chaotic world.

Maybe he didn't understand her.

Maybe he never would.

But somehow, after being left behind by someone he thought cared —

Chitra started to feel like **home again**.

Even from miles away.

[Late Night Chat – A Week After the Breakup]

Screens dim, two people staring into their own regrets.

Aaditya:

Hey... you still up?

Chitra:

Define "up." Alive? Yes. Awake? Barely. Want to reply to this? Not really.

Aaditya:

Fair. I deserve that.

Chitra:

Good. As long as you know.

Aaditya:

Can we talk? Please?

Chitra:

What happened now, Aaditya? She broke up with you?

Aaditya:

Worse. She cheated.

[There's a pause. Three dots blinking for a long time.]

Chitra:

Wow.

That's... wow.

I mean... should I say sorry or should I say "I told you so"?

Aaditya:

Both maybe? Just don't say nothing.

Chitra:

So what now? You remembered me because she forgot you?

Aaditya:

No. I remembered you because you never forgot me.
Even when I was being a dumbass.

Chitra:

That's a strong word for yourself. I like it.
Progress.

Aaditya:

I missed talking to you.

Chitra:

Now that... that's a weak line. Try harder.

Aaditya:

Okay, let me try this – you were the only real thing I had

in school, and I threw it away for a temporary crush.
And now... I just keep going back to our conversations,
our chai, your diaries, your silence.
God, I even miss how mad you used to get when I forgot
to reply.

Chitra:

I still get mad, Aaditya. That hasn't changed.

Aaditya:

But you're still replying.

Chitra:

I don't know why. Maybe I'm stupid too.

Aaditya:

You're not stupid. You're just you. And I'm just... late.

Chitra:

Very. But okay. Let's just talk.

No expectations, no overthinking, no promises.

Aaditya:

Can I at least say one thing though?

Chitra:

What now?

Aaditya:

Talking to you feels like finally breathing after holding my
breath for too long.

Chitra:

...you still suck at metaphors.

Aaditya:

But you smiled, right?

Chitra:

Just a little.

~

[Diary Entry | 2:13 AM]

“The Sound of Familiarity”

I don’t know why I replied to him.

Maybe because I knew he’d type again even if I didn’t.

Maybe because I was curious. Or maybe because I was waiting – silently – like I always do, pretending I’m not.

Pretending I don’t care.

But I do. That’s the worst part.

Tonight, it wasn’t just him showing up.

It was *that* version of him – the one I liked before he became a stranger in his own skin.

He sounded... honest. Bruised maybe, but honest.

I don’t think I’m happy that he got cheated on.

But I’m not *not* feeling something either. What kind of messed-up emotion is that?

Is that petty? Is that closure? Or is that just relief that finally... he felt something I felt all those times he “didn’t get it”?

He said he missed me.

I don’t know what to make of that anymore. People miss people when their comfort breaks.

But do they *choose* those people again? That's the real question.

I should be angry still.

I should've snapped, blocked, ignored, ghosted.

But then... there he was. Telling me he missed my chai addiction. My diary entries.

He remembered things I stopped talking about. And that makes it harder to stay angry.

Because how do you stay mad at someone who finally sees you?

I didn't say it to him, but yes, I smiled.

A little.

And then I hated myself for it.

A little.

We're stupid. Both of us.

But somehow... it still feels nice to hear his name without wincing again.

Maybe that's growth.

Or maybe I'm just as lost as I was at 16.

Whatever this is — it's not a beginning.

It's just a chapter. A short one. A familiar one.

But at least... I'm writing again.

— C

~

The next night...

[10:47 PM]

Aaditya:

Hey.

Still up?

Chitra:

Clearly. You?

Aaditya:

Insomnia. Or karma maybe.

Or the ghosts of JEE papers still haunting me.

Chitra:

laughs Or maybe the ghost of the girl who cheated on you



Aaditya:

Okay, wow.

You're in a mood tonight. 🙄

Chitra:

Not really. Just... bored.

Also, you kind of walked into that one.

Aaditya:

Fair.

(Also, rude.)

Chitra:

You're used to my rudeness. Come on.

Aaditya:

Yeah... I missed it. Weirdly.

Missed this... us.

Chitra:

There is no “us,” Aaditya.
It’s just chai and midnight texts.

Aaditya:

Still. Better than nothing, right?

Chitra:

Depends who you ask.

[a few minutes of silence]

Aaditya:

So, what do you write about these days?
Still journaling your soul out?

Chitra:

Not as much as I used to.
Life’s too loud lately. I need silence to write.

Aaditya:

You always said that.
“Silence breeds stories.”

Chitra:

Wow. You remember.

Aaditya:

I remember a lot, Chitra.
More than I probably should.

Chitra:

You also forgot a lot.
More than you probably should.

Aaditya:

Touché.

Chitra:

Look, I don't hate you.

I never did. I was just... disappointed. You were home, you know? And you left the lights off sometimes.

Aaditya:

I didn't know how to be home for anyone.

Not even myself.

Chitra:

I think I knew that deep down. But I still hoped you'd learn. For me.

[long pause]

Aaditya:

Is it too late to try now?

Chitra:

Maybe. Maybe not.

We're not 17 anymore. Life's... messier now.

Aaditya:

You still drink chai 4 times a day?

Chitra:

3 now. I've matured 😊

But yes, it still saves me.

Aaditya:

I'll mail you some from Kanpur someday. Premium. No compromise.

Chitra:

laughs I'll hold you to that.

Aaditya:

Please do.

Also, can I ask something without ruining the vibe?

Chitra:

Dangerous sentence. Go on.

Aaditya:

Did you ever... I don't know... think of me *that* way? Back then?

Chitra:

...

Yeah.

But only when you weren't trying too hard to be someone else.

Aaditya:

Wow.

Okay.

That... explains a lot.

Chitra:

Don't overthink it.

You were a boy. I was a girl. Timing sucked. That's all.

Aaditya:

Yeah.

But maybe timing gets a second chance sometimes.

Chitra:

Aaditya...

Aaditya:

Okay okay. I'll stop.

Just... don't disappear again?

Chitra:

Not planning to.

But no promises. I've learned from you.

Chapter 9:

When Distance Isn't Just Miles

The week Chitra moved to Prayagraj, a lot happened. (The above conversations and the text messages of course.)

Too much, actually.

Aaditya had just gotten out of that relationship — the one that never really felt like his in the first place. It ended with more silence than screaming. It just fizzled. Like it never meant enough to fight for. And maybe, that was the real heartbreak of it. Not the cheating, not the lies, but how little it all mattered.

But there was something — or rather, someone — who kept coming back to his mind like muscle memory. Her name? Chitra.

That week, everything hit him all at once. She was gone. Gone in the literal sense — off to a new city, new campus, new chai stalls — but also emotionally distant in a way she hadn't been before. He didn't even get to see her off properly. No dramatic goodbye. No airport hugs or teary promises. Just a text.

“Reached Prayagraj. New room smells like paint and bad decisions. Will update when I find the chai spot.:)”

It was such a **her** thing to say. Casual, quirky, emotion buried under a joke.

But for Aaditya, it hit harder than expected.

The night she sent that, was the night he finally texted her again. The same **chat** you just read above. It wasn't pre-planned. It wasn't clever. It wasn't even hopeful. It was just... real.

He needed to talk to her. And when she replied, despite the miles and months and missed moments, something inside him exhaled.

Because for the first time in a long while — they weren't fighting. They weren't misunderstanding each other. They weren't playing the blame game. They were just talking. Breathing in the same space, even if through a screen.

And Chitra?

She was surprised. A little cautious.

Because, in her mind, this guy had **never really told her the whole truth**. He'd ghosted the explanation of what happened with that other girl. Never confirmed if he was over her. Never explained his silence. She had moved forward assuming **he was still taken**, still caught up in something half-serious and fully stupid.

But this conversation?

This *version* of him?

This night — it made her pause.

"Maybe he's not that guy anymore."

That's what she wrote in her diary later that night.

And for Aaditya, that night was when he finally realized:

He had never really been in love with that girl from coaching classes.

He was just trying to fill a space someone else had already built a home in.

-

She left.

And he... didn't text her for the first few days. Not out of ego — but confusion. Because that week itself, his relationship had crumbled. The one Chitra still assumed he was in.

Turns out, the girl he was dating during JEE prep had not only cheated on him but made sure it felt like his fault somehow. It was brutal. And in that wreckage, in that strange, lonely week of exams ending, relationships breaking, and friends moving away...

He typed.

He deleted.

He typed again.

And that one message — that simple **"Still up?"** — opened a door neither of them knew they'd been leaning against for so long.

-

They kept texting every night after that.

But not out of formality or force — it was natural. No expectations. No pressure. Just two people leaning back into a friendship they didn't realise they'd missed so much.

And even though Chitra still believed he was taken — she noticed a softness in his texts.

A certain vulnerability.

A certain *lack* of performance.

He wasn't trying to be funny. Or flirty. Or overly nice.

He was just... Aaditya.

And that felt new. Familiar. Safe.

-

One night, just after her first class in college:

Chitra:

This place is... loud.

But the sunsets are nice.

Aaditya:

Sunsets are overrated.

Unless you're watching them with someone who shuts up.

Chitra:

So not you.

Aaditya:

Wow.

Hurtful. Accurate. Deserved.

Chitra:

Still figuring out the roommates.

They're loud. But sweet.
I miss my window at home.

Aaditya:

I miss your window too.
I used to imagine what you were writing when I passed
your house.

Chitra:

You're being weird again.

Aaditya:

Yeah.
But I'm allowed now. No?

Chitra:

Depends.
Still dating her?

Aaditya:

No.
Haven't been for a while.

Chitra:

You didn't tell me.

Aaditya:

Didn't know how.
Didn't know if it mattered.

Chitra:

It does.
Not for *that* reason.
But... because you matter.

[Pause]

Aaditya:

Thanks.

You do too.

More than you think.

That moment — that pause — was real. Not some poetic metaphor. Not some spark flying in slow motion.

Just silence. Between two phones. In two cities. Two hearts untangling themselves slowly.

This wasn't about love.

Not yet.

This was about the **moment**.

The chai in her hand.

The streetlight flickering outside his window.

The not-so-funny memes they still sent each other.

The space where “**you matter**” meant more than “**I miss you.**”

Because right now, they were still healing.

Still rediscovering.

Still learning how to stay — even from a distance.

And sometimes, that's enough.

-

[Chat, a few nights later – 11:47 PM]

Aaditya:

Still up?

Chitra:

I knew you'd text.

Was waiting for it.

Aaditya:

Oh, confident now?

Chitra:

No. Just... certain.

You've been quiet since last night.

Aaditya:

Was just thinking. About stuff.

Us, mostly.

Chitra:

Call?

Aaditya:

Right now?

Chitra:

Yes, right now. Before I change my mind.

[Phone rings.]

Aaditya: (*picking up*)

Hey.

Chitra: (*softly*)

Hi. So now you have a voice again.

Aaditya:

You didn't miss it?

Chitra:

I missed the silence between your stupid jokes.

Aaditya:

Ouch. That was poetic and rude.

Chitra:

I've upgraded.

Aaditya:

I can tell. New city effect?

Chitra:

Maybe. Or maybe I just stopped waiting for people to understand what I don't say out loud.

Aaditya:

That's a jab, isn't it?

Chitra:

It's not. It's just the truth.

[A short pause.]

Aaditya:

I didn't know how to tell you about her. Or about how it ended.

I guess I thought you'd just... figure it out.

Chitra:

I'm not a mind reader, Aaditya.

And you don't get to be vulnerable only when you're

hurting.
It doesn't work like that.

Aaditya:

I know.
I think I'm still learning.

Chitra:

You always were a slow learner.

Aaditya: (*chuckles*)

But a determined one.

Chitra: (*smiling slightly*)

That you are.

[Another pause. Longer this time. Neither hangs up.]

Aaditya:

So, how's Prayagraj really?

Chitra:

Lonely.

But I like the chai here. It reminds me of... well,
everything before this.

Aaditya:

Us?

Chitra:

Some parts of it.

You, when you weren't being annoying.

And the way you used to walk beside me without asking
anything. Just being there.

Aaditya:

I can still do that.

Even from here.

Chitra:

Then stop disappearing.

Aaditya:

Okay.

[Silence again — but a softer one, this time. Like both of them are breathing a little easier.]

Chitra:

You know, this?

This call? It matters more than you think.

Aaditya:

It matters to me too.

Maybe we're bad at saying things.

But we're pretty great at staying.

Chitra:

Let's just... keep calling. Sometimes.

Aaditya:

Sometimes sounds perfect.

That night, they didn't say much after that. They didn't need to.

No confessions.

No labels.

No pressure.

Just *presence*.

Two people, on different sides of a call, with nothing but old laughter and new silence between them — and somehow, it was just enough.

Chapter 10: The Year That Changed Everything (Again)

One Year Later

Location: Still two cities apart, but much, much closer than before.

It's been a full year. A year filled with missed trains, surprise exams, random breakdowns, half-eaten meals, chai that wasn't the same anymore, and conversations — long, stretched-out, heart-spilling, soul-calming conversations.

They never planned for this to continue, really. It just did.

The occasional check-in turned into midnight rants.

Midnight rants turned into life updates.

Life updates turned into soft silences.

And before they realized it, *they were back*.

Not the same as before. But maybe better.

[Phone rings. Late evening. No one asks for time anymore.]

Chitra:

You called without me nagging today. Must be the apocalypse.

Aaditya:

Yeah, my city's raining frogs and flamingos.
But you're welcome for the consistency.

Chitra:

Consistency? From you?
Color me shocked.

Aaditya:

Don't lie, you love it.

Chitra: *(softly)*

A little.

[She pauses, then says it almost without thinking.]

Chitra:

I missed you today.
Randomly. In the middle of my class. For no reason.

Aaditya: *(voice dropping to a softer tone)*

I missed you yesterday. When I saw someone sitting alone
at the chai stall near my place.
I don't know why. Just made me think of... you know. Us.
That phase.

Chitra:

We really were a mess, huh?

Aaditya:

Still are. But now we sweep up together.

Chitra: *(laughing)*

Stop trying to sound poetic. That's my thing.

Aaditya:

Only because I let you win.

Chitra:

You *wish*.

It wasn't perfect — it never is.

There were still moments when they fought.

Still silly things, still misunderstandings.

But now they knew how to find their way back.

They knew when to pause. When to talk. When to simply *be*.

[Another random call, a few weeks later.]

Aaditya:

I found the playlist we made in Class 12.

Chitra:

Wait — the one with the worst names ever?

Aaditya:

Yup.

“Chaicosmic Vibes” and “Study? What’s that?”

Legends.

Chitra:

We were so dramatic.

Aaditya:

We still are.

Chitra: *(with a smile he can feel through the phone)*

But now, it's a little more honest, don't you think?

That's the thing about some friendships — they go through hell and nostalgia, through silence and chaos, and if they still find a way back?

They become unbreakable.

Like Aaditya and Chitra.

They were no longer just old school friends.

They were no longer broken versions of a maybe.

They were *something else* now.

Maybe still undefined.

But deeply known.

-

Excerpt from Chitra's Diary

Dated: Exactly one year and two weeks since she moved to Prayagraj

"There's something strange about this new version of us."

Not strange-bad.

Strange... warm.

Strange like the first time you notice your old jeans still fit after months.

Like finding a forgotten song and remembering every lyric.

Like Aaditya calling without me asking.

We don't talk like we used to — it's quieter now.

We don't fight like before — but when we do, it's softer, slower, like we both know how far not to push.

We don't meet. Not in person. But it somehow feels like he's here.

In the way I laugh without realizing.

In the way I reach for my phone during chai.

In the way I now write... like someone's going to read it.

Aaditya.

I don't know what to call him anymore.

He's not the boy who sat with someone else in class.

Not the guy who made excuses or forgot things.

Not even the one who once didn't understand me.

He's someone else now. Or maybe — I am.

Maybe this is what growth looks like.

Or maybe, it's still love in disguise.

But no, I won't call it that.

It's something. It means something.

And that's enough for now.

— C.

~

It was one of those early summer evenings. The kind where the breeze carries just enough warmth to remind you that things have changed – but not too much to make it unbearable.

She wasn't expecting him. Not today.

He hadn't texted, hadn't called, hadn't even sent a dumb meme. Nothing. Radio silence for two days straight – which for them now, in this new rhythm, felt like eternity.

And then there he was.

At the chai stall.

Their chai stall.

The same spot she used to sit at after school, the same one he dragged her to during every silly fight to make her forgive him.

Chitra stood there for a second longer than she should have. Her hands froze mid-air with the cup of chai, and all she could manage was a half-hearted, "Oh."

He grinned. Not the full teeth smile – that one reserved for surprises and stupidity – but the soft, side-smirk one.

Aaditya: "Still standing exactly where I thought you would be."

Chitra (raising an eyebrow): "And you still think showing up without notice is cool?"

He shrugged, stepping closer. The space between them felt loud.

Aaditya: “I thought I’d test if you’d still glare at me the same way.”

Chitra (sipping her chai, trying to suppress a smile): “I do. In fact, stronger now. With more disappointment layered in.”

Aaditya: “I deserved that. Maybe more.”

There was a pause. Not awkward. Just... paused. Like the world had slowed down for a moment to watch these two people re-meet in the most predictable and yet oddly cinematic way.

Chitra (softly): “Why now?”

He looked at her, really looked at her. Like someone finding a chapter they never finished.

Aaditya: “Because a year without you was a lot. And a year talking to you – and not seeing you – was somehow more. I don’t know if it makes sense. I just... had to.”

Chitra (after a long pause): “I wrote about this moment once. In my diary. But it didn’t have you talking this much.”

He chuckled.

Aaditya: “Oh yeah? How did I show up in the diary version?”

Chitra (smiling faintly): “Quiet. Awkward. Unsure. Still you.”

They sat on the bench outside the stall. Like they used to. The chai was still too hot. The wind still pushed her hair into her eyes. He still sat a little too close and pretended like he didn't mean to.

And somehow, in that very ordinary moment, something extraordinary began again.

Not the same.

Not like before.

But maybe, something that had been quietly waiting to begin all along.

Chai, Bun Maska, and That One Look

The kettle hissed behind them. A new batch of chai was being brewed – the scent of elaichi and familiarity lingering like an old song. They'd ordered two cups and shared a single bun maska – like they used to. The bench beneath them creaked every time either of them shifted, but neither seemed to care.

Chitra (mouth half full of bun maska): "So then this professor in Prayagraj just *assumed* I cheated in the test because apparently my handwriting looked too neat for last-minute answers. Like... what even?"

Aaditya (grinning faintly): "Hmm?"

She paused.

Chitra (squinting at him): "Wait. Are you even listening?"

He didn't answer immediately. Just kept that slight, absent smile on his face, eyes fixed on her like she was telling the

most captivating story in the world — except he wasn't really hearing a word of it.

Chitra (raising an eyebrow, smirking): "Aaditya?"

Still no response.

Chitra (leaning slightly toward him): "Hello? Earth to JEE genius? I'm literally calling you out."

He blinked a few times. Caught. Almost as if waking from a trance. Then coughed awkwardly.

Aaditya: "Oh sorry, I was just..."

Chitra: "Staring?"

Aaditya (sheepishly): "Kind of. I mean... not in a creepy way. It's just... it's been a long time, you know?"

Chitra (mockingly): "So you decided to stare at my face instead of listening to my trauma?"

Aaditya (laughing): "Your *trauma* was about a neat handwriting accusation. Please."

Chitra (grinning): "Still. It was emotionally damaging."

Aaditya: "Right. Deep scars. But in my defense... it's just nice. Sitting here. With you. Talking nonsense. I guess I didn't realise how much I missed it until I saw your face again and forgot what words were."

Chitra looked at him for a moment — surprised, maybe, at the unexpected softness in his tone. Her smirk dropped just a little, replaced by something quieter. Something real.

Chitra (quietly): "Yeah. Me too."

There was a silence. The good kind. The kind where no one's rushing to fill the air because it already feels complete. She broke it with a sudden laugh.

Chitra: "But you *were* smiling like an idiot."

Aaditya (grinning): "And I will absolutely deny it in court."

Chitra (teasing): "I'm writing about this in my diary, by the way."

Aaditya: "Make sure you mention how cute I looked while being caught."

Chitra (mocking): "Sure. That'll be the *highlight*."

The chai was halfway done. The bun maska was already reduced to crumbs on the newspaper it came in. And yet, neither moved.

Because some reunions aren't loud. Some are quiet.

Like chai cooling in porcelain.

Like eyes meeting after a year of almos*t*s.

Like silence — finally — meaning something beautiful.

-

Excerpt from Chitra's Diary

19th July – 11:14 PM

One year later, back to bun maska and the same boy...

I don't know how to put it into words properly, but today felt different. Not *new* exactly... just... familiar in a way that made my heart ache and smile at the same time.

We met again after a whole year. A year of missed calls, broken relationships, late-night chats, and diary entries that should've been conversations. And yet, today — we were just two kids again, sitting at the same stall, sharing the same chai, laughing at the same dumb jokes.

Except... he stared.

Not the way boys do in school when they want attention. Not the way strangers look when they don't know your story. This was different.

He looked at me like I was someone he remembered in silence. Someone he had missed in ways he didn't even realise until the moment I spoke.

And when I caught him staring and teased him for it — he didn't deny it. Not fully.

He said something strange. Sweet. "I guess I didn't realise how much I missed it until I saw your face again and forgot what words were."

Do you ever have a moment where the world slows just enough for you to notice a shift in the air? Like something unspoken just... lands?

That was mine.

I laughed it off, of course. I always do.

But between the sips of chai and the jokes and the crumbs of bun maska, something quiet changed. Maybe just in me.

We've grown up. We're still figuring out what that means. But sitting there, I felt safe again.

And maybe that's what matters.
Not love. Not labels. Not even the diary pages.
Just... that I still feel safe with him.
And he still looks at me like I'm someone worth
remembering.
— Chitra

Chapter 11:

When the Past Sits Right in Front of You

It had been a year. A whole damn year. Time doesn't wait for anyone—they say that, and I believed it, but somehow when I saw her sitting across the table from me again, chai in hand and that slight curve of her lips when she spoke passionately about a book she was reading—I swear, time had frozen.

Chitra.

We talked on calls so much these past few months that I almost forgot what it felt like to just sit and *watch* her talk. You know how some people look different in pictures and different in real life? With her, it was the opposite. She didn't change. But still, something about her felt different. Like life had drawn a few new lines on her, shaped her edges sharper, but her core? Still soft. Still the same.

I'd asked her to meet at our old chai stall—the same spot we had all those silly fights, all those stupid conversations, and some moments that stuck deep. She came. And it felt normal. That was the strangest part—it wasn't awkward. Not even for a second.

She started rambling about something—some college drama, some professor who was too much into himself. And I swear I was listening... at least, trying to. But in the

middle of her words, I zoned out. My eyes were on her, sure. But my mind?

It was racing.

There she was. The same girl who yelled at me over a missed chai, the same girl who sulked over a stupid classroom seat, and the same girl who I didn't even know had written poems until I read them secretly in her diary. The same Chitra who cried when she left for Prayagraj and didn't know that I cried too—just later, just alone.

I caught myself smiling. Not at anything she said. Just at her. And maybe, at myself too—for being that dumb kid who never really knew how much she mattered until she wasn't around every day.

She stopped mid-sentence. “What?” she asked, a little smirk playing on her face.

I blinked. “What what?”

“You’re doing it again.”

“Doing what?”

“Staring. Like some creepy hero in a bad rom-com. What's up?”

I laughed, brushing it off. “You talk too much. I think I was just trying to find the mute button.”

She rolled her eyes, but her cheeks turned that soft red she always got when she was flustered.

That moment? I wanted to freeze it. Just capture the smell of chai, the buttery crumbs of bun maska on her fingers, the way the light hit her hair, the sound of her laugh teasing me for zoning out.

Excerpt from Aaditya's Mind

If someone told me years ago that this girl—the same girl who would pick fights over saved seats and missed chai meets—would become such a deep part of my everyday existence, I would've laughed.

But there she is. And here I am. Still trying to figure her out. Still failing in new ways. But this time... I don't want to run from it. This time, I want to try.

And maybe, just maybe, I don't want to be her *best friend* anymore.

-

The Crossroads Inside

The chai cup was nearly empty, but my mind was far from calm.

It's funny how some moments freeze you in time—not because of what's happening around, but because of what's raging inside. Sitting across from Chitra, watching her laugh, seeing the light flicker in her eyes when she teased me about zoning out—it should've felt like relief. Like finding solid ground after a long, chaotic journey.

But it didn't.

Because inside me, a war was still raging.

The ghost of that other girl—the one I thought I cared for during JEE prep—haunted my every waking moment. I remember the days when I convinced myself that things would work out, that she was worth the fight. And then the moment everything cracked: the betrayal, the lies, the cold silence that followed. I thought I had left that chapter behind, locked it in a drawer with all my old notebooks and failed dreams.

But here I am, stuck between two worlds.

On one side: the future.

The hard grind. The entrance exams. The pressure of expectations—from my family, from myself. That relentless voice telling me to focus, to prioritize, to not get distracted by anything that isn't the goal.

On the other side: this new feeling. This pull toward Chitra.

Every message we exchanged, every call we made, peeled back layers I didn't know I had. Suddenly, I wanted to be more than just a friend. I wanted to understand her—truly understand her—in ways I never bothered before. I wanted to be the reason she smiled when she was supposed to be mad.

But was it the right time?

Can I afford to invest in this—when my future feels so fragile, so uncertain?

Sometimes, I catch myself imagining a life where she and I walk through these struggles side by side. A life where her laughter cuts through the stress, where her stubbornness balances my chaos, where we find peace in the mess together.

Other times, I push the thought away like a foolish daydream, reminding myself that people like us don't get to have it all. That dreams require sacrifices.

And the hardest part? I don't even know if she feels the same.

She's always been a mystery to me. Complex, fiery, unyielding. And maybe that's why I'm drawn to her—the challenge, the depth, the raw honesty that no one else can see beneath the surface.

But what if I'm just fooling myself? What if this is another mistake, another detour?

The exam dates are creeping closer, and the pressure mounts with every passing day. I'm drowning in a sea of notes, formulas, and deadlines, but my mind keeps drifting back to her—the way she sipped her chai, the way her eyes softened when she smiled, the way she called me out for zoning out.

It's maddening.

I don't know if I should chase this feeling, or lock it away like the diary entries she keeps, hidden and secret.

Maybe some things aren't meant to be figured out just yet.

For now, I'm stuck. Between what I want and what I'm supposed to want.

Between the boy who ran after a girl who wasn't faithful, and the man who's beginning to realize what truly matters.

And in the middle of it all... there's Chitra.

Waiting, maybe. Hoping, maybe.

And me, still unsure if I'm ready to be the person she deserves.

-

Scene: Late Night Call with His Friend, Rohan

Phone rings. Aaditya sighs before answering.

Aaditya: "Bro... I don't know what to do anymore."

Rohan: "What's up? Sounds serious."

Aaditya: "It's all messed up. The JEE prep, the pressure, family expectations—everything. And now... there's Chitra."

Rohan: "Chitra? Wait, that girl from school?"

Aaditya: "Yeah. We've been talking more recently. Met after a long time, you know? But it's confusing, man. I'm still dealing with... you know, what happened with Neha."

Rohan: "Ah, that drama again. Look, you can't keep carrying that baggage forever."

Aaditya: "I get that. But what if I'm just replacing one mistake with another? Like, maybe I'm not ready to focus on anything serious."

Rohan: "Maybe you need to figure out what you want, not what everyone expects. If Chitra makes you happy, maybe give it a chance."

Aaditya: "I wish it were that easy. Exams are next month. I barely have time to breathe. How do I balance all this?"

Rohan: "Man, life's messy. But regrets from not trying are worse. Just don't lose yourself chasing either."

Aaditya: "Yeah... easier said than done."

Scene: Text Chat with Chitra (Later that Night)

Chitra: "You've been quiet today. Something on your mind?"

Aaditya: "Maybe. It's just... everything feels complicated right now."

Chitra: "Like what?"

Aaditya: "Like I'm standing at a crossroads. One path leads to exams, focus, the future everyone expects from me. The other leads to... well, you."

Chitra: "Me?"

Aaditya: "Yeah. You. It's stupid, I guess. After everything, I'm still confused if I'm ready to handle this. Or if I even deserve it."

Chitra: "You deserve happiness, Aaditya. Don't let your past mistakes chain you."

Aaditya: "Easier for you to say. You're not the one juggling all this pressure."

Chitra: “True. But I know what it feels like to want something and be scared of losing it.”

Aaditya: “Maybe we’re both scared, then.”

Chitra: “Maybe. But fear can’t stop us from trying.”

Aaditya: “I want to try. I really do.”

Chitra: “Then that’s a start.”

-

One Year Later — Quiet Changes

The conversation thread blinked open on Aaditya’s phone.

Aaditya: *Hey, how’s Prayagraj treating you?*

Simple words, but they hit her deeper than she expected and at the same time for some reason it affected him too.

Prayagraj — the city she now called home, the place where she chased her dreams, where she sought peace away from the chaos of their shared past.

He was no longer the nervous JEE aspirant burning the midnight oil. College had begun. New routines. New faces. Yet, somehow, her messages still found their way to him, weaving their silent connection across the miles.

They talked again — about classes, favorite books, rainy days, chai, and the small absurdities of everyday life. The old fights had vanished, replaced by easy banter and that comfortable awkwardness only true friends share.

But beneath the surface, something had changed.

Neither said it aloud.

Neither dared to admit that the casual ‘how are you?’ carried more weight now, that the pauses between texts felt heavier, full of unspoken words and emotions they weren’t ready to face.

Aaditya caught himself smiling at her messages more often than he wanted to admit. That smile wasn’t just about friendship anymore.

He thought back to the days when he was lost in confusion—caught between the past and a future he couldn’t decide on.

But now?

Now, every message from her was a small anchor, reminding him of something he had almost forgotten—a feeling he hadn’t allowed himself to explore fully.

And today, as he read her latest message, he realized:

Talking to her again wasn’t just about friendship.

It meant more.

More than he’d admitted, even to himself.

And maybe, just maybe, that was the beginning of something new.

-

The memory of that message still lingered in Aaditya’s mind as he sat across from Chitra, the familiar smell of chai and the warm hum of the street around them. It had been

a whole year since they last saw each other in person. A year filled with distance, unanswered questions, and quiet hopes.

They were catching up like old times—talking about college, professors, the weather, silly stories from their new lives. Chitra's eyes sparkled with that same fiery energy he remembered, her laugh still contagious, her presence as magnetic as ever.

But then, somewhere in the middle of her animated story, Aaditya caught himself lost in her gaze. His attention slipped away from the conversation and settled on the curve of her smile, the way her hair fell softly over her shoulder, the way her eyes crinkled when she laughed.

He didn't mean to stare. It just happened.

And then—there it was.

That moment when she stopped mid-sentence and looked at him, eyebrows raised.

She said something and a small conversation took place which neither expected.

Caught off guard, Aaditya flushed a little but smiled sheepishly.

"Distracted, huh? By what? Me?"

He laughed, a little nervous but honest.

"Yeah. Maybe."

The moment hung between them—light, unspoken, charged with something new yet familiar.

And in that simple exchange, Aaditya realized how much he had missed her. Not just as a friend, but maybe something more.

The day was ordinary, yet to him, it felt like the start of something extraordinary.

-

As Chitra's words hung in the air, Aaditya felt his heart beat a little faster. He wanted to say something clever, something that would mask the sudden rush of feelings bubbling inside. But all he could do was smile, awkward and a little vulnerable.

Distracted by her, he thought, like a moth to a flame. And damn, I don't even want to pull away.

He studied her—every little detail that had somehow become etched into his memory over the years: the way her eyes lit up when she was excited, the subtle dimple that appeared when she smiled, the faint scent of jasmine that seemed to follow her like a secret.

How is it possible that after all this time, after all the silence and distance, she still has this hold on me?

The more he tried to rationalize it—the pressure of college, the weight of expectations, the past mistakes—the harder it became to ignore the simple truth that was blossoming quietly inside him.

Maybe this is what I've been searching for all along—the comfort of someone who knows me, the spark of a connection that never really faded.

He glanced back at her, catching her eyes once more. There was no denying it now. The friendship they'd shared was a foundation, but what was growing beneath it was something deeper, something unspoken but undeniable.

Aaditya swallowed the lump in his throat and made a silent promise to himself: to not run away this time. To face whatever this was head-on, no matter how complicated it got.

Because some moments—the ones that make your heart skip—only come once.

And he wasn't going to let this one slip away.

Chapter 12:

Six Months Later – Closer Than Ever

Six months had quietly slipped by since that afternoon at the chai stall, and with every passing day, Aaditya and Chitra had grown closer – almost inseparable.

Their conversations were no longer just casual check-ins or catching up on life's little details. They shared dreams, fears, late-night thoughts, and everything in between. The line between best friends and something more blurred in the most natural way.

One evening, chatting over their usual video call:

Chitra: “You know, it’s crazy how you’re the only person who actually gets my obsession with old songs.”

Aaditya: “Well, someone has to appreciate your vintage taste. Besides, those songs are classics.”

Chitra: *laughs* “Classic? You’re just saying that because I forced you to listen to them a hundred times.”

Aaditya: “Maybe. But I don’t mind. It’s become... kind of our thing.”

Chitra: “Our thing, huh? Sounds official.”

Aaditya: “Officially unofficial best friends?”

Chitra: “I’ll take that.”

A few days later, a text exchange as they plan to meet:

Aaditya: *So, bun maska and chai tomorrow? Same spot?*

Chitra: *You know it. Wouldn't miss it for the world.*

Aaditya: *Great. I'll bring that ridiculous playlist you love.*

Chitra: *Oh no... you're evil.*

During one of their in-person hangouts, Aaditya nudges Chitra playfully:

Aaditya: "Remember when you caught me staring? I'm not apologizing for that."

Chitra: "Good. Because I might have been doing the same."

Aaditya: *smirks* "See? We're perfect for each other."

Chitra: *laughs* "In your dreams."

Through every laugh, every silly argument, every shared secret, they built a bond that felt unbreakable.

But beneath the ease and comfort, both of them knew — this was more than just friendship.

Neither dared say it out loud yet.

Because sometimes, the best connections start quietly — growing, strengthening, and waiting for the right moment to become something beautiful.

-

Over the past six months, Aaditya had learned countless things about Chitra — her stubbornness, her love for old songs, her sharp wit, and her quiet moments of vulnerability. She was like an open book he had spent months reading, page by page, chapter by chapter.

But one evening, something new surprised him.

They were sitting in her room after their usual chai and bun maska hangout, scrolling through music videos on her phone.

Aaditya: “Wait, since when do you like dancing? You never told me.”

Chitra: *smiling softly* “Because you never asked.”

Aaditya: “Fair point. But I thought you were all about books and quiet corners.”

Chitra: “I am. But dancing... dancing is my escape. It’s when I feel free, when I’m just me — no judgments, no expectations.”

Aaditya watched her eyes light up as she spoke, the same fiery passion he’d seen when she argued or fought for her point, but softer, almost tender.

Aaditya: “Why didn’t you show me this side earlier?”

Chitra: “Because it’s personal. And honestly... I wasn’t sure if you’d get it.”

Aaditya: “Well, I’m learning a lot about you. This one’s a beautiful surprise.”

As she played a video of her performing a traditional dance, Aaditya realized how much more there was to her — layers he had yet to uncover.

Meanwhile, Chitra had been quietly observing Aaditya for months, piecing together his life through their countless conversations.

She knew about his struggles with JEE, the heartbreak with Neha, his quiet fears about the future, and the moments when he felt lost.

She knew him better than anyone else — maybe even better than he knew himself.

Chitra: “Funny, isn’t it? You’re always discovering new things about me, but I feel like I’ve known everything about you since the start.”

Aaditya: *laughs* “That’s because you’ve been paying attention.”

Chitra: “Or maybe because you don’t hide much when you’re with me.”

Aaditya: “Guess I trust you.”

Their friendship was no longer just about shared jokes or casual chats. It had grown into a quiet understanding — a safe space where secrets were shared, fears were laid bare, and dreams were nurtured.

And in that space, something deeper was taking root.

-

When Aaditya Danced

I never thought I’d see the day when Aaditya would willingly dance. The idea alone felt so... impossible. Him — all serious, focused, sometimes a little awkward — moving to music with abandon? It sounded like a dream.

But there we were, in my small room in Prayagraj, the evening sunlight filtering through the curtains, and I had convinced him — or maybe teased him enough — to give dancing a shot.

He was hesitant at first, shifting from foot to foot, eyes darting nervously like a deer caught in headlights.

“Come on, Aaditya,” I coaxed, grinning. “Just one song. No judgments.”

He gave a half-smile, shaking his head. “You’re evil, you know that?”

I laughed, setting the playlist to an old, upbeat track — one of my favorites.

The first few beats filled the room, and Aaditya awkwardly started moving his feet. It was... adorable. Not graceful by any stretch, but genuine.

He flailed his arms, tried a spin, nearly tripped over himself – and I couldn't help but laugh.

“Stop laughing!” he protested, cheeks flushing red. “I told you I'm not made for this.”

But I wasn't laughing to mock him. It was the pure joy of seeing this different side of him – raw, unfiltered, willing to try something new just for me.

After a few more moments, he started loosening up, finding a rhythm in the chaos of his moves. His eyes met mine, shining with a mixture of amusement and vulnerability.

In that moment, I saw more than just my best friend. I saw someone brave enough to step outside his comfort zone, to share a piece of himself he rarely showed.

My heart squeezed a little.

“See? Not bad,” I said softly.

He smiled, breathless but triumphant. “For you, I'll dance anytime.”

And just like that, the distance between us – the unspoken feelings, the past confusions – seemed to shrink.

Because sometimes, it's in the little, imperfect moments that the strongest connections are born.

-

After the dance, Aaditya plopped down on the floor, laughing and catching his breath.

Aaditya: “Okay, I admit — that was way harder than it looks.”

Chitra: *grinning* “Told you! Dancing is an art, not just moving around.”

Aaditya: “Yeah, and I’m definitely no artist.”

Chitra: “But you gave it a shot. That’s what matters.”

He looked at me, eyes soft and a little tired.

Aaditya: “You know... I never thought I’d be able to do this. Not just the dancing, but... opening up, trying something new because you wanted me to.”

Chitra: *quietly* “Sometimes the right people bring out parts of us we didn’t know existed.”

We sat in the silence that followed, the kind that felt comfortable, like two souls simply sharing a space without needing to fill it with words.

Chitra’s perspective:

Watching Aaditya struggle and laugh through those first awkward moves made me realize how much we’d both changed — and how much we’d stayed the same.

He was still the guy who got lost in his thoughts, who sometimes missed the obvious, who wore his heart a little too openly when he trusted someone.

And I... I was still the stubborn, fiery girl who fought over reasons and logic, but who secretly craved someone who understood the silences as much as the words.

In that moment, I saw him — not just my best friend, but something more fragile, more real.

Maybe this was what we'd been tiptoeing around all along: the fear of admitting that our friendship was evolving into something neither of us was quite ready to name yet.

But the dance — his willingness to try, to be a little vulnerable — that said everything words hadn't yet dared to speak.

And I found myself hoping that maybe, just maybe, this was the start of a new rhythm for us — one we'd learn to move to together.

As Aaditya caught his breath, the quiet confidence in his eyes unsettled me—in the best way possible. It was like seeing a glimpse of the man he was becoming, beyond the awkward smiles and scattered thoughts.

I thought about all the times he had stumbled through conversations, misunderstood my moods, and missed the subtle signs I sent. Yet here he was, trying. Not just with the dance, but with me. With us.

Maybe that's what mattered most—not perfection, but the willingness to try, to be vulnerable, to step into the unknown together.

I felt a flutter in my chest, the kind that was both exciting and terrifying.

Could this be more than just friendship? Could we find a rhythm together — imperfect, messy, but ours?

Aaditya's reaction:

He caught my gaze and hesitated for a moment, as if weighing whether to speak or stay silent.

Then, in that soft, uncertain voice I had come to cherish, he said,

“Chitra... I don't know what this is yet. Or where it's going. But... I'm not running away anymore. Not from you, not from this.”

His words settled over me like a warm blanket on a chilly evening.

He reached out, his hand brushing lightly against mine—not a grand gesture, but enough.

“I want to figure it out. With you.”

The room felt charged with possibility, the future uncertain but filled with quiet hope.

And in that shared moment, we both understood that whatever came next, we wouldn't face it alone.

Because sometimes, the first step isn't about having all the answers—it's about choosing to take the step together.

Chapter 13:

“The In-Betweens”

Two years.

Two years of growing up, falling apart, and finding their way back to each other — over and over again.

Chitra was in her second year of college now, buried under submissions, seminars, late-night dance rehearsals, and the occasional existential dread. Aaditya was deep in the labyrinth that was IIT — assignments that barely made sense, professors who seemed to talk in riddles, and a brutal schedule that left little room for breath.

And yet, somehow, through all of this... they still managed to hold on.

Not always tightly, but enough.

11:54 PM – Instagram DM

Aaditya:

Just watched "Tamasha" again. That bit where he breaks down in front of his boss? Brutal.

Chitra:

You finally saw it!? God. Took you long enough. Did it hit you right in the gut though?

Aaditya:

Yeah. Too close to home maybe. Adulthood is a scam, Chits. Let's drop out and open a chai tapri in Himachal.

Chitra:

Only if you let me dance in the mountains after closing hours.

Aaditya:

Deal.

Of course, not every conversation was this dreamy.

They fought. Oh, they *really* fought.

Fights over missed calls.

Fights over "Why didn't you text back?"

Fights over "You didn't sound okay yesterday. Why didn't you just tell me?"

Sometimes the fights were silly.

Sometimes they were a little too real.

But the recovery was always soft. Familiar. Like patching up a tear in your favorite shirt.

1:37 AM – Call (post-fight silence)

Chitra: *(softly)*

"You're annoying, you know that?"

Aaditya:

"Yeah... but you'd miss me if I wasn't, no?"

Chitra:

pauses

"Don't push it."

Aaditya: *(laughs)*

"Okay, okay. Sorry again. I shouldn't have snapped earlier. I was just tired. But that's not an excuse. You matter, and I was being stupid."

Chitra:

"You *are* stupid. But at least you said that last line right."

Then there were the long-distance movie nights.

Laptop screens, play buttons synchronized over countdowns. Snacks on both sides. Her room lit with fairy lights, his with only a dim desk lamp. Sometimes the movies mattered. Sometimes they didn't. Sometimes it was just about sharing time in silence, existing together even when miles apart.

Chitra's Diary – Entry No. 143

He fell asleep mid-way through "Barfi" last night. Again. That idiot. But before he did, he laughed so genuinely during that rooftop scene with Jhilmil, I paused the movie and stared at his frozen frame on the call screen. He's got that stupid dimple that shows up only when he laughs with his whole heart. I don't know what this is. I don't know where we're headed. But I know that moment made my heart feel full.

It wasn't perfect.

But in a world full of disconnects, Aaditya and Chitra had carved out something of their own – messy, tangled, often hard to define, but real.

Some days, they were best friends.

Some days, they were a little more.

Some days, they didn't talk at all – and hated that fact.

But the story continued.

~

Just a Visit, Or Something More?"

It was just another chaotic Thursday afternoon in Prayagraj. The sun was merciless, the air sticky with summer humidity. Chitra had just finished a dance practice that left her hair sticking to her forehead and her throat dry. She walked out of the auditorium, phone in hand, scrolling through an oddly quiet conversation thread.

Aaditya hadn't replied in two days.

That wasn't like him.

There was a strange void – not loud, but noticeable. That uncomfortable stillness you feel when someone who usually takes up space in your everyday suddenly doesn't.

She unlocked her scooter, mumbling to herself.

"Probably swamped. Stupid IITians and their endless quizzes."

And then, from behind her:

“Hey, Chits.”

She froze. That voice was too familiar to mistake. Too real to imagine.

She turned.

There he stood — bag slung over one shoulder, wearing that old grey tee she used to tease him about because it made him look “too sincere.” Hair messy, eyes slightly tired, but smiling like he had all the time in the world.

“What— what are you—?” she stuttered, heart skipping in a way she wasn’t prepared for.

“I was in Lucknow for a project thing. Took a bus. Thought I’d visit.”

“You thought you’d visit?” she repeated, blinking in disbelief. “Aaditya, this isn’t some coffee shop two blocks away. You’re in *Prayagraj*!”

He shrugged with a grin. “Yeah, well... You said you’ve been tired lately. I figured you could use some chai and bun maska. From your new favorite stall.”

She stared at him for a long second, lips parting, words failing.

Then:

“You’re insane.”

“But you’re smiling,” he replied.

Later, at the chai stall – under the dim yellow light

They sat on a bench which reminded them of a time when they used to talk for hours during school breaks. Except now they were older, this was a different place. There was more space between them – both physical and emotional – but it didn't feel uncomfortable.

"You didn't tell me you were coming," she said softly, stirring her chai even though it didn't need it.

"I wanted to see your real reaction."

"You're lucky I didn't faint."

He chuckled.

She looked at him sideways, sipping slowly. "So... just chai and a surprise visit, huh?"

"Why, what else did you think?" he asked, raising an eyebrow.

She didn't answer.

Instead, she placed her cup down and said, "You're still terrible at replying to texts."

"You're still terrible at taking compliments," he shot back.

"Last week I told you your poetry post was beautiful and all I got was a 'shut up, duffer.'"

She laughed, leaning back against the bench. For a second, everything felt like it used to. All those tiny walls they'd built in the months apart seemed to blur, and there was nothing but the two of them in that moment.

A quiet pause.

Then he said, without looking at her, “I missed you. A lot.”

That made her heart stutter again.

She didn’t say anything. But she didn’t need to.

Because the look she gave him — a mix of warmth, shyness, and that familiar spark — was enough to say it back.

They didn’t hold hands.

They didn’t confess love.

But something had shifted.

Maybe not dramatically.

Maybe not loudly.

But it was there — in the chai, the silence, the soft way she smiled at him, and the way he never took his eyes off her for the rest of the evening.

And sometimes, that’s all it takes.

~

They had dinner at a simple local place—nothing fancy, just one of those quiet, tucked-away dhabas where the rotis came hot and the lights were yellow and tired. Chitra sat across from him, stirring her buttermilk lazily.

Chitra:

“So... remember I told you about that guy from my literature elective?”

Aaditya looked up, mid-bite.

“Which one? The guy who borrowed your notes or the guy who talks like a TED talk on speed?”

She chuckled. “Neither. The one who once offered to walk me back to my hostel because it was raining?”

“Ohh, *that* guy.” He rolled his eyes playfully, but his shoulders tensed a little.

Chitra:

“He proposed.”

There was a pause.

The sound of distant traffic outside felt louder for a second.

Aaditya tried to stay neutral. “When?”

Chitra:

“A month ago.”

He nodded slowly. Focused on his plate. Picked at the naan even though he wasn’t hungry anymore.

“Wow. Okay. And...?”

Chitra: (*with a faint smirk*)

“I said no, obviously.”

Aaditya looked up, caught her gaze. She was staring at him like she was trying to catch something flickering in his eyes.

Chitra:

“You’re quiet.”

He shrugged. “What do you want me to say? ‘Good job rejecting him?’”

Chitra:

“Not really. But I thought you’d at least ask why.”

He did want to. Badly. But his throat dried up a little. His eyes betrayed him, though—they flickered, faltered, showed more than they were supposed to.

Chitra:

“You’re doing that thing again.”

“What thing?”

Chitra:

“That look you give me when you’re not saying something, but you want to.”

He tried to laugh it off. “I don’t have a look.”

Chitra:

“You absolutely do.”

She leaned forward. “Say it.”

He looked at her, face unreadable for a moment, then softened with a crooked smile.

Aaditya:

“It’s nothing. I guess I’m just glad you’re... not with someone who wouldn’t get your weird chai obsession and your dramatic diary rants.”

Chitra: *(laughing)*

“Wow. Such a smooth deflection.”

He smiled, but inside, it twisted a little.

Because what he wanted to say was—

“I hated the idea of someone else thinking they had the right to your late-night overthinking, to your chai moods, to your quiet.”

But he didn’t.

So he just changed the topic. And smiled through it.

But Chitra had already seen more than he thought he let slip.

~

Excerpt from Chitra’s Diary

Date: The Night He Came to Prayagraj

I don’t know what made me bring up that guy tonight.

Maybe I wanted to see if his eyes would flicker. Maybe I just wanted to say it out loud and watch what he does with the silence that follows.

And he did flicker. Just for a second. That tiny storm in his eyes—like someone moved the curtains in a very quiet room.

He pretended not to care, of course. Classic Aaditya. Picked up the naan like it was suddenly the most interesting piece of bread in the universe. Smiled like he always does when he wants to hide behind a sentence. But I know him better now. I know when the silence is loud inside him.

And for a moment...

God, I wish he had said something more.

Not that I wanted a confession. Not that I expected him to say *anything*. But a part of me... a really ridiculous, girly part of me wanted him to admit it. That he felt something. Even if it was something small.

I don't want love right now. I don't even know if I believe in it.

But I want to matter.

To him.

Maybe that's selfish. Maybe I should've just enjoyed the dinner without turning it into an emotional landmine. But that's not me. Not with him.

I never have to pretend with Aaditya.

And maybe that's the most dangerous part of all this.

Because the more real it feels...

The harder it will be... if he ever decides to walk away.

You know, it's funny... how we can say something out loud and yet every part of us is screaming something else entirely.

Tonight, after dinner, we were walking back—nothing dramatic, just us being us. Talking about music, his messed-up hostel food, and the guy who proposed to me a while ago. I don't know why I told him. Maybe I wanted to see his reaction. Maybe I just needed to hear his silence.

But when I mentioned it, his eyes flickered—just for a second. Like someone who heard something they didn't want to, but quickly masked it with a crooked smile. He didn't say much. Typical him. But I saw it. That little dent in his confidence. That momentary

shift in his body language. He doesn't realize how much I pick up on.

And then we said it again. That line. "Best friends."

I said it. He repeated it. We even smiled. But I don't know... it didn't feel like the truth tonight. It felt like a curtain we both agreed to keep up because neither of us is brave enough to walk past it.

When he said "Goodnight, Chits," I almost turned around and said— "But what if we're not just that?"

But I didn't. I smiled, turned, walked into the gate, and wrote this instead.

We're both cowards. Sweet, silly cowards who keep calling this 'friendship' just to avoid how complicated the truth might be.

~

Aaditya's Thoughts – That Same Night

She told me about some guy who proposed to her. Some random guy from college. She laughed it off, said it wasn't serious. I laughed too. At least I think I did.

But my stomach twisted. And my smile felt too tight on my face. You know that feeling when you suddenly feel like the floor beneath you just shifted, but you're still pretending everything's stable? Yeah... that.

It's not like I have a right to feel anything. We're best friends, right? That's what we say. That's what we've always been.

But lately, when she talks, I catch myself looking at her lips instead of listening to the words. When she laughs, something warm and terrifying stirs in my chest. And tonight... when she talked about that guy, something else stirred. Something cold. Ugly. Insecure.

I walked her back. We joked. Talked about stupid things. And somewhere in that conversation, she said it again— "We're just best friends."

I echoed it. Because what else could I say? I've never been great with emotions. I solve math equations, not feelings.

But the truth is... every time she says "best friend," it feels like a pause. Like she's waiting to see if I'll correct her. Like I'm waiting to see if she'll take it back.

I watched her walk inside the gate, all calm and collected. Meanwhile, I stood there like an idiot—half in love, half in denial, and fully confused.

Maybe I should've said something tonight. Maybe I should've asked about that guy. Maybe I should've told her I don't want to be just her best friend anymore.

But I didn't. Coward, aren't I?

~

Same Night – After Dinner

The dinner had been casual on the surface—laughter, shared bites, inside jokes tossed around like warm blankets. But underneath it all, something was shifting. They both felt it. Neither acknowledged it.

The streetlights cast a soft yellow glow as they walked slowly back toward her place, their steps quieter now, not because they had nothing to say—but because they didn't know how to say it.

Aaditya kicked a pebble along the road. Chitra tucked her hands into her jacket sleeves, her fingers cold, or maybe just nervous.

“So...” he said, glancing sideways. “You still writing in that diary of yours?”

Chitra smiled, “Of course. You think I'll ever stop?”

“Just checking,” he said, his hands shoved deep in his pockets. “That thing probably knows more about me than I do.”

She chuckled softly, but didn't say anything.

They kept walking.

And then, in a pause too long to be comfortable, Aaditya turned slightly toward her.

“It's good, you know... that we're still like this,” he said.

“Like what?” she asked, genuinely curious.

“You know... us. Best friends.”

There it was—that term. “Best friends.”

Chitra nodded slowly. “Yeah,” she said, but the word hung mid-air between them like a question. Not quite agreement. Not quite protest.

A beat.

“Right. Best friends,” Aaditya repeated, almost as if he were trying to convince himself.

But the tone wasn’t playful. It was uncertain. Tender. Maybe even... lost.

She looked at him then, really looked. His jaw was clenched like he was holding back thoughts. His eyes flickered—on hers, off hers.

The silence that followed wasn’t awkward. It was loud.

Neither of them said it aloud, but in that tiny hesitation, that microsecond of eye contact, both of them knew—*best friends* didn’t fully explain what they were anymore. But neither of them had a better word for it.

Not yet.

And so they walked on, side by side.

Not just friends.

Not lovers.

Not strangers.

Something in-between.

Something fragile and slowly growing.

And in that quiet, undefined space, they let the night hold the answer. For now.

~

Next Morning

Two cities. Two rooms. One silence.

The sun broke lazily over Prayagraj, pouring golden light through the cream curtains of Chitra's small room. She was already awake, had been for a while. Not reading. Not writing. Just lying there, tracing the slow-moving fan above her, letting her thoughts spill and spin inside her head like restless dancers.

She could still hear his voice from last night.

"Best friends."

She said it too.

They both did.

And yet, it didn't feel complete. It didn't feel real. It felt like... putting a tiny lid on a boiling kettle. The steam still found ways to escape.

She curled on her side, clutching her pillow as if it would answer the confusion instead of just absorbing it.

"Why does it feel like that word's too small now?" she whispered to herself.

Why did he hesitate? Why did *she*?

He came all the way to see her. He smiled like he saw something new in her. He listened like he remembered every version of her. But when it came to giving a name to it—he backed off. So did she.

Her fingers brushed the edge of her diary on the table beside her. But she didn't reach for it. Not yet. Because some emotions are too raw to be caught in ink. Some mornings are too tangled to be folded into words.

Meanwhile... On a Train Back to IIT

Aaditya sat by the window, watching trees blur past like an old film reel. His bag was beside him, earphones plugged in—but no music played.

He thought about last night. The dinner. The walk. Her face when he said *best friends*. The way her smile faltered for half a second. That tiny second was haunting him now.

He rubbed his thumb over his index finger—his nervous habit—and leaned his head back.

"Why is this so damn complicated?" he muttered under his breath.

He liked her. Maybe more than liked her. But what *was* this? And what if she didn't feel the same? What if it was all in his head—this slow, growing flame that refused to name itself?

And most importantly—what if he said it and lost her altogether?

He closed his eyes, trying to escape his own thoughts, but all he could see was her face across the dinner table, lit softly under the dim lights, laughing at something he said.

He remembered that smile. He'd known it for years. But last night, it felt different. Felt like she was someone he was still discovering, not just remembering.

And yet, he had no clue how to even begin explaining all this—to her, to himself, to anyone.

"Best friends," he whispered.

Even he didn't believe it anymore.

Two Places. One Story.

They both stared at nothing, in their respective corners of the world, feeling everything all at once.

Wanting to talk.

But not knowing how.

Feeling the same.

Yet completely unsure.

Almost lovers.

Still calling it *just friendship*.

Maybe tomorrow they'll talk.

Or maybe not.

But one thing was certain—

This wasn't over.

Not even close.

~

[Excerpt from Chitra's Diary]

Date: A Day After He Left

Location: Prayagraj

I've always believed there's something comforting about the silence right before the city wakes up. When the roads are empty, chai stalls haven't opened, and all you can hear is the breeze brushing past your window... it feels like the world is holding its breath with you.

This morning was one of those.

Aaditya left last night.

I know it's not forever. But it felt heavier than it should have. Like a chapter just closed but the story didn't know what the next one was.

We said *best friends*.

But we hesitated.

And that hesitation... was loud. Too loud for a label that once came so easily.

Why is it that something so familiar now feels... unsure?

Maybe it's just me overthinking—again. That's my toxic trait, isn't it?

I overthink everything.

How he looked at me.

How he didn't.

The way he smiled mid-sentence like something else was playing in his head.

The way he didn't hold my hand when it felt like he wanted to.

The way *I* didn't let myself ask him to.

So, here I am—back in my little world of messy feelings, unfinished thoughts, and dance playlists that help me breathe.

Dancing has been my therapy lately.

Every time my brain won't stop spinning stories, I let my feet do the talking.

Twisting, turning, floating... like if I move enough, maybe the noise in my head will quiet down.

Also, I've been singing again. Nothing professional. Just late-night, off-key humming while watering my plants or doing my laundry. And you know what? It helps. Even if the songs don't make sense, they help me feel.

To cope with the chaos in my head, I did something else too.

I started a little space on Instagram.

It's called **@chitraaa_writes**.

Three A's because just "chitrawrites" was taken... and because Aaditya always joked that I stretch my name like a drama queen. (*chitrrrraaaaa!*)

I haven't told anyone about the page yet. It's mostly small poems, late-night thoughts, scribbles that never made it to this diary. My digital safe space. Maybe one day I'll tell him. Or maybe it'll remain my quiet rebellion against the noise in my head.

Sometimes, I feel like if I could just sit with him for one more day... maybe we'd talk about it. Maybe we'd stop dancing around words.

But then again, maybe this is who we are.

Almost. Nearly. Not quite.

Best friends—with quotation marks.

Anyway, for now—I dance.

I sing.

I write.

And I survive.

Until the next chapter writes itself.

— *Chitra*

Chapter 14:

Unspoken, Unforgotten

Time has a strange way of folding things.

One moment, you're laughing over bun maska and chai, the next—you're back on your own path, surrounded by classmates, assignments, societies, and a new circle of people... none of whom know the entire backstory behind that soft pause in your voice when someone mentions a familiar name.

It had been over a month since Aaditya had come to Prayagraj.

Since then, something had shifted.

Not drastically. Not with anger or dramatic exits.

Just... distance. The soft kind.

The kind you don't notice until it lingers long enough to become routine.

The calls became fewer.

Chats now began with “Hey, it’s been long!” instead of “Ugh, listen to what happened today!”

And yet—neither of them said anything.

But here’s the strange bit.

Every time Aaditya sat at the college café, he picked a table with two chairs—always leaving one untouched.

Sometimes beside him. Sometimes across.
And he never placed his bag on that chair.

As if that space... belonged to someone else.

Chitra, on the other hand, had developed a similar habit.
She would often find herself sitting on the library terrace
during the golden hour, earbuds in, staring out at the
sky... always with an extra seat next to her.
Untouched. Waiting.

Not that they didn't talk at all.
They did. Occasionally. Casually. With politeness and a
touch of warmth.
But the firecrackers? The chaotic excitement? The
impulsive mid-day calls?
Gone.

And yet, not a single day went by without one of them
thinking of the other.

Scene: Aaditya's college campus café

(He's sitting alone, stirring cold coffee with a spoon that's clinking against the glass. The second chair across him is empty. He looks at it for a long time.)

Friend: "Waiting for someone?"

Aaditya (smiling faintly): "Not today. Just... force of habit."

He didn't say it out loud, but that chair was always hers.
Even if she wasn't there.

Scene: Chitra's hostel terrace – golden hour

She sat with her diary open, pen hovering over the page, blank for fifteen minutes now. She wasn't sure what to write.

The wind was brushing her hair over her eyes, and for a second, she turned her head, imagining someone was sitting beside her.

She smiled at the thought.

No, not smiled. She exhaled.

Like her thoughts were gently pressing down on her chest.

Chitra's Notes app draft (never sent):

"It's funny how someone can occupy so much of your silence.

Even when they're not around, they sit beside you, in empty chairs, in songs, in moments when laughter feels familiar.

And the weirdest part?

I don't even know if you feel the same."

Aaditya's WhatsApp draft (also never sent):

"Do you also avoid filling the chair next to you sometimes?"

Or is that just me holding on to something we never spoke about?"

Both drafts stayed unsent.

Both chairs stayed empty.

But the feeling? Always full. Always present.

The absence was the loudest part of their everyday life now.

And even though time was moving forward, one thing was clear—

neither of them wanted to forget.

~

It had been weeks. Not that they were counting days like before, but there was still a quiet ache behind every notification that wasn't from each other.

Then, one afternoon, as Chitra stood backstage, waiting to perform at a college fest, her phone buzzed. It was a mention. On Instagram. From a college page reposting her dance video.

And there it was—**Aaditya's username in the likes.**

A heartbeat skipped.

She hadn't told him about the performance. Hell, she hadn't even posted it on her personal story. But he had found it, watched it, and liked it.

No text. Just that.

Later that night, while lying in bed, debating whether to open that chat or not, she saw the typing dots.

Aaditya:

You were amazing.

I didn't even know you could move like that. I mean, I knew you danced... but that was something else, Chits.

She stared at the screen for longer than she should have, her thumb hovering over the keyboard.

Chitra:

Thank you... didn't expect you to see it actually.

You liked it?

Aaditya:

Of course I did. I always did.

Even when you danced alone in corridors.

Even when you danced with your eyes closed.

A pause.

A lump in her throat.

She typed, deleted, typed again.

Chitra:

You didn't write to me after meeting that day. It's okay. Just... felt strange.

Aaditya left it on "seen" for five minutes. Maybe more.

Then—

Aaditya:

I didn't know what to say, Chitra. That dinner. The empty words. The word "best friend" felt... off. But I didn't have a

better one.

Still don't.

She didn't reply. She didn't have one either.

Meanwhile, in a different part of the city...

Aaditya was at a café, trying to be normal with someone new—a girl from his robotics club. She was sweet. Funny, even. She smiled when he spoke, touched his arm when she laughed.

But as he sat across from her, all he could think of was how Chitra holds her cup with both hands when she's cold, how her laugh bursts out when she tries not to, how she finishes her sentences with "you know?" even when he doesn't.

The girl in front of him asked, "You look distracted... thinking of someone?"

He smiled. Halfheartedly. "Yeah, kind of. Old friend."

"You should call them sometime."

He nodded, sipping his coffee. But that empty chair beside him, the one he had subconsciously left unoccupied, said enough.

Later that night...

Chitra lay on her bed, scrolling through messages. She saw Aaditya's last text again.

"Still don't."

Still don't have a better word.

She opened her notes app. Then her diary. Then didn't write anything at all.

She just whispered into the silence:

"Yeah. Me too."

~

Final year.

For most people, it was about placements, final projects, farewell events, and countdowns to "lasts."

For Aaditya and Chitra, it was about unfinished sentences, unspoken confessions, and that one big question neither dared to ask:

What are we really?

They had grown up, separately but somehow still tethered.

Long calls turned into short catch-ups.

Reels shared with "this reminded me of you" became fewer.

Birthday texts were still a must. But they didn't stay for long conversations afterward.

Still, something lingered in the silence.

—

Chitra sat on her hostel terrace in Prayagraj one evening, watching the sky go from saffron to indigo.

She'd just wrapped her final thesis review and felt that familiar sting—she had done it, completed her degree... but she didn't feel done.

She messaged him, instinctively.

Chitra:

Hey, how's your final project going?

Aaditya:

Just submitted the last bit. It's weird, no? Four years just... vanished.

Chitra:

Yeah. It's like... time swallowed us whole.

Do you remember our first phone call after school?

Aaditya:

Of course I do.

I was pacing the rooftop. You were humming something and told me I never listened.

I listened.

She smiled. The kind of smile that comes with warmth... and ache.

Chitra:

So what now?

It wasn't about the degree. The job. The city.

It was about them.

Aaditya:

I don't know. You tell me?

She left it there.

Not because she didn't want to answer—but because she didn't know how to.

Meanwhile...

Aaditya was back at home after college. Surrounded by relatives asking about placements, future plans, and marriage (already?!), he kept glancing at his phone.

It buzzed again—this time not Chitra. Just a recruiter.

He scrolled to her chat.

He thought about that evening he saw her in Prayagraj again. The one where she told him about the guy who had proposed to her. The one where neither of them could say they were “just best friends” without hesitating.

He had replayed that dinner in his head a thousand times since.

What if he had said something that day?

What if she had?

What if...

Too many what-ifs.

So he typed again.

Aaditya:

Do you ever feel like we left something halfway?

The typing dots appeared.

Then disappeared.

Then appeared again.

Chitra:

Every day.

He took a deep breath.

So did she.

But neither said the next line.

Because “What now?” is a loaded question.

Because the fear of losing what they had—even if undefined—was far greater than the desire to define it.

They were both standing at the edge of something, just waiting for the other to jump first.

~

All this time, while Aaditya was exchanging late-night messages with Chitra, wondering about their undefined bond, there was someone else.

A girl from his college.

A sweet, confident, and funny girl who got along well with his friends, who laughed at his dry jokes, and who didn’t demand too much emotional decoding.

And maybe that’s exactly why he let it happen.

It wasn’t love. But it wasn’t meaningless either.

They went on walks around campus, shared notes, went for coffee runs, and slowly began appearing in each other’s stories.

Everyone assumed they were a thing.

He didn't correct them.

Not because he was in love.

But because... he thought it was safer.

Safer than confronting the mess of feelings he had every time he saw Chitra's name flash on his screen.

Safer than risking something so precious—their years of connection, laughter, even fights—for something he himself couldn't name.

And honestly? Maybe he just wasn't sure.

Maybe it was guilt.

Or timing.

Or fear.

Or maybe...

Maybe he simply thought she didn't feel the same.

And so he stayed with this girl. Sweet. Safe. Predictable.

But here's the thing about hearts—you can't distract them forever.

Every time Chitra laughed over a call...

Every time she sent a poem from her "chitraaa_writes" page...

Every time she danced in the background during video calls thinking he wasn't watching...

Something tugged.

Not loudly.

Not enough to force change.

But just enough to never let him settle.

He'd catch himself staring at this girl from college and wondering why her smile didn't make him feel like gravity had shifted.

He would kiss her and wonder if Chitra would hate him for this.

But he never told Chitra.

Not once.

Not until now.

And maybe...

Maybe he wouldn't tell her at all.

Because how do you confess something when you're not even sure what you're confessing?

That you like someone else?

That you're confused?

That you're afraid of breaking the one thing in your life that has always felt safe—her?

So, no.

We may never know why he chose silence over truth.

Maybe even he doesn't.

And that...

That's what makes this story so painfully, heartbreakingly real.

~

Half Answers and Hidden Canvases

While all this was quietly, chaotically unfolding in Aaditya's world, Chitra was creating a world of her own.

Her Instagram page, *@chitraaa_writes*, was slowly becoming a space of comfort—for her, and for hundreds of strangers who somehow saw pieces of themselves in her words.

Aesthetic posts about fleeting love, loud laughter hiding quieter sadness, chai on rainy evenings, and verses about two people almost in love but never really saying it.

She never named names.

But Aaditya was always between the lines.

She had also started painting again—something she had stopped after school ended. Her walls slowly filled with abstract emotions, faces that looked like blurred reflections of herself, and colors that told stories of days when she felt too much.

College was almost over now.

Just a few presentations, some final submissions, and then everything she knew would scatter like paper after the wind.

She kept herself busy.

Busy enough to ignore the ache of watching people around her fall in love, go on dates, post couple reels, and find clarity in places where she only found questions.

Because Chitra... she had proposals too.

More than a few.

Boys from college—some genuine, some just curious.

But she said no to every single one of them.

Not because she was waiting.

Not exactly.

But because every time she imagined someone else... she saw Aaditya's face instead.

And that scared her.

Because she didn't even *know* if she had the right to feel that way.

After all, they were *best friends*, weren't they?

Except... were they still?

Some days, they didn't talk for weeks.

Other days, they'd randomly call and talk for hours like nothing ever changed.

But something *had* changed.

Chitra could feel it in the pauses between texts.

In the slight formality that crept into their chats.

In the fact that Aaditya didn't tell her *everything* anymore.

Once upon a time, she was the first person he shared his highs and lows with.

Now?

She found out things from his friends' stories.

And maybe it wasn't a big deal.

But to someone like Chitra—who noticed every shift in tone, every missed heartbeat—it was.

Still... she never asked.

Because what would she even say?

"Hey, are you still mine in ways we never admitted?"

"Do you still think of me when you're laughing with someone else?"

She wouldn't say those things.

So instead, she painted.

She wrote.

She overthought.

She filled the empty spaces in her life with poetry, chai, and yes, even rewatching old voice notes from him on lonely nights.

All while telling herself: *"It's okay. You're just his best friend. That's all."*

But deep down, she didn't quite believe it.

~

Excerpt from Chitra's Diary

22nd March – 1:17 AM

I'm tired of pretending like it's all okay.

It's funny how I have so many followers now—strangers who tell me I understand them. Strangers who tell me I write about their lives.

And yet, the one person I wish would understand mine... doesn't.

Or maybe he does.

Maybe he's just scared, like I am.

He used to be the first notification I'd wake up to.

Now he's just... a random ping in the afternoon.

Or worse, silence.

I don't want to overthink. But how do you stop overthinking someone you never stopped feeling for?

Today someone told me I look happier these days. I smiled and nodded.

They didn't know I cried myself to sleep two nights ago over a guy who still calls me his best friend but has someone else calling him hers.

I miss us.

The "us" that never officially existed, yet meant more to me than most real things in life.

I wish he'd just ask—

"Chitra, are we more than this?"

And I'd finally be brave enough to say—

"God, I hope so."

Instagram Post from @chitraaa_writes

A blurred photo of two empty chairs facing each other in a café, captioned:

"It's always the unspoken things that hurt the most.

Not the silence... but the fact that we both learned how to

live inside it.”

— #notapoemjustafeeling

Kanpur was quieter than they remembered. Or maybe they had just become louder in their own heads over the years. College had ended. No final, dramatic goodbyes. No closure. Just last exams, a few tearful hugs, and emails about convocation ceremonies they weren't sure they would attend.

Chitra had quietly moved back to Kanpur two weeks ago. Her room, though familiar, now felt unfamiliar. Walls that once knew her every shade of silence now watched her with an awkward stillness. She had set up her tiny art desk again—canvases with half-painted hopes and cups filled with brushes she hadn't touched in days.

Aaditya had returned just a week earlier. He didn't announce it to anyone. He didn't want to. He was still figuring things out. The relationship he had in college had ended during the final semester—a quiet drift more than a dramatic collapse. He hadn't even told Chitra.

Maybe because they barely spoke these days.

Maybe because he didn't know what to say anymore.

Maybe because the “best friends” label was stretched thin across years of unspoken things.

And then... it happened.

A rainy Sunday morning.

Kanpur's old bookstore.

The one they both had visited when they were in school—the one near Civil Lines with creaking wooden floors and dusty poetry shelves.

Chitra walked in, drenched slightly from the drizzle, hair tied up in a messy bun, wearing a faded sweatshirt and holding a takeaway coffee. She wasn't here to buy a book. She just wanted to hide for a while.

And there he was.

Aaditya.

Standing at the far end of the poetry section, flipping through a Rumi collection.

She froze.

And he... didn't notice her at first.

But as he looked up, his eyes caught hers—and he blinked once, maybe twice, as if confirming this wasn't one of those daydreams he had of her.

“Chitra?”

“Aaditya.”

Just two words. And then that same silence that once existed between them when they had nothing and everything to say.

She gave a small smile, “Didn't know you were back.”

“I didn't either. Not really.”

They both chuckled lightly. The kind of laugh that is heavy with history.

A moment passed.

A long one.

And then—

“Want to get chai?” he asked.

“Sure. I’m always up for chai,” she said, her smile growing.

And just like that, something long paused... prolonged.

Later that evening, sitting at a roadside chai place (not *their* old one, just a new familiar)

They talked about the little things first.

Graduation.

Convocation ceremonies neither attended.

Family.

Career confusion.

He told her he hadn’t written code in weeks. She told him her art page had 13K followers now.

They laughed.

They paused.

They tried to be normal.

And then, there was silence again—only this time it wasn’t awkward. It was filled with something both of them understood but were afraid to name.

Chitra stirred her chai.

“You know, for a moment, I thought we’d never meet again,” she said softly, eyes fixed on the steam rising from her cup.

Aaditya nodded, swallowing. “Yeah... me too.”

He looked at her.

Something in his eyes had changed. Or maybe it had always been there—just clouded by confusion and time and... other people.

She looked at him too. Really looked.

And somehow, in that shared gaze—neither of them said “best friends.”

Not this time.

Because that label no longer fit.

But neither of them knew what would.

Not yet.

They were laughing now—Chitra had just finished recounting how she accidentally used white acrylic paint thinking it was moisturizer during a late-night painting session.

Aaditya was mid-sip of his chai when he chuckled, “Only you could turn into a walking canvas by accident.”

She nudged him lightly. “You’re just jealous of my multitasking skills.”

He was about to say something back—something like “you’ve always been good at creating beauty out of chaos”—

but he stopped. Not because he didn't want to say it, but because at that exact moment, a voice called out:

“Aadi?”

Both their heads turned.

There she was.

Aaditya's girlfriend from college. Anika.

In a sleek grey hoodie, ripped jeans, and the kind of confidence that only came when someone knew they still had an emotional hold over you.

Chitra straightened in her chair. She didn't say anything. Aaditya looked stunned for a second, as if someone had hit pause on a happy movie.

“Anika?” he blinked, placing his chai down.

“I've been calling you, didn't think I'd find you here,” she said, eyes flicking toward Chitra with a polite-but-not-really smile. “Hey, I'm Anika.”

Chitra, ever poised, smiled faintly. “Hi.”

“Sorry to barge in. I was just in the neighborhood... and Kanpur's small. I saw your bike outside.”

Chitra looked down at her half-empty cup. Her fingers instinctively wrapped around it like it was something to hold on to.

Aaditya stood awkwardly between them for a beat. “Uh... we were just catching up.”

Anika gave a soft laugh, one that didn't quite reach her eyes. "I can see that."

She sat down beside Aaditya without being asked. "You didn't text me back after our last talk. Are we still ignoring things or...?"

Now the air shifted.

Chitra's gaze didn't meet Aaditya's.

He was caught—emotionally and literally—between a past relationship that hadn't quite ended and something unspoken that hadn't quite begun.

"I... didn't know what to say," Aaditya mumbled.

Anika raised an eyebrow. "That we're done? That you've moved on? Or haven't you?"

Chitra quietly stood up, brushing her hands on her kurti.

"I should probably get going," she said, without looking at either of them.

Aaditya instinctively reached out, "Chitra, wait—"

"It's okay," she interrupted, her tone calm but final. "We all have unfinished chapters, right?"

With that, she nodded once at Anika, gave Aaditya the smallest, saddest smile she had ever worn, and walked away.

Anika leaned back, arms crossed. "She seems... important."

Aaditya watched Chitra's figure fade into the Kanpur crowd.

And for the first time in a long, long time—
he didn't know who he was chasing anymore.
Or who he had just lost.
Or whether he had ever really made a choice in the first
place.

Aaditya stood frozen.

The warmth from the chai cup was still lingering on his
palms, but everything else inside him had gone cold.

He turned to look at Anika, sitting there with folded arms
and raised eyebrows, still waiting for some kind of response,
some clarity he never truly gave her.

But his eyes—his mind—his heart...

They were already following Chitra's fading silhouette as
she walked away.

The heaviness in his chest wasn't unfamiliar. It was the
same kind he had felt years ago when Chitra had left for
Prayagraj... the same kind he felt when they used to fight,
and he never quite knew how to say the right thing... and
now, it returned with a new weight.

A regret.

A realization.

She had walked away again.

But this time, it wasn't because of distance, time, or
college.

This time, it was because of him.

Aaditya sat down again slowly, still staring in the direction she had gone. His voice barely a whisper.

“...She was never supposed to walk away again.”

Anika raised an eyebrow. “Sorry?”

Aaditya turned to her, eyes clearing, jaw tightening as if some internal decision had just been made—one that had been marinating for too long already.

“I think you’re right,” he said quietly.

“About?”

“We’re done.”

Anika blinked. “That’s it?”

He nodded. “That’s it. We’ve both known it for a while, haven’t we?”

Anika didn't argue. She just studied his face for a moment before standing up. “You know, I always had a feeling about her. I guess I just didn’t expect you to take so long to have one too.”

And with that, she left.

Aaditya sat there, alone now. The sun was lower. The crowd around him louder. But inside, it was just silence.

He glanced at the empty seat across him—the one Chitra had just been sitting on, laughing about paint and stories.

That chair had always been meant for her.

Not just today.
But every day before this.
And maybe every day after.

He leaned forward, elbows on the table, hands over his mouth.

“What if I’m already too late?”

The thought hit him hard, heavy, and real.
Because for once... he didn’t want to call her just to talk.
He wanted to run.
To show up.
To say something that didn’t sound like *just friends*.

But the thing is—
Even now, with everything in him knowing what she meant to him...

He still didn’t know how to say it.

And that’s where we leave him for now—
Staring at an empty chair.
Realizing, too late, that sometimes silence speaks louder than confessions.

And that maybe, the words he didn’t say...
were the ones that mattered the most.

Chitra’s Perspective

She walked away from the chai stall, the cool Kanpur drizzle mixing with the warmth rising from her tear-filled eyes. The streets blurred around her—sounds, colors, faces—all fading into a haze. Her heart thudded painfully, a rhythm she hadn’t anticipated when she decided to come back.

Why did it have to be like this?

Why did the universe have to throw them together only to remind her of what wasn't theirs anymore?

She pulled out her phone, fingers trembling, ready to type something—anything—to him. But her thumb hovered over the send button and then retreated. What could she say? How could she explain the ache of seeing him caught between her and someone else?

The weight of “best friend” felt heavier than ever, a label she wore like a mask now—fitting, but hollow beneath.

Her mind replayed his hesitant eyes, the way he tried to bridge two worlds but was pulled apart by both.

She stopped near a quiet park bench, sat down, and let the silence seep in. Somehow, this silence was louder than any argument they'd ever had.

Her diary would say it all tonight.

But for now, she whispered to herself:

“Maybe some meetings aren't meant to fix things... just remind us what we lost.”

Aaditya's Perspective

Sitting alone at the chai stall, the empty chair across from him a harsh reminder of what just slipped through his fingers, Aaditya's thoughts spun wildly.

He had thought he was ready. Thought he could finally let go of the past and move on. But the moment he saw her—really saw her—something inside cracked open.

It wasn't just nostalgia. It was a realization. A quiet, aching truth.

He wanted to hold her hand. To say the words that tangled in his throat for years. But the timing, the fear, the unspoken history all paralyzed him.

His conversation with Anika was the final push, but it didn't bring relief—only the gnawing question of whether it was too late.

He stared at the rain-slicked street outside and admitted to himself:

"I don't want to lose her again—not as a friend, not as anything."

Yet, he had no map, no words, no courage to navigate the space between them.

All he had was the silence that followed her footsteps as she disappeared into the city.

Two hearts, same city, tangled in unspoken feelings and unresolved pasts—each processing the day in their own quiet, aching way.

Chitra's thoughts, later that night

Lying in bed, the soft glow of her phone screen was the only light in the room. She stared at the blank message box for what felt like hours, fingers twitching with the urge to reach out—but she didn't.

Because deep down, she knew.

They had crossed a line today that couldn't be uncrossed. The way he looked at her wasn't just friendship anymore—but neither of them dared to say it aloud.

And maybe that was for the best.

Maybe some feelings were better left unspoken, some roads better left untraveled.

She whispered to herself, *"We lost something today. Not because we stopped caring, but because we cared too much and got scared to ruin what we had."*

Her heart ached, but the pain was bittersweet. A quiet acceptance settling in.

"Maybe this is how it's meant to be. Best friends... and nothing more."

Aaditya's perspective, moments later

Staring out his window at the flickering city lights, Aaditya felt the same heavy weight pressing down.

He thought about the empty chair across from him—the empty space where she should have been.

His mind replayed the day: her smile, her silence, the way she walked away without looking back.

And then the harsh truth hit him like a wave.

"We lost her today."

Not because she left the city. Not because they grew apart in distance.

But because something fragile between them broke—a chance, a possibility, a future he'd quietly hoped for.

He sighed deeply.

"Maybe we were never meant for more. Maybe this is all we can be—best friends with unspoken 'what ifs'."

It hurt.

But maybe, just maybe, it was for the better.

Because some stories aren't about beginnings or endings.

They're about the beautiful, complicated middle.

Both carrying the same silent ache, wondering if their story was destined to be a friendship etched with forever questions—without answers.

~

After that day, Aaditya and Chitra didn't talk for quite some time.

Neither of them knew what to say. Words seemed insufficient, or maybe too heavy—too loaded with meaning neither wanted to face. They were both distracted, caught in their own whirlpools of thoughts and doubts.

Each lost in their own world, wrestling silently with the idea of what their friendship really meant now.

To everyone else, they were just “best friends”—the label they’d given themselves so long ago. But to them, it had become something so much more complicated, so fragile, it was impossible to just pick up where they left off.

For Aaditya, the silence wasn’t as suffocating. The moment Chitra stood up and walked away that day—right in front of him and Anika—something settled inside him.

He knew, deep down, he had lost her.

But for Chitra... somewhere beneath the surface of her quiet retreat was a flicker of hope. A small, stubborn part of her wanted him to run after her, to hold her hand and say, “Stay.”

If only he had understood that. If only he had seen that unspoken plea.

Then maybe—just maybe—the story would have taken a different turn.

The chair remained empty.

The words remained unsaid.

And the question lingered in the silence:

What if?

Chapter 15: Alone, Together

Chitra's Journey

Kanpur felt quieter these days.

The familiar streets, the chai stalls, the old songs on the radio—all the things she once found comfort in now seemed tinged with a subtle sadness. Her laughter came less easily, her smiles a little more guarded.

Her diary was her refuge. Pages filled with inked emotions—frustrations, hopes, confessions she wouldn't dare voice aloud.

Dancing became her escape. When the world felt heavy, she would lose herself in the rhythm, letting the music wash away the ache of unanswered questions and silent goodbyes.

Her Instagram, *chitraaa_writes*, grew steadily—not just a collection of words, but a place where she poured her soul, connecting with strangers who understood the unspoken.

Yet, every time her phone buzzed, a small hope flickered—maybe it was him.

But the silence remained unbroken.

She learned to live with it, convincing herself that some distances, no matter how painful, were necessary.

That sometimes love meant letting go.

~

Chitra's Day in Kanpur

The morning sun filtered softly through the curtains of Chitra's room. She sat cross-legged on the floor, a notebook balanced on her lap, scribbling furiously.

The words flowed like a river—thoughts she couldn't voice, emotions she bottled deep inside. Her pen moved faster than her doubts.

Outside, the sounds of Kanpur stirred awake—vendors calling, traffic humming, children laughing.

Chitra paused, glanced at her phone lying silent beside her, and sighed.

Her Instagram page, *chitraaa_writes*, was alive with comments and hearts. Strangers connected to her words, yet none of those messages filled the quiet space left by one person.

Later, she would slip on her dancing shoes, the only place she felt free to forget the heaviness.

The music started, and with it, the world melted away.

She spun and moved, every step a silent plea, every beat a whispered hope.

Aaditya's Journey

Far away, in the crowded lecture halls of IIT, Aaditya wrestled with equations and expectations.

Books, notes, and endless problem sets filled his days, but his mind was often elsewhere—wandering back to the chai stall, to her smile, to the empty chair beside him.

He tried to move on, dating, focusing on his career, pushing feelings deep down where they wouldn't surface.

But nights were the hardest.

Alone in his room, the weight of regret pressed down.

He replayed their last encounter on repeat, wishing he had been braver, wishing he had said more than just “*best friends.*”

He wrote letters he never sent—words he wasn't ready to say aloud.

Aaditya realized that some parts of the past refuse to stay buried, no matter how far you run.

~

Aaditya's Evening in IIT Dorm

Aaditya leaned back in his chair, eyes fixed on the complex equations sprawling across his laptop screen. But the numbers blurred; his mind wandered.

The room was small and cluttered—textbooks stacked high, a guitar resting in the corner, untouched for days.

He grabbed his phone, fingers hovering over the contact name he'd avoided for weeks.

Instead, he opened a blank document and typed:

"I wonder if she's thinking of me too."

He deleted it.

A soft ping announced a message from a friend, breaking his thoughts.

He sighed, closed his laptop, and reached for his guitar.

Strumming a quiet tune, he let the music carry the unsaid words swirling inside.

Alone, Together

Two hearts in different cities, carrying the same silent burden.

Both learning, growing, and surviving.

Both wondering if someday, somehow, their paths would cross again.

Or if this was the quiet ending to a story that was never meant to be more than *just* best friends.

Chapter 16:

Chitra – Between Worlds

Chitra's first few weeks of post-graduation in Geography were a mix of new lectures, endless assignments, and quiet moments stolen for herself.

The campus was a world away from her old school days, filled with strangers and fresh faces. Sometimes it overwhelmed her, but she found comfort in small routines that tethered her to herself.

Her phone buzzed more often these days—with messages from Aaditya.

They had started talking again.

Best friends, as they insisted. Cautious, careful, tiptoeing around the fragile past that still lingered between them.

She smiled at his jokes, debated over mundane things, and shared little moments from her day. Yet, there was an unspoken understanding that some roads were still too complicated to travel.

Instagram became her canvas—a place where she poured thoughts, poems, and snapshots of moments that mattered.

Singing, once a secret indulgence, now found its way into her free hours, though only for her own ears. The melodies were soft and soothing, a balm to the restless heart beneath.

Paintings still waited in the corner of her room—colors ready but restrained, mirroring the cautious steps she took in life now.

And chai—always chai—remained her faithful companion through late-night study sessions and solitary mornings.

Through it all, she missed him. Not loudly, not desperately, but quietly—a shadow in the background of her new life.

Yet, with every message exchanged, every shared laugh, there was a hope—fragile and tentative—that maybe, just maybe, some connections could find their way back.

~

Chitra had always been a paradox — a storm wrapped in calm, fierce yet fragile. Post-graduation had brought a strange kind of stillness. The chaos of school and board exams was behind her, but the questions about who she was and what she wanted had only grown louder.

Her Geography books lay stacked neatly on her study table, but often her gaze would drift away, caught by the dance of shadows cast by the afternoon sun. Sometimes, the quiet of her room felt comforting. Other times, it echoed with memories she couldn't quite shake.

Her Instagram, *chitraaa_writes*, had become more than just a hobby — it was her voice when words failed in real life. Short poems, fleeting thoughts about life, love, and loss filled the screen. She didn't chase followers or likes; this was her space to be honest, even if only strangers read her words.

Singing was her secret therapy. Behind closed doors, she let melodies wash over her, her voice soft but full of emotion. No audience, no judgment – just her and the music. Sometimes she'd hum old Hindi songs, the ones she had loved since childhood, songs that spoke of longing and dreams.

Painting, once a passion, had slowed down. The canvases waited patiently, colors muted but ready. It wasn't about creating masterpieces anymore; it was about finding moments of peace between deadlines and overthinking.

And then there was chai – strong, warm, and unchanging. Whether it was the first sip in the morning or the last comforting cup before sleep, chai was her anchor. The familiar bitterness mirrored the complexity of her thoughts – sometimes sharp, sometimes soothing.

She missed Aaditya, yes. But it wasn't a desperate ache. It was more like a gentle tug at the heartstrings – a reminder of what once was and what could never be, at least for now.

Yet, when his messages popped up on her screen, a smile would find its way to her lips. Their conversations were easy, sprinkled with jokes and memories, the kind only best friends shared.

Chitra knew the distance between them was more than miles. It was in the silence, the unsaid words, the space where something deeper once lived.

But for now, she focused on the little things — the chai, the songs, the paintbrushes, and the stories she penned in her diary.

She was learning to live between worlds — holding onto the past without letting it weigh her down, and stepping cautiously into the future she was beginning to paint for herself.

Scene: A Day in Chitra's Life

The alarm buzzed softly at 6:30 AM. Chitra blinked awake, the soft morning light filtering through her curtains. She reached for her phone—not to scroll, but to check the time and turn off the alarm.

In the quiet of her room, she stretched and sat up, pulling on a loose sweater. The world outside was just waking, but inside, the familiar hum of her thoughts was already stirring.

First things first — chai.

She shuffled to the small kitchen corner, boiled water, and steeped her favorite strong, spicy chai. The aroma filled the room like an old friend greeting her.

With a steaming cup in hand, she settled by the window, the notebook resting on her lap. The morning was her sacred writing time — short poems, musings, or simply letting the pen wander without purpose.

Today, a few lines about loneliness and hope spilled onto the page. She read them quietly, a small smile curling her lips.

Classes began at 9 AM. Geography lectures stretched through the morning—maps, climates, and endless discussions. She took careful notes but often found her mind drifting back to memories — moments with Aaditya, the chai stalls of Kanpur, the weight of unspoken words.

Lunch was a simple affair, taken with a few classmates. Conversation buzzed around her, but she remained mostly an observer — polite smiles, soft laughter, a world she watched but didn't fully enter.

Afternoon brought studio time — a few strokes on a canvas, colors blending slowly. It wasn't about finishing the painting; it was about the quiet meditation it offered.

By evening, she'd retreat to her room, headphones on, singing softly to herself — old Hindi songs that carried both sorrow and sweetness. Her voice was barely audible, but it soothed the restless parts of her heart.

Before bed, she checked her phone. A message from Aaditya popped up.

"Saw a geography documentary today, reminded me of you."

She typed back a quick smiley.

Sometimes their conversations were brief, sometimes long. But each message was a thread keeping the fragile connection alive.

Lying down, she sipped her last cup of chai for the day, eyes closing slowly.

The city outside settled into the night, and Chitra drifted between dreams and memories — a girl caught between past and future, learning to find peace in the spaces in between.

Inside Chitra's Mind

There's a quiet space inside Chitra's mind where time slows, and the noise of the outside world fades into a distant hum.

It's in this space that she wrestles with the contradictions of her heart—strength and vulnerability, hope and hesitation, clarity and confusion.

She thinks about Aaditya often—not with the intensity of obsession, but with the soft ache of familiarity. Someone who knows her better than most, yet remains an enigma she can't fully decipher.

She wonders if he feels the same, or if the words left unsaid have built walls too high to cross.

Her thoughts circle around their friendship—the laughter, the fights, the silences heavier than words.

She's aware of the spaces between them, like empty chairs waiting to be filled, moments where their eyes almost meet but shy away.

Chitra tries to make sense of the “what ifs” and “maybes” — what if things had been different? What if she had been braver to say more? What if he had noticed the quiet longing behind her smiles?

But she also knows that overthinking is a double-edged sword. It can be a comfort and a cage.

So, she channels her restless energy into dancing alone in her room, letting the music speak what words cannot.

She sings old songs, their melodies threading through her like gentle reminders of a past both sweet and complicated.

Writing has become her voice when silence is too loud. Each poem, each line, is a piece of her soul shared with a world that may never fully understand.

Yet, beneath it all, there is a quiet determination — a promise to herself to keep moving forward, to live fully even when the heart lingers in the past.

Chitra knows that life will unfold in its own time. Maybe the story with Aaditya will find its next chapter, or maybe it will remain a beautiful memory etched softly in the corners of her heart.

Either way, she is learning to be enough — for herself, for the dreams she holds close, and for the journey ahead.

A Quiet Conversation Within

Why does it always come back to him? Chitra wondered as she traced the rim of her chai cup, eyes distant.

Is it the memories? The comfort of knowing someone who sees me—even when I don't say much? She sighed, a swirl of emotions knotting inside her.

But what am I waiting for? The question echoed in the silence of her room.

Is it closure? Or maybe a new beginning? She wasn't sure anymore.

Her mind drifted to the fights, the silences, the almost-moments. The way his eyes sometimes lingered a bit longer, the way her heart skipped despite herself.

Why can't I just say what I feel? she asked herself softly, voice barely more than a whisper.

Because it's complicated, Chitra. Because we are complicated. She acknowledged the truth, feeling both the weight and the freedom in admitting it.

Maybe he feels the same. Maybe he's just as scared to admit it. Her heart wanted to believe that.

She paused, letting the quiet settle.

I'm tired of pretending this is just friendship. But what if it's not supposed to be anything more?

Her fingers tapped lightly on the table, restless.

I want to be brave. To speak the words. But what if the silence between us is safer?

The chai cooled in her hand, forgotten.

Maybe one day, the words will come. Until then, I'll write. I'll sing. I'll dance. I'll live.

And with that, she closed her eyes, breathing in the calm — a quiet promise to herself that whatever happens, she will keep moving forward.

Later in the evening:

As the chai cooled and the evening light softened around her, Chitra felt the familiar swirl of emotions settle into a quiet resolve. The questions would remain, tangled and unresolved, but for now, she chose to hold space for herself – imperfect, uncertain, but undeniably alive.

She reached for her diary, the pages worn and waiting. With a slow breath, she began to write:

*“There’s a strange kind of beauty in not knowing—
In the space between words unsaid and feelings unexplored.
I carry memories like fragile treasures,
each one a whisper of what was and what might be.
I don’t have all the answers, and maybe I never will.
But I am learning to be patient with the silence,
to find strength in uncertainty,
and to trust that, in time, the story will unfold as it should.”*

Closing the diary, Chitra smiled softly to herself – a quiet promise held deep within her heart.

Chapter 17:

Inside Aaditya's Mind

The evening sun cast long shadows across Aaditya's room as he sat by his desk, the silence around him heavier than usual. The world outside moved on—college, friends, plans—but inside, his mind kept circling back to the same thoughts, the same unsettled feelings.

He picked up his phone, fingers hovering over the screen, wanting to message Chitra but unsure what to say.

Why is it so hard to talk to her? he wondered. *We've been friends forever, but lately, it feels like there's this invisible wall.*

The memories played on loop—the laughter, the fights, the comfortable silences filled with unspoken words. He knew she was growing, changing, but somehow, so was he.

He thought about the distance that had crept between them, the moments missed, the things left unsaid.

Maybe I'm scared, he admitted quietly. *Scared to lose what we have, scared to risk everything by saying too much.*

He remembered the nights spent wondering if what he felt was just friendship or something deeper — feelings that didn't have a clear name yet.

She's more than just a friend, he realized. *But how do I tell her that without ruining us?*

A soft sigh escaped him as he stared out the window. The path ahead was uncertain, tangled with hope and hesitation.

He opened his notes app and typed quietly:

"Sometimes, I wish I could say everything I feel without messing it up. Maybe one day, I'll find the courage. Until then, I'll hold onto the memories and hope they're enough."

Putting the phone down, Aaditya leaned back, letting the weight of his thoughts settle.

In the silence, he made a quiet promise to himself – to understand, to try harder, and to keep the fragile bond between them alive, no matter what came next.

Crossroads and Confusion

While Chitra had just started her post graduation, immersing herself in books, chai, and the quiet rhythm of her new life, Aaditya was standing at a very different crossroads.

The city outside his window was bustling with opportunity—and uncertainty.

He was preparing to start a new job, stepping into adulthood with all its pressures and expectations. The fresh excitement of a career beginning was tempered by the sting of a recent breakup, a reminder that not all connections last as long as we wish.

But amidst this chaos, there was one constant thought that refused to leave his mind—Chitra.

She was like a puzzle he couldn't solve, a storm he wanted to chase but never quite catch.

Chaotic and confusing, he muttered to himself, smiling wryly. *Just like life.*

His days were filled with training sessions and office emails, but his nights were often restless, tangled in memories of long calls, shared laughter, and moments that felt too fragile to name.

He caught himself replaying her words, her silences, the way her eyes held stories he hadn't yet fully understood.

What does all this mean? he wondered, heart heavy with questions he couldn't answer.

In the midst of moving forward, he felt pulled back—to a friendship that was anything but simple.

The new job was a beginning, the breakup a closing, but his feelings for Chitra were a complicated thread woven through both.

As he packed his bag for the next day, Aaditya took a deep breath.

Maybe this time, I won't let confusion hold me back.

With that thought, he switched off the light and let sleep carry him, dreams tangled with hope and hesitation.

Reconnecting Threads

While Chitra began to weave herself into new worlds — painting strokes of color on canvases, singing softly in quiet

corners, and finding solace in small joys — Aaditya's life was slowly shifting gears in another direction.

He was becoming more career-driven, diving deep into the demands of his new job, navigating the challenges of adulthood with a seriousness he hadn't known before.

But despite the growing weight of responsibility, there was one thing he couldn't ignore: the pull to reconnect with Chitra.

It was Aaditya who reached out first, fingers tapping nervously at his phone screen late one evening.

Hey, how have you been?

The reply came quicker than he expected, simple but warm.

I've been good. Busy with college and... life.

Their conversations started small — casual check-ins, shared jokes, memories revisited.

Slowly, the familiar rhythm of their friendship returned, though the spaces between words held new meaning.

They weren't exactly the same as before. Time and distance had changed them both.

Yet, beneath it all, there was an undeniable spark — a connection stronger than mere friendship but still undefined.

They were best friends again — not perfectly, not effortlessly, but with something real and worth holding onto.

And maybe, just maybe, that was enough for now.

Aaditya's phone buzzed softly in the quiet of his room. The screen lit up with Chitra's name.

He sighed, rubbed his tired eyes, and hit the call button.

"Hey," he said, voice heavy with exhaustion.

"Hey yourself," Chitra replied warmly. "Rough day?"

"More like a rough week," Aaditya muttered. "Work's been nonstop. Deadlines, meetings, office politics—you name it. I'm just drained."

Chitra listened quietly, the familiar comfort of her voice anchoring him.

"Want to talk about it?" she asked gently.

Aaditya ran a hand through his hair. "It's frustrating. Sometimes I wonder if I'm cut out for this career stuff. Everyone expects me to have it all figured out. But honestly? I'm just trying to survive."

"You're allowed to feel that way," Chitra assured him. "Nobody's perfect at this. You don't have to have it all figured out right now."

He chuckled, the tension easing a little. "I miss the days when things were simpler. When we used to rant about silly things and fight over chai."

"Those were the days," she smiled in her voice. "But you know what? Even now, you can rant to me about silly things."

He smiled, a little lighter. “Thanks, Chitra. You always know how to calm me down.”

“That’s what best friends are for,” she said softly.

“And here I thought you were just the drama queen who argued over everything.”

“Guilty as charged,” she laughed. “But underneath all that, I’ve always been here. Still am.”

Aaditya’s heart warmed at her words. “I’m glad. I don’t say it enough, but I’m really glad you’re still here.”

“Me too,” Chitra whispered. “Now, go get some rest. Tomorrow’s another day to conquer.”

“Yeah. Thanks for listening.”

“Anytime. Always.”

The call ended, but the warmth lingered—two old souls, navigating new chapters, still holding on to the simple comfort of friendship.

Do you guys remember when I told you what kind of person Chitra exactly is?

The girl who would make you feel heard without speaking much.

The one who’d call you out on your nonsense but also stay up with you till 3 AM just to listen to your silences.

The one who’d fight over an extra chai but give you the last bite of her favorite bun maska anyway?

A self-declared drama queen, not in the petty, eye-roll-worthy way people use the word—but in the way storms

announce their arrival. Loud. Unfiltered. But never without a reason.

Yeah, that Chitra.

And do you also remember how Aaditya once described her as "*a bit chaotic*"?

Well, here's the truth: he misunderstood her. Entirely.

Because, let's face it—when you're not used to someone holding space for your mess without trying to fix you, it does feel like chaos. It feels unfamiliar. Overwhelming. And Aaditya, poor guy, he'd never met someone who saw straight through him like that and didn't run away.

So when she stayed on that call the other night, comforting him while he spiraled out about work, adulting, and life in general—it threw him off. The calm in her voice, the softness in her tone, the way she just *understood* without him needing to explain—it scared him.

It scared him because it felt too close. Too real.

And guess what happened after that?

They started calling more often.

Late night phone calls that started with "Hey, just checking in" and ended with "I should sleep but I don't want to hang up."

They talked about work, about what music they were listening to, about their old school fights, about how weird adult friendships are, about how *different yet exactly the same* they still felt around each other.

Aaditya would start his sentence with something random like, "Why does my manager think I can finish an 8-hour job in 2 hours?"

And Chitra would reply, "Because you're an idiot and said yes once. Never say yes the first time."

And then he'd laugh, and she'd laugh, and something would settle between them that neither dared to name.

But that's the thing, isn't it?

When you let someone in that deep and pretend it's nothing more than *just friendship*, something's bound to snap.

So here it is.

This is where it all went to complete shit.

Not because they fought.

Not because someone did something wrong.

But because they kept pretending it was *just* friendship when it was becoming *everything else*.

They said goodnight but didn't sleep.

They said "take care" but started caring too much.

They said "we're best friends" while secretly wondering what if...

What if this was more?

And that's when it started breaking—quietly. Like a crack in a cup no one notices until one day it shatters.

~

Same Old 2 AM

Two weeks later. One more late night call.

Aaditya:

"Did you see the mail I sent you today? That deck I've been working on for days finally got approved."

Chitra: *(half asleep)*

"Hmm? Yeah, I saw. It was good. I liked the use of blue, for once you didn't blind me with your taste in fonts."

Aaditya: *(laughing)*

"Thanks, madam art critic."

(beat)

"You always know how to mock me and compliment me in the same breath. It's your toxic talent."

Chitra: *(smiling to herself)*

"You love it."

Aaditya:

"Unfortunately."

Silence lingered. Not heavy. Just... *comfortable*. Like an old song neither wanted to skip.

Chitra:

"Hey... Aaditya?"

Aaditya:

"Yeah?"

Chitra:

"Do you ever... I don't know... do you ever wonder what we would've been like if things were slightly different?"

Aaditya: *(caught off-guard)*

"Different how?"

Chitra:

"Like, if you weren't scared all the time. If I didn't hold back so much. If we didn't always run away from whatever *this* is."

Aaditya: *(after a pause)*

"...Chitra, are you saying—"

Chitra: *(quickly cutting in, voice too loud)*

"I mean—just theoretically, of course. Like in an alternate timeline kind of way. Not *this* one. This one is fine. This is good. We're good."

(laughs awkwardly)

"Don't overthink it."

Aaditya:

"Right... yeah. Yeah, I was just wondering what you meant. That's all."

(softly)

"This one is... good."

Chitra:

"Yeah."

And just like that, it passed.

Whatever it *was*, it floated away like the smoke from her chai cup, lost in the weight of all the unsaid things.

Because here's the truth — she almost said it.

Almost admitted that she still thought about him when

she painted.

That she checked his active status more than she'd like to admit.

That she kept a playlist of songs they used to share in school and never deleted it.

That his voice still calmed her on nights when nothing else made sense.

But she didn't.

Because they were best friends.

Because timing was off. Again.

Because when you've held back this long, a few more months don't seem impossible.

She hung up that night, lying on her bed staring at the ceiling.

He did the same.

They slept—hearing the words they almost said, echoing in their heads louder than anything that actually came out.

~

Excerpt from Chitra's Diary

2:57 AM

Title: The Things We Almost Say

I was so close.

I had the words right there — *on the tip of my tongue*, hanging in the air like a string of fairy lights between us.

“Do you ever wonder...” I began. And then I chickened out. Again.

Because that’s what we do, right? We dangle. We circle. We orbit. But never collide.

He sounded tired tonight. Exhausted, really. But he still laughed at my font joke. He still listened. He always listens.

And I think — maybe this is it. Maybe this is love in its most quiet form. No labels. No declarations. Just... consistency.

But then again, who am I kidding? I’m the girl who can’t even say how she feels to her best friend of 8 years.

I should sleep.

But every time I close my eyes, I wonder what would’ve happened if I’d just said it.

“I think I never stopped liking you.”

Just once.

Maybe next time.

– C.

Aaditya’s Thoughts (That Night, Staring at His Fan)

She was *so close* to saying something.

He knew it. He *felt* it.

The way her voice caught in her throat. The way she laughed nervously, something she did only when she was terrified of being too vulnerable. The way she cut him off

mid-question, like she was scared of where the conversation might go.

Aaditya lay on his bed, hands behind his head, heart strangely loud in the silence of his room.

"Do you ever wonder what we would've been like if things were slightly different?"

God. That sentence wouldn't leave him alone.

Did she mean if he hadn't dated Anika?

If she hadn't walked away that day in Kanpur?

If they hadn't been cowards about their feelings?

He stared at the ceiling fan, watching it spin in slow circles — a mirror of their story.

Always spinning.

Never quite landing.

Always a beat away from something they never name.

He wanted to call her again.

Say something stupid, like *"Hey, do you miss me more than you should?"*

But he didn't.

Because they were "best friends."

And best friends don't call at 3 AM just because their heart feels heavier than usual.

Or do they?

He sighed.

"God, she's chaos."

He smiled.

"But she's my kind of chaos."

He closed his eyes.

And let the silence hold everything neither of them could
say out loud.

Chapter 18:

"If Silence Had a Sound"

Instagram post from @chitraaa_writes

Captioned at 9:18 AM, along with a minimalistic sketch of two chairs facing opposite directions, yet drawn so close their shadows overlap.

Some conversations live in the pause between two heartbeats.

Some confessions arrive too late, dressed as memories.

And sometimes, we pretend to be strangers with souls that still whisper each other's names.

– c.

The post gathered quiet likes and soft comments, mostly from her loyal readers who'd started to guess—just a little—who her writing was about. But no one knew the full story. No one knew about the way her voice almost cracked on a simple question the night before. No one knew the almost.

Not even him.

Especially not him.

It was one of those mornings when the tea didn't taste right—not because the milk boiled over or the sugar was wrong, but because her mind was elsewhere. She sat on her desk with her phone beside her sketchbook, a small lamp

illuminating a half-drawn watercolor of a window. The chai sat untouched.

She had received no texts from him that morning, and somehow that bothered her more than it should. He always texted in the morning—even if it was just a "Tired af. Existing."

But today, nothing.

No blue ticks. No memes. No nothing.

She brushed it off, told herself not to spiral. But the silence—the same silence that used to feel comfortable between them—was suddenly loud and unfamiliar. Almost as if they'd crossed a line they could no longer ignore.

She kept checking her phone. Again and again. Scrolling. Not really seeing anything.

"He must be busy," she told herself. "He said he had that product meeting today. Or maybe he didn't sleep well. Or maybe... maybe he's processing things, just like I am."

Still, the thought sat heavily in her chest like an unopened letter—one that's been sitting on the edge of her desk, gathering dust, begging to be read aloud.

Later that day, she recorded a song—just on a whim. A soft humming cover of *"Phir Le Aaya Dil"*, nothing fancy. Just her voice, slightly raspy from the chai, a little uncertain, like the words she never said.

She didn't post the full version.

Just a story.

15 seconds.

No caption.

But those who knew her—really *knew* her—would hear it.

They always did.

~

Things Left Almost Said

Aaditya saw the story.

He didn't respond.

Not immediately, at least.

But he watched it three times. Maybe four. The humming lingered in his ears even as he turned off his phone and tried to convince himself he was just imagining things.

"*She sings well,*" he told himself.

That's all.

Right?

Except it wasn't just the voice. It was the timing. The silence that had followed their last call. The way her voice trembled just slightly before she shifted the conversation. The way she almost—*almost*—said something she probably shouldn't have.

He remembered the pause. The soft "I think I..." that faded into a laugh.

And how he'd smiled and changed the topic like a coward.

He hated himself for that.

A shift followed. Subtle. But real.

He started texting more.

Calling on time, even if he was tired.

Sending her songs late at night like he used to do before
the world got weird between them.

One night, he stayed up revisiting their old chats—back
when they were both preparing for different futures, yet still
part of each other's daily routine.

Aaditya (1:03 AM):

*Do you remember the rain fight? Where you made me dance
under the water tank and said it's your version of monsoon
therapy?*

Chitra (1:06 AM):

Haha, yes. You were so awkward. Stiff as a stick. 🤔

Aaditya (1:07 AM):

I would do it again.

That one line. He typed it.

Stared at it.

And then deleted it.

What he sent instead was a meme about two skeletons still
“just talking” after years of mutual feelings and avoidance.

Chitra:

That's us.

Aaditya:

Shut up. We're best friends.

Chitra:

Mhm. Of course. Nothing more to see here.

They both knew what they weren't saying.

Aaditya's Shift

He became a bit more present.

The guy who used to cancel calls claiming "meetings" now showed up on time.

He sent photos of the sky, the food he made, the new office space.

He even complimented her singing story—with a simple "Nice voice:)"

And though it seemed casual, Chitra knew it wasn't.

There was something in the dot at the end. Something in the pause that followed.

The truth was, he was scared.

He'd been burned before.

And somewhere deep inside, a voice whispered:

What if she doesn't feel the same? What if I lose even this?

So he stayed in the gray zone.

The almost.

The maybe.

The not-yet.

But for now—he was showing up.
More than he used to.
Less than he should.

And Chitra...
She noticed every bit of it.

~

While all of this was unfolding—late-night texts, unsent messages, and that careful dance of not-saying-it—Aaditya was trying his best to *not* get too involved.

He kept reminding himself:
Career first. Focus. No distractions.

But of course, the heart has a terrible sense of timing.
And worse memory control.

Because just when he'd think he was getting a grip—when Chitra's voice was fading from his mind for the evening and he was finally knee-deep in a new work project or a presentation—his thoughts would betray him.

Suddenly, he'd be comparing her.

To *her*.
The ex-girlfriend. The JEE coaching chaos.
The one who had promised “forever” and left before
“someday” could even begin.

It wasn't fair, but the comparisons happened involuntarily.

"She never used to talk like that. Not so passionately about random things. Not like Chitra does."

"She would hate sitting through a long call unless there was a point to it. But Chitra just listens."

"But then again... she was less chaotic. More composed. More mature, maybe?"

He would spiral sometimes—thinking about the "what ifs" and the "could have beens."

Wondering if his past self had messed up a relationship that could've worked out if he'd just been more *stable*.
More *focused*.

But every time those thoughts dragged him too deep, something Chitra said or did would break the cycle.

A song cover she posted.

A voice note of her laughing at something random.

A meme perfectly describing their dynamic.

A photo of her chai mug with a quote scribbled in her handwriting.

And then, almost instinctively, he'd find himself smiling.

Aaditya (9:12 PM):

"You still write quotes on tissue papers and mugs?"

Chitra (9:14 PM):

"Not tissue anymore. I evolved. Now I use coasters:)"

Aaditya:

**"Classic. Your future book should be titled *Coasters of Chaos*"*

Chitra:

"HEY. I'm using that now. Don't steal it."

Aaditya:

"Okay okay. Just dedicate it to me then."

Chitra:

"Why tho?"

Aaditya:

"...Because I was there. Through all your chaos."

He hit send before he could stop himself.

Then regretted it. Then didn't.

Because she simply replied with:

Chitra:

"You still are."

And just like that—Aaditya forgot, momentarily, about the girl who left him in his lowest.

Because Chitra... she was quietly becoming the person who stayed.

Even when he pushed.

Even when he pulled away.

But despite that, he still hesitated.

Because this wasn't supposed to happen.

Not again.

Not with someone he considered his "best friend."

Not with someone who deserved more than his half-healed version.

So he kept reminding himself—“Don’t fall. Not now. Not yet.”

Even as he realized...

He already had.

~

Chitra had always been someone who *felt* things deeply—words, glances, silences, and unspoken truths. She had always known Aaditya wasn’t someone who showed emotions easily. But this? This new Aaditya?

It was both comforting and confusing.

One day, he would stay on call until 3 AM talking about galaxies and guavas.

The next day, his replies would be brief and distant, as if he was trying to shrink their connection back into a box it didn’t quite fit into anymore.

She noticed it all.

The pauses.

The shift in his tone.

The forced normalcy in conversations.

It wasn’t like before.

It wasn’t light anymore.

Not fully heavy either.

It was... something in between.

One evening, after another conversation where he spoke and she listened—really listened—she sat on her bed, cross-legged, holding her phone and staring at the empty screen.

No new message.

No goodnight.

No heart emoji like the one he accidentally sent a week ago and quickly deleted.

She sighed.

“What are we even doing?”

She whispered to the room.

Then she typed and deleted a message five times.

“Are you okay?”

“Is something wrong?”

“Do you want to talk?”

“Is this becoming too much for you?”

None of them felt right.

She tossed the phone to the side and hugged her knees.

Excerpt from Chitra’s Diary — titled: *The Tilted Label*

“I think he’s trying not to love me.

I don’t even know if I love him.

Maybe I do. Maybe it’s a different kind. Maybe it’s not the kind he wants.

There’s a version of me that wants to scream at him:

‘Choose me. Just choose me fully or don’t choose me at all.’

But there's another version of me who knows he's tired.
He's scared. He's healing.
And I know what that feels like.

So I stay.
Like an idiot.
Like a friend.
Like maybe something more."

The next morning, she posted something subtle on her Instagram.

@chitraaa_writes

*"There are people you don't fall in love with...
you just slowly stop making sense without them."*
#notapoem #almostlove #chaiforbrains

She didn't tag him.
She never did.

But she knew he would see it. He always did.
And that night, when his message came through:

Aaditya:

"That line you posted... it hit different."

She just replied:

Chitra:

"Yeah. It hit me first."

And just like that—another almost confession slipped through the cracks.

Neither of them catching it in time.
Or maybe pretending not to.

~

The Edge of Maybe

It was nearly 12:42 AM when Aaditya's name flashed on Chitra's screen.

She hesitated.

Not because she didn't want to talk.
But because she knew — if this call happened tonight,
something would shift.

Still, she answered.

Chitra (softly):

"Didn't expect your call this late."

Aaditya (quiet):

"Yeah... me neither. I just... couldn't sleep."

A pause.

The kind that swelled between people who used to know
what to say, but now held too much unsaid between them.

Chitra:

"What's keeping you up?"

Aaditya:

"You, maybe."

That caught her off-guard.

She didn't respond immediately. He heard the sharp breath she took. She tried to sound unaffected.

Chitra:

"Is this one of those nights where you get all sentimental and philosophical and then disappear again for days?"

He smiled. But she wasn't joking. Not really.

Aaditya:

"I deserve that."

Chitra:

"I didn't say you did. I just... I don't know what you're doing, Aaditya."

Silence again.

Chitra (soft, vulnerable):

"I feel like we're standing in a room full of half-built bridges, and you keep handing me bricks and walking away."

He let out a long sigh. The kind that sounds like someone trying to swallow a confession.

Aaditya:

"I don't know how to do this. With you. I keep thinking about the past, about Anika... about everything I messed up. And then I look at you and I—"

Chitra:

"You what?"

A moment.

A hesitation so thick it almost cut the line in half.

Aaditya (quietly):

"I feel safe. But scared. Like if I take one more step toward you, I won't be able to go back."

Her breath caught. That was the closest he'd come to saying it.

Chitra:

"And what's so wrong about not going back?"

Aaditya:

"Because I don't trust myself not to ruin it. You're... too important."

Her heart felt heavy in her chest. This was the conversation she had both longed for and feared.

Chitra (gently):

"I'm not asking you to promise me a future, Aaditya. I'm just asking you to stop pretending the present is not what it is."

He didn't respond for a while. She could hear a faint tremble in his breathing.

Like he wanted to say it — whatever "it" was — but couldn't pull it out of himself.

Aaditya (whispers):

"Sometimes I wish I met you later. When I was more... sure."

She smiled, a bittersweet, knowing smile — the kind that people wear when they understand the weight of *almost love*.

Chitra:

"Maybe I wish I met you earlier. When you weren't so scared."

And just like that, they stayed on the call for a while longer — not speaking much.

Just listening to each other breathe.

No confessions.

No conclusions.

Just the ache of something that *could have been* if one of them had just taken the leap.

Chitra's thoughts, later that night (from her diary):

"He came close tonight.

So close, I could hear the words behind the silence.

But silence, even in its loudest form, is still silence.

I'm not sure how long I can stay waiting on the edge of maybe."

That night, after the call ended, Chitra stayed awake longer than she admitted to anyone.

She stared at the ceiling, blinking back questions she didn't have the answers to. Every word Aaditya hadn't said echoed louder than the ones he did.

And suddenly, it all came crashing into clarity.

She had been holding onto hope in its most disguised form — in the shade of late-night calls, in pauses between

conversations, in “take care”s that felt heavier than they should.

She was holding space for a man who only ever held her when he felt lost himself.

She sat by her window, curled into her shawl, the breeze brushing her cheek like something trying to wipe away the heaviness.

And she whispered it to herself aloud — as if that would help make it true:

“I need to stop doing this to myself.”

Because it was always her.

Showing up.

Waiting.

Listening.

Forgiving.

But the realization, as hard and honest as it was, didn’t translate into action.

She went offline for a day.

Didn’t open his chats.

Didn’t check his Instagram.

Didn’t replay their call in her head.

Until she did.

Again.

That evening, she caught herself opening his text thread.

Nothing new.

Still read. Still blue.

Still unread emotions on both ends.

And she smiled. That helpless, *"God, what is wrong with me?"* smile.

Excerpt from her diary:

*"You can know something is bad for you,
you can recite all the reasons to walk away,
you can rehearse the distance,

and yet,

when it's him...

I forget everything I've unlearned."*

So, did she move on?

No.

Not really.

Because love — or the illusion of it — doesn't need confirmation to settle in.

And when someone lives in your silences, not your sentences,

it takes more than willpower to forget them.

It takes a kind of courage that Chitra hadn't built yet.

But maybe, one day.

Chapter 19:

The Side I'll Never Know

See, the thing is, up till now...

What you've read – the dances in confusion, the echoes of unsaid feelings, the weight of silence and the warmth of late-night calls – they've all been from Chitra's side.

Mostly.

And a little from Aaditya's, yes.

But only a little.

I'm not trying to be one-sided here.

I swear I'm not painting one of them as the victim or the hero, the giver or the heartbreaker.

It's just that... I don't know the guy properly.

Not really.

I know what Chitra felt.

I've read her diary.

Heard her humming songs in the kitchen while trying to forget him.

Seen her stare at her phone like it might offer clarity if she just looked long enough.

Watched her write poems she never posted.

Heard the click of unsent voice notes.

Watched her laugh at his texts and then cry ten minutes later.

But Aaditya?

He's...

Distant.

Even when he's present.

He's a man of maybes.

Of long silences and short answers.

Of checking in just when you've convinced yourself to
move on.

Of emotional half-presence.

Of "I care about you" but never "I want to be with you."

Of "I miss you" but only at 1 a.m.

Of *almosts*.

Of course, I'm sure he had his side too.

His version of heartbreak.

His confusion.

His long days and lonelier nights.

His own diary entries, if he ever had the courage to keep
one.

Maybe he loved her in his own way.

Maybe he didn't even know how much.

Maybe he was protecting her by staying away.

Or maybe, he was just protecting himself.

I've got questions.

So do you, probably.

But this story — this version — is told through Chitra's
eyes. Through her tears, her voice notes, her unread
poetry, and the chai she kept pouring into two cups out of
habit.

Because truthfully?

That's the only side I was ever let into.

And unless he decides to tell his side someday, this is all I have.

This is all **we** have.

A half-love story.

Told from the half that loved a little louder.

-

In everyone's life, at some point or another, you want —
no, you **need** — someone.

Someone you can lean on.

Someone you can trust with every secret, every scar, every
whisper of your soul.

Someone you can sit beside on that same old bench and
just be — no words necessary, no masks worn, no pretense.
Just *be*.

That longing?

It's primal.

It's raw.

It's the kind of hope that keeps hearts beating in the
darkest hours.

And Chitra?

She wanted that.

More than anything.

But here's the thing —

You want that person to be sure.

Sure of you.

Sure of themselves.

Sure of *us*.

Because if they aren't sure —

If they waver, hesitate, step back and forth on that line —

Would you want them to stay?

Or would you rather let go before it becomes too tangled?

Would you want to carry the weight of doubts?

The burden of questions that have no answers?

Because sometimes love isn't just about holding on.

Sometimes, love is knowing when to loosen your grip
before it suffocates.

And maybe that's the cruelest part of all —

Loving someone enough to want them close,

But loving yourself enough to let them go if they can't
love you the same way.

~

However, there's another side to this story —

Because it's never just about one person sitting on that
bench, waiting, hoping, wondering.

There are **two** people.

Two hearts.

Two minds.

Two sets of choices.

Each one holding the power to either stay or walk away.

To hold hands or let go.

To speak up or stay silent.

To fight for what could be, or accept what is.

In this case — the case of these ‘best friends’ —
The choices were laid out like an invisible crossroads.

What did they choose?

What do you think?

Did they finally say the words that would change
everything?

Did they take the leap into something new, something
fragile, something terrifying?

Or did they retreat, protecting their friendship by
guarding their hearts —

Leaving those “almosts” and “maybes” hanging in the air,
unfinished and unresolved?

Because sometimes the hardest choice is to risk everything
for a chance at something real.

And sometimes the easier choice is to hold on to what is
comfortable,

Even if it means living with the ‘what ifs’ forever.

Chapter 20:

Silly Thing Number Four

You remember this one, don't you?

No?

Well, let me jog your memory!

Silly Thing Number Four:

"Because,Aaditya!"

Sounds simple, right?

But trust me, it's way more complicated than just a complaint.

It's the frustration that sneaks in when words go unheard. The silent feeling of being overlooked even when you're right there.

It's those little cracks that start to grow between two people who should be close.

So, ready to see how this "small" thing turned into a huge deal for them?

~

It was a fine morning.

A complicated morning.

Chitra was already in Kanpur for her semester break. Aaditya, drained from work deadlines and city buzz, had taken a few days off and landed in Kanpur the night before. They hadn't talked much recently.

Just the usual “take care,” “had dinner?” and a bunch of seen-but-unreplied-to texts.

But of course, like muscle memory, the moment both of them were back in the same city...

It was bound to happen.

Aaditya texted her that morning:

Aaditya:

“Chai ki tapri at 11?”

There was no “Hey,” no “How are you?”

Just that.

But he knew it was enough.

Chitra (after a pause):

“Done. Don’t be late.”

The chai ki tapri hadn't changed.

Same rusty counter, same grumpy uncle with a hidden soft corner, and the same two cement benches under the half-broken tin shade.

Some places remain loyal to time.

Aaditya reached first, surprisingly early.

He looked around—

nothing much had changed, except maybe himself.

A few minutes later, Chitra walked in, dupatta flaring slightly in the breeze, phone in one hand, bag in the other, and that expression he hadn't seen in months—mildly annoyed but still calm.

She sat in front of him.

Chitra:

"You're early. That's a first."

Aaditya (*half-smiling*):

"Maybe I missed the tapri more than you."

She rolled her eyes, but her lips curved.

The chai arrived.

Hot. Familiar. Comforting.

They sipped in silence for a few moments.

But even silence, when shared with the right person, feels like a conversation.

Then she broke it.

Quietly. Almost like it had been sitting at the edge of her throat for a while.

Chitra:

"So... you're back. For how long?"

Aaditya:

"Four days. Needed a break from everything. Work's crazy."

She nodded.

There was a beat. Then—

Chitra:

"You don't listen to me anymore."

Aaditya looked up, mid-sip.

That line.

It hit him like a slow echo from somewhere far away.

Aaditya:

"What do you mean? I'm here, aren't I?"

Chitra:

"Being physically here and actually listening—those are two different things, Aaditya."

He didn't reply. Not immediately.

Because she wasn't wrong.

He *hadn't* really listened lately.

Not when she talked about her classes.

Not when she shared about her art, her songs, her new post series on Instagram.

His silences had grown, and hers had followed.

And that's when *Silly Thing Number Four* showed up again, right there at the old chai ki tapri.

The chai had cooled, but the space between them had warmed up with unspoken truths.

And while they both sat in front of each other, sipping their now-bitter tea,
they both knew—

This wasn't just about tea.

Or time.

Or even words.

It was about presence.

~

The chai was lukewarm now, the kind that no longer burns your tongue but still comforts your chest.

Aaditya stirred his glass absentmindedly with the small steel spoon, eyes flickering to Chitra who was rhythmically tapping her nails on the glass rim.

Chitra (*teasingly*):

"Do you know how many proposals I rejected in college?"

Aaditya raised an eyebrow, lips twitching.

"Ten?"

Chitra (*smirking*):

"Twenty-three."

Aaditya almost choked on his chai.

"Twenty-three? Were you running a waiting list?"

She laughed, that old soft laugh that made him smile before he even realized it.

Chitra:

"Apparently, saying 'I'm not looking for anything serious right now' isn't clear enough anymore."

She paused, and looked at him for a second too long.

"But I wasn't, you know. Not when I..."

She stopped herself. Looked down. Sipped her chai.

Aaditya didn't ask her to finish the sentence.

Aaditya (*gently*):

"And now?"

Chitra:

"Now I'm just tired. Everyone either wants a temporary muse or a permanent possession. I'm neither."

A soft silence settled again. This time, it wasn't heavy. It was... thoughtful.

Chitra:

"And you? Work seems exhausting."

Aaditya nodded, stretching a little.

"It is. Sometimes I feel like I've aged ten years in the last one. It's like... there's always more to do. More to prove. More to fix."

Chitra:

"You never needed to prove anything to me, you know."

Her voice was soft, not trying to be profound, just real.

Aaditya:

"I know."

A beat.

Chitra tilted her head slightly, voice lighter now.

"So... how's Anika?"

The question dropped between them like a pebble in still water.

He blinked, caught off guard.

Aaditya (*after a pause*):

"She's... not in the picture anymore."

Chitra looked up, searching his face.

"No more Anika?"

He shook his head.

"It ended a while back. Quietly. Like how we drifted... you and I. Except that didn't hurt as much."

She didn't respond immediately. Instead, she traced her finger along the rim of her glass.

Chitra:

"And why did it end?"

Aaditya took a breath.

"She wasn't you."

He said it so casually, like stating a fact, but his eyes betrayed the weight behind it.

Chitra froze.

Chitra (*half-laughing, unsure*):

"That's a dangerous thing to say, Aaditya."

Aaditya met her gaze this time.

"But it's true. You've ruined my capacity to settle, Chitra. And I don't even think you know how much."

She swallowed hard, her fingers curling slightly.

And for a second—for just one second—they both sat there, caught in the gravity of a sentence that was too honest for this familiar, rusty chai tapri.

The sound of a kettle whistling behind them pulled them back. Aaditya looked away.

Chitra exhaled.

Chitra:

"You're such a mess."

Aaditya:

"You started it."

They both smiled, but that strange weight still sat beneath the smile. Unnamed. Undefined. Unmoved.

~

They were still sitting there on the worn wooden bench at the chai tapri, their glasses of chai half full and cooling with the evening breeze. Chitra had been talking about college and work, and Aaditya was listening, half-present, half-lost in the chaos of thoughts behind his eyes.

The laughter had barely faded when Chitra's voice shifted—soft, hesitant, but laced with something she'd been carrying far too long.

Chitra:

"Aaditya... can I ask you something?"

He looked up mid-sip, eyes alert, a little caught off guard by the sudden change in her tone.

"Yeah. Of course."

She inhaled deeply, as if bracing herself.

Chitra (*quietly*):

"Why didn't you stop me that day... when I walked away after Anika showed up?"

Aaditya froze.

Chitra kept going, the words spilling now, quiet but resolute.

"And... why didn't you ever call when she wasn't in the picture anymore? Why did you let it all just... fade?"

He didn't answer immediately. He looked at her, really looked—eyes scanning hers like he was trying to find the right version of himself to speak from.

Aaditya (*after a pause*):

"I didn't mean to hurt you, Chitra. But... I just needed time. And I think a part of me still does."

He turned to look at her now.

"After college ended, everything felt like a blur. New job, new pressure, trying to figure out what kind of man I want to be. I wasn't ready for anything... not emotionally. I still don't think I am."

She stayed silent, her lips slightly parted as if ready to say something—but waiting.

Aaditya:

"And about that day... when Anika showed up? I didn't stop you because I didn't know if I *should*. Anika and I... we had history, and things were already complicated between us."

He hesitated, watching her face carefully.

Aaditya (*quietly*):

"Anika understood that part of me. The pressure. The chaos. She didn't ask too much of me—just let me be who I was. I didn't have to explain myself to her all the time."

Chitra flinched a little, almost imperceptibly, but he caught it.

Aaditya (*continuing*):

"With you, Chitra... it's different. You ask questions I don't have answers for. You make me think about things I've spent years trying to avoid. You... you see too much."

His voice softened.

Chitra looked down at her hands. Her fingers were trembling slightly, barely noticeable unless you really knew her.

Chitra (*quietly*):

"So... all this time, it was just easier to stay away?"

Aaditya didn't answer.

The silence between them said more than either of them could.

After a moment, Chitra stood up, brushing imaginary dust off her jeans.

Chitra (*half-smiling*):

"I guess some answers do more harm than silence."

She took one last glance at him, and her voice dropped lower, almost a whisper.

Chitra:

"But thanks. I needed to hear it anyway."

She had barely taken three steps when his voice—sharp, desperate—cut through the hum of traffic and clinking glasses.

Aaditya:

"Chitra... wait."

She halted mid-step, the night cold against her arms. Slowly, she turned back to face him. He was still standing near the bench, the half-empty chai glass shaking slightly in his hand. His eyes weren't angry—they were tired, disappointed, and raw.

Aaditya (*shaking his head*):

"I really don't get you sometimes."

Chitra (*quietly*):

"What do you mean?"

He stepped forward, not caring who was watching or how loud his voice was anymore.

Aaditya:

"You say things like this... you ask me why I didn't stop you that day, why I didn't call you, why I let you walk away." (*pauses*) "But have you ever looked at yourself? Have you ever realized how... *chaotic* you can be?"

Her expression flickered.

Aaditya (*voice rising*):

“You come into my life like a storm, leave me all tangled up, and then act surprised when I can’t figure things out. You give me these tiny, confusing signals—one moment it feels like you want something more, and the next, you’re gone.”

He looked her straight in the eye now.

Aaditya:

“Chitra, it’s exhausting. Being close to you... it’s like walking on a wire that keeps shifting under my feet. I never know when it’s safe to take a step forward.”

She swallowed hard, her throat dry.

Chitra:

“I never meant to—”

Aaditya (*cutting her off*):

“I know. That’s the problem. You never mean to. But it keeps happening. You draw me in and then disappear behind silence and subtle distance. And I kept making excuses for you. Telling myself maybe you were scared. Maybe you didn’t know what you wanted.”

He looked down at the ground for a beat before meeting her eyes again.

Aaditya (*flatly*):

“But maybe... maybe you *did* know. Maybe you just didn’t want *me*. Not really.”

That sentence landed like a blow.

Chitra stood frozen. The streetlight above cast a halo of gold behind her hair. Her eyes were wide—not in shock, but in painful recognition. She’d felt it too, hadn’t she?

She stepped forward, one hand reaching out but stopping in mid-air.

She looked stunned. Hurt.

Chitra:

“Aaditya... that’s not fair.”

Aaditya:

“Isn’t it? You say you missed me. You say you wanted me to stop you. But where were you when I needed something real? You always made me feel like I had to guess what you felt. And when I guessed wrong, you disappeared.”

His voice cracked a little, softer now, but not any less angry.

Aaditya:

“You are chaos, Chitra. Beautiful, unpredictable chaos. And I kept hoping that someday, it would calm down enough for me to breathe around you.”

She didn’t respond. Her silence said more than her words ever could.

Aaditya (*bitterly*):

“And maybe that’s on me. For thinking it would ever change.”

The tapri around them, once their place of laughter and late-night comfort, now felt like a battlefield of unspoken history.

She took a step back, visibly shaken. He didn't follow.

The silence between them stretched—long and suffocating. The soft clang of a chai glass being washed in the distance was the only sound. Chitra stood still, her breath shaky, her fingers trembling.

She wasn't one to cry easily. But her eyes betrayed her tonight.

Chitra (*voice trembling*):

"You think I'm chaos?"

Her voice was barely above a whisper.

Chitra:

"You think I *wanted* to confuse you? To mess things up every time? Aaditya... do you even know how hard I've tried to not feel anything—*anything*—because I knew you'd never be sure about me?"

Tears slipped down her cheek as she looked at him, no longer hiding the ache in her chest.

Chitra:

"I walked away that day because you didn't *stop* me. And when Anika showed up, it felt like I had been made up in my own head. Like whatever we were—whatever *this* was—was never real to begin with."

Her voice cracked.

Chitra:

"I never said it out loud, Aaditya. But I showed up. Every time. For every call, every text, every time you needed someone. I waited even when I had no clue if you'd ever see me the way I saw you. I tried to be okay with 'best friends.' I tried to fit into that word when my heart felt something else entirely."

She paused, wiping her face with the back of her hand.

Chitra:

"You call me chaos. But maybe that's because I feel things too much and say them too little. Maybe it's because I kept *hoping* you'd read between the lines."

Her eyes locked with his—soft but burning with hurt.

Chitra (*quietly*):

"You said I didn't want you. But the truth is... I didn't know if *you* ever wanted me enough to choose me. And I was too scared to ask, because I wasn't ready to hear no."

Her voice dropped to almost a whisper now.

Chitra:

"And maybe... I kept backing away because deep down, I always felt you'd walk away first."

There it was. Her truth, laid bare like an open wound under the streetlamp glow.

She wasn't expecting him to fix it. She didn't even know if there *was* anything left to fix.

But she needed him to know.

The tears had stopped, but her face was flushed, her chest rising and falling as she exhaled deeply—relieved and wrecked all at once.

Chitra (*softly*):

“I’m not chaos, Aaditya. I’m just someone who loved you in quiet ways... and maybe I got tired of waiting for you to notice.”

And with that, she looked down, hugging her arms to herself—bracing for whatever he would say next.

Would he stay? Would he walk away?

She didn’t know.

But for the first time in years, she had finally said it.

Aaditya looked at her, and for a moment, there was something unreadable in his eyes. Maybe it was guilt. Maybe it was discomfort. Or maybe it was just him trying to hold himself back—again.

He rubbed his temples, his jaw tightening.

Aaditya (*after a pause*):

“Chitra, I get it... I do. But it’s just... it’s too late now.”

She looked up, confusion flickering in her tear-brimmed eyes.

Aaditya (*flatly*):

“I’m at a point where I need to focus on my career. I can’t afford to get pulled into this again—the confusion, the unpredictability, the... emotional mess.”

She flinched.

The word *mess* hung between them like an insult that wasn't meant to be, but was.

Aaditya (*continuing*):

“And I know it’s unfair to say this now, but Anika... she wasn’t like this. She was clearer. Calmer. She didn’t make me second-guess myself every time I tried to care. She just... got me.”

Chitra’s face froze.

He noticed the flicker in her eyes, the way her lips parted as if to say something—but didn’t.

Aaditya (*still talking, unaware of how sharp his words had become*):

“I mean, even when she was upset with me, she’d talk things out. She wouldn’t just vanish or drop hints or expect me to figure everything out like some puzzle.”

The blow had landed.

Aaditya (*softly, as if trying to explain*):

“I’m not saying you’re not important, Chitra. But with Anika... I didn’t feel so lost. It was easier.”

That was it.

The turning point.

The comparison.

The worst kind of betrayal: not distance, not silence, but being held up against someone else—and falling short.

Chitra blinked away the remnants of her tears. The ache in her chest wasn't just sadness now—it was something heavier.

Humiliation, maybe.

Resignation, definitely.

She straightened up, inhaling deeply. Her chai had long gone cold.

Chitra (*quietly, almost too composed*):

"You really had to do that, didn't you?"

He looked up, confused.

Chitra:

"Compare me. Reduce me."

Aaditya looked like he wanted to say something—anything—to soften the edges of what had just happened. But the damage was done. The words couldn't be unsaid.

Chitra (*barely above a whisper*):

"I may be chaotic. But I never made you feel small, Aaditya."

She placed her glass down gently, stood up, and for the first time, didn't look back.

Chitra turned to leave, her spine stiff, her fists clenched tight at her sides.

Aaditya stood frozen for a moment, watching her back as she began to walk away. But something shifted in him, suddenly—urgency, maybe, or guilt finally catching up.

He took two steps forward and reached out, placing his hand gently on her shoulder.

Aaditya (*softly, desperate*):

"Wait... please, Chitra."

She stopped.

Slowly—almost reluctantly—she turned around. But the look on her face now wasn't the quiet, wounded calm from before. Her eyes were wild, her breath uneven. This wasn't the composed Chitra he was used to. This was the storm he had never let her be.

And finally—she let herself be chaotic.

Chitra (*her voice sharp, cracking*):

"Why now, Aaditya? You got what you wanted, didn't you? Career, clarity, peace? The girl who 'understood you' is gone, but somehow, I'm still the one you're blaming for the mess in your head?"

Aaditya's hand slipped away from her shoulder as if burned.

Aaditya (*helpless*):

"I... I don't understand you, Chitra. I never did. But I—"

He paused, fumbling.

Aaditya (*rushed*):

"We can still fix this. I know I messed up, but why are you letting me go like this? Why do you always walk away instead of telling me what you want?"

There was a long pause. Her gaze didn't waver. Her voice this time was terrifyingly calm.

Chitra:

"Because you never get it, Aaditya."

And with that, she turned again—this time with no hesitation. No poetry. No lingering silences.

Just the crunch of footsteps on gravel, the clink of chai glasses behind them, and the sharp sting of the kind of goodbye that doesn't need to be said out loud.

And then, just like that day outside the bookstore, she walked away.

But this time, she didn't look back.

Aaditya sat there, chai untouched, the words he'd spoken echoing in his head, wondering if honesty always had to feel this lonely.

He wanted to say something. Anything. But the words were trapped somewhere between the ache in his throat and the panic in his chest.

Instead, he reached for his glass again. But the chai had gone cold.

So had the moment.

And neither of them knew if this time, it would warm again.

~

That was the night it broke. Not with a fight. Not with silence.

But with a comparison.

One that left her shattered. And him—still not understanding the weight of what he'd just lost.

~

Excerpt from Chitra's Diary

Date: Somewhere between endings and what-could-have-beens

Time: 2:47 AM

I don't even know why I'm writing tonight. Maybe because if I don't put this all down somewhere, it will sit in my chest like a stone I can't ever swallow or spit out.

I think this was it. The real end. No poetic fade out. Just a sharp, burning halt.

Funny how we build people up in our minds. I spent years believing that maybe, just maybe, Aaditya and I were two pages of the same book — misprinted in different chapters, but meant to eventually meet. I kept reading on, hoping the story would circle back to the start.

But tonight, he reminded me I was never the heroine. I was just a footnote. A chaotic one, apparently.

Chaotic. That word won't stop echoing in my head.

I guess it was never about how much I cared or how long I stayed. It was about how “complicated” I made him feel.

How I wasn't calm enough, understanding enough, simple enough.

Simple.

Anika was simple, right? She understood him better, he said. She never made things heavy.

And here I am—heavy. Messy. Emotional.
The girl who talks too much, feels too much, overthinks
and overwrites and over-fucking-loves.
And somehow, that always made me less.

He compared me to her.
Do you know what that feels like? To be told you're not as
graceful, not as composed as someone who isn't even
around anymore? To be held up to a memory and found
lacking?

I wanted to scream at him.
Not because he compared me.
But because I stayed. Even after all those years of him not
choosing me clearly, I stayed. I allowed myself to orbit
him, like some lost planet hoping for warmth that never
really existed.

And the worst part?

I still don't hate him.
I should, right?
I should slam the door on his name and his voice and that
stupid half-smile that always made me forget how much
he's hurt me before.

But here I am—writing instead of deleting. Crying instead
of forgetting.

I told myself I wouldn't walk away without making him
understand.
But I did. I walked away anyway. Not for him. Not

because I wanted him to chase me.

But because, for once, I needed to choose myself.

Still, I hoped...

Maybe he'd stop me.

Maybe he'd say, "Don't go. I need you. I want you."

But he didn't. Of course, he didn't.

You know, the silence right after someone tells you that
you're not enough in so many words?

That silence is louder than any screaming match.

I'm tired.

Of waiting.

Of hoping.

Of being this version of myself that he keeps trying to
edit.

I don't want to be someone's 'almost' anymore.

Maybe he'll think about this conversation someday.

Maybe he'll regret it. Maybe he won't.

But I'll remember.

Not because it broke me.

But because it finally woke me up.

— C.

Chapter 21: The Clarity That Complicated Everything

See, to understand this fight – this argument – you have to understand Chitra and Aaditya.

It might seem small for us – just another disagreement, just another emotional tangle between two people who clearly cared too much and communicated too little.

But for them...

It was *big*.

It was *everything*.

Because this wasn't just about one night or one comparison.

It was about *years* of almos*t*s, of unfinished sentences, of missed timings and unspoken feelings.

It was about that one unreserved train berth of emotions they both sat on for far too long, hoping one day the destination would finally read: each other.

This moment – that argument – it wasn't just about Anika. Or about Chitra being "chaotic".

It was about all those chai breaks.

All those calls ending in "hmm, goodnight."

All those little things they let slide in the name of

friendship because neither had the courage to name it love.

When Aaditya compared her, he didn't just pick the wrong words.

He stabbed every part of her that had quietly loved him. And when Chitra walked away, she didn't just leave that chai tapri.

She left *them*.

At least, she tried.

But the thing is – when two people are bound the way these two were, clarity doesn't always simplify things. Sometimes, it complicates it even more.

Because now there was no hiding behind excuses.

No more blaming timing.

No more pretending.

They knew what the other person meant to them.

They just didn't know what to *do* with that truth.

And so now, here we are.

Chitra, with her half-healed heart, writing poems with veiled lines and soft metaphors.

Aaditya, with his sleepless ambition, overthinking texts he'll never send.

The silence between them?

It's not empty.

It's full of echoes – of conversations that could have happened, hugs that were never given, and a love that... maybe, just maybe, never got its name.

But hey...

Maybe we'll see them again.

Maybe there's more to this story than just misunderstandings.

Or maybe — just maybe — this is how some people love.

Loudly. Quietly. Messily.

From afar.

I didn't know her.

Not personally, not by name, not even through mutuals.

All I knew was this page — @chitraaa_writes — that had started showing up on my explore feed every now and then.

Short poems. Scribbled thoughts.

Some voice notes where her words trembled, and sometimes, where they roared.

There was something oddly quiet about the chaos she wrote.

And then one evening, as I scrolled mindlessly through stories, I saw it.

A plain white background.

Black text. Simple font. No hashtags. No frills.

Just this:

“Thinking of giving up this page. DM if you're interested in taking it over.”

– @chitraaa_writes

I don't know what made me stop.

Maybe it was the finality in her words.

Maybe it was how she had written “*giving up*” and not “*deactivating*”.

Or maybe, deep down, I was just tired of seeing good things disappear.

I tapped.

Opened the message box.

Typed one sentence.

“Why are you selling the page?”

No emojis. No context. Not even an introduction.

Just a stranger asking a question that felt a little too personal.

I didn’t expect a reply.

But two minutes later, she did.

“I don’t think it matters anymore.”

No “hi.” No “who are you?”

Just a brutally honest sentence — the kind you only write when you’ve already let go of something in your head.

I stared at her message for a while.

And then I replied, not even knowing why:

“It matters to me.”

A stranger.

A late-night message.

A girl who was about to give up something that clearly had a piece of her soul.

And maybe, without knowing it,
that's the exact moment I met Chitra.

Not on a chai tapri.
Not through mutual friends.
Not even through fate.

Just through one question —
And a conversation that hadn't even begun yet.

That question — “*Why are you selling the page?*” —
turned everything upside down for Chitra.

It wasn't just the fact that someone asked it.
It was that someone *noticed*.

She told me much later — not right away, of course — that
she had stared at that message for ten whole minutes
before replying.

That she typed out “I don't think it matters anymore”
four times and deleted it five.

That something about being seen in that exact moment —
not as an “Instagram writer,” but just as a person wanting
to disappear quietly — broke something open.

And here's the thing.
It wasn't just me.

That night, her inbox had messages from dozens of
strangers. People she didn't know.

People who had been reading her words at 2 AM.
People who saw pieces of their own heartbreaks,
confusions, and “almosts” in her lines.

People who didn't care about aesthetics or follower counts
or likes.

They just *felt* it.

Because the truth is —

Chitra wasn't just writing about her own story.

She was writing about **ours**.

You and me.

The ones who've waited too long for a reply that never
came.

The ones who smiled through goodbye hugs, pretending it
didn't shatter us.

The ones who loved someone and called it "friendship"
because we didn't know what else to do.

The ones who kept showing up for people who never
really asked us to.

Different people.

Different timelines.

Different heartbreaks.

But if you pause and read through @chitraaa_writes, you'll
know exactly what I mean.

Because at some point in life — maybe long ago, maybe
just yesterday —
we've all *been there*.

Not in Chitra's story.

But in the feeling of being too much and not enough, all at once.

That night, she didn't delete the page.

She didn't even sell it.

She posted a quote instead.

It didn't get thousands of likes or anything.

But it reached the people it had to.

"Sometimes, we hold the door for someone who was never planning to walk in."

I read it.

So did a hundred others.

And that was the first time I realized...

Chitra wasn't just someone I messaged once.

She was about to become part of a story I didn't know I had a role in.

And this—

This was just the beginning.

What happened after that night?

Well... we might never know the whole story.

And maybe we're not meant to.

Because some stories don't end.

They just *fade out* —

like the last note of a song you don't realize has stopped

playing.

Until there's silence.

That's what happened with Chitra and Aaditya.

They lost touch.

No grand goodbye.

No closure.

Just... a slow vanishing.

A message left unanswered.

A call never returned.

And this time —

Chitra didn't run after him.

She let him go.

Not because it didn't hurt.

But because she finally understood something:

**Some people only come into your life to teach you how
to live without them.**

She stopped checking her phone for his name.

She stopped wondering what he meant when he said
nothing.

Instead, she chose herself.

She poured her silence into words.

Into chai cups at 5 p.m.

Into playlists that didn't have his name.

Into pages of @chitraaa_writes — her way of healing in plain sight.

She writes now —
not to be heard by him,
but to be understood by herself.

Some days are still heavy.
But most are lighter now.

She smiles a little more.
Paints when she can.
Sings softly to herself in her room.
Talks to strangers in comment sections about heartbreak,
hope, and healing.

And Aaditya?

We don't know.
Maybe he's still chasing ambitions in another city.
Maybe he scrolls past her stories.
Maybe he misses her.
Maybe not.

But here's what I *do* know:

Chitra doesn't want him to come back.

Not anymore.

Not with half-explanations.
Not with another comparison.
Not with confusion dressed as care.

She deserves peace.
And he had his chance.

So – what happened after that night?

Nothing dramatic.
No reunion.
No romantic twist.

Just a girl choosing herself.
One slow, brave morning at a time.

And maybe... that's the real love story.

Chapter 22:

The Empty Chair

That Night

Kanpur was unusually quiet.

A heavy stillness hung in the air, as if the city too had paused to take a breath.

Chitra sat alone in her room, the dim light from her bedside lamp casting long shadows across the walls.

Her dinner tray sat on the table, untouched.

Two rotis, a small bowl of daal, and the exact amount of sabzi she liked.

Everything in place.

Except her appetite.

She stared at the plate for a long time, then slowly pushed it away.

Got up.

Opened her window.

Sat down again — this time on the floor, cross-legged, back resting against her bed.

And then she looked at it —
that chair.

The one across her desk.

Once a place for books, for chai cups, for messy sketchbooks.

Now, just... *empty*.

Her throat tightened.

The words from the evening kept looping in her head.

"You're chaotic, Chitra."

"Anika understood me better."

"This is why I stayed away."

Each one sharper than the last.

And even though she stormed away, even though she left
without saying much,

she was saying *so much* in her silence.

She picked up the cushion from her bed and hugged it.

Her eyes burned, but she didn't cry.

Not yet.

She glanced at her desk.

The sketchbook lying slightly open.

Her diary beneath it.

The pen next to it, cap off – as if the pages were still
waiting.

She pulled it out.

Chitra's Diary

Date: That Night

Time: God knows...

"It's funny how people keep calling me chaotic like it's a
character flaw.

But maybe I *am* a bit chaotic. Maybe I feel too much. Think
too much. Want too much.

But when I love someone — I love them with every tiny
shattered piece of me.

I don't compare.

I don't weigh their silences against someone else's words.

I just stay. I show up.

Even when it's hard.

And Aaditya?

I would've stayed.

I would've waited —

If he had asked me to.

But he didn't.

He placed someone else above me... again.

So I left.

And God, I wanted him to stop me.

But he didn't.

And maybe that's all the clarity I ever needed."

She closed the diary softly, the pen still in her hand.

She didn't cry.

Not yet.

But that night, as she sat next to that empty chair,

Chitra finally realized:

She was never too much.

She was just... not enough for someone who couldn't see
her clearly.

And maybe that hurt more than anything else.

The empty chair across her desk felt heavier than ever.
More than just a piece of furniture, it had become a silent witness to everything — the late-night talks, the shared laughter, the unspoken promises, and now... the distance.

Chitra's fingers traced the edge of the cushion she'd hugged moments ago, her mind drifting to Aaditya.

That chair, she thought, is like him.

Once a constant presence beside her, a place where she felt seen and safe.

But now, empty.

Cold.

And strangely peaceful.

For the first time, she felt something unexpected — gratitude.

Thankful that he left.

Not because she didn't care, but because staying tangled in his chaos was suffocating her own.

She closed her eyes and whispered softly to herself,

"I'm glad you left, Aaditya.

I'm grateful you didn't stay.

Because maybe... maybe now I can find space to breathe, to grow, to be me — without the weight of what we never said."

And deep down, she hoped — with every piece of her
fractured heart —
that he wouldn't come back.

Not because she didn't want him, but because some
endings are meant to be real.

Sometimes, letting go was the only way to move forward.

~

In her quiet room, the empty chair stood by her desk,
bathed in the soft glow of the fading evening light.

That chair —
once a place where laughter had spilled,
where secrets were shared in whispered confessions,
where moments stretched and time slowed —
now held only the weight of absence.

To her, the empty chair was not just emptiness,
but a sanctuary of solitude,
a silent witness to the battles fought within,
and the strength she gathered in the quiet.

It was the space where she learned to breathe alone,
to hold herself together when the world felt too heavy,
where she met the parts of herself she had hidden away.

The chair reminded her of what once was —
the warmth she had treasured, now gone cold,
and the ache of loss that carved shadows in her heart.

But it was also a symbol —
of survival, of moving on,
of standing tall amidst the fragments of broken dreams.

She thanked the empty chair for its honesty,
for giving her room to grieve, to hope, to grow.

And as she sat there,
sometimes with a book, sometimes with her thoughts,
she realized that this emptiness was not a void to fear,
but a space waiting to be filled again —
with new stories, new dreams, and maybe,
just maybe, new beginnings.

~

Aaditya sat hunched over the chipped wooden table at the
chai tapri, a cold cup of chai untouched before him. The
steam had long since faded, just like the warmth he once
felt in his chest.

Beside him, the chair sat empty.
A vacant throne for memories that no longer had a place
here.

That chair —
it was more than just a seat.
It was a symbol of all the spaces left behind by those he
had lost.
The friends, the lovers, the confidants — Chitra, Anika,
the names whispered softly in his mind.

Each had once filled that space,
warming the cold silence,
filling the void with laughter and whispered dreams.

Now, it was just him.
And the empty chair.

A hollow echo of connections unraveling like threads in
the wind,
lost chances and unspoken words swirling in the dust
around his feet.

He sipped the cold chai, bitter on his tongue,
a taste that matched the ache in his heart —
the sting of watching people drift away,
of failing to hold on tight enough,
or maybe holding on too tightly in the wrong way.

That empty chair wasn't just a seat at a tapri.
It was a testament to the transient nature of his world —
fragile, fleeting, and forever slipping through his fingers.

And yet, as he sat there in the fading light,
he wondered quietly if one day, somehow,
someone might sit there again.
Not as a ghost of what was lost, but as a promise of what
could still be.

The Empty Chair — it isn't just hers or his.
It's a silent presence in everyone's life,
sometimes obvious, sometimes hidden deep beneath
layers of laughter or noise.

For some, it stands for loss — a love gone, a friendship faded, a dream shattered.

For others, it's a space of waiting — a pause before the next chapter begins,
an invitation to reflect, to heal, to grow.

Sometimes, it's a refuge,
a place where you find yourself when the world feels overwhelming.

Other times, it's a reminder of what's missing,
the ache of absence that won't quite let go.

It can be painful — a wound that stings with every glance.
It can be peaceful — a breath of calm in a storm of chaos.
Or maybe, just maybe, it's a bit of both,
a complicated feeling that refuses to be simplified.

But no matter what it means,
no matter how it feels —
you can never truly run from The Empty Chair.

It waits patiently,
asking us to face what we've lost,
to understand what we need,
and sometimes, to embrace the unknown paths that lie ahead.

Because The Empty Chair is more than emptiness —
it's space for everything we were, are, and might become.

And in that, it holds the quiet promise of tomorrow.

The Empty Chair is a silent witness to moments we never say aloud—

the unsaid apologies, the lingering “what ifs,” the fragile hopes folded away like fragile paper cranes.

For Chitra, it’s the quiet echo of footsteps that once filled her world,

a space carved out by memories — some warm, some sharp like winter’s first chill.

It holds her laughter from days when the world felt lighter,

and the shadows of silence from nights spent wrestling with her own thoughts.

For Aaditya, it’s the weight of missed chances, the heavy pause between what was spoken and what was meant.

That chair beside him — still empty — speaks louder than words,

reminding him of all he’s lost and all he’s yet to understand about love and friendship.

But The Empty Chair is more than loss or regret.

It is the space where growth quietly blooms,

where broken pieces can be gathered and shaped anew.

It teaches us patience — to sit with discomfort, to face the unknown,

and sometimes, to find comfort in our own company.

In every life, The Empty Chair invites us to reckon with our stories —

the tangled threads of joy and pain, certainty and doubt, closeness and distance.

It holds a mirror, reflecting not just what we have lost,

but also what we still carry — the resilience to begin again,
the courage to reach out or let go,
and the hope that in the emptiness, something beautiful
can still grow.

So whether The Empty Chair in your life feels like a
wound or a refuge,
know this — it is a part of your journey,
a place to rest, to remember, and to rediscover who you
are when no one else is watching.

And perhaps, one day, when the time is right,
that chair will be filled again —
not by someone else, but by the person you've become.

Chitra's Reflection:

She often found herself staring at that empty chair in her
room —

a silent, stubborn reminder of what once was,
and what she had to let go of.

It was a space that no longer held someone's presence,
but carried the weight of her own growing solitude.

In that emptiness, she discovered a strange kind of peace
—

a pause to breathe without the chaos of
misunderstandings,
without the ache of unspoken feelings.

The chair was empty, yes, but it was hers now —
a quiet sanctuary to reclaim herself.

Sometimes, late at night, she would whisper into the darkness,
thanking the void for teaching her to stand on her own.
The empty chair was a symbol — of endings, yes,
but also of beginnings yet to unfold.
It reminded her that sometimes, letting go was the only
way forward.

Aaditya's Reflection:

On the other side of the city, sitting with his cold chai,
that same empty chair at the tapri was a mirror to his
regrets.

Each sip tasted like a memory, bittersweet and sharp.

That chair wasn't just empty — it was a space he had left
vacant by his own hands,

filled with moments he wished he could rewrite.

It spoke of lost chances and silent apologies,
of emotions tangled so deeply he struggled to untangle
them himself.

Yet, in that emptiness, Aaditya felt a stirring —
a quiet hope that maybe, just maybe, the chair wasn't
meant to stay empty forever.

That space could be transformed,
not by someone else, but by the man he was becoming.

He realized that The Empty Chair was less about absence,
and more about the room to grow, to heal,

and to learn what it truly means to hold someone close — without losing oneself in the process.

Closing Reflection:

The Empty Chair — a universal symbol woven into the fabric of every life.

For Chitra and Aaditya, it was a reminder of love complicated,
of friendship tangled with feelings,
and of the courage it takes to face both loss and hope.

Sometimes The Empty Chair is a wound that hurts too much to bear,
sometimes it is a refuge where the soul finds rest,
and sometimes, it is the quiet space where new stories begin to take shape.

No matter what it means to you,
know that The Empty Chair is part of your journey —
and that in its silence,
there lies the promise of everything still to come.

~

What happened next is something we may never get to know.

Who will fill the empty chair now? God knows.

And sometimes, that is exactly how life chooses to keep its secrets —

left to the quiet spaces, the lingering silences, and the empty chairs waiting patiently for their stories to unfold.

A Letter from Chitra:

(Unsent, Unread, Unforgotten)

I don't know why I'm writing this—

You won't read it.

You're not coming back.

But if I don't spill this onto the page,

I fear I'll drown in my own thoughts of you.

Yes, I'm stubborn. Loud. Clumsy. Sensitive.

A walking contradiction of tears and chatter.

But I never showed that side of me to anyone else—only
you.

Because for some foolish reason,

I thought you were my safe place.

I thought you'd see the real me and stay.

But you didn't.

Do you remember when I said,

“I have a gut feeling that you'll break my heart
and never look back”?

I said it in anger,

yes.

But you proved me right.

You walked away. Just like I feared you would.

I know I'm not perfect.

I overthink everything.

I fumble with feelings,

but for you—I tried.

I tried to communicate, to understand love,
to soften the walls I spent years building.

But the irony?

It was you who tore them down
only to leave me exposed and empty.

What shattered me the most wasn't the silence,
but the comparisons.

The way you spoke of **her**—Anika—

like she was your peace

and I was your storm.

You never saw that maybe I was a storm
because I was trying to quiet the chaos inside me
just enough to be loved too.

You told me she laughed at your jokes,

replied on time,

made you feel seen.

And me?

I guess I wasn't enough.

Too loud, too slow, too emotional—
too *me*.

But I never wanted to be her.

I only ever wanted to be loved for who I am,
not measured against someone who broke you
and somehow still remains your standard of “better.”

You said you value loyalty.

Then why does the *feeling* she gave you
matter more than the *betrayal* that followed?

You once made me feel seen.
Heard.
Loved even—
In your own imperfect way.
When my world trembled under the pressure of exams,
you calmed me.
You taught me to look inward.
And for that—I'm thankful.

But then you made me question
why I ever let my guard down.

Your fears, your past, your wounds—
they blocked our future.
And I suppose my walls,
my silence,
my selfish protection
did too.

We both failed.
But what stings more is knowing that
you saw me as the villain in your story.
Maybe I was.

Maybe I always am.
The person people grow tired of,
the character they cut when the plot thickens.
I think about the day you confessed—March 26.
How your words felt real,
so real I built dreams on them.
How I replayed that moment in my head
until it became the lullaby I'd cry myself to sleep to.

It's funny,
how one moment can feel like everything—
and still mean nothing to the other person.

You told me not to wait.
That you didn't want "anything with me."
And those words
keep pulling me back
every time I start drifting into the illusion of you again.

Our timing was cruel.
Our circumstances colder.
If only you had stayed a little longer,
if only I had softened a little sooner,
maybe we'd be okay.

But the truth is—
when you left,
in your absence,
I finally understood how deeply I loved you.

And you?
You realized why you didn't.

And that is what hurts the most.
Because when someone can go days
without talking to you,
they're already gone.

You've been gone.

Maybe it'll take me months. Maybe years.
But thank you for leaving now.
Had you left later,

after more promises,
after more “almosts,”
I don’t know if I would’ve survived that version of
heartbreak.

So thank you...
for leaving when you did.

I can’t be with someone
who doesn’t choose me.
Not even if I love them more than life itself.

—Chitra
(*Unsent. But finally said.*)

Closing Letter: What the Empty Chair Means—A Man Writing for a Woman

Dear Reader,

I write these last words as a man, but they carry the echoes of a woman's heart. All through *The Empty Chair* I have tried to listen—to her pauses, her quiet strength, her storms—and to let those moments guide my pen. What follows is my attempt to honor what that chair means to her, even though I can only approach it from the outside.

To her, the empty chair is not just wood and shadow. It is a silent witness to the tenderness she gave and the silence that followed when someone walked away. It holds the sound of her laughter, the weight of unsent messages, and the scent of evenings she spent waiting for a door that never opened. It is a vessel of memory—of love that once burned brightly and of the calm that came after.

From where I stand, the chair is both her wound and her strength. It reminds her that she can survive the leaving, that her worth is not defined by who stays. It is the quiet proof that she can sit with her own solitude and still feel whole.

I see it as a paradox: absence that is also presence, a space where pain and hope coexist. She would tell you that it is a place of reflection, where she measures the distance she has

traveled from heartbreak to self-possession. In that silence, she meets herself fully—no apologies, no masks.

Writing this as a man, I know I cannot claim her voice. But I can witness it. I can say that her empty chair is not emptiness at all; it is possibility. It is the soft place where healing begins, where she discovers that love can be lost but the ability to love remains.

If you have your own empty chair, may you find in it what she has: the courage to sit with it, the grace to let it teach you, and the strength to rise again—whole, unbroken, and free.

With quiet respect,

A Man Listening to a Woman's Story