THE SPACE BETWEEN WORDS

PRERONA DEB

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Some people teach you about love by loving you.
Others teach you by making you love yourself first.
This is for everyone who's ever been left on
read and finally learned their silence was the answer.

Dedicated

"To my unknowing muse, who has no idea he lives between these lines: though this world is one of fiction, you walked through my life as a stranger, but your spirit became the catalyst that led me to this story's end."

Without you, this piece of my soul, this book, might not exist. You were the magic that made it possible.

Acknowledgments

This novel exists because of the spaces between—between silence and words, between fear and courage, between what we feel and what we dare to say.

In times of Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube, you definitely deserve thanks for picking up a book, and especially for picking up my book!

No book is one person's effort alone. For this, too, I have many to thank:

To my Parents, who taught me that love is patient, even when patience is painful. Thank you for believing in this story before it found its shape.

To my friends, especially those who listened to characters who felt real to me long before they lived on these pages.

To my Jayanta Tamuli sir and Biman sir, without both of you, I would not have had the courage to publish it. Your encouragement kept me writing through every doubt.

To everyone who has ever been left on read, who has waited for "soon," who has loved someone too scared to love them back—this book is for you. Your experiences, though uniquely yours, found their echo in these pages.

To those who shared their stories of modern love, digital connection, and the courage it takes to be vulnerable—thank you for your honesty. You reminded me why this story needed to be told.

And finally, to anyone who has ever rebuilt themselves after heartbreak: you are the true inspiration here. Priyanshi's strength is yours. Her journey to choosing herself is one I hope resonates with

every reader who needed to hear that they are enough, exactly as they are.

This book is a love letter to patience, to growth, and to the messy, beautiful process of learning to be brave enough for love.

With gratitude,

Prerona Deb.

Preface

In the quiet chaos of a university cafeteria, a notification changes everything.

A follow-up request. A stranger's profile. Twelve mutual friends. And Priyanshi Dubey, who has no idea that pressing "accept" will lead her into the most beautiful, maddening journey she's ever encountered.

This is a love story for the digital age—for everyone who's ever been left on read, for everyone who's fallen for someone who can't decide what they want, for everyone who's waited for "soon" while their life passed by in Instagram stories and unanswered messages.

This is what happens when an artist who is also an economist meets an engineer, when emotion collides with logic, when two people keep choosing fear over each other until they finally learn what it means to be brave.

Priyanshi will wait. She'll hope. She'll transform herself from a painter into a published researcher, convincing herself she's moved on while counting every day of his absence. Chinmoy will run from his feelings, from commitment, from the terrifying vulnerability of loving someone completely. He'll disappear for a year, believing that achievement can fill the void she left behind.

But some connections refuse to die, even when buried under silence and self-protection. Some questions—"What are we?" demand answers, no matter how long they take to arrive.

Welcome to the space between words, where everything that matters is never quite said until it finally, desperately has to be.

By the final page, you won't just have read about Priyanshi and Chinmoy's journey. You'll have lived it. You'll remember what it's

like to hope against logic, to wait against reason, to protect yourself while still leaving the door slightly open, and to discover that sometimes the longest journey isn't across cities, it's across the terrifying distance between two hearts learning to be brave enough to meet.

Love has its own timeline—sometimes patient, sometimes agonising, sometimes silent, sometimes screaming. *The Space Between Words* brings you an honest look at how two people stumble, fall, hurt each other, and somehow find their way back not to who they were, but to who they needed to become.

Get ready to feel every beautiful, heartbreaking, frustrating, and hopeful moment.

Your journey into the space between words begins now.

Contents

Chapter 1 The Instagram Discovery..... 1
Chapter 2 Both Sides of Silence 14
Chapter 3 The Slow Unravelling.....20
Chapter 4 The First Conversation 31
Chapter 5 The Rhythm of Us.....34
Chapter 6 The Unspoken Storm.....38
Chapter 7 The Art of Small Wars 44
Chapter 8 The IIT Visit.....52
Chapter 9 The Silence and The Text 61
Chapter 10 The Puja Promise 74
Chapter 11 The Weight of Silence.....84
Chapter 12 The Paradox of Moving On 93
Chapter 13 Thirty-Two Seconds 98
Chapter 14 The Silence of Success 106
Chapter 15 The Year of Waiting.....122
Chapter 16 The Call That Changed Everything 135
Chapter 17 Building Trust 155
Epilogue: One Year Later 173
Author's Note:.....176
Author's Bio:.....178

Chapter 1
The Instagram Discovery

The cafeteria hummed with the usual lunchtime chaos: trays clattering, friends laughing, someone's phone blasting the latest Bollywood track. Priyanshi had claimed her usual spot by the window, where the afternoon sun painted golden squares across the scratched table surface. Her economics textbook lay open to Chapter 7, but the words blurred into meaningless shapes as her thumb moved in that hypnotic scroll through Instagram.

Just five more minutes, she promised herself—the same lie she told every day.

Double-tap. Scroll. Double-tap. A friend's vacation in Goa had too many sunset photos. Her roommate's brother's engagement announcement—she'd need to remember to call and congratulate her. A motivational quote overlaid on a mountain backdrop that she'd probably seen fifteen times before.

Then her thumb paused mid-scroll.

A follow request notification sat at the top of her screen. The profile picture was unusual—not a typical selfie or group photo, but someone photographed from behind, sitting at a table with what looked like playing cards spread out. There was something deliberate about the composition, like a movie still.

The username read: @chinmoy_Madhukulyo

What caught her attention wasn't the mysterious photo; it was the row of mutual friends beneath it. Twelve mutual connections. Aisha from her literature class. Rohan, who sat two rows ahead in Economics. Even Roshni, her tuition friend. *How had she never heard of this person?*

Priyanshi clicked on the profile.

B.Tech | Magician | IIT | Atif Aslam > Everything

The bio was sparse, almost deliberately minimal. No string of emojis, no "DM for collabs," none of the usual social media performance. She scrolled through his posts.

The first photo showed a deck of cards suspended in mid-air, captured at the perfect moment before they fell. The caption read: *"The magic isn't in the trick. It's in making you forget you're watching one."*

Another post: A stack of books—Murakami, Dostoevsky, and Chetan Bhagat (which made her smile—the sacred and the profane together). Caption: *"Reading is just socially acceptable dissociation."*

There were photos of what looked like campus festivals, but he was never the focus, always in the background, often behind the camera. A video of him performing a card trick for a group of kids, their faces lit with wonder. A photo of a sunset from what she recognised as the IIT Guwahati campus, several cities away from her university.

No gym selfies. No party photos with red cups. No carefully curated shots of expensive watches or cars.

Who is this guy?

Priyanshi found herself scrolling back to the top, reading the bio again. An IIT student who did magic tricks and read Murakami. Her finger hovered over the 'Follow Back' button.

Don't overthink it, she told herself. *It's just Instagram.*

She tapped 'Confirm.'

The instant she did, a small thrill ran through her—the kind that felt both exciting and slightly embarrassing. She immediately

clicked back into his profile, seeing it now with the lens of someone granted access to his posts.

She noticed new details: his location tags showed he was indeed at IIT Guwahati. His music stories were all Atif Aslam and Darshan Raval—melancholic songs that suggested depth and sensitivity. One highlight reel was titled "Philosophy" and contained screenshots of quotes from Camus and Kierkegaard.

He's exactly the kind of person who would have interesting conversations at 2 AM, she thought.

Priyanshi was still scrolling, now three weeks deep into his feed, when Aditi's voice cut through her concentration.

"Is that your sandwich from yesterday? Priyanshi, class started five minutes ago!"

She jolted, grabbing her bag and rushing out, but even as Professor Malhotra droned on about fiscal policy, her mind kept wandering back to the mysterious IIT magician with the philosophical captions.

The evening settled over her dorm room with that particular quiet that only comes when your roommate is out. Priyanshi had showered, changed into comfortable pyjamas, and was settled into her bed with her laptop, half-watching a show she'd seen before while simultaneously scrolling through her phone.

Then her phone buzzed with a DM notification.

Her heart did a small, unexpected flip. She opened Instagram.

@chinmoy_Madhukulyo: Hey! You studied at St. Thomas' College, right?

Priyanshi stared at the message for a full minute. Her mind raced through possibilities. Had she mentioned her college in her bio? No, she hadn't. But something about the specificity of his question felt different, as if he already knew the answer.

She typed and deleted three responses before settling on:

Priyanshi: Yes, I am. How did you know?

The reply came quickly, the typing indicator barely appearing before his message popped up.

Chinmoy: You don't know me, but I know you quite well.

A chill ran down her spine—half intrigue, half concern. This was entering potentially creepy territory.

Priyanshi: That sounds slightly stalker-ish 😅 Should I be worried?

Chinmoy: Haha, no! Nothing creepy, I promise. You've actually been to my house. Twice.

Priyanshi sat up straighter, her mind spinning. His house? She'd been to his house? She tried to think through the past few months—whose homes had she visited?

Priyanshi: I've been to your house?? I think you have me confused with someone else. I definitely would remember.

Chinmoy: You really don't know me. But you know my father quite well. Very well, actually.

Her heart began to race for a different reason now. She visited professors' homes occasionally—for project discussions, for festive gatherings, for informal mentoring sessions. Could he be—?

Priyanshi: Wait... is your father a professor?

Chinmoy: Getting warmer. 😊

Priyanshi: Okay, but I've been to several professors' houses. You need to give me more hints!

Chinmoy: What's my surname? Check my profile again.

Priyanshi switched screens, scrolling through his profile with a new purpose. His name was just listed as "Chinmoy Madhukulyo"—no surname visible in the main name. She checked

his bio, his captions, looking for clues. Then she noticed a small detail in one of his older posts.

His face looked somewhat similar to Professor Kukrejha's.

Priyanshi: Wait. WAIT. Kukrejha?? Are you Professor Kukrejha's son??

The moment she hit send, her stomach dropped. For several heartbeats, she just stared at the screen, her mind racing faster than her fingers could type.

Professor Kukrejha's son.

Oh God. Oh no.

A wave of panic crashed over her, cold and sudden. Her breath caught somewhere between her chest and throat. She set her phone down on her bed with trembling hands, as if the device itself had become dangerous.

Does Sir know?

The question exploded in her mind, bringing with it a cascade of terrifying possibilities. Did Professor Kukrejha know his son had been talking to her? Did he know about these messages, these late-night conversations that had felt so private, so separate from her academic life?

Her mind raced backwards through every visit to the Kukrejha house—every word she'd said, every smile, every moment of casual vulnerability. What had she told them about herself? What impressions had she left? She'd been comfortable there, relaxed even, treating their home like a safe space where she could just be herself.

But what if Chinmoy had told his father everything? What if Sir knew about these messages and had... opinions about them?

"Papa wouldn't stop talking about how talented you were."

The words from Chinmoy's message echoed in her head, but now they felt different. Heavier. What else had Professor Kukrejha said about her? When she'd visited, sharing chai and conversation with his wife, laughing at their stories, accepting their motherly concern—had Chinmoy been listening? Watching? Forming opinions?

A hot flush of embarrassment crept up her neck. What must they think of her? Was she using her connection to Sir to get close to his son? Did she have ulterior motives for those visits, for the portrait, for the eager way she'd accepted every invitation to their home?

Her heart hammered against her ribs. She thought of Mrs Kukrejha's warm hugs, Sir's proud smiles when he talked about her artwork, the way they'd made her feel like family. Had it all been... what? A performance? Or worse, had they been evaluating her, watching her interact with their world, silently judging whether she was good enough?

No. Stop. You're spiralling.

She forced herself to breathe, to think rationally. Chinmoy had reached out to her first, not the other way around. She hadn't known who he was when they started talking. She'd done nothing wrong.

But the anxiety lingered, coiling in her chest like smoke she couldn't quite dispel. The comfortable boundary between her academic life and this new, confusing connection had just dissolved, and she wasn't sure how to navigate what remained.

Her phone buzzed, jolting her from her spiral of thoughts.

Chinmoy: Took you long enough 😄 I'm impressed you figured it out, though. Most people would have needed more hints.

His casual tone should have been reassuring, but instead, it made everything feel more surreal. She read his message three times, trying to detect any hidden meaning, any judgment. But there was nothing—just the same easy warmth that had characterised their conversations before.

Priyanshi's mind was still reeling. Professor Kangkan Kukrejha—the brilliant, slightly eccentric psychology professor from the psychology department. He wasn't her regular professor, but she'd attended several of his guest lectures on modernist literature and psychological themes in art. More importantly, she'd been to his home twice in the past six months.

The first time was for a small gathering he'd hosted for students interested in modernist literature—an intimate evening of discussion, chai, and heated debates about Woolf and Joyce. The second time was more personal: she'd delivered a portrait she'd painted of him as a surprise gift, a thank-you for all his mentorship and the way he'd encouraged her artistic pursuits despite her economics major.

The portrait. Oh God, the portrait.

Her fingers moved almost automatically, typing before her anxious brain could stop her.

Priyanshi: The portrait! I gave your father a portrait I painted. That's when I was there last.

Chinmoy: Yes! I was home that day. I was in my room when you came. I saw you from my window when you were leaving. Papa wouldn't stop talking about how talented you were. He hung your portrait in his study immediately. It's beautiful, by the way. You really captured something in his expression.

Priyanshi felt her cheeks warming, though she couldn't quite name the emotion behind it. He'd been watching her? The thought should have felt invasive, but instead, it felt... flattering? Concerning? She wasn't sure. Her hands trembled slightly as she typed.

Priyanshi: You were there? I had no idea. Your dad never mentioned he had a son at IIT.

Chinmoy: He's humble like that. Doesn't parade me around. But after you left, he showed me the portrait. Also, you're supposed to tag him in your art posts on Instagram, remember? I looked at your

profile. Your artwork is incredible. But more than that, your captions... the way you write about art, about books, about life. I found myself reading through all of them.

The confession landed between them in the chat, vulnerable and honest. And despite her earlier panic, despite all her fears about what this connection might mean, Priyanshi felt a smile tugging at her lips.

Priyanshi: So you've been... what? Silently observing me for months?

Chinmoy: That sounds creepier than it was! More like... I kept meaning to message you, but I didn't know what to say. "Hey, you don't know me, but I think your art is amazing and you seem like an interesting person" felt too forward. "Hey, I'm Professor Kukrejha's son" felt too formal. So I just... waited.

There was something endearing about his awkwardness, his honesty. The anxiety in her chest began to loosen, just slightly.

They fell into an easy rhythm after that. The conversation flowed like water finding its path—meandering, natural, occasionally rushing with excitement. He told her about his magic tricks, how he'd learned them from YouTube videos during power cuts in his hometown. She told him about how she'd started painting as therapy during exam stress.

Chinmoy: So, an artist who studies economics. That's an interesting combination.

Priyanshi: Says the engineer who does magic tricks and quotes Camus.

Chinmoy: Touché. Maybe we're both refusing to be just one thing.

Priyanshi: Maybe that's why we're interesting 😊

Chinmoy: Oh, so you find me interesting?

Priyanshi: Don't let it go to your head. I said "we're" interesting. Plural. Including myself in that statement.

Chinmoy: Too late. My head is already swelling. I'm floating near the ceiling now.

She laughed out loud, actually laughed—the sound surprising her in the quiet room. An hour passed, then another. They discussed books—he'd just finished "Kafka on the Shore" and had thoughts, so many thoughts. She defended her love of Khaled Hosseini against his gentle mockery. They debated whether Atif Aslam's "Tera Hone Laga Hoon" was his best song (she said yes; he argued for "Pehli Nazar Mein").

The earlier panic had faded almost completely now, replaced by something warmer, more exciting. This was just a conversation between two people who happened to connect. It didn't have to be complicated by family connections or academic relationships. It could just be... this.

Then, around 11 PM, the tenor of the conversation shifted.

Chinmoy: This is going to sound incredibly old-fashioned, but this tiny text box is starting to feel limiting. Would you be open to... actually talking? Like, on the phone?

Priyanshi's breath caught. Her heart began to race again—that feeling of standing at the edge of something, about to jump.

Priyanshi: Talking? Like voice calls? Do people still do that? 😄

Chinmoy: Only the brave ones. So... can I have your number?

There it was. The question that would move them from the safe distance of Instagram DMs into something more direct, more real, more vulnerable.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. Part of her wanted to play it cool, make him wait. But a larger part of her—the honest part—wanted to hear his voice, wanted to see where this could go.

But she also wanted to test him. To see how he'd react if she pushed back.

Priyanshi: Do you really need my number, though? We're talking fine here, aren't we?

The typing indicator appeared immediately, then disappeared. Appeared again, then disappeared. Finally, a message came through.

Chinmoy: You're right. If you're not comfortable sharing it, that's completely okay. I don't want to pressure you. We can keep talking here. I'm just... I'd like to hear your voice. But only if you want to.

The consideration in his response, the immediate backing off, the respect for her boundary—it did something to her. Made her trust him more. Made the earlier anxiety seem almost silly.

Priyanshi: 98xxxxxxx10

She hit send before she could overthink it, her heart hammering against her ribs. This was it. The moment when online became offline, when a stranger became something more.

The response came within seconds.

Chinmoy: Got it.

Just two words. "Got it."

Priyanshi stared at her screen. That was it? After all that buildup, after he was the one who asked, after she'd taken the leap and shared her number... his response was "got it"?

She waited. Surely there would be more. A "I'll call you soon," or "Talk to you later" or even just an emoji. Something to match the energy of their conversation.

Nothing.

The minutes ticked by. Five minutes. Ten. Fifteen.

Her earlier anxiety began creeping back, morphing into something different. Not fear this time, but confusion. Hurt, even.

Then another message appeared.

Chinmoy: Just so you know, I'll save your number, but I probably won't message or call you.

Priyanshi felt like she'd been slapped. The words blurred on her screen as confusion turned to hurt, then to anger. The emotional whiplash was dizzying—from panic about the Kukrejha connection, to comfort in their easy conversation, to excitement about exchanging numbers, to... this.

Priyanshi: I'm sorry, WHAT?

Priyanshi: What does that even mean? You ASKED for my number!

Chinmoy: I know. I just... I needed to have it. But I can't explain right now why I won't use it.

Priyanshi: This is ridiculous. Is this some kind of game to you?

Chinmoy: No! It's not a game. It's complicated. There are things I need to work out first before—

Priyanshi: Before what? Before you treat me like an actual person instead of some weird social experiment?

Chinmoy: Priyanshi, please, just give me some time to—

But she was done. The whiplash from intimacy to distance, from warmth to coldness, was too much. All the anxiety about Professor Kukrejha, all the fear about family connections and complications, all the worry about what people might think—it had all been for this? For him to ask for her number and then immediately say he won't use it?

Her vision blurred with angry tears.

Priyanshi: You know what? Forget it. This is stupid. I don't need this confusion in my life.

She deleted the message thread on her phone with shaking fingers. Then she threw her phone across the bed, watching it bounce once before settling into the pillows.

What the hell just happened?

One moment, she'd been laughing, feeling understood, experiencing that rare spark of connection with someone who seemed to genuinely see her. The next, she was staring at a screen full of mixed signals and cryptic half-explanations.

And somehow, the worst part wasn't even the rejection. It was that now she'd have to face Professor Kukrejha again, knowing that his son had her number, knowing that there was this strange, undefined thing between them that had ended before it even began.

She grabbed her pillow and pressed it against her face, letting out a frustrated scream that was muffled by the fabric.

This was exactly why she usually kept her academic life and personal life separate. This was exactly why getting involved with someone connected to her mentor was a terrible idea.

And yet, even in her anger and confusion, a small traitorous part of her mind kept replaying his words: *"Papa wouldn't stop talking about how talented you were."*

She groaned and rolled over, staring at her ceiling.

This was going to be complicated. She could already tell.

And the most frustrating part? Despite everything, despite the confusion and the mixed signals and the emotional whiplash, she knew she'd still be thinking about him tomorrow.

About his laugh through their messages. About the way he talked about books. About the possibility that existed in those few hours before everything got weird.

"I hate this," she muttered to the empty room.

But even as she said it, she knew it wasn't entirely true.

She didn't hate it. She was just terrified of what it might mean for her relationship with Professor Kukrejha, for her own emotional safety, for the careful balance she'd built in her life.

One conversation, and everything felt tilted, precarious.

She grabbed her phone again, almost instinctively, then remembered she'd deleted the chat.

Good. It was better this way. Clean break. No more confusion.

But as she tried to fall asleep that night, her mind kept circling back to one question: Why would he ask for her number if he never intended to use it?

And more importantly: What was she supposed to do the next time she saw Professor Kukrejha?

Chapter 2
Both Sides of Silence

Chinmoy's POV

Chinmoy stared at his phone screen, watching the typing indicator appear and disappear under Priyanshi's name, then finally stop altogether. Her last message glared at him: *"This is stupid. I don't need this confusion in my life."*

"Damn it," he muttered, running both hands through his hair until it stood up in frustrated spikes.

His roommate, Karthik, looked up from his laptop. "Dude, you look like you just failed a viva. What happened?"

"I screwed up," Chinmoy said, his voice hollow. "Badly."

He stared at the digits saved in his phone: Priyanshi – 98xxxxx10. Just seeing her name there, in his contacts, should have made him happy. Instead, it felt like evidence of his own cowardice.

His thumb hovered over the keyboard. He needed to explain, but how?

Priyanshi was different. Special. He'd watched her from his window that day she came to deliver the portrait, the way she smiled at his father, the careful way she handled her artwork, the paint stain on her thumb that she kept absently rubbing. He'd read every single one of her Instagram captions, feeling like each one revealed another layer of someone he desperately wanted to know.

He couldn't afford to lose her before he even had her. So he thought if he could just... wait. Get himself together first. Learn to love in moderation, not in floods.

But looking at her messages now, at the hurt bleeding through her words, he realised his plan had backfired spectacularly.

Chinmoy: Priyanshi, wait. Let me explain. I want to tell you something, but not now. When the right time comes, I'll explain everything. I promise.

Priyanshi: Why not now? What's so complicated that you can't just be honest?

Chinmoy: Because you're sensitive. And emotional. And you'll take it the wrong way. I need you to trust me.

He hit send and immediately regretted it. That came out all wrong, patronising, dismissive.

Priyanshi: I'm WHAT? You don't even know me! You can't just call me emotional and immature like that's an excuse for YOUR behaviour!

Priyanshi: I'm done. Don't message me again.

Karthik whistled low. "That bad, huh?"

Chinmoy didn't respond. He saved her number properly in his contacts, adding a note: "The portrait artist. Makes me want to be brave enough for phone calls."

Then he opened her Instagram profile and scrolled through her artwork again, torturing himself with what he might have just destroyed.

Priyanshi's POV - The Morning After

Priyanshi woke up to sunlight slanting through the blinds and the immediate, crushing memory of last night's conversation. Her first instinct was to grab her phone from the nightstand.

No new messages.

The disappointment hit her before the anger could rush back in sharp and startling in its intensity. She'd actually hoped, in that

vulnerable space between sleep and waking, that he'd have sent an explanation. An apology. Something.

"Good," she said out loud to her empty room. "I don't want to hear from him anyway."

But as she went through her morning routine, brushing her teeth, picking out clothes, making the instant coffee that never tasted quite right, she kept checking her phone. The screen stayed stubbornly blank.

"You've looked at that phone seventeen times in twenty minutes," Aditi observed, appearing in the doorway with her hair wrapped in a towel. "What happened? And don't say 'nothing' because you have your 'processing emotions through silent suffering' face on."

Priyanshi sighed, slumping onto her bed. "Remember I told you about that follow-up request yesterday? Professor Kukrejha's son?"

"The IIT magician? Yeah?"

"We were talking last night for hours. It was... really good, Aditi. Like, scary good. The kind of conversation where you lose track of time and everything feels easy and exciting." Priyanshi traced patterns on her bedspread. "Then he asked for my number."

"And?"

"And I gave it to him. And then he said he won't actually call or text me."

Aditi's face went through several expressions: confusion, disbelief, and anger in rapid succession. "He what?"

"Right? He ASKED for it, then immediately said he won't use it. Something about complications and timing and me being 'too emotional' to understand right now." The hurt crept back into her voice. "The worst part is, for those hours before that, I actually thought... I don't know what I thought. That may be this could be something."

"An IIT guy being emotionally constipated? I'm shocked. Shocked, I tell you," Aditi said dryly. "Want me to cyber-stalk him and find something embarrassing to make you feel better?"

Priyanshi laughed despite herself. "No. I just need to forget about it. Forget about him."

But as she gathered her books for class, her phone felt heavier in her bag, like it was pulling at her attention. She caught herself typing out messages in her head:

"Are you going to explain yourself or just leave me confused?"
"Your dad would be disappointed in how you're treating people."
"I actually thought you were different."

She never sent any of them. Pride and hurt tangled together, keeping her fingers still.

The Lecture Hall

Walking into Professor Malhotra's economics class felt different now. Priyanshi found her usual seat by the window, but her attention kept drifting. She found herself noticing other things.

" Ms Dubey, you seem distracted today," Professor Malhotra said gently, his eyes kind behind his wire-rimmed glasses. "Everything alright?"

"Yes, sir. Sorry. Just tired," she mumbled, her cheeks burning.

The Instagram Story Games

Over the next few days, a strange pattern emerged that was somehow worse than complete silence.

Priyanshi posted an Instagram story with a photo of her morning coffee with the caption: *"Some conversations leave you more confused than when you started."* Within sixty seconds, Chinmoy's name appeared on the viewers' list.

No like. No reply. Just the knowledge that he'd seen it.

The next day, she posted a song lyric: *"Distance makes the heart grow fonder, or just makes it forget faster?"* Again, within a minute, Chinmoy viewed it.

It became a maddening game. Every story she posted, he watched immediately. But he never reached out. Never explained. Never broke his silence.

"He's definitely stalking you," Aditi declared, watching over Priyanshi's shoulder as Chinmoy's name popped up on yet another story viewer list. "This is some next-level psychological warfare."

"It's not warfare. It's just..." Priyanshi struggled for words. "He's there but not there. Like he wants me to know he's paying attention but won't actually engage."

"That's literally the definition of psychological warfare, babe."

Priyanshi started crafting her stories more carefully, each one a message in a bottle she was throwing into the void, hoping he'd finally respond:

A photo of her sketchbook: *"Started a new painting today. Some portraits are harder than others—especially when you've never actually seen the person clearly."*

Viewed by Chinmoy. No response.

A sunset from her dorm window: *"Endings are just beginnings we're not ready for yet."*

Viewed by Chinmoy. No response.

A stack of books: *"Currently reading about people who actually communicate their feelings. Revolutionary concept."*

Viewed by Chinmoy. No response.

It was torture of the most modern kind: the read receipt, the view count, the digital proof that someone was watching but choosing not to speak.

On the eighth day of this silent dance, Priyanshi broke. She posted a direct callout:

A blank black square with white text: *"If you're going to watch my life through a screen, at least have the courage to be part of the conversation."*

For the first time, Chinmoy didn't view it immediately. An hour passed. Then two. Then three.

Priyanshi felt sick to her stomach. Had she pushed too hard? Had she finally driven him away completely?

Just as she was about to delete the story, her phone buzzed.

A DM from Chinmoy.

Her hands shook as she opened it.

Chinmoy: You're right. I'm a coward.

Chinmoy: But I'm a coward who can't stop thinking about you.

Chinmoy: And that's exactly the problem.

The message left her staring at her phone, heart racing, with more questions than answers. But for the first time in days, at least they were talking again.

Chapter 3
The Slow Unravelling

Scene 1: The Unexpected Call

Priyanshi's POV

Three days after their cryptic conversation ended with Chinmoy's promise to explain "when the time is right," Priyanshi was in the library, trying to focus on her economics assignment. Her phone buzzed—a familiar number.

She almost declined, but something made her answer.

"Hello?"

"Priyanshi! Beta, how are you?" The warm, familiar voice of Professor Kukrejha filled her ear.

Her heart stopped. *Sir is calling me. Does he know? Did Chinmoy tell him?*

"S-Sir! I'm good, thank you. How are you?"

"All well, all well. I was just thinking about you. Haven't seen you around the department lately. Everything okay with your studies?"

Priyanshi relaxed slightly. This seemed like a routine check-in. "Yes, Sir. Just busy with assignments. I've been meaning to visit, actually."

"Good, good. You know you're always welcome. How's your painting coming along? Working on anything new?"

They chatted for a few minutes about her art, her classes, and her research interests. Professor Kukrejha had always been more than

just an academic mentor—he genuinely cared about his students' holistic development.

Then came the curveball.

"By the way," he said casually, too casually, "Chinmoy mentioned you two have been talking. He said you're quite the conversationalist."

Priyanshi's throat went dry. *He knows. Oh God, he knows.*

"I... yes, Sir. We've messaged a few times."

"He's a good boy, my son. Bit complicated sometimes, takes after his mother in that regard." Professor Kukrejha chuckled. "But he has a good heart. Just takes him time to show it."

Priyanshi didn't know what to say. Was Sir... giving his approval? Offering insight? Warning her?

"He's been different lately," Professor Kukrejha continued. "More thoughtful. Asks a lot of questions about emotional intelligence, about communication. I suspect someone has been making him think." There was a smile in his voice.

"Sir, I—"

"You don't have to explain anything, beta. I'm just saying... whatever conversations you two are having, they seem to be good for him. He needs someone who challenges him, who doesn't let him hide behind his logic and equations."

The call ended shortly after, but Priyanshi sat frozen in the library, staring at her phone.

Professor Kukrejha knew. And instead of being concerned or disappointed, he'd almost seemed... hopeful?

Scene 2: The Message That Changed Everything

That evening, still processing the call from Sir, Priyanshi received a message that made her heart stop.

Chinmoy: My dad called you today.

Priyanshi: Yes. How did you know?

Chinmoy: Because he spent the last hour giving me a lecture about "emotional availability" and "not taking good things for granted." He doesn't usually do that unless he's talked to someone who matters.

Priyanshi: He was very kind. Just checking on my studies.

Chinmoy: He likes you. Always has. After you left that day with the portrait, he talked about you for hours. About how rare it is to find young people who genuinely care about art and ideas, not just grades.

Priyanshi: That's sweet of him.

Chinmoy: He also told me I should stop being "cryptic and confusing" with people I care about. His exact words.

Priyanshi's fingers hovered over the keyboard. *People I care about.*

Priyanshi: And are you? Going to stop being cryptic?

Chinmoy: I'm trying. It's harder than it looks.

Priyanshi: Try harder.

Then, after a long pause, a message appeared that felt different from all the others:

Chinmoy: I'm a coward who can't stop thinking about you.

Priyanshi stared at those words, her heart hammering against her ribs. After several deleted responses, she finally typed:

Priyanshi: What does that even mean, Chinmoy?

Chinmoy: It means I'm trying to protect both of us from something I'm not ready for yet.

Priyanshi: Everyone has a track record. That doesn't mean you get to be cryptic and pull away from people trying to understand you.

Chinmoy: You're right. I promise I'll tell you everything. Just not through text. I need to see your face when I explain. I'll be home next month for Durga Puja. We can talk then.

Priyanshi: That's four weeks away.

Chinmoy: In the meantime... can we just talk? Just two people who find each other interesting.

Priyanshi: As friends. But you have to actually talk to me, Chinmoy. Not just watch my stories like some Instagram ghost.

Chinmoy: Deal. 😊

Scene 3: The Daily Roller Coaster

The pattern was maddening. Some days, Chinmoy was fully present, sending morning messages about octopuses having three hearts, debating pizza toppings, and sharing music. These were the good days when Priyanshi felt understood.

Morning texts on good days:

Chinmoy: Good morning. Did you know octopuses have three hearts? Two pumps blood to the gills, one to the rest of the body. I feel like that sometimes—like I need multiple hearts to handle everything.

Priyanshi: That's oddly poetic for 7 AM. Are you okay?

Chinmoy: Just thinking out loud. Or... typing out loud? Is that a thing?

Priyanshi: It is now.

Other days, her messages went unanswered for hours. She'd see him active on Instagram while her texts sat unread.

Wednesday, 2:30 PM

Priyanshi: Have you ever noticed how weird the word "moist" is?

Read 2:31 PM. No response.

Wednesday, 11:47 PM

Chinmoy: Sorry, crazy day. Also, YES, "moist" is terrible. I think "vulnerable" is like that, too. The word itself makes people want to run away.

Priyanshi: Is that why you keep running away from our conversations?

Chinmoy: I'm not running. I'm just... pacing myself.

Priyanshi: That's just running slowly.

The inconsistency was killing her. One day, he'd send her a song with the message: *"This made me think of you."* The next day, radio silence. One evening, he'd ask about her painting, genuinely interested in every detail. The next morning, her "good morning" would go unanswered until midnight.

Evening check-ins when he was present:

Priyanshi: Update: My painting professor loved my new piece. Called it "emotionally resonant."

Chinmoy: Of course, he did. Because it is. What was it of?

Priyanshi: Abstract. A lot of blues and greys. I called it "Waiting."

Chinmoy: That's... pointed.

Priyanshi: Good art should be. 😉

Late-night conversations:

Chinmoy: You awake?

Priyanshi: Unfortunately, yes. Exam tomorrow.

Chinmoy: Want me to quiz you?

Priyanshi: On economics? You're an engineer.

Chinmoy: I can read your notes and ask questions. Might help?

They'd spend an hour with him reading her notes through photos she sent, asking random questions, and making terrible jokes to keep her from stressing. It was sweet. Unexpected. The kind of thing that made her hope this could be real.

But then he'd disappear again, and hope would curdle into frustration.

Scene 4: Aditi's Intervention

"You've checked your phone fourteen times in the last hour," Aditi confronted her one evening, settling down with two cups of chai. "He's giving you breadcrumbs. His confusion is not your responsibility to manage."

"When we do talk, it feels like finding someone who speaks my language," Priyanshi defended, wrapping her hands around the warm cup.

"I'm not saying give up. I'm saying protect yourself. Stop making him the main character of your story. You're Priyanshi Dubey—you're the main character of your own story."

Priyanshi looked down at her coffee, watching the steam curl upward. Aditi was right. She'd been organising her entire day around whether or not he'd message. She'd stopped making plans because what if he wanted to talk? She'd turned down a movie night with friends because she was "waiting for something."

Waiting. Always waiting.

"You're right," Priyanshi said quietly.

"I usually am. So what are you going to do about it?"

Something shifted inside Priyanshi. A determination settled in her chest, solid and unshakeable.

"I'm going to stop waiting. I'm going to live my life. And if he wants to be part of it, he can show up. Consistently."

"Now that's the Priyanshi I know."

Scene 5: The Shift in Power Dynamic

The next day, Priyanshi started making changes. Small ones at first, but deliberate.

She stopped checking her phone every five minutes. She turned off Instagram notifications. She made plans with friends and actually went, phone tucked away in her bag.

When Chinmoy finally messaged after a six-hour gap, she didn't respond immediately. She finished her painting first. Then had dinner. Then, casually, when she felt like it, she replied.

The change was subtle but powerful.

Chinmoy: Want to talk?

Priyanshi: Can't, in the zone right now. Talk later?

Chinmoy: Oh. Yeah, sure.

Priyanshi: Maybe 😊

She could almost feel his confusion through the screen. This wasn't the Priyanshi who'd wait hours for his response, who'd be available whenever he finally decided to show up.

And interestingly, the more space she gave herself, the more present he became.

Sunday, 11:30 PM

Chinmoy: Can I call you?

Her heart jumped, but she made herself wait before responding.

Priyanshi: It's late.

Chinmoy: I know. But I want to hear your voice. Because texting isn't enough. Because I miss something I never actually had. And because I'm tired of being a coward.

Priyanshi: Tomorrow then?

Chinmoy: Tomorrow. I'll call you tomorrow evening. 7 PM?

Priyanshi: Maybe. I'll let you know.

She didn't call him at 7 PM the next day. She made him wait until 7:43, after she'd finished her assignment and felt ready. When they finally talked, the conversation flowed like it always did—easy, deep, full of laughter and comfortable silences.

But this time, she ended the call first.

"I have to go," she said. "Early class tomorrow."

"Oh. Okay. This was nice, though."

"It was. Goodnight, Chinmoy."

"Goodnight, Priyanshi."

After she hung up, she felt something unfamiliar: power. Not over him, but over herself. She wasn't at the mercy of his inconsistency anymore. She had choices. Agency.

It felt good.

Scene 6: Professor Kukrejha's Wisdom

The following weekend, Priyanshi visited the Kukrejha house again. This time, Chinmoy wasn't home—deliberately, she suspected. Sir had invited her for tea, and she had a feeling it wasn't just about academics.

Mrs. Kukrejha fussed over her as always, pressing snacks and sweets into her hands. But it was Professor Kukrejha's quiet observation that struck her.

"You seem lighter," he said, studying her over his cup of tea. "Less burdened."

"Do I?"

"Yes. When you visited a few weeks ago, you carried something heavy. It's lighter now. Not gone, but lighter."

Priyanshi smiled, caught off guard by his perceptiveness. "Maybe I'm learning how to carry it better."

"Or maybe someone is helping you carry it," Mrs. Kukrejha interjected with a knowing smile.

Professor Kukrejha shot his wife a look but didn't disagree. Instead, he said, "Priyanshi, can I tell you something as a friend, not as your professor?"

"Of course, Sir."

"My son is brilliant. Truly brilliant. But he's also deeply scared of anything he can't control or predict. Love, emotions, vulnerability—these things terrify him because there's no formula, no guaranteed outcome."

Priyanshi's throat tightened.

"But I've watched him these past few weeks," Professor Kukrejha continued. "He's changing. Slowly, but he's changing. He asks different questions now. About people, about relationships, about how to be brave when you're scared. That's because of you."

"Sir, I don't know if—"

"You don't have to say anything. I just want you to know that whatever is happening between you two, it's good for him. You're good for him. And if he's too stubborn or scared to see that clearly, well... give him time. But not too much time. You deserve someone who knows your worth."

Mrs. Kukrejha squeezed her hand. "What he's trying to say, beta, is that our son is lucky you're patient. But don't be so patient that you forget you have choices too."

The words echoed Aditi's advice. Everyone could see what she'd been too close to notice: she had power in this situation. The power to choose herself.

Scene 7: The Night Before

Two weeks later, Durga Puja arrived with all its festive chaos. The pandals were decorated, the air smelled of incense and street food, and Priyanshi found herself at the largest pandal in town with her family.

She wasn't looking for him. She'd told herself she wouldn't look for him.

But then she saw Professor Kukrejha in the crowd, and her body moved on autopilot.

"Sir!" she called out, weaving through the crowd.

"Priyanshi! Wonderful to see you here," he boomed warmly, pulling her into a fatherly side-hug.

But just over his shoulder, standing in the shadow of a tree, was Chinmoy.

Her breath caught. He was exactly than she'd imagined from their voice calls, watching with quiet intensity. Their eyes met across the crowd—no smiles, no waves, just silent, electric acknowledgment.

Does Sir know? The thought crashed through her mind. *Does he know about the confusion, the emotional whiplash? What would he think?*

She maintained her polite conversation with Sir, laughing at his jokes about the pandal decorations, but her thoughts raced. *Is this why Chinmoy has been so cautious? The connection through their professor—does that complicate everything?*

They didn't speak. Chinmoy disappeared into the crowd with the Professor, casting one last unreadable glance in her direction.

That night, as Priyanshi lay in bed, unable to sleep, her phone buzzed. Not Instagram. WhatsApp. He'd finally used her number.

Chinmoy: You looked beautiful tonight.

Her heart raced, but she made herself wait five minutes before responding.

Priyanshi: I saw you too. Why didn't you say anything?

Chinmoy: It wasn't the right place. But tomorrow, it can be.

Priyanshi: What do you mean?

Chinmoy: Let's catch up tomorrow. Let's talk. Properly.

Priyanshi: Okay. Yes.

The wait was almost over. Tomorrow, the digital would become real, and the story that started on a screen would finally be written face to face.

But as Priyanshi finally drifted off to sleep, she made herself a promise: she wouldn't lose herself in him. Whatever happened tomorrow, she would remember that she was the main character of her own story.

And the main characters don't wait in the wings for someone else's clarity.

They create their own.

Chapter 4
The First Conversation

The next day, they finally met. She saw him walking towards her, and the casual grace with which he moved made the digital phantom real, solid, and incredibly intimidating.

He stopped in front of her, a slow, easy smile spreading across his face. His eyes, which she had only ever guessed the colour of from pixels on a screen, were a warm, intelligent brown, and they were currently crinkling at the corners with amusement.

"So," Chinmoy said, his voice deeper and smoother than it had been in her head, "the famous Priyanshi Dubey."

Priyanshi tried to form a witty retort, but her mind had gone blank.

His smile widened. "You know, the first thing I thought when I saw you yesterday was... You are so childish in real life."

The words, delivered with a teasing lilt, landed with a gentle thud. Priyanshi felt a blush instantly heat her cheeks.

"The way you just... *ran* over to meet my Papa," he continued, chuckling softly at the memory. "It was so eager, so... unguarded. I was just standing there, thinking, 'Wow, she's actually this childish.' It made me laugh."

In that moment, the confident debater, the girl who demanded explanations, vanished. All she could feel was a wave of acute self-consciousness. *Why did I do that?* she screamed internally, mentally replaying her enthusiastic dash towards Professor Kukrejha. *He must think I'm a silly little girl, not a woman an IITian would take seriously.*

She looked down at her shoes, unable to meet his gaze, a shy smile tugging at her lips despite her embarrassment. "I... I was just being polite," she managed to mumble, the excuse sounding feeble even to her own ears.

Chinmoy watched her—the blush on her cheeks, the downcast eyes, the slight fluster in her posture. The raw, unfiltered reaction was more captivating than any cool, composed greeting could ever have been. His teasing had been a test, a way to break the ice, and her response—so genuine and flustered—told him everything he needed to know. The digital mystery was now a beautifully real, wonderfully shy person standing before him.

"Don't be," he said, his voice softening, losing its teasing edge. "It was the most honest thing I'd seen all day."

He gestured to a nearby bench. "Shall we? I believe we have an hour's worth of talking to catch up on."

And as they sat down, the initial sting of his words melting away under the warmth of his tone, Priyanshi knew the rollercoaster hadn't ended. It had just climbed its most thrilling peak yet.

She told him about the debate she'd nearly lost because she was distracted, wondering if he'd reply to her story, about the funny thing her professor had said that she'd immediately wanted to share with him, about the entire plot of the novel she was currently reading, complete with dramatic hand gestures.

Chinmoy, for his part, simply listened.

He didn't just hear her; he *listened*. His responses were minimal—a soft "Hmm," a quiet chuckle, a nod of understanding. His eyes remained fixed on her, a small, captivated smile playing on his lips as he watched her talk, her hands flying, her expressions shifting from earnest to excited to indignant in a matter of seconds.

He was utterly charmed by her *bak-bak*.

It wasn't mindless chatter to him; it was a revelation. It was the unedited, vibrant, full-colour version of the girl he'd only known in text bubbles and curated Instagram posts. This was her mind, unleashed and unfiltered.

Priyanshi, mid-sentence about the symbolism in the book she was describing, suddenly caught herself. She paused, her hands freezing in the air. "I'm... I'm talking too much, aren't I?" she said, a fresh wave of self-consciousness washing over her. "You must be so bored. I'm just... bak-baking."

Chinmoy's smile widened into a full, genuine grin that lit up his entire face. It was a sight she decided she wanted to see more often.

"Bored?" he repeated, his voice low and sincere. "Priyanshi, I've been listening to the silence for weeks. This... this is the best sound I've heard in a very long time. Please, don't stop."

His words sank in, dissolving the last of her doubts. The warmth in his eyes was undeniable. He wasn't just tolerating her; he was enjoying her.

So she continued. And he continued to listen. He asked a few questions, just enough to fuel her thoughts further, and she was off again, weaving stories and sharing fragments of her life, each word building a bridge between the digital fantasy and the beautiful, talking, breathing reality sitting beside him.

Chapter 5
The Rhythm of Us

The days that followed their first meeting settled into a new, comfortable rhythm. The frantic, anxious energy of waiting for Instagram DMs was replaced by the steady, warm pulse of WhatsApp chats. The digital thread that connected them had thickened, becoming more substantial, more real.

The WhatsApp Tapestry

Their conversations now lived in the green bubbles of WhatsApp, a space that felt more intimate and personal. It was no longer about public profiles or curated stories; it was a private world they were building together, one message at a time.

The topics were as meandering and deep as ever, but now they were coloured by the memory of each other's voices and smiles.

Chinmoy: You know, I've been thinking about your theory on the colour blue in Van Gogh's paintings. It's not just sadness, it's depth. The way you explained it... It stuck with me.

Priyanshi: You remembered that? I was just bak-baking!

Chinmoy: It was the most insightful bak-bak I've ever heard. Don't sell yourself short.

They shared pieces of their days like scattered jewels. He would send her a blurry photo of a circuit board with the caption: *"My life for the next 48 hours. Send coffee and motivation."* She would reply with a picture of a half-finished painting, bathed in the golden light of her dorm room window: *"Trying to capture the exact colour of the evening sky. It's not cooperating."*

It wasn't a constant, 24/7 chatter. They were both busy, he with his relentless IIT schedule, she with her classes and art. Sometimes, a whole day would pass with only a "Good morning, have a good day!" or a "Hope you're surviving your lab report." But the silence between messages no longer felt like a void of confusion. It felt like a comfortable pause, a mutual understanding that they each had their own lives to live.

The Lingering Glance on Instagram

Even though WhatsApp was their new home, Instagram wasn't forgotten. It became a playground for a different kind of connection.

Priyanshi would post a story of a quote from a book she was reading—*"We accept the love we think we deserve."*—and within minutes, his name would appear in the viewers' list, often followed by a WhatsApp message.

Chinmoy: Perks of Being a Wallflower. Bold choice. That quote wrecked me for a week in twelfth grade.

Priyanshi: It's a permanent state of being for me. Glad to have a fellow wreck as company.

He would post a video of a new, impossibly complex card trick, and she would be the first to view it, sending him a string of mind-blown emojis. It was a silent nod across the digital room, a way of saying, "I saw you. I'm here." The platform that had once been a source of anxiety was now a place for shared, unspoken understanding.

The Beautiful Arguments

Their connection wasn't all serene sunsets and intellectual discussions. They were two strong-willed, opinionated individuals, and clashes were inevitable. But even their arguments had a unique, beautiful rhythm.

It could start with something silly.

Priyanshi: *[Sends a reel of a famous actor]* Okay, I take back everything I said. He CAN act.

Chinmoy: Absolutely not. That's just good editing. He has the emotional range of a teaspoon.

Priyanshi: You're being deliberately obtuse! Look at that micro-expression!

Chinmoy: That's not a micro-expression, that's indigestion. I've seen more convincing acting in toothpaste commercials.

The debate could escalate, spanning multiple messages, employing logic, pop culture references, and dramatic hyperbole. But just as quickly as it heated up, it would dissolve.

Chinmoy: ...and that's why your opinion, while passionately argued, is fundamentally flawed.

Priyanshi: You're impossible. And wrong. I'm not talking to you for the next five minutes.

Chinmoy: Fine. I'll use the time to gather more evidence for my flawless argument.

(Four minutes and thirty seconds later)

Priyanshi: Okay, time's up. I just saw a dog wearing a raincoat, and it was the cutest thing I've ever seen. Look. *[Sends picture]*

Chinmoy: ...Okay, that is objectively adorable. You win this round. But the actor debate is still on hold.

The *argument* would end as suddenly as it began, not with an apology, but with a shared understanding that their connection was stronger than any disagreement. They never let the sun set on their anger. The argument would be shelved, replaced by the next shared moment of wonder or laughter, proving that their bond could withstand a little friction.

Never a Stranger's Silence

The most beautiful part of this new chapter was the effortless way they slipped back into conversation, no matter the gap. There were days, sometimes two or three in a row, where their communication was minimal, a quick check-in, a forwarded meme.

But when they did finally have a long, uninterrupted window to talk, it was as if no time had passed at all.

Priyanshi: *[After a three-day silence filled with her art submission and his midterms]* So, I finished the book.

Chinmoy: AND? Don't leave me hanging. What did you think of the ending? I've been thinking about your theory on the unreliable narrator all week.

Priyanshi: You were right! It was all in the letters! I feel so betrayed, but in the best way. Let me tell you everything...

The conversation would pick up exactly where it had left off, the flow immediate and natural. There was no awkwardness, no feeling of *"bahut dino ke baad baatein kar rahe hain."* It felt like coming home. The foundation they had built through text, through their first meeting, through their shared vulnerability was solid. The connection hummed quietly in the background, always alive, always ready to flare up into its full, brilliant intensity whenever they stepped back into its light.

They were writing their story not in a frantic, continuous script, but in beautiful, meaningful chapters, each one worth the wait.

Chapter 6
The Unspoken Storm

Weeks melted into a new, unspoken rhythm. The constant, warm pulse of their WhatsApp conversations faded into a comfortable, mutual silence. Both were submerged in the relentless tides of their own lives—Priyanshi had a pivotal research paper submission looming, while Chinmoy was grappling with demanding robotics labs.

Their connection didn't break; it simply shifted form. Every story one posted was viewed within minutes by the other—a quiet testament that even in the busiest hours, a part of their attention remained reserved for the other.

But silence, Priyanshi was learning, could be comfortable or threatening. And lately, it was becoming harder to tell the difference.

The Thumbs Up

It started with something small. It always did.

Priyanshi posted a story of her latest painting—a turbulent seascape in blues and greys, the kind of piece that took three sleepless nights and every ounce of emotion she'd been suppressing. Within minutes, two notifications appeared.

Aditya Mehra (a classmate from Design Theory who'd been gradually, gently inserting himself into her orbit): *This is breathtaking. The way you've captured the chaos but also the stillness underneath... You're seriously gifted, Priyanshi.*

Chinmoy: 👍

Just a thumbs up. That was it.

Priyanshi stared at her screen, an unfamiliar frustration building in her chest. Three sentences of genuine appreciation versus an emoji. She knew Chinmoy was busy. She knew he'd seen it—the view count proved that. But couldn't he spare five seconds to type actual words?

She didn't reply to either message.

Present vs. Complicated

The next day, Aditya invited her to a campus art showcase. "There's this incredible installation artist presenting. I immediately thought of you. Want to go?"

Priyanshi hesitated, her thumb hovering over her phone. She could message Chinmoy, tell him about the showcase, and wait to see if he'd engage. Or she could just... go. With someone who was actually asking. Actually present.

"Sure," she said. "I'd love to."

The showcase was everything she loved—experimental, thought-provoking, boundary-pushing. But what surprised her wasn't the art. It was how easy it felt to be there with Aditya. He asked what she thought about each piece, shared his own interpretations without overshadowing hers, and when she got lost analysing a particular sculpture, he simply stood beside her. Patient. Present.

No cryptic responses. No need to decode hidden meanings. Just... simplicity.

That evening, she posted a photo from the showcase. Within minutes, Chinmoy viewed it. No reaction, no message.

But Aditya commented publicly: *Best afternoon in weeks. Thanks for the company, art connoisseur!* 🎨

Priyanshi's phone buzzed almost immediately after. Chinmoy, on WhatsApp.

Chinmoy: Who's that?

She stared at the message, something bitter mixing with satisfaction. So *now* he was paying attention.

Priyanshi: A friend from class.

Chinmoy: Seems like a good friend.

Priyanshi: He is. He's very present.

The word hung between them, loaded with everything she wasn't saying directly. The typing indicator appeared and disappeared several times before his response came.

Chinmoy: I haven't been, have I?

Priyanshi: I didn't say that.

Chinmoy: You didn't have to.

When Teasing Becomes a Weapon

Two days later, Chinmoy tried to fix things the only way he knew how—by retreating into their old pattern of playful arguments.

Chinmoy: So, are you still convinced that an actor from the reel has 'depth,' or have you finally seen the light? Admit it, you were wrong.

He waited for the inevitable fiery retort, for her to engage, for things to feel normal again.

Priyanshi: Chinmoy, please. Not today.

Okay, okay. Touchy subject. What's on your mind then?

Priyanshi: My mood is already terrible because of something else. Please, don't add to it by The words were flat, heavy. Wrong. He tried again, softer.

Chinmoy: messing with my head right now.

Chinmoy's playful smirk faded. He'd been so focused on the growing distance between them, on that guy commenting on her posts, that he'd missed something fundamental: she was hurting.

Chinmoy: If you don't mind... can you share what's wrong?

A pause. Then the dam broke.

She told him everything—the pressure of her submission, the crippling self-doubt, a professor who'd made her feel small and insignificant during a presentation. The words tumbled out, raw and unfiltered.

What she didn't mention was that Aditya had been there earlier that day, sitting beside her in the library after that brutal meeting with her professor. He hadn't said much. Hadn't needed to. His presence had been enough.

Chinmoy read every word, his own worries about their relationship suddenly feeling petty and irrelevant.

Chinmoy: I read everything. Look, I know it feels massive right now, but it won't always feel this way. This is just a phase, a really shitty one, but it will pass. You are far more capable than you're giving yourself credit for. Everything will be okay.

Then, something rare:

Chinmoy: Can I call you?

They weren't big on phone calls. It required asking. Permission. A ritual they both valued.

Priyanshi: Yes. Please.

The Call That Mattered

The phone rang. His voice, calm and steady, filled her room.

He didn't offer grand solutions or empty platitudes. He just listened—really listened—and then spoke with quiet certainty that

began to patch up the cracks in her spirit. He asked the right questions and made her see the situation differently. Reminded her of her own strength with specific examples she'd forgotten.

For the first time that day, Priyanshi felt genuine calm.

This was why she couldn't let him go. This depth, this ability to understand her without her having to explain everything. This connection felt like finding someone who spoke her language in a world of foreigners.

But as they talked, her phone screen lit up with a notification she couldn't help but see.

Aditya: Hope you're feeling better. Remember—you're brilliant, even when you can't see it yourself. ☕ tomorrow?

She glanced at it, then back to the phone pressed against her ear, to Chinmoy's voice still offering comfort.

Two people. Two different kinds of attention.

One was simple—steady, uncomplicated, present. Coffee tomorrow. No guessing required.

The other was complicated—deep, consuming, inconsistent. A phone call when she needed it most. But also days of silence. Also, thumbs-up emojis instead of words.

"Priyanshi? You still there?" Chinmoy's voice cut through her thoughts.

"Yeah, sorry. I'm here."

"You should get some rest. You've had a rough day."

"Yeah. Thank you for this. For listening."

"Always."

The word felt like a promise. But she'd heard his promises before.

After they hung up, she stared at Aditya's message. Her thumb hovered over the reply button.

☕ *tomorrow?*

She could say yes. It would be easy. Uncomplicated. He'd show up on time, smile genuinely, and not leave her wondering what he meant or whether she mattered.

But would it feel like *this*? Would his words reach the places Chinmoy's did?

She set her phone face down without responding to either message.

The question hung in the air, unanswered, as complicated as everything else between them: was depth worth the inconsistency? Or was she just making excuses for someone who couldn't give her what she actually needed?

Outside her window, storm clouds gathered. The first drops of rain began to fall.

Chapter 7
The Art of Small Wars

The morning after their phone call, Priyanshi woke up feeling lighter. The weight that had pressed against her chest for days had lifted, replaced by a quiet warmth—the knowledge that someone had truly listened, truly cared.

She reached for her phone and found a message waiting.

Chinmoy: Good morning. Slept better, I hope?

A smile tugged at her lips.

Priyanshi: Much better. Thank you for last night. I needed that.

Chinmoy: Anytime. That's what I'm here for.

Priyanshi: To rescue damsels in distress? How chivalrous.

Chinmoy: More likely to prevent a artists from spiralling into unnecessary self-doubt. It's a very specific niche.

Priyanshi: 😊 Well, you're good at it.

The Pattern of Contradictions

As days turned into weeks, a fascinating pattern emerged. She and Chinmoy were, by all logical measures, completely opposite. She was spontaneous; he was methodical. She wore her heart on her sleeve; he kept his emotions carefully guarded. She made decisions based on feeling; he relied on logic and analysis.

But their conversations were a constant dance of contradictions that somehow worked. When Priyanshi would launch into an emotional rant about how a particular painting made her feel, Chinmoy didn't dismiss it as illogical. He asked questions, trying

to understand her language of emotions, even when it was foreign to his analytical mind.

And when Chinmoy explained his robotics projects, Priyanshi didn't tune out. She asked questions, even when she had no idea what half the terms meant, wanting to understand his world of logic and circuits.

This mutual willingness to inhabit each other's worlds created something rare. They didn't just tolerate their differences—they celebrated them.

Until they didn't.

The University Festival

Three weeks before mid-semester exams, the university campus transformed. Posters announcing "Euphoria"—the annual cultural fest—plastered every available surface. The air buzzed with excitement as students scrambled to register for competitions.

"Come on, Priya! Just register for the dance competition!" Aditi urged, bouncing on Priyanshi's bed while waving the registration form like a flag.

"I don't know..." Priyanshi hesitated.

"Which is exactly why you should do it! I've seen you practice in this room. You're amazing!"

Riya appeared in the doorway. "If you don't register, we're registering for you."

"That's not how consent works!"

"It is when your friends know what's best for you," Aditi declared. "Contemporary dance. Your speciality. What's the worst that could happen?"

Looking at her friends' expectant faces, Priyanshi found herself nodding. "Fine. But if I mess up, I'm blaming both of you."

The next two weeks became a blur of practice sessions. Between classes and study hours, Priyanshi would slip into the empty auditorium, losing herself in movement. She chose a fusion piece—classical Kathak spins blending into contemporary expressions, set to a haunting melody that spoke of longing and freedom.

Her phone remained mostly silent during this time. Chinmoy had pulled back again, his messages growing sparse. His last text from ten days ago read: *"I need some time. Don't take it personally."*

How was she not supposed to take it personally when he kept saying they were "more than friends"?

She pushed the thought away and threw herself into preparation.

The Performance

The night of the cultural fest arrived with all the chaos of a battlefield, dressed in fairy lights. The auditorium hummed with energy—students cheering, music blaring, the smell of street food wafting in from outside.

Backstage, Priyanshi's heart hammered against her ribs.

"Priya! You're up in three performances!" Aditi rushed over, phone ready to record.

"I think I'm going to throw up."

"You're going to be brilliant. This is *your* moment. Not Chinmoy's. Not your professors'. Yours."

When her name was announced, Priyanshi walked onto the stage. The lights were blinding. Then the music started—soft at first, building slowly—and her body took over.

She wasn't Priyanshi, the confused girl, anymore. She was the dance itself—spinning, leaping, expressing everything she'd kept bottled up. The longing. The frustration. The hope. The doubt.

Every emotion poured into each gesture, each turn. The classical spins grounded her while the contemporary movements set her free.

When she struck her final pose, chest heaving, the auditorium erupted. The applause was thunderous. Students were on their feet, whistling and cheering.

She'd done it.

Backstage, her friends mobbed her with hugs.

"YOU WERE INSANE!" Riya screamed.

"I can't believe I actually did that," Priyanshi laughed, adrenaline coursing through her veins. "I feel... alive."

For the first time in weeks, she felt entirely present. No overthinking. No analysing cryptic messages. Just joy.

The Silence That Spoke Volumes

Back in her hostel room near midnight, still buzzing with excitement, Priyanshi uploaded a snippet of her performance to Instagram. Aditi had captured the perfect moment—mid-spin, her outfit billowing, her expression fierce and free.

Within minutes, notifications flooded in. Friends, seniors, juniors—all sending congratulations.

Then she saw it: *Chinmoy viewed your story.*

Her heart stuttered. She stared at the notification, waiting. *Surely he'd message. Surely, after seeing her dance, he'd say something.*

Minutes passed. Then an hour.

Nothing.

Something cold settled in her stomach. He had watched it. Seen her at her most vulnerable, most expressive. And he'd said nothing.

"Don't overthink it," Aditi said from her bed. "Maybe he doesn't know what to say."

"He always knows what to say," Priyanshi replied quietly. "When he wants to."

Three days later, a message finally arrived.

Chinmoy: You danced well.

Four words. After three days.

Priyanshi stared at the message, exhaustion replacing anger.

Priyanshi: Thanks.

Chinmoy: How's everything else?

How's everything else? As if they were casual acquaintances. As if he hadn't disappeared.

Priyanshi: Fine. Busy with assignments.

Chinmoy: Good. Don't overwork yourself.

The conversation died as quickly as it had begun. As always, he dictated the rhythm—when they talked, when they didn't, how much he revealed, how much he withheld.

What Are We?

The pattern became exhausting. They would talk normally for a few days, falling back into easy banter. Then, without warning, he would say something that made her heart flip.

Chinmoy: You know what I like about talking to you? You make even boring days interesting.

Priyanshi: That's sweet. You do the same for me.

Chinmoy: We're good together, aren't we?

Her heart would soar. *Maybe now. Maybe he'll finally say something concrete.*

Then, the next day:

Chinmoy: I need space. Don't message me for a while.

And he'd be gone—days, sometimes a month—leaving her to replay every conversation, analysing every word.

When he'd return, it would be as if nothing had happened.

Chinmoy: So, still team pakora over samosa?

Priyanshi: ...You disappeared for one month.

Chinmoy: I told you I needed time. Are you mad?

Priyanshi: No. Just... confused.

Chinmoy: Don't be. We're fine.

And she'd let it go. Because what else could she do?

One evening, after another sudden reappearance, Priyanshi finally asked the question burning in her chest.

Priyanshi: Chinmoy, what are we?

The typing indicator appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

Chinmoy: We're not friends.

Her breath caught. *Not friends.*

Priyanshi: Then what are we?

Chinmoy: Maybe more than that. I don't know yet.

Priyanshi: How can you not know?

Chinmoy: Because I'm still figuring things out. Give me time.

Priyanshi: You keep saying that. How much time do you need?

Chinmoy: As much as I need. When the time is right, I'll clear all your confusion. Trust me.

But how could she trust someone who kept moving the goalposts? Who said they weren't friends but wouldn't define what they were? Who gave her attention one day and silence the next?

The Realization

Late that night, Aditi was away for the weekend, and Priyanshi sat alone with her phone, scrolling through their chat history.

The pattern was undeniable: he would draw her close with vulnerability and attention, then push her away with silence. Close, away. Close, away. Like breathing, but suffocating.

"We are not friends," he'd said repeatedly, drawing a deliberate line. But when she asked what they were, his answers led nowhere. *"Maybe more than that." "When the time is right, I'll clear all your confusion."*

Then he'd pull away completely. *"Don't talk to me. You bother me too much."* And she'd be left stranded, wondering what she'd done wrong.

Yet when they reconnected, the conversation would flow as if no time had passed. Until he'd retreat again. *"I need time."*

This constant flux meant she could never arrive at a conclusion. Was she his father's student? A temporary distraction? A friend, he tolerated? Or something more?

The question echoed, unanswered. She was trapped in his ambiguity—a puzzle she desperately wanted to solve but couldn't, because he kept changing the pieces.

Priyanshi set her phone down and stared at the ceiling.

The art of small wars, she'd once thought—*where both sides win.*

But this didn't feel like winning. This felt like fighting a battle where the rules kept changing, where she was the only one left on the battlefield.

And the saddest part? She knew she'd still be there tomorrow, waiting for the next message, hoping the next time would be different.

Because despite everything—the confusion, the silence, the push and pull—she still believed that somewhere beneath all his walls, he felt something real.

She just wished he'd let her see it.

Chapter 8
The IIT Visit

The arrival of her admit card for an online certification exam brought an unexpected twist—the exam centre was located at IIT Guwahati. Holding the printed card, Priyanshi felt a nervous flutter. It had been months since their last, inconclusive conversation. Taking a breath, she decided to break the silence.

Her message was practical, devoid of the emotional weight that usually characterised their chats.

Priyanshi: My exam centre is in IIT Guwahati. Can you tell me exactly where the exam hall is?

The reply came within minutes, swift and efficient.

Chinmoy: Sure. Which hall is it in your admit card?

A brief, practical exchange followed as he confirmed the location, even mentioning he had double-checked with a friend to be certain. Then, his tone shifted from logistical to personal.

Chinmoy: How is your preparation going? Are you feeling ready?

Before she could answer, another message popped up.

Chinmoy: All the very best for it. You'll do great.

The simple encouragement warmed her. The day before the exam, her nerves got the better of her. She called him.

"Since I'm coming all the way there," she said, her voice a little too casual, "I was thinking of looking around the campus afterwards. Do you think you'll have time?"

He didn't hesitate. "Of course. I'll be there."

The Morning of the Exam

Reporting time was 8:30 AM, an ungodly hour for someone of Priyanshi's nocturnal habits. She arrived on campus, the sprawling, unfamiliar grounds making her feel small. Clutching her bag, she called him. "I'm here, near the main gate."

"Wait five minutes," his voice came, calm and steady. "I'm coming."

True to his word, he appeared and, without any fanfare, guided her to the exam hall. But the best part wasn't just that he showed her the way. He didn't just point and leave. He waited. He stood there, a silent, steadying presence, until her verification was complete and she had disappeared inside the hall. Just before she went in, he called out, "Call me when you're done. I'll be around."

Three hours later, the exam was over. She called him again, a wave of relief washing over her. "I'm done. I'm coming out."

"I'm on my way," he replied. "Go to the cafeteria and order something to eat. Just keep walking straight, you'll find it."

Following his directions, she found the cafeteria, ordered a sandwich, and sat down. A few minutes later, he slid into the seat opposite her. They talked as she ate—light, easy conversation about the exam and her first impressions of his campus. It felt wonderfully normal.

The Accident

As they finished and began to walk out to tour the campus, disaster struck in the most mundane way possible.

They were navigating the stone steps leading down from the cafeteria, Priyanshi gesturing animatedly as she described a particularly tricky exam question, when her foot caught on an uneven edge. Time seemed to slow. She felt herself pitching forward, her arms flailing uselessly for balance.

Before she could process what was happening, Chinmoy's hand shot out, catching her elbow and steadying her. But the momentum had already carried her forward too far. Her knee collided hard with the concrete edge of the step below, and her palm scraped against the rough stone as she tried to break her fall.

"Ow!" The cry escaped before she could stop it.

"Priyanshi!"

The panic in his voice was immediate and visceral. In an instant, he was crouched beside her, his hands hovering uncertainly before gently grasping her shoulders. "Are you okay? Let me see."

"I'm fine, I just—" she started, but he wasn't listening.

His eyes were scanning her frantically, taking inventory. He spotted the angry red scrape on her palm first, already beginning to bead with tiny droplets of blood. Then his gaze travelled down to her knee, where her jeans had torn, revealing a nasty gash that was bleeding more freely.

"You're bleeding," he said, his voice tight with concern. "We need to clean this immediately."

"Chinmoy, it's just a scrape—"

"You could get an infection." His tone left no room for argument. He was already helping her to her feet, his arm firm around her waist for support. "Can you walk? Does it hurt too much?"

"I can walk," she assured him, though she couldn't help wincing as she put weight on her injured knee.

His jaw tightened. Without a word, he adjusted his grip, taking more of her weight. "Lean on me. The medical centre isn't far."

As they made their way across the campus, Priyanshi became acutely aware of the stares. Students passing by were openly watching them—whispers followed in their wake. A boy and a girl, his arm around her waist, her limping, both clearly in some state of

distress. On a campus where Chinmoy was known, it was the kind of scene that would fuel gossip for days.

But Chinmoy didn't seem to notice. Or if he did, he simply didn't care.

"Watch this step," he murmured, his focus entirely on her. "Just a little further."

She found herself staring at him—at the furrow of concentration between his brows, at the set of his jaw, at the way his entire being seemed focused on getting her help. This was the boy who maintained careful distance, who was always so conscious of boundaries and appearances, who worried about complications and consequences.

Right now, none of that mattered to him. Only she mattered.

At the Medical Centre

The medical centre was mercifully empty. Chinmoy didn't wait for her to sit before flagging down a nurse. "She's hurt. She fell on the steps. Can someone help her, please?"

The nurse, a middle-aged woman with kind eyes, took one look at Priyanshi's knee and nodded. "Come, dear. Let's get you cleaned up."

Chinmoy followed them into the treatment room without asking for permission. The nurse raised an eyebrow but said nothing.

As the nurse began cleaning the wound, Priyanshi hissed in pain, her hand instinctively reaching out. Chinmoy immediately grasped it, his fingers intertwining with hers.

"Squeeze as hard as you need to," he said softly.

She did, her nails digging into his palm as the antiseptic stung. His face remained impassive, though she knew it must have hurt. He didn't let go.

"You have a good friend here," the nurse commented with a knowing smile as she applied bandages. "Very concerned about you."

Priyanshi glanced at Chinmoy, expecting him to correct her, to offer some clarification about what they were or weren't. But he simply nodded, his eyes never leaving Priyanshi's face.

"I am concerned," he said quietly. "Very."

The nurse finished up, giving Priyanshi instructions about keeping the wound clean and changing the dressing. Chinmoy listened intently, nodding, as if committing every word to memory.

"Thank you," he told the nurse with genuine gratitude. Then, turning to Priyanshi, "Can you walk okay? Should I get you a wheelchair?"

"Chinmoy, it's a scraped knee, not a broken leg," she said, but she was smiling. She couldn't help it.

"Just checking," he said defensively, but there was relief in his eyes now that she was patched up.

The Question

They made their way slowly back outside, his hand still hovering near her elbow, ready to steady her at any moment. As they settled on a bench overlooking the campus lake, she finally voiced what had been running through her mind.

"You didn't care, did you?" she asked softly.

He looked at her, confused. "About what?"

"About everyone staring. About people seeing you with me like that. About what they might say or think."

Understanding dawned in his eyes. He was quiet for a moment, his gaze drifting to the lake. When he spoke, his voice was steady and sure.

"No," he said simply. "I didn't. I don't." He turned to look at her directly. "When I saw you fall, when I saw you were hurt... nothing else mattered. Not where we were, not who might see, not what anyone might say. The only thing I could think about was making sure you were okay."

Priyanshi's breath caught. This was the clearest thing he'd ever said to her about what she meant to him.

"Besides," he added, a small smile tugging at his lips, "you think I care about gossip? Let them talk. They don't know anything about us."

"Do we?" she asked, the question slipping out before she could stop it. "Know about us, I mean?"

His smile faded, replaced by something more serious, more vulnerable. "I'm trying to figure it out," he admitted. "But I know that when you're hurt, I can't think straight. I know that making sure you're safe matters more to me than anything else. That has to mean something, right?"

She wanted to press him, to demand more clarity, more definition. But looking at him now—at the genuine worry still lingering in his eyes, at the dried blood on his palm where her nails had dug in, at the way he sat angled toward her as if ready to catch her if she toppled again—she found she didn't need to.

His actions had spoken louder than any words could.

The Campus Tour

After ensuring she was comfortable and the pain had subsided to a dull throb, Chinmoy gave her a proper tour, showing her the library, the main academic block, and the lake. Their conversation was a

gentle hum of shared discovery, though he checked on her knee every few minutes.

"Stop fussing," she finally said, laughing. "I'm fine."

"I'm not fussing," he protested. "I'm being appropriately concerned."

"You've asked me how my knee feels seven times in the last twenty minutes."

"And I'll ask an eighth if I want to." But he was smiling now, relaxed.

As they walked, she asked the question that had been burning inside her for months. "Why don't you ever call me your friend?"

She saw it instantly—the subtle shift in his posture, the flicker in his eyes as they darted away. He deftly sidestepped the question. "We should hurry," he said, his tone suddenly brisk. "I have to be somewhere soon."

Recognising the familiar wall going up, she let it go. But the question hung between them, unanswered.

For Priyanshi, the most memorable part of the day wasn't the iconic campus landmarks. It was the quiet, steadfast way he had waited for her outside the exam hall. It was the panic in his voice when she fell. It was the complete disregard for everything except her well-being. It was the feeling of his hand in hers as the nurse cleaned her wound.

It was all the things he couldn't say, shown through everything he did.

The Journey Home

After the long journey back from IIT to her hostel, exhaustion finally caught up with Priyanshi. She dropped her bag by the door, the events of the day replaying in her mind. Before getting lost in thought, she called Chinmoy to let him know she'd returned safely.

The phone rang once, twice, then went to voicemail. A faint prickle of disappointment needled her, but she brushed it aside. *He's probably busy.*

She freshened up, ate a quick lunch, and succumbed to fatigue, falling into bed.

When she awoke hours later, the room was bathed in soft, golden afternoon light. Her first conscious action was to check her phone. The screen was blank—no missed calls, no messages. The disappointment returned, sharpened into irritation. *Why hadn't he called back?*

She was mentally composing a slightly miffed opening line when her phone vibrated, his name lighting up the screen. Her heart gave a traitorous leap. She let it ring twice before answering.

"Hello?"

But the moment his voice came through warm and familiar, her resolve melted. The irritation dissipated like mist under the sun.

They fell into easy conversation, dissecting the day. Then, in the flow of their talk, she said something that made his breath catch.

"You know," she began, her tone thoughtful, "I think… this might be our last meeting."

The words landed with a quiet, profound thud.

"Okay. Well, it was… very different. Thank you for your time."

There was a brief, heavy silence. When he spoke again, his voice held gentle reproach. "Why would you say that? Why would you think that?"

Before she could respond, he continued, his tone softening into something earnest and profound. "Priyanshi, if a connection between two people is true, it doesn't matter if they meet after ten days or ten years. The bond remains exactly the same. It doesn't fade."

His words sank into her, disarming her completely. A small, involuntary smile touched her lips.

"Be positive," he continued, warm and encouraging. "We'll meet again soon, I'm sure."

He explained he had to finish a project. "I have some work to do. So, I'll talk to you later. You should take proper rest now and focus on your own stuff. And don't forget to change that bandage before bed."

Even now, still worried about her knee.

As Priyanshi set the phone down, the room no longer felt solitary. It was filled with the quiet echo of his promise—not of an ending, but of a connection that could span any distance, any silence.

And as she gently touched the bandage on her knee, she couldn't help but smile at the memory of his panicked face, his steady hands, his complete disregard for everything except making sure she was okay.

Maybe he couldn't say what they were to each other. But today, he had shown her exactly how much she mattered to him.

And somehow, that was enough.

They said their goodbyes, and as Priyanshi set the phone down, the room no longer felt solitary. It was filled with the quiet echo of his promise, not of an ending, but of a connection that could span any distance, any silence.

Chapter 9
The Silence and The Text

Three months bled into four, marked by a silence so complete it felt like a physical presence. The frantic rhythm of their WhatsApp chats, the silent Instagram acknowledgements, the beautiful arguments—all of it had faded into a digital graveyard. Priyanshi threw herself into her work, her art, her life, but the absence of his name on her phone was a hollow space she kept stumbling into.

For the last few days, the feeling had become a constant, aching thrum. She missed him with a rawness that surprised her: the sound of his laugh, the way he debated the smallest things, the comfort of his steady, listening silence. It was a longing that grew teeth and claws, gnawing at her composure.

One evening, the ache became unbearable. Sitting in her dorm room, surrounded by her sketches and the quiet hum of the night, her resolve crumbled. She picked up her phone, her fingers trembling slightly as she typed, not overthinking, just feeling.

Priyanshi: Are you fine?

She stared at the simple message, then, before she could lose her nerve, added another, letting her vulnerability spill onto the screen.

Priyanshi: I don't know if you'll even see this... but I was missing you a lot, so I just messaged.

She didn't expect a reply. She had prepared herself for the vast, echoing silence that had become their norm. But life, it seemed, was full of surprises. Within ten minutes, her phone buzzed, and his name appeared, making her heart slam against her ribs.

Chinmoy: I'm fine. And if you miss me, you can text sometimes, you know.

The casualness of his reply, after all this time, was both a relief and a sting.

Chinmoy: Actually, I've been really busy for the last six months. Wasn't even active on social media.

Priyanshi: Yeah, I knew that.

Emboldened by his response, and craving the intimacy of his voice, she typed the next question.

Priyanshi: Can I call you?

The response was immediate and firm.

Chinmoy: No, whatever you have to say, just say it here.

His refusal felt like a door being gently but firmly closed in her face. A pang of hurt shot through her. She wanted to talk, to hear the nuances in his voice, to have the kind of meandering conversation that text could never capture.

Priyanshi: It's nothing important. Okay, fine.

The words were a surrender, but they tasted bitter. She wanted to push, to insist, but she could feel the invisible wall he had put up. She didn't have the energy to climb it. He then asked about her, and she, still smarting from the rejection, replied with a terse "I'm fine," closing that avenue of conversation.

The exchange ended, leaving her feeling more unsettled than before.

But the thread, once pulled, had begun to unravel. A few days later, she posted a story—a melancholic sketch of a lone figure looking out a window. He was one of the first to view it, and this time, he didn't just watch. He replied.

And just like that, they were talking again. The conversation quickly fell into their old, familiar pattern, sparking a minor argument. But this time, something was different. He didn't let the

debate escalate. He paused, and she could almost feel him reading between the lines of her frustrated texts.

Chinmoy: Wait. You're not actually angry about this, are you? You're upset about the other day. About the call.

His perception, his ability to see right through her defensive frustration, disarmed her completely. Before she could form a reply, another message came through.

Chinmoy: If I made you feel bad by not taking your call, I'm sorry. I didn't mean to be rude.

The apology was so direct, so unexpected, that it dissolved the last of her lingering hurt.

Chinmoy: And listen... if you miss me, just text. Anytime. Sorry for being rude to you. Take care.

She stared at the words "Take care," which usually felt like a polite ending, but now felt like a promise of continuation. A warmth spread through her chest, soothing the ragged edges of the last few months. In a single moment, the confusion and silence were forgiven. The connection was still there, fragile but alive, and for now, that was more than enough.

Scene: The Flower and the Fool

Their conversations, Priyanshi was learning, could pivot from the profound to the profoundly silly in a single message.

One afternoon, feeling particularly cheerful, she bought a beautiful, vibrant flower from a street vendor. She took a picture of it cradled in her hand, the sunlight catching its petals, and posted it as her status with the caption: "A little colour for a grey day."

Within minutes, Chinmoy's name appeared in the viewers' list, followed by a direct message.

Chinmoy: It's a universal truth, you know. Phool hamesha fool log hi pasand karte hain.

Priyanshi rolled her eyes, a smile playing on her lips. He was in that mood.

Priyanshi: I don't think that's correct. I think everyone likes flowers. Except you, I guess.

Chinmoy: Right, but not me. For sure.

Priyanshi: Well, that's totally up to you. Everyone's choice is different.

Chinmoy: Right, right. Fool dhoondhke nikalna bhi ek badi kaam hai.

She read the message twice, the Hindi words and their double meaning settling in. A slow, mischievous grin spread across her face as she typed her reply.

Priyanshi: Are you talking to this fool right now?

His response was immediate; the trap sprang perfectly.

Chinmoy: Yeah. Because you are a fool.

Instead of being offended, Priyanshi laughed. This was their language, a battlefield of words where the only goal was to make the other person smile.

Priyanshi: I wish I could just crawl inside your head and see what your problem with me actually is.

Chinmoy: I wish you could.

The words, though still playful, felt like a tiny crack in his usual facade, a brief moment of startling honesty.

Priyanshi: Don't worry. One day I'll figure it out.

Chinmoy: Best of luck.

She set her phone down, the warmth of their silly exchange lingering. He was an enigma, a puzzle box of logic and emotion, but in moments like these, she felt she was one step closer to finding the key.

A Visit to the Kukrejha House

Two weeks later, Priyanshi found herself standing outside the familiar gate of the Kukrejha residence. It had been months since her last visit—months since everything had become complicated with Chinmoy. She clutched a small box of sweets she'd picked up from the local bakery, her heart doing an uncomfortable dance in her chest.

She was here to see Sir, she told herself firmly. Just Sir. Her mentor, her guide, the professor who had believed in her potential when she was still finding her footing. This visit had nothing to do with the fact that Chinmoy might be inside, or that she'd spent the entire auto ride rehearsing what she'd say if she ran into him.

The gate creaked open before she could ring the bell. Mrs. Kukrejha stood there, her face breaking into a warm smile.

"Priyanshi! Beta, what a lovely surprise!" She pulled her into a hug that smelled of sandalwood and home-cooked food. "Come in, come in! Why are you standing outside like a stranger?"

"Hello, ma'am," Priyanshi said, returning the hug with genuine affection. Mrs. Kukrejha had always treated her with a motherly warmth that made her feel less homesick. "I hope I'm not disturbing?"

"Disturbing? You're one of my favourite people! Come, Your Sir is in his study. He'll be so happy to see you."

As they walked through the familiar corridor—walls lined with family photographs and Chinmoy's academic achievements—Priyanshi's eyes automatically searched for any sign of him. But the house seemed quiet, save for the classical music drifting from Professor Kukrejha's study.

"Sir!" Mrs Kukrejha called out, leading Priyanshi inside. "Look who's here!"

Professor Kukrejha looked up from a stack of papers, his reading glasses perched on his nose. When he saw Priyanshi, his stern academic expression melted into genuine pleasure.

"Priyanshi! This is a wonderful surprise. Come, sit, sit." He gestured to the chair across from his desk, then noticed the box in her hands. "And you didn't have to bring anything."

"Just something small, Sir," she said, placing the sweets on his desk. "It's been so long since I visited. I felt bad."

"Nonsense. You're always busy with your studies, as you should be. But yes, it's good to see you. How's your research coming along?"

They fell into a comfortable conversation about her work, his recent lectures, and academic gossip that made her laugh. Mrs. Kukrejha brought tea and samosas, insisting Priyanshi eat more even when she protested she was full.

"You've become so thin, beta," Mrs. Kukrejha fussed, settling onto the armrest of her husband's chair. "Are you eating properly in that hostel?"

"I am, ma'am, I promise," Priyanshi assured her with a smile.

"She says that, but look at her!" Mrs. Kukrejha appealed to her husband. "Tell her she needs to take better care of herself."

Professor Kukrejha chuckled. "Leave the poor girl alone. She looks perfectly healthy to me."

As they talked, Priyanshi found herself relaxing into the warmth of their company. Mrs Kukrejha shared stories about the neighbourhood, about her latest attempts at gardening, about the stray cat she'd been feeding despite her husband's protests. Professor Kukrejha interjected with dry observations that made both women laugh.

At one point, while Mrs Kukrejha was animatedly telling a story about their nosy neighbour, Professor Kukrejha quietly pulled out

his phone and snapped a picture—his wife gesturing expressively while Priyanshi laughed, her face lit up with genuine joy.

Priyanshi caught the movement and smiled. "Sir, you're being sneaky."

"Documentary evidence," he said with mock seriousness. "For when she denies telling embarrassing stories about our neighbours."

"I'm not embarrassed! Mrs Sharma deserved to be called out for her ridiculous accusations about our mango tree!"

Watching them banter, seeing the easy affection between them, something twisted in Priyanshi's chest. This was what partnership looked like—comfortable, warm, full of shared jokes and mutual respect.

And then, unbidden, a thought crept into her mind: *Does Sir know? Does he know that his son and I... whatever we are?*

Her smile faltered for just a second. What if Professor Kukrejha knew about the messages, the late-night calls, the months of confusion and mixed signals? What would he think? Would he be disappointed? Concerned?

Maybe he could help, another part of her whispered. *Maybe if he knew, he could talk to Chinmoy. Make him see that this back-and-forth isn't fair.*

"Priyanshi? Beta, where did you go?"

Mrs Kukrejha's gentle voice pulled her back. Both of them were looking at her with mild concern.

"Sorry," Priyanshi said quickly, shaking her head with a self-deprecating laugh. "I just... zoned out for a second. Was thinking about an assignment deadline."

"See?" Mrs Kukrejha turned to her husband triumphantly. "I told you she's overworking herself. Look how distracted she is."

"I'm fine, ma'am, really," Priyanshi insisted, forcing her smile to brighten. "Just a lot on my mind lately. Nothing to worry about."

But Professor Kukrejha was watching her with that penetrating gaze he reserved for when he suspected a student wasn't telling the complete truth. For a terrifying moment, Priyanshi wondered if he could read everything on her face—the confusion, the longing, the months of emotional turbulence centred around his son.

"You know," he said slowly, carefully, "if you ever need to talk about anything—academic or otherwise—my door is always open. Sometimes external pressures can be just as challenging as academic ones."

The kindness in his voice nearly undid her. She swallowed hard, nodding. "Thank you, Sir. That means a lot."

Mrs Kukrejha reached over and patted her hand. "And you can talk to me, too, beta. Not everything needs to be a serious academic discussion with this one." She jerked her thumb at her husband affectionately. "Sometimes you just need chai and a sympathetic ear."

"I know," Priyanshi said softly, genuinely touched. "You both have always been so kind to me."

They talked for another hour, the conversation drifting to lighter topics. Finally, as the evening light began to slant through the windows, she stood to leave.

"Come visit more often," Mrs Kukrejha insisted, walking her to the door. "Don't wait so long next time. This house feels brighter when you're here."

"I will, ma'am. I promise."

Professor Kukrejha appeared behind his wife, his expression warm. "And Priyanshi? Whatever's troubling you—and I can see something is—remember that confusion is temporary. Clarity always comes, though sometimes not in the timeline we'd prefer."

She looked at him sharply, but his face was unreadable. Did he know? Or was he just being his usual perceptive, philosophical self?

"Thank you, Sir," she managed. "I'll remember that."

As the auto rickshaw pulled away from the house, Priyanshi looked back to see the Kukrejhas waving from their doorway, silhouetted against the warm light spilling from inside. A perfect picture of home, of warmth, of certainty.

Everything she didn't have with Chinmoy.

The visit had been exactly what she needed—comforting, grounding, a reminder of the relationships in her life that were straightforward and unconditionally supportive.

But it had also highlighted the stark contrast. With the Kukrejhas, she knew exactly where she stood. With Chinmoy, everything was questions and maybes and "soon."

She closed her eyes, exhausted by the weight of her own thoughts. *One day, this will all make sense.*

But today wasn't that day.

The Rain, the Call, and the Beautiful Confusion

A week after her visit to the Kukrejha house, the monsoon arrived with all its dramatic fury. The rain hammered against Priyanshi's hostel window in rhythmic waves, and thunder rolled across the sky like a warning.

She sat cross-legged on her bed, a sketchbook open in her lap, though she hadn't drawn a single line in the last twenty minutes. Her mind was elsewhere, caught in the familiar loop of thoughts about him.

Her phone buzzed. A message from Chinmoy.

Chinmoy: It's raining there too?

She looked out at the storm and typed back.

Priyanshi: Pouring. Can barely see the building across from my hostel.

Chinmoy: Same here. The entire campus is flooded. Had to wade through ankle-deep water to get back to my room.

Priyanshi: You should be more careful. You'll catch a cold.

Chinmoy: Look at you, worrying about me. 😊

Priyanshi: Someone has to. You're too busy being logical to take care of yourself.

There was a pause, longer than usual. The typing indicator appeared, disappeared, and appeared again. Then, instead of a text, her phone rang.

His name lit up the screen.

Priyanshi's breath caught. He was calling. After weeks of refused calls and text-only conversations, he was actually calling. Her hands trembled slightly as she answered.

"Hello?"

"Hey." His voice came through, slightly breathless, warm and close despite the distance. "Sorry for calling so suddenly. I just... the rain made me want to hear your voice."

The casual admission sent a flutter through her chest. Outside, lightning split the sky, illuminating her room in stark white for a brief second before plunging it back into grey.

"It's okay," she said softly. "I'm glad you did."

They talked about small things at first—the weather, his flooded campus, her latest painting that wasn't cooperating. The conversation flowed easily, punctuated by the sound of rain on both ends, creating a shared soundtrack to their words.

Then, emboldened by the intimacy of the moment, Priyanshi decided to ask what had been weighing on her mind for months.

"Chinmoy... can I ask you something?"

"Sure."

She took a breath. "Why do you always say we're not friends? But then you never tell me what we actually are?"

The silence on the other end stretched. She could hear him breathing, could almost feel him choosing his words carefully.

"Because we're not friends, Priyanshi," he said finally, his voice measured. "We're... more than that. But I can't explain it right now."

"Why not?" The frustration in her voice was evident. "Why can't you just be clear about what this is? What are we?"

"Because..." he paused, and she heard him exhale slowly. "Because I'm not ready to put it into words yet. And when I do, I want to be completely sure. I want to do it properly."

"But when?" she pressed. "You always say 'soon' or 'when the time is right' or 'I need time.' How much time, Chinmoy?"

"I know it's frustrating," he said, his voice gentle but firm. "I know I'm being cryptic and that it's not fair to you. But I promise you—one day, very soon, I'll clear all your doubts. I'll tell you everything you want to know. Just... wait a little longer. Can you do that for me?"

The conversation continued in circles, as their conversations always did. He admitted she was special, that she wasn't imagining their connection, that his silence didn't mean he didn't care. But he also insisted he needed time, that his final year pressures required him to shut everything else out, that he wanted to give her certainty only when he was ready to follow through.

"So what am I supposed to do in the meantime?" she asked. "Just accept these mixed signals and hope one day you'll decide I'm worth the risk?"

"You're worth the risk," he said immediately. "You've always been worth the risk. That's not the question. The question is whether I'm in a position to take that risk right now."

When they finally said goodbye, Priyanshi sat in the grey, rain-washed light of her room, feeling no more certain than before. If anything, she felt more confused. He'd said she was special. He'd said she was more than a friend. He'd said she mattered. But he'd also said he needed time, that he wasn't ready, that she'd have to wait until he sorted himself out.

It was the same beautiful, painful dance they'd been doing for months. One step forward, two steps back. A glimpse of something real, then a retreat into vagueness.

Her phone buzzed.

Chinmoy: Thank you for understanding. Or at least for trying to. I know I'm difficult.

Priyanshi: You're very difficult.

Chinmoy: But you're still here.

Priyanshi: Unfortunately for me, yes.

Chinmoy: Get some rest. And Priyanshi?

Priyanshi: Yeah?

Chinmoy: Whatever doubts you have about us... They'll all be cleared. Soon. I promise.

Priyanshi: You always say that.

Chinmoy: This time, I mean it. Just wait. You'll know everything you want to know.

As she set her phone down, Priyanshi realised something. She was no closer to understanding what they were than she had been before the call. If anything, she was more confused. He'd given her just enough—admitted she was special, promised future clarity, said

she was more than a friend—but pulled back from anything concrete.

Outside, the rain had stopped completely. The world was washed clean, fresh, and new. But Priyanshi's confusion remained exactly as murky as before.

She picked up her pencil and began to draw—not a clear image, but abstract lines that intertwined and separated, came close and pulled away, mirroring the push and pull of whatever existed between her and Chinmoy.

One day, she told herself. *One day, he'll be ready to say what we are. One day, "soon" will actually arrive. One day, I'll have the clarity I crave.*

Until then, she'd exist in this beautiful, frustrating, impossible space—more than friends, less than defined, caught in the web of his mixed signals and her own stubborn hope.

He has something for me. I know he does. I feel it. But whether I'll ever get him to admit it... That's the real question.

And so the beautiful confusion continued, as it always did, with no end in sight.

Chapter 10
The Puja Promise

Before she knew it, the whirlwind of preparations and the scent of shiuli flowers in the air signalled that Durga Puja had arrived. Priyanshi was home, surrounded by the comforting chaos of her family, the new saris, and the distant, rhythmic beating of dhaks. Yet, her heart existed in a separate, anxious dimension.

For two days, she didn't message him. It was a silent test, a fragile hope that he would remember his promise and take the initiative. Her eyes, instead of soaking in the dazzling pandals and the vibrant idols, constantly scanned the crowds, searching for a familiar face—tall, quiet, with intelligent eyes that crinkled at the corners. Every time her phone buzzed, her heart would leap, only to sink back into disappointment.

But the call never came.

On the third day of Puja, her patience finally snapped. Sitting in her room, the sounds of celebration felt like a mockery, so she typed out a message.

Priyanshi: So, are you planning to step out to see the pandals at all?

The reply was not what she wanted.

Chinmoy: Not really. My health hasn't been great.

A cold knot tightened in Priyanshi's stomach. *Not this again.*

Priyanshi: What's wrong? You were saying the same thing the other day, too.

Chinmoy: It's nothing like that. Just feeling a bit weak from overworking. So, just taking a rest for the last few days. It's nothing serious.

Priyanshi: You should prioritise your health a little.

Chinmoy: Yup.

The next morning, she checked in again.

Priyanshi: Feeling any better?

Chinmoy: Yes, feeling a lot better now.

This was it. The door was open.

Priyanshi: So… does that mean you'll be stepping out now?

His response felt like a physical blow.

Chinmoy: Actually, I did step out yesterday. Had to meet a friend.

The world seemed to tilt. He had stepped out. He was well enough to meet a friend, but meeting her—the one he had specifically promised—hadn't even occurred to him?

Priyanshi: Accha. Great.

She threw her phone onto the bed, the two words dripping with sarcasm. She felt foolish. She had been sitting at home, dressing up every evening, her heart jumping at every shadow, while he was out meeting friends, his promise to her evidently a low priority.

The Weight of Realisation

For two, three hours, she fumed in silence, the festive joy around her feeling like an intrusion. The anger slowly curdled into profound sadness. In a moment of impulse, she deleted the message thread. It was childish, but it gave her fleeting control.

That evening, her mother knocked softly on her door. "Beta, come down for dinner. Your favourite—luchi and alur dom."

"I'm not hungry, Ma," Priyanshi said, her voice muffled against her pillow.

Her mother entered anyway, settling on the edge of the bed. She didn't ask what was wrong. She simply placed a gentle hand on Priyanshi's back, the kind of touch that had soothed scraped knees and broken hearts since childhood.

"You know," her mother said softly, "whatever is troubling you will pass. Everything does."

Priyanshi turned to look at her mother—at the worry lines etched around kind eyes, at the greying hair tied back neatly, at the unconditional love that radiated from her very presence. Her father's voice drifted up from downstairs, calling out something about the news, that familiar, comforting sound of home.

And suddenly, the contrast hit her like a wave.

Here were two people who loved her without conditions, without confusion, without mixed signals. Her father who had driven three hours in traffic just to bring her favourite rosogollas from that specific shop in College Street. Her mother, who noticed when Priyanshi was upset even before Priyanshi herself fully understood it. Their love was clear, steady, unwavering—a lighthouse in every storm.

And yet, here she was, lying in her childhood bed, pining for someone who couldn't even decide if he wanted to meet her. Someone who gave her breadcrumbs and called it a connection. Someone who made her question her worth with every hot-and-cold message.

Why?

The question echoed in her mind as her mother gently stroked her hair.

Why am I doing this to myself? Mummy loves me so much that she can sense my pain from another room. Papa's entire face lights up

when I come home. They give me clarity, security, and unconditional support. And I'm lying here crying over a boy who gives me nothing but confusion and heartache.

"Ma," she whispered, her voice breaking. "Am I stupid?"

"Never," her mother said firmly. "You're young. You're learning. But remember, beta—you deserve someone who makes you feel as loved as we make you feel. Not someone who makes you question if you're even wanted."

Priyanshi closed her eyes, tears finally spilling over. Her mother was right. She *knew* her mother was right. And yet...

Why does it still hurt so much? Why do I still check my phone, hoping he'll message? Why do I still make excuses for him in my head?

She thought about the way her parents looked at each other—her father bringing her mother chai without being asked, her mother laughing at his terrible jokes, the silent language of partnership they'd built over decades. That was love. Clear, honest, present love.

What she had with Chinmoy wasn't even close. It was chaos masquerading as connection. It was confusion dressed up as complexity.

I have people who love me unconditionally, who would do anything for me, who show up every single time. And I'm wasting my tears on someone who can't even show up once.

The realisation should have freed her. Instead, it made her feel even more foolish. Because despite knowing all of this, despite seeing the stark contrast between real love and whatever this was, a stubborn part of her heart still hoped. Still wanted him to prove everyone wrong. Still believed that maybe, just maybe, he would finally choose her.

"Come down when you're ready," her mother said, kissing her forehead. "Your Baba made your favourite mishti doi."

As her mother's footsteps faded down the stairs, Priyanshi pulled out her phone. No new messages. Of course not.

She looked at the family photo on her nightstand—her parents flanking her, all three beaming at the camera during last year's Puja. Three people who knew exactly where they stood with each other. No confusion. No games.

This is what I deserve, she thought. *This kind of certainty. This kind of love.*

But knowing what she deserved and being able to walk away from what she wanted were two very different things.

The Silence

The next day passed in silence. He didn't ask why she had deleted the thread. This silence was somehow more painful than his earlier cryptic ones. Before, he would always notice, always question her when she pulled away. Now, there was nothing. Just a vast, indifferent quiet.

What more can I even expect from him? she thought, her spirit deflating. *Let it go. Don't let him ruin my Puja.*

She threw herself into the festivities with forced cheer, but the quiet hum of disappointment persisted.

Then, after three or four days of absolute silence, her phone buzzed.

Chinmoy: You know, I don't really like it when someone sends a message and then deletes it.

A bitter laugh escaped her. So, he had noticed. He had just chosen to ignore it until now.

Priyanshi: Haa, I don't like it either when someone first says they'll do something and then doesn't follow through.

Chinmoy: What should I say?

Priyanshi: Eh, chodo. Forget it.

Chinmoy: ok

Okay. That was it. No explanation. No apology.

Priyanshi: Kabhi kabhi mujhe samajh nahi aata… ki main iss ladke k sath baat kyun karti hoon. You know exactly what I'm talking about.

She was laying her cards on the table, admitting her own bewilderment.

Chinmoy: Actually, I was genuinely unwell. I hope you know that.

Priyanshi: Ya, I know. That's why I kept asking if you were feeling better or not.

Chinmoy: Yes. And now I am totally fine.

Priyanshi: That's my point. That day, you were well enough to go out and meet your friend. Even when you weren't feeling well, you made time for them, but .....

She left the sentence hanging, the unfinished "but" carrying all her unsaid hurt.

Chinmoy: Oh, that? That was different. We can plan to meet another day, properly. And besides, that day, I got home very late because of it.

Priyanshi: Thik hai. Fine. But why can't you just say you didn't feel like meeting me? Why all these excuses?

Chinmoy: Thik hain. Think whatever you want. And if that's what you think, then please don't talk to me right now.

The dismissal was like a slap. Hurt and anger bubbled over.

Priyanshi: Mein kya socha? Tum hein toh...

Before she could finish, she deleted the message.

Chinmoy: Again? You sent a message and deleted it.

Priyanshi: Maybe you were busy with someone else and didn't see it.

Chinmoy: Yes. I was.

The two words landed with the force of a physical blow. The conversation was over.

The Final Breaking Point

A strange calm descended upon her, the kind that follows a storm that has destroyed everything. She picked up her phone one last time.

Priyanshi: The day I finally get to meet you in person, I'm going to give you a piece of my mind. I can't properly show my anger through this tiny screen.

Chinmoy: There's no need for you to meet me. I'm disturbing you too much, and I feel sorry for that.

Priyanshi: Think whatever you want. I've always had this wish to write a novel someday. Maybe I'll finally write it, and perhaps you'll be the subject of the final chapter.

Chinmoy: It would be better if you just forgot me. I'm just giving you trauma like this.

Priyanshi: My life, my decisions. I will decide who gets an entry in my life and who gets thrown out.

Chinmoy: So that means you still won't let me go?

Priyanshi: We'll see what I do.

Chinmoy: Have a bad night.

That night, sleep truly did not come. His words echoed in the darkness: *"It would be better if you forgot me."*

The Morning After

The next morning, heavy clarity settled over her. It wasn't about anger anymore. It was about a pattern she had been too blind, or too hopeful, to see.

She walked downstairs for breakfast. Her father looked up from his newspaper, his face brightening instantly. "There's my girl! Come, I saved you the best luchis."

Her mother placed a steaming cup of chai before her without asking, knowing exactly how she liked it—strong, with crushed ginger and just a hint of honey.

This was love. This was what it looked like when someone cared.

Maybe I am actually bothering him, she thought, watching her parents move around each other with practised ease. *He told me not to talk to him yesterday, but it wasn't the first time. He's said it before.*

She looked at her parents at their simple, steady love and felt ashamed. Ashamed that she had let someone who gave her so little take up so much space in her heart. Ashamed that she had cried over confusion when she was surrounded by clarity.

Why am I chasing someone who runs away when I have people right here who would never leave?

Her mother noticed her staring. "What is it, beta?"

"Nothing, Ma. Just… thank you. For always being here."

Her mother smiled, confused but pleased. "Where else would we be?"

Exactly, Priyanshi thought. *Where else would people who truly love me be?*

She picked up her phone, her thumb hovering over Chinmoy's name one last time. This wasn't an emotional outburst; it was a decision. A surrender.

Priyanshi: From now on, I will never bother you again. I know I disturb you a lot. I won't text you ever again.

She waited, her heart a numb, quiet thing in her chest. She expected silence. Or perhaps a cold "Okay."

What she did not expect was the reply that appeared a moment later.

Chinmoy: Uff... finally... thanks.

Priyanshi stared at the screen, the words searing into her vision. *Uff... finally...* As if her presence in his life had been a weight he had been carrying for too long. *Thanks.* He was thanking her for her absence.

Her father looked up from his paper. "Beta, you look pale. Are you alright?"

She looked at him—at his concerned eyes, at the love written plainly across his face—and something broke inside her. Not her heart. That had already been broken. Something else. The last stubborn thread of hope that had made her believe Chinmoy was worth the pain.

"I'm fine, Baba," she said, and meant it. "I'm going to be fine."

She blocked his number. Not in anger, but in self-preservation. Not because she hated him, but because she finally, finally loved herself enough to walk away.

Her mother squeezed her shoulder as she passed. Her father offered her the newspaper's comics section, like he had since she was seven.

This was love. Clear, present, unconditional love.

And she had almost lost sight of it, chasing someone who couldn't even offer her basic respect.

The last fragile thread of hope snapped. There was no labyrinth left to navigate. The maze had vanished, and she was simply standing outside, in the cold, with the door shut firmly in her face. He wasn't complicated or cryptic anymore. He was, finally and devastatingly, clear.

But so was she. And for the first time in months, that clarity felt like freedom.

Chapter 11
The Weight of Silence

Priyanshi's POV

The days after that final message moved like honey—thick, slow, suffocating. Priyanshi went through the motions of Puja celebrations like an actress who'd forgotten her lines but knew she had to stay on stage. She smiled when aunties complimented her sari. She ate the bhog without tasting it. She posed for family photos with a practised curve of her lips that never reached her eyes.

Uff... finally... thanks.

The words played on loop in her mind, a cruel soundtrack she couldn't turn off. At night, when the house fell quiet and the distant dhak drums faded, she would lie in bed and dissect those three words from every possible angle, as if different lighting might reveal a hidden meaning, a secret tenderness she'd missed.

But there was none. It was exactly what it appeared to be: relief at her absence.

On the fourth night, sitting cross-legged on her bed with her sketchbook open to a blank page, she finally allowed herself to think the thoughts she'd been holding at bay.

How did I become this person?

The question sat heavily in her chest. When had she, Priyanshi Dubey, the girl who painted portraits that made professors cry, who debated literary theory with confidence, who prided herself on her independence, become someone who waited by her phone like a character from a tragic novel?

She thought about all the times she'd checked her phone mid-conversation with friends, hoping for his name to light up the screen. All the Instagram stories she'd crafted specifically to get his attention, each caption a message in a bottle thrown into an indifferent sea. All the nights she'd stayed awake analysing his words, searching for hidden feelings in his grammatical choices and emoji usage.

I made him the sun, and myself the planet revolving around him.

The realisation was bitter. She had given him a power he never asked for and certainly didn't deserve, the power to validate her, to make her feel seen, to determine whether her day was good or terrible based solely on whether he chose to respond.

Aditi had tried to warn her. "You're making him the main character of your story," she'd said. And Priyanshi had nodded, agreed, promised to do better. But the next day, she'd been right back on her phone, waiting, hoping, fooling herself.

Why did I accept so little?

This question hurt more than the others. She thought about how he'd said they were "more than friends" but refused to define what that meant. How he'd promised clarity "soon", but that day never came. How he'd go months without talking to her, then reappear as if no time had passed, and she'd welcome him back every single time with open arms and a heart that should have learned better.

She had accepted breadcrumbs and convinced herself she was being fed a meal.

Her phone buzzed with a message from a university friend. For the first time in months, seeing a notification that wasn't from him didn't feel like a disappointment. It just felt... normal.

Maybe this is what freedom feels like, she thought. *Not the relief of finally getting an answer, but the exhaustion of no longer having to ask the question.*

She picked up her pencil and began to draw. Not him. Not their story. Just herself sitting at a window, looking out at a world that existed beyond the confines of one person's attention. The lines flowed easier than they had in weeks.

As she drew, a strange clarity emerged. She wasn't angry at him anymore. The anger had burned itself out, leaving only a profound sadness and something else, pity, not for herself, but for him.

He's more trapped than I ever was, she realised. *I was trapped by hope. He's trapped by fear.*

Fear of feeling too much. Fear of being vulnerable. Fear of admitting that maybe, just maybe, he did care but was too terrified to do anything about it. His walls weren't protection; they were a prison he'd built for himself, brick by brick, excuse by excuse.

And she, in her desperate need to be let inside, had stood at those walls and begged to be locked in with him.

Never again, she thought, not with anger but with a quiet, firm resolve. *I will never again mistake someone's fear for depth, their confusion for mystery, their inability to choose me for something I need to earn.*

She looked at the drawing herself at the window, but there was light on her face now, coming from somewhere outside the frame, somewhere beyond him.

I deserve someone who is sure about me. Someone who doesn't need months to figure out if I'm worth their time. Someone who doesn't disappear and reappear like I'm a hobby they pick up when they're bored with their main interests.

The thought felt revolutionary. After months of trying to make herself smaller, quieter, more patient, more understanding, the idea of demanding more—of believing she deserved more—felt like stepping into sunlight after living in shadow.

Her mother's voice drifted up from downstairs, calling her for dinner. Priyanshi closed her sketchbook and stood, catching her reflection in the mirror. The girl looking back at her looked tired but not broken. Sad but not destroyed.

I will write that novel, she decided. *And maybe he will be in the final chapter. But not as the hero. Not even as the villain. Just as a character who taught me what I won't accept ever again.*

She took a deep breath and went downstairs to join her family, leaving her phone on the bed. For the first time in months, she didn't take it with her, didn't feel its absence like a phantom limb.

It was a small act of rebellion. A tiny declaration of independence.

But it was a start.

Chinmoy's POV

Chinmoy stared at his phone screen, at the last message he'd sent.

Uff... finally... thanks.

The words glared back at him, sharp and cold and final. His thumb hovered over the chat, scrolling up through their conversation history, the arguments about coffee and breakfast food, the late-night philosophical discussions, her artwork that she'd share with shy excitement, his terrible attempts at making her laugh.

He closed the app. Opened it again. Closed it.

What the hell is wrong with me?

The question echoed in the silence of his room. His roommate, Karthik, had gone home for Puja, leaving him alone with his thoughts, a dangerous combination he'd been avoiding for months by burying himself in lab work and projects.

But now, with nothing to distract him, the thoughts came flooding in.

She said she'd never bother me again. And I thanked her for it.

He ran both hands through his hair, a gesture of frustration that had become habit whenever he thought about Priyanshi, which was far more often than he'd ever admit to anyone, even himself.

The truth was, he had wanted her to stop messaging. He had needed the distance, the space, the freedom from the constant pull he felt every time her name appeared on his screen. The pressure of her expectations, her questions, her need for clarity that he couldn't provide.

But now that she was gone, now that she'd actually done what he'd been half-heartedly pushing her to do for months, he felt...

Empty.

The realisation hit him like a physical blow. The silence he'd craved felt suffocating now. The freedom felt like a loss.

Why did I do that?

He thought back to the beginning, seeing her from his window that day, the way she'd smiled at his father, the careful way she'd handled her own artwork. The first time he'd scrolled through her Instagram, reading her captions that felt like looking into someone's soul. The way his heart had raced when she'd followed him back.

I wanted to know her. I wanted to talk to her. I wanted... what did I want?

The question was harder than any engineering problem he'd ever solved. Equations had answers. Algorithms had logic. But this? This mess of feelings and fear and want and terror?

He'd been running from it since the beginning.

Every time she'd asked "what are we?", every time she'd pushed for clarity, he'd felt panic close around his throat like a fist. Not because he didn't know the answer, but because he did, and the answer terrified him.

I care about her. More than I've cared about anyone. And that's exactly why I kept pushing her away.

The logic was twisted, he knew. But it was the only logic that made sense to him. If he didn't let her in, if he didn't define what they were, if he kept her at arm's length, then she couldn't hurt him. She couldn't become someone he needed. She couldn't become someone whose absence would destroy him.

Except she already had.

I've been protecting myself from pain by causing it instead.

The thought made him sick. He remembered her voice on that rainy night, the way she'd asked, "Why can't you just be clear?" The vulnerability in those words, the hurt underneath. And what had he done? Given her more vague promises. More "soon"s and "I need time"s and "trust me"s.

She did trust me. She trusted me over and over again, and I repaid that trust by jerking her around for months.

He thought about the day he'd gone to meet his friend. That hadn't been a lie; he had been unwell, and the outing had exhausted him. But the truth underneath the excuse was uglier: he'd had the energy to see his friend because his friend didn't require anything from him emotionally. His friend wouldn't ask "what are we?" or look at him with eyes that expected him to be brave.

She deserved better than my confusion. She deserved someone who could look at her and say, "Yes, this is what I want" without drowning in panic.

He opened their chat again, his fingers hovering over the keyboard. What could he say? "Sorry, I didn't mean it"? "I actually do miss you"? "I'm terrified of how much I care about you, so I hurt you instead"?

All of it was true. None of it was enough.

Maybe she's better off without me.

The thought should have brought relief. Instead, it felt like accepting defeat. Like admitting that the best thing he could offer her was his absence.

He thought about her threat to write a novel which is related to them. A small, sad smile touched his lips. She would do it, too. She would take all this pain and confusion and turn it into something beautiful because that's who she was, someone who transformed hurt into art.

And I'm someone who transforms caring into distance.

His engineering mind, trained to solve problems and find solutions, kept trying to plot a path forward. If he messaged her now and explained everything, if he finally gave her the clarity she'd been begging for, maybe—

No.

The thought stopped him cold. He'd had months to give her that clarity. Months to be honest, to be brave, to meet her halfway. And instead, he'd strung her along, disappeared and reappeared like some ghost who couldn't decide whether to haunt or help.

She had finally done what he'd been too cowardly to do; she'd ended it. She'd drawn the boundary he should have drawn from the beginning, or crossed completely instead of hovering in the middle.

The least I can do is respect it.

But God, it hurt. The silence hurt. The absence of her name on his screen hurt. The knowledge that somewhere, she was moving through her life without him, learning to be okay without his chaos, hurt more than anything.

This is what I wanted, he reminded himself. *Space. Time. Freedom from the pressure of her feelings and mine.*

Except now he had it, and it felt like losing something irreplaceable.

His phone lit up with an Instagram notification that someone had liked an old photo. He opened the app, and there, at the top of his feed, was her story. A drawing. A girl at a window, light on her face, looking out at something beyond the frame.

It was beautiful. It was sad. It was her moving on.

He watched the story, adding his name to the viewer list one last time. Then he did something he'd never done before: he sent a reaction. Not a message. Just a simple heart emoji. An acknowledgement. An apology in the only language he could manage.

Within seconds, she'd seen it. The "Seen by Priyanshi" appeared under the story.

But there was no reply. No message. Nothing.

For the first time, she was the one choosing silence. And he was the one left staring at his phone, waiting for a response that would never come.

This is what I did to her. For months. This is how she felt.

The empathy came too late, as it often does. But it came nonetheless, sharp and brutal and exactly what he deserved.

Chinmoy set his phone face down on his desk and tried to focus on his project work. But the equations blurred, the code wouldn't compile, and his mind kept drifting back to a girl who'd painted his father's portrait, who'd argued with him about breakfast food, who'd waited for him outside an exam hall, who'd asked him over and over what they were and accepted his non-answers with a patience he'd never deserved.

I had something real, and I was too afraid to hold onto it.

The thought would haunt him through the rest of Puja, through the return to campus, through the long nights of project work he'd use to avoid thinking about her. But in the quiet moments—and there would be many he'd remember.

The way she laughed at his terrible jokes. The way she challenged him, even when he was being impossible. The way she'd looked at him that day on campus, like he was someone worth knowing, worth waiting for, worth the confusion and mixed signals and emotional whiplash.

I wasn't worth it, he thought. *But she thought I was. And I threw that away because I was too scared to find out if she was right.*

Somewhere across the city, Priyanshi was learning to live without him. And here, alone in his room, Chinmoy was learning what it meant to get exactly what you asked for, and realising too late that it was the last thing you actually wanted.

The silence between them was complete now. No more messages. No more story reactions. No more beautiful arguments or vague promises of "soon."

Just two people, thinking about each other in the dark, both believing they'd lost something they'd never quite had, both wondering if the other was thinking of them too.

The answer, if they'd known it, was yes. Always yes.

But some truths come too late to change anything. And this was one of them.

Chapter 12
The Paradox of Moving On

Scene 1: The Art of Pretending

Four months had passed since the "Uff... finally... thanks" message. Two months of Priyanshi telling herself she was fine, she was over it, she had moved on.

And in many ways, she had.

She threw herself into her research world. The irony wasn't lost on her. She attended every lecture, tried to join all the national, international seminars. Her days were full, productive, and deliberate.

But moving on, she discovered, wasn't a straight line. It was a circle that kept looping back to the same starting point.

Every morning, she would wake up and not check her phone immediately. A small victory. She'd go through her routine: brush teeth, make coffee, get dressed, all without once looking at WhatsApp. Another victory.

But then, inevitably, while sitting in class or eating lunch or painting in her room, her hand would reach for her phone. Her thumb would hover over the green icon. And she'd open it.

Just to check.

Not hoping for anything specific. Just... checking.

His last seen timestamp became a strange comfort. *Active 23 minutes ago.* It meant he was alive, going about his life, existing in the same world as her, even if that world no longer included their conversations.

"You're doing it again," Aditi said one afternoon, catching Priyanshi mid-scroll through their old chat history.

Priyanshi quickly locked her phone. "Doing what?"

"That thing where you pretend you're over him while simultaneously keeping one foot in the door."

"I'm not—"

"Priya. You've checked your phone seventeen times in the last hour. I counted."

Priyanshi slumped against her pillow. "I'm pathetic."

"You're not pathetic. You're human." Aditi sat beside her. "But honey, you need to decide. Are you moving on, or are you waiting? Because you can't do both. It's killing you."

"I am moving on," Priyanshi insisted. "I haven't messaged him. I deleted our chat twice. I'm focusing on my work—"

"But you're still checking if he's online. You're still watching his stories. You're still hoping he'll message you first."

The truth of it stung. "What if he does?" Priyanshi's voice was small. "What if one day he just... comes back? And I've completely shut that door?"

Aditi's expression softened. "Then you decide in that moment. But Priya, you can't put your healing on hold for a 'what if.' That's not moving on. That's just waiting with extra steps."

Scene 2: The Conversation She Kept Having

The strangest part about moving on while waiting was the conversations Priyanshi would have with him in her head.

She'd be walking to class and think of something funny, and her first instinct would be to tell him. Then she'd remember she couldn't, and she'd have the conversation anyway, in her mind.

Chinmoy, you won't believe what Professor Malhotra said today...

Or she'd read something profound in a book and immediately think, *He'd have an interesting take on this.* And she'd imagine his response, hear his voice in her head dissecting the quote with that particular blend of logic and unexpected insight.

Or she'd see something that reminded her of him: a card trick on TV, an Atif Aslam song playing in a café, someone wearing an IIT hoodie, and she'd mentally draft the message she'd never send.

Saw someone doing your card trick today. They weren't as good as you.

This song came on, and I thought of you. Hated that I did.

Why do IIT people wear their college name like a personality trait? Oh, wait, you did that too. 🤔

The unsent messages piled up in her mind like letters written to someone who'd moved away without leaving a forwarding address.

Aditi caught her doing it one day, smiling at nothing, lost in an imaginary conversation.

"You're talking to him again, aren't you?" she asked gently.

Priyanshi blinked back to reality. "What? No, I—"

"In your head. You're having conversations with him in your head."

There was no point denying it. "Is that bad?"

"It's not bad. It's just... it means you're not really moving on. You're keeping him alive in here." Aditi tapped Priyanshi's temple gently. "And as long as he's alive in your head, he doesn't need to be present in your life."

Scene 3: The Small Relapses

Moving on wasn't linear. Some days, Priyanshi felt strong, confident, genuinely okay. She'd go hours without thinking about

him. She'd laugh with friends, focus on her art, and plan her future without his shadow looming over it.

But other days, the smallest thing would unravel her carefully constructed composure.

A song. A place. A turn of phrase that sounded like something he'd say.

One particularly bad day came when she was organising her room and found a small slip of paper tucked into one of her textbooks—a receipt from a café. She stared at it, confused, until she remembered: the day at IIT Guwahati. He'd bought her that sandwich. She'd kept the receipt without even realising it.

Such a small, stupid thing. A piece of paper with faded text and a coffee stain. But holding it, she could suddenly remember everything the way he'd waited for her outside the exam hall, the easy conversation over food, the tour of campus, the moment she'd thought maybe, just maybe, this could be real.

She sat on her floor, receipt in hand, and let herself cry for the first time in weeks.

Not loud, dramatic sobs. Just quiet tears that came from somewhere deep and tired. Tears for the version of herself who'd been so hopeful that day. Tears for the relationship that never quite happened but felt real enough to mourn.

When the tears stopped, she did something she'd been avoiding for four months. She opened their chat.

She didn't message him. She just read. Scrolled through their entire history, the arguments about coffee and breakfast, the late-night philosophical discussions, the teasing and the tenderness and the confusion that marked every interaction.

We were something, she thought. *Maybe we didn't have a name for it, but we were something.*

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard. It would be so easy. Just a simple "Hey" or "How are you?" or even just a meme, like the old days.

One message, and maybe he'd respond. Maybe they'd fall back into their rhythm. Maybe—

No.

She closed the chat. Deleted it again, for the third time. Put the receipt in a box of memories she kept under her bed, not thrown away, but not on display either.

Some things deserved to be kept, even if they hurt to look at.

Chapter 13
Thirty-Two Seconds

The Unspoken War

Scene 1: The Waiting Game

Priyanshi's POV -

Priyanshi stared at her phone for the seventeenth time that morning and saw his last messages, which still glowed on her screen: *"I promise, when the time is right, I'll clear all your doubts."*

When the time is right. Soon. Very soon.

She'd been hearing variations of "soon" for so long that the word had lost all meaning. How soon was "soon"? Days? Weeks? Months? Another year?

Maybe this time is different, she thought, then immediately hated herself for the hope that flickered in her chest. *Maybe this time he actually means it.*

"So he said 'soon' again?" Aditi asked, sprawling across Priyanshi's bed, munching on chips with the judgmental energy of a reality TV commentator.

Priyanshi snapped back to reality. "Not exactly 'soon.' He said 'One day, very soon."

"Oh, well, THAT'S completely different. 'Very soon' is so much more specific than regular 'soon.'" Aditi's sarcasm was thick enough to cut with a knife.

"Can you not?"

"I'm just saying, if I had a rupee for every time he said 'soon,' I could fund my entire master's degree."

Priyanshi threw a pillow at her. "You're not helping."

"I'm not trying to help. I'm trying to make you see how ridiculous this is. He's been promising to explain for MONTHS. At this point, his explanation better come with a PowerPoint presentation, a musical number, and a written apology in calligraphy."

Despite herself, Priyanshi laughed. "A musical number?"

"Full Bollywood style. Background dancers and everything. 'Main hoon na' plays in the background while he dramatically confesses his feelings in the rain."

"It was raining during our call," Priyanshi pointed out.

"SEE? He's already halfway there! He just needs the dancers."

Scene 2: The Academic Rivalry No One Asked For

Two Weeks Later

What Priyanshi didn't expect was for her "moving on" era to coincide with the arrival of Aditya Mehra, a transfer student from Delhi University who joined Professor Mehra's research group.

Aditya was... a lot.

He was the kind of person who used words like "paradigm shift" in casual conversation. Who colour-coded his notes? Who actually read the "suggested reading" and then brought it up in discussions.

In other words, he was exactly the kind of academic overachiever that made Priyanshi's competitive side flare up.

"Your paper on rural economic disparity was interesting," Aditya said during their first research meeting, in a tone that suggested he found it anything but.

"Thank you," Priyanshi replied coolly.

"Though I think you could have explored the intersectionality aspect more deeply. Perhaps incorporate more contemporary feminist economic theory?"

Professor Mehra watched this exchange with barely concealed amusement.

"I focused on empirical data rather than theoretical frameworks," Priyanshi said, her smile not reaching her eyes.

"Ah, yes. Data. How... practical."

And just like that, a rivalry was born.

Over the next two weeks, their research meetings became increasingly competitive:

"I've found three new sources that completely support my hypothesis," Aditya announced.

"That's nice. I've found seven that support mine," Priyanshi countered.

"I'm presenting at the state economics conference next month."

"Cool. I'm presenting at the national one."

"My paper was cited in the Journal of Economic Studies."

"My paper was in the Journal of Economic Studies."

Professor Mehra eventually had to intervene. "You two realise you're on the same research team, right? This isn't a competition."

They both looked at him, then at each other.

"It's definitely a competition," they said in unison.

The Group Chat Chaos

Aditi created a group chat called "Priyanshi's Love Triangle" with herself, Riya, and two other friends.

Aditi: GUYS. Emergency meeting. Priya has a new academic boyfriend.

Priyanshi: I DO NOT.

Riya: Wait, what happened to the IIT guy?

Aditi: The IIT guy is in the "explaining soon" phase. Has been for approximately 84 years.

Priyanshi: It hasn't been 84 years.

Aditi: Feels like it. Anyway, the new guy is Aditya. Transfer student. Very smart. Very annoying. Very into Priya.

Priyanshi: He is NOT into me. We're academic rivals.

Riya: That's literally a romance trope.

Priya: Enemies to lovers! I've read this fic!

Priyanshi: This is NOT a fanfiction. This is my LIFE.

Aditi: Your life IS a fanfiction. Pining for an IIT guy who gives mixed signals while your academic rival slowly falls for you? That's literally a Wattpad story.

Priyanshi: I hate all of you.

Aditi: No, you don't. Anyway, update: Aditya brought Priya coffee today. Without being asked.

Priyanshi: He brought EVERYONE coffee!

Aditi: He brought everyone regular coffee. He brought YOU a cappuccino with cinnamon, exactly how you like it.

Riya: Okay, that's suspicious.

Priya: VERY suspicious.

Priyanshi: Or maybe he's just observant?

Aditi: Babe. Chinmoy dated you for months and still didn't know if you liked coffee or tea.

Priyanshi: We weren't dating!

Aditi: EXACTLY MY POINT.

Scene 3: The Instagram Cold War

Chinmoy's POV

"Dude, you're doing it again," Karthik said, not looking up from his laptop.

"Doing what?"

"Stalking her Instagram like it's your part-time job."

Chinmoy closed the app guiltily. "I'm not stalking. I'm just... staying informed."

"You've watched her story about library coffee seventeen times. SEVENTEEN. It's coffee, man. It's not the Mona Lisa."

"I was just—"

"And before you say you were 'just checking,' she posted it four minutes ago. You were the first viewer. Again."

"Maybe I was just on the app."

"At 11:47 PM? When she posts? Every single time?" Karthik finally looked up. "Chinmoy, this is getting sad. Either message her or stop torturing yourself."

"I can't message her. I promised I'd explain everything soon."

"It's been three weeks since that call. How much 'soon' are we talking about?"

"I'm working on it! I'm trying to figure out the right words."

"The right words are 'I love you, I'm sorry, let's talk.' Three sentences. Done."

"It's more complicated than that."

"It's literally not. You're the one making it complicated. As usual."

What Karthik didn't know was that Chinmoy had drafted seventeen different messages to Priyanshi. Seventeen different ways to start the conversation he'd promised.

None of them felt right.

Meanwhile, Priyanshi's Instagram stories had taken on a new character. Gone were the melancholic quotes and paintings. Now they were all academic achievements, conference photos, and—most concerning—several pictures that included a guy Chinmoy didn't recognise.

A tall guy. A guy who smiled too much. A guy who appeared in three different study group photos, always standing suspiciously close to Priyanshi.

"Who's that?" Chinmoy finally asked, showing Karthik his phone.

"How should I know?"

"He's in all her recent stories. Look—library photo. Research meeting. Coffee shop."

Karthik squinted at the screen. "Maybe that's her new boyfriend."

"She doesn't have a—" Chinmoy stopped. "Does she?"

"How would you know? You haven't talked to her in weeks. She could have moved on, man. She's not going to wait forever."

The thought made Chinmoy's stomach twist. But Karthik was right. He'd been promising to explain "soon" for so long that "soon" had lost all meaning.

Scene 4: The Accidental Group Project

Priyanshi's POV

The universe, Priyanshi decided, had a sick sense of humour.

Because, of course, the one time she needed to focus on NOT thinking about Chinmoy, Professor Mehra assigned a collaborative research project.

With Aditya.

"This will be good for both of you," Professor Mehra said, oblivious to Priyanshi's internal screaming. "You have complementary research styles. Aditya brings theoretical depth, Priyanshi brings empirical rigour. Together, you'll produce something exceptional."

"Or we'll kill each other," Aditya muttered.

"I heard that, Mr Mehra. Try to survive each other for six weeks. The paper is due before Durga Puja."

Their first project meeting was in the library, at a table Priyanshi had specifically chosen because it was in the quietest corner, away from distractions.

Aditya arrived exactly on time (annoying), with his laptop (expected), and two cups of coffee (unexpected).

"Cappuccino with cinnamon," he said, sliding one across to her. "Am I right?"

"How did you—"

"I'm observant." He opened his laptop. "Shall we begin?"

For the first hour, they actually worked well together. Aditya's theoretical framework complemented her data analysis. His writing style was formal, whereas hers was accessible. They disagreed on methodology, but in a productive way.

Then Aditya's phone buzzed. He glanced at it and smirked.

"What?" Priyanshi asked.

"Nothing. Just... do you know someone named Chinmoy?"

Her heart stopped. "Why?"

"Because there's a guy named Chinmoy who's watched your Instagram story exactly thirty-two seconds after you posted it. Every single time you post. Including the one from five minutes ago."

Priyanshi snatched his phone. Sure enough, her latest story—a photo of their research materials with the caption "Collaboration in progress"—had one viewer: @chinmoy_Madhukulyo.

Posted 4 minutes ago. Viewed 3 minutes and 28 seconds ago.

"Are you timing how long it takes him to view my stories?"

"I got curious after the third time. He's remarkably consistent. Usually within a minute, never more than five. It's almost impressive." Aditya leaned back. "So, who is he? Ex-boyfriend?"

"It's complicated."

"It always is. Let me guess—he's in your DMs but won't commit? Watches all your stories but doesn't like your posts? Makes vague promises about 'soon'?"

Priyanshi stared at him. "Are you psychic?"

"No, I'm a guy. I know the game. Though I'll admit, thirty-two seconds is dedication. Most guys wait at least a few minutes to not look desperate."

"Can we get back to work?"

"Sure. But Priyanshi?" He was smiling, but his tone was serious. "From an outside perspective? A guy who watches your stories within a minute but hasn't messaged you in weeks isn't making you a priority. He's keeping you as an option."

The words stung because they felt true.

Chapter 14
The Silence of Success

Scene 1: Parallel Lives - One Year Later

Chinmoy's POV - The Morning of Results

The email arrived at 6:47 AM.

Subject: GATE Results - Qualified

Chinmoy stared at the screen, his heart pounding. All India Rank 47. He'd done it. After a year of relentless preparation, sixteen-hour study days, sacrificing everything social life, sleep, peace of mind, he'd cleared one of the toughest exams in the country.

His phone immediately started buzzing with congratulatory messages. His parents, his professors, friends from IIT, relatives he hadn't spoken to in years, suddenly appearing with their "always knew you'd make it" messages.

He responded to them mechanically, his fingers moving on autopilot while his mind was elsewhere.

There was one person he wanted to tell. One person whose reaction would have made this victory feel real.

He opened Instagram, found her profile, not that he needed to search for it; it was muscle memory by now. His thumb hovered over the message button.

What would I even say?

"Hey, remember me? The guy who showed up for a week and then disappeared into exam preparation for a year? I cleared GATE. Want to celebrate with a stranger?"

He closed the app without messaging.

She'd moved on. Her Instagram showed a completely different person now—not the artist who posted paintings and melancholic captions, but a focused researcher. Her recent posts were all academic: screenshots of published papers, photos from conferences, and reposts of journal acceptances.

Dr Sharma's Research Group welcomes our prolific young researcher, Priyanshi Dubey, whose third paper has been accepted in the International Journal of Economic Studies.

Three papers. In one year. While he'd been buried in GATE prep, she'd been building an entirely different life.

Her bio had changed too: **Research Scholar | Published Author | Economics & Policy | Less art, more analysis**

That last line felt like a message. *Less art, more analysis.* As if she'd deliberately chosen logic over emotion. Chosen to become more like him, maybe. Or chosen to become someone who wouldn't get hurt by people like him.

Karthik burst into the room. "Dude! You're trending on the IIT group! Rank 47! That's insane!"

"Yeah." Chinmoy's voice was flat.

"Why do you look like someone died? You just qualified with an amazing rank!"

"I know. It's great."

Karthik studied him. "You're thinking about her, aren't you?"

Chinmoy didn't answer.

"Man, it's been a year. If you wanted to talk to her, you should have done it before disappearing into your books."

"I told her I needed to focus on this exam. She understood."

"Did she? Or did you just assume she would and then never check?"

Chinmoy pulled up their last conversation from exactly 374 days ago.

Chinmoy: I know I promised to show up every day. But my exam is in 10 months and I need to give it everything. I can't be distracted.

Priyanshi: Distracted. Right. Of course.

Chinmoy: That came out wrong. I didn't mean—

Priyanshi: It's fine. Focus on your exam. Good luck.

Chinmoy: Can we talk after? Once this is over?

Priyanshi: Maybe. We'll see.

He'd taken that as permission. As understanding. He'd thrown himself into preparation, convincing himself that once he cleared GATE, once he had his future secured, he could come back to this. To her.

Now, staring at her transformed profile, he wondered if "maybe" had been her way of saying goodbye.

Priyanshi's POV - The Morning of Publication

The notification came while Priyanshi was in the library, buried under a mountain of research papers.

Your manuscript "Economic Disparities in Post-Pandemic Rural India" has been accepted for publication in the Journal of Development Economics.

Her fourth publication. Fourth. In thirteen months.

Her supervisor, Dr Mehra, had called her "unprecedented", a student with a publication record that rivalled PhD candidates.

Aditi rushed over, having seen the news in their research group chat. "Priya! Another one! You're on fire!"

"Thanks." Priyanshi's smile was tired.

"You don't look excited."

"I am. I'm just exhausted."

It was true. She was exhausted. Exhausted from pouring every ounce of her energy into research, into data analysis, into building a version of herself that was respected, accomplished, and completely immune to the kind of emotional chaos that had nearly destroyed her two years ago.

She'd stopped painting almost entirely. Her sketchbooks lay untouched in her cupboard, gathering dust. When people asked about her art, she'd smile politely and say, "I'm focused on other things now."

The truth was more complicated: she'd stopped creating art because art required feeling, and feeling was dangerous. Feelings were the reason she'd spent months waiting for messages that never came, hoping for clarity that was never offered, accepting breadcrumbs and calling it love.

Research was safer. Research had clear methodologies, peer reviews, and replicable results. Research didn't leave you staring at your phone at 3 AM wondering why you weren't enough.

"You should celebrate," Aditi said. "Let's go out. Dinner, something."

"I have a conference call with the editorial team at 6."

"After that?"

"I need to work on the revisions for paper five."

Aditi's expression softened. "Priya, when was the last time you did something that wasn't work?"

"Work makes sense. Work has outputs. Work doesn't—" She stopped herself.

"Work doesn't hurt," Aditi finished quietly. "I know. But babe, you're running yourself into the ground. You've lost weight. You barely sleep. You've turned yourself into a machine."

"A successful machine."

"A lonely one."

Priyanshi looked away. "I'm fine."

"You're not. You haven't been fine since—"

"Don't." Priyanshi's voice was sharp. "I don't want to talk about him."

"I wasn't going to say his name. But the fact that you knew who I meant says everything."

Later that evening, alone in her room after the editorial call, Priyanshi allowed herself five minutes. Five minutes to open Instagram, to scroll through her feed, to accidentally-on-purpose check his profile.

She'd unfollowed him months ago, but she hadn't blocked him. She told herself it was because blocking felt too dramatic, too revealing of how much he'd affected her. The truth was simpler: she wanted the option to look. To know he was alive, existing somewhere in the world, even if that world no longer included her.

His latest post was from this morning: a simple image of his GATE result. Rank 47. The caption was brief: *1 year. 1 goal. Done.*

The comments were flooded with congratulations. She scrolled through them, looking for—what? She didn't know.

Her thumb hovered over the like button.

Don't. Don't you dare.

She closed the app without liking it.

Five minutes were up.

Scene 2: The Status That Changed Everything

Three Days Later - Chinmoy's POV

Chinmoy had spent three days in a celebration haze—parties thrown by friends, family dinners, congratulatory calls from relatives. But something felt hollow about all of it.

He'd achieved what he'd been working toward for a year. So why did it feel incomplete?

Late at night, he found himself scrolling through Priyanshi's profile again. Her latest story was a photo of a sunset from what looked like a conference venue, with text overlaid:

"*Sometimes the best research happens in conversation, not in solitude. Grateful for brilliant minds and challenging questions.* #AcademicLife #ConferenceVibes"

Below the main image was a group photo—Priyanshi with several other researchers, all dressed in formal conference attire. She looked different. Her hair was shorter, styled professionally. She wore glasses now, thin, elegant frames that made her look older, more serious. She was smiling, but it was a different smile. Polished. Professional. Not the unguarded, slightly chaotic smile he remembered.

There was a guy standing next to her in the photo, his hand casually resting on the back of her chair. Not touching her, but... close.

Chinmoy felt something twist in his chest.

Before he could overthink it, he replied to her story.

Chinmoy: Academic life suits you. You look different. Good different.

He watched the message delivered. One grey tick. Two grey ticks.

Minutes passed. The ticks turned blue.

Seen.

No reply.

He waited. Five minutes. Ten. Twenty.

Nothing.

The next morning, he tried again, this time a direct message rather than a story reply.

Chinmoy: I think you're still angry with me.

Again, the ticks turned blue almost immediately.

Seen.

Still no reply.

He stared at his phone, frustration mounting. The old Priyanshi would have replied instantly, would have probably written a paragraph explaining exactly what she felt. This version of her, this polished, academic version, just... ignored him.

It felt worse than anger. Anger he could work with, could apologise for, could address. This deliberate silence was impenetrable.

Chinmoy: Or maybe you're not angry. Maybe you just don't care anymore.

Seen.

Another minute of silence. Then, finally, a response.

Priyanshi: No.

Just that. One word. The exact same response she'd given him a year ago when he'd first tried to reconnect.

Chinmoy's heart sank. They were back to this, the game of extracting meaning from single syllables.

He paused, his fingers hovering over the keyboard. A year ago, he'd pushed. He'd asked questions, tried to explain, tried to rebuild something. And then he'd abandoned it all for his exam.

What right did he have to expect anything now?

But he couldn't just... not try.

Chinmoy: Are you fine? How's your research journey going? What are you working on these days?

He sent the message and waited, watching the ticks turn blue again.

This time, the typing indicator appeared. Disappeared. Appeared again.

Finally, a response came through longer than before, but still remarkably restrained.

Priyanshi: I'm fine. Research is going well. Currently working on economic policy analysis for rural development. Published four papers this year. Presenting at three conferences next month.

The message was factual, professional, and completely devoid of emotion. It read like a LinkedIn summary.

Chinmoy read it twice, trying to find something, anything personal in it. Some hint of the girl who used to send him paragraphs about her feelings, who'd argue with him about breakfast food, who'd share her art with shy excitement.

Chinmoy: Four papers? That's incredible, Priyanshi. I always knew you'd do something amazing.

Seen.

No response.

Chinmoy: I saw you're at a conference. How's it going?

Seen.

Still nothing.

Chinmoy: Congratulations on all your success. Really. You've built something impressive.

Seen.

The pattern was clear. She was reading everything, responding to nothing beyond the bare minimum. Every message he sent was acknowledged and dismissed in the same breath.

It was the digital equivalent of a polite nod to a stranger.

Priyanshi's POV - Same Conversation

Priyanshi sat in her hotel room, her laptop open to a research paper she was supposed to be reviewing. But her eyes kept drifting to her phone, to the messages from Chinmoy that kept appearing.

Don't reply. Don't engage. You don't owe him anything.

But her traitorous fingers kept hovering over the keyboard, wanting to type more, wanting to ask about his exam, wanting to fall back into their old rhythm of conversation.

No. You worked too hard to get here. You built a life that doesn't revolve around waiting for his messages. Don't throw it away because he suddenly remembered you exist.

When he'd first messaged her three days ago, she'd felt her heart jump in that old, familiar way. Then she'd remembered: he'd disappeared. For an entire year. After promising to show up every day.

Yes, he'd told her he needed to focus on his exam. And yes, she'd said she understood.

But understanding and accepting were different things. She'd understood his need for space intellectually. Emotionally, each day of silence had felt like confirmation that she was exactly what he'd called her: a distraction. Something to be set aside when more important things demanded attention.

So she'd done what she needed to survive: she'd become important too. She'd thrown herself into research with the kind of single-minded focus he'd given to his exam. She'd turned herself into someone whose value didn't depend on whether someone chose to message her back.

She'd become the person who left messages on read.

His latest message glowed on her screen: *Congratulations on all your success. Really. You've built something impressive.*

The old Priyanshi would have melted at that. Would have responded with gratitude, would have asked about his exam, would have reopened the door she'd spent a year closing.

The new Priyanshi—Dr. Mehra's star researcher, the girl with four publications and three conference presentations, just marked it as read and went back to her paper.

But she didn't block him either.

Scene 3: The Monologue

Chinmoy's POV - The Breaking Point

By the evening, Chinmoy had sent seven more messages. Each one was read and ignored.

Chinmoy: I know I don't have the right to expect anything from you after disappearing for a year.

Seen.

Chinmoy: I'm not asking you to forgive me. I just want to know how you are. Really are.

Seen.

Chinmoy: The person in your conference photos looks so different from the Priyanshi I remember. It's like you've become someone else entirely.

Seen.

Chinmoy: I cleared GATE. Got rank 47. I wanted you to be the first person I told, but I didn't think I had the right to message you. Turns out I was right.

Seen.

Chinmoy: I saw you stopped posting art. You haven't shared a single painting in over a year. Did you stop creating, or did you just stop sharing?

Seen.

Chinmoy: I'm sorry. For everything. For the confusion, for the mixed signals, for disappearing when I promised I wouldn't, for making you feel like you were a distraction when you were actually the only thing that made sense in my chaotic life.

Seen.

Chinmoy: You don't have to respond to any of this. I just needed you to know that I haven't stopped thinking about you. Not for a single day in the past year. Even when I was buried in textbooks, you were there in the margins of every page.

Seen.

The messages piled up, creating a one-sided conversation that looked increasingly desperate. Chinmoy knew how it looked. He didn't care.

Finally, unable to stop himself, he sent one more:

Chinmoy: Say something. Anything. Even if it's just to tell me to stop messaging you. This silence is killing me, and I think you know it.

This time, the typing indicator appeared.

Chinmoy's heart raced. She was going to respond. Finally.

The message that appeared was brief, surgical in its precision:

Priyanshi: You asked me to be less of a distraction. So I am. You're welcome.

Then, before he could respond, another message:

Priyanshi: I have a presentation to prepare. Goodbye, Chinmoy.

And that was it. No anger, no long explanation, no emotional outpouring. Just a clear, professional dismissal.

Chinmoy stared at his phone, feeling something crack inside his chest.

She'd done exactly what he'd feared: she'd moved on. Not just from him, but from the version of herself that had cared about him. She'd rebuilt herself into someone who didn't need him, didn't want him, and didn't feel anything when he finally came back.

He'd won his exam but lost her in the process.

And the worst part? He'd done this to himself.

Priyanshi's POV - After Sending the Message

After hitting send, Priyanshi set her phone face down on the desk and tried to return to her paper.

Her hands were shaking.

You asked me to be less of a distraction. So I am.

The words had felt powerful when she'd typed them. Now they just felt... hollow.

She wasn't angry. She'd meant that when she'd said it. Anger would have required energy she no longer had to spare.

She was just... done.

Done with the cycle of hope and disappointment. Done with checking her phone every five minutes. Done with analysing every word for hidden meaning. Done with making herself smaller to fit into someone's life when they had space.

She'd spent a year becoming someone who didn't need external validation. Someone whose worth was measured in citations and conference presentations, not in whether someone chose to message her back.

But sitting alone in her hotel room, her phone silent on the desk, she felt the cost of that transformation.

She'd become successful. Respected. Independent.

She'd also become lonely.

She looked nothing like the girl who used to stay up until 4 AM talking about art and philosophy with a boy who could never decide if he wanted her or not.

Good, she thought. *That girl was a mess. This version is better.*

But when she picked up her phone to head down to dinner, she couldn't help but look at their conversation one more time.

You asked me to be less of a distraction. So I am.

She'd meant it as closure. As a clean ending.

So why did it feel like she'd just started a new chapter instead?

Scene 4: What Success Costs

Two Days Later - Chinmoy's POV

Chinmoy sat in his room, GATE result certificate in hand, feeling more lost than he had before taking the exam.

Karthik walked in with two cups of coffee. "You're still moping."

"I'm not moping. I'm reflecting."

"Same thing, but with better vocabulary." Karthik handed him a cup. "Want to talk about it?"

"What's there to talk about? I got what I wanted. Great rank, good prospects, family's proud. Everything according to plan."

"Except you look miserable."

Chinmoy took a sip of coffee. "I messaged Priyanshi."

"And?"

"And she basically told me to fuck off. Politely. Professionally. But the message was clear."

"Can you blame her? You ghosted her for a year."

"I didn't ghost her! I told her I needed to focus on my exam. She said she understood."

"Did she, though? Or did she just say that because you'd already made up your mind and she didn't want to be the reason you failed?"

The question hit harder than expected.

"I thought..." Chinmoy struggled to find words. "I thought if I got this exam, if I secured my future, I could come back and we could figure things out. That she'd still be there."

"She is still there. She's just not the same person anymore. And honestly? Good for her. She built an actual life instead of waiting around for you to decide she was worth your time."

"I never said she wasn't worth my time."

"You didn't have to say it. You showed it. For a year."

Chinmoy set down his coffee. "So what do I do now?"

"Honestly? I think you let her go. She's clearly moved on. She's doing amazing things. Maybe the kindest thing you can do is leave her alone instead of pulling her back into your mess."

"What if I don't want to let her go?"

"Then you need to figure out what you're actually offering her. Because 'I'm sorry I disappeared, but I'm back now' isn't enough. She doesn't need your apologies. She needed you a year ago, and you chose your exam. That's done. You can't undo it."

After Karthik left, Chinmoy opened his laptop and typed her name into Google Scholar.

Four publications appeared, each one more impressive than the last. He read through them—dense economic analysis, original research, sophisticated methodology. The byline on each one read: *Priyanshi Dubey, Research Scholar, Department of Economics, St. Thomas' College.*

She'd done this. Built this. Become this. All while he was buried in his textbooks, thinking she'd still be the same girl waiting for his messages when he finally came up for air.

He opened Instagram, scrolled through her academic posts. Then, on impulse, he went to her tagged photos, old posts from a year ago, before she'd transformed.

There was a painting. One he remembered. The abstract one with violent reds and blues that she'd posted the day after their fight. The caption read: *"Some colours bleed through."*

In the comments section, buried under dozens of other comments, was one from her roommate, Aditi, from two months ago:

"Remember when you used to paint instead of living in the library? I miss artist Priya."

Priyanshi had replied: *"That version of me made poor choices. This one has publications."*

Chinmoy stared at that comment for a long time.

He'd wanted her to stop being a distraction. To stop demanding emotional availability he couldn't provide. To stop making him feel things he wasn't ready to process.

She'd done exactly that. She'd become focused, logical, analytical. She'd turned herself into someone who wouldn't get hurt by people like him.

And in doing so, she'd become someone he no longer knew how to reach.

This is what you wanted, he thought. *You wanted her to need you less. Congratulations. She doesn't need you at all anymore.*

His phone buzzed. A message from his father: *Proud of you, son. Your mother and I are celebrating. Come home soon.*

He responded with a thumbs-up emoji and set the phone down.

He'd achieved everything he'd been working toward. So why did success feel so much like loss?

Chapter 15
The Year of Waiting

Scene 1: The Truth Beneath the Surface

Priyanshi's POV - The Night After Ignoring Him

Priyanshi sat on her hotel bed, laptop open to a research paper she'd read the same paragraph six times without comprehending a single word.

Her phone lay face-up beside her, their conversation thread still open on the screen.

You asked me to be less of a distraction. So I am.

She'd typed those words with such conviction, such finality. They were meant to be armour—sharp, protective, impenetrable.

But alone in the dark, they just felt like lies.

Because the truth she couldn't admit to anyone, not even Aditi, was that she hadn't moved on. Not really.

She'd just become very, very good at pretending.

Every paper she published, every conference she attended, every professional achievement she collected—they were all armour pieces, carefully constructed to build a version of herself that didn't need him. That didn't wait for his messages. He didn't remember his promises.

But beneath all that armour, the girl who'd loved him was still there, waiting.

"Just give me this year. After this exam, everything will be clear. I'll clear all your doubts. I promise."

That's what he'd said. Exactly one year and seventeen days ago.

She'd counted. God help her, she'd counted every single day.

She'd told herself she was moving on. Told Aditi she was done. Told herself that building her career was more important than waiting for a boy who might never come back.

But in the quiet moments, the 3 AM insomnia, the gap between conference sessions, the long train rides home, her mind would drift back to that promise.

One year. He said one year.

The year had passed. He'd cleared his exam.

And now he was back, trying to talk to her, and she was... ignoring him.

Why am I doing this?

She knew why. It was a test. A final, desperate test to see if he'd fight for her the way she'd fought for him. If he'd persist when she pushed him away, the way she'd persisted through all his mixed signals.

She was done being the one who chased. If he wanted her really wanted her, he'd have to prove it.

But what if he gave up? What if her coldness convinced him she really had moved on, and he walked away for good?

Then I'll know he never really cared, she told herself. *If he gives up now, after everything, then I was right to protect myself.*

But the thought of him actually giving up made her chest tighten with panic.

Her phone buzzed. Her heart leapt.

It was just Aditi: *How's the conference? Also, why do you look miserable in all the photos? You're literally at your dream event.*

Priyanshi typed back: *Just tired. Long days.*

Aditi: Or you're thinking about someone whose name we don't mention anymore?

Priyanshi: I'm not.

Aditi: Liar. What did he do now?

Priyanshi: Nothing. He cleared GATE. Rank 47.

Aditi: And he told you?

Priyanshi: He tried to. I ignored him.

Aditi: Oh, Priya...

Priyanshi: What? You're the one who said I should protect myself. Make him work for it.

Aditi: I said that a year ago when he was being a confusing mess. But babe... he came back. Like he said he would. After his exam. That's literally what he promised.

Priyanshi: He disappeared for a YEAR, Aditi. No messages, no calls, nothing. Just because he kept a technical promise doesn't mean I have to fall at his feet.

Aditi: I'm not saying fall at his feet. I'm saying maybe don't freeze him out completely. You've been waiting for this, haven't you? For him to come back?

Priyanshi stared at the message, her throat tight.

Priyanshi: I don't know what I've been waiting for anymore.

Aditi: Yes, you do. You're just scared. Which is fair. He hurt you. But Priya, what if he's actually ready now? What if he actually wants to explain everything as he promised? Are you going to let pride stop you from finding out?

Priyanshi didn't reply. She set her phone down and stared at the ceiling, Aditi's words echoing in her mind.

What if he's actually ready now?

That's what terrified her most. Not that he wouldn't explain. But that he would. That he'd finally give her the clarity she'd begged for, and she'd have to decide whether it was enough. Whether she could trust him again. Whether she could let herself be vulnerable after spending a year building walls specifically designed to keep him out.

Her phone buzzed again. This time, it was him.

Chinmoy: I know you're reading these messages. I know you're seeing them and choosing not to respond. That's fine. You don't owe me anything. But I need you to know something.

Chinmoy: A year ago, I asked you to wait. I told you that after my exam, I'd clear all your doubts. I'd explain everything. I'd give you the clarity I'd been too scared to give before.

Chinmoy: I'm ready now, Priyanshi. I'm ready to tell you everything. To answer every question you ever asked me. To explain why I was the way I was, and why I'm different now.

Chinmoy: But I can't do that if you won't talk to me.

Chinmoy: So I'm asking: can we talk? Really talk? Not through these messages where you can ignore me, but face to face. Or at least on a call. Please.

Chinmoy: I kept my promise. I came back. Now I'm asking you to let me keep the rest of it.

Priyanshi read the messages three times, her heart hammering against her ribs.

He was ready. After a year of waiting, of wondering, of pretending she'd moved on he was finally ready.

And she was terrified.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

Seen.

She left him on read and turned off her phone.

Scene 2: The Breaking Point

Chinmoy's POV - Three Days Later

Three days.

Chinmoy had given her three days to respond to his messages. Three days of watching his phone obsessively, jumping every time it buzzed, hoping it was her.

It never was.

Karthik found him on the fourth day, sitting on their room's balcony at 2 AM, staring at his phone like it held the secrets of the universe.

"Still nothing?"

"Still nothing."

"Maybe it's time to accept that she really has moved on, man. You can't force someone to talk to you."

"I know." Chinmoy's voice was hollow. "I just... I don't understand. I did what she asked. I gave her space for the exam. I came back after, as I promised. I'm ready to explain everything now. Why won't she even hear me out?"

"Maybe because a year is a long time. People change. Maybe she's not the same girl who wanted those explanations anymore."

"Then why do I feel like she's testing me?" Chinmoy looked at his friend. "Every time I message her, she reads it immediately. IMMEDIATELY. But she doesn't respond. If she'd really moved on, wouldn't she just... not read them? Or block me?"

"Or maybe she reads them, feels nothing, and doesn't think they deserve a response."

"No." Chinmoy shook his head. "I know her. The cold, professional responses? The calculated ignoring? That's not indifference. That's protection."

"Protection from what?"

"From me. From getting hurt again." He ran his hands through his hair. "I did this. I made her build these walls. And now I don't know how to get through them."

Karthik was quiet for a moment. "What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to keep trying. I'm going to show her that I'm serious. That I'm not going to disappear again."

"And if she keeps ignoring you?"

"Then I'll try harder."

"That's either really romantic or really pathetic. I can't tell which."

"Maybe both," Chinmoy admitted. "But I spent a year focusing on my exam, convincing myself that it was the priority. That everything else could wait. I was wrong. She couldn't wait. And I lost her because of it. I'm not making that mistake again."

Scene 3: Protection or Punishment

Priyanshi's POV - One Week After the Conference

Priyanshi returned from the conference to find her dorm room exactly as she'd left it—organised, efficient, devoid of personality. Her art supplies were still packed away in boxes under her bed. Her sketchbooks sat unopened on her shelf.

She'd become so good at being "Research Scholar Priyanshi Dubey" that she'd almost forgotten she was ever anyone else.

Almost.

Aditi was waiting for her, sitting on her bed with a knowing look.

"Don't start," Priyanshi said, dropping her bags.

"I wasn't going to say anything."

"Your face is saying plenty."

"My face is just concerned about my best friend, who's clearly miserable despite being more successful than anyone else in our program."

Priyanshi slumped into her desk chair. "I'm fine."

"You're exhausted. When was the last time you did something just because you wanted to, not because it looked good on your CV?"

"I like research."

"You love research. Past tense. Now you use it as a shield."

"That's not—"

"Priya, I watched you ignore messages from Chinmoy for a week. Messages where he was literally offering to give you everything you asked for a year ago. And you just... left him on read. Why?"

"Because!" Priyanshi's voice cracked. "Because what if I let him explain, and it's not enough? What if his reasons don't justify the hurt? What if I forgive him and he does it all over again?"

"And what if his reasons do make sense? What if he's actually grown? What if you're throwing away something real because you're too scared to find out?"

"I'm not scared, I'm smart. There's a difference."

"Is there?" Aditi's voice was gentle. "Because from where I'm sitting, you look terrified."

Priyanshi felt tears prick her eyes. She'd held them back for so long through the conference, through the messages, through the week of pretending she was fine.

"I waited for him, Aditi," she whispered. "The whole year. I told myself I was moving on, but every single day, I was counting. Counting down to when his exam would be over. When he'd come back. When he'd finally explain everything as he promised."

"I know."

"And now he's back, and he wants to talk, and I can't. I can't let him in again. It took everything I had to survive the first time. I don't have anything left for a second round."

"Who says there'll be a second round? Maybe this time it's different. Maybe he's actually ready."

"Or maybe he'll explain everything beautifully, and I'll forgive him, and then three months from now, something else will be more important, and I'll be back to waiting. Back to wondering why I'm never enough."

Aditi moved to sit beside her. "You were always enough, Priya. You are enough. If he couldn't see that, that's his failure, not yours."

"Then why does it feel like mine?"

They sat in silence for a long moment.

Finally, Aditi said, "You need to decide something. Are you protecting yourself, or are you punishing him?"

"What's the difference?"

"Protection is about you. It's setting boundaries, taking care of yourself, and making sure you don't get hurt again. Punishment is about him. It's making him suffer because you suffered. And babe? Punishment doesn't heal you. It just keeps the wound open."

Priyanshi wiped her eyes. "When did you become so wise?"

"I've always been wise. You were just too busy being emotionally complicated to notice."

That night, alone in her room, Priyanshi finally let herself check their messages.

His last few messages were different from the desperate earlier ones:

Chinmoy: I'm not going to spam you anymore. I'm not going to flood your messages or reply to your stories or try to force a conversation you don't want to have.

Chinmoy: But I need you to know this: I'm here. Whenever you're ready to hear what I have to say, whether that's tomorrow or next month or next year, I'm here.

Chinmoy: You once waited for me to be ready. Now I'm waiting for you.

Chinmoy: Take all the time you need. I'm not going anywhere.

The messages were from five days ago. Since then: nothing. No follow-ups, no story replies, no attempts to get her attention.

He was actually giving her space.

It should have felt like victory. Instead, it felt like a loss.

She opened her desk drawer and pulled out something she'd hidden there a year ago: a small piece of paper. The receipt from their day at IIT Guwahati. The one she'd kept, despite telling herself she was throwing everything away.

On the back, in her own handwriting from a year ago, she'd written: *"If he comes back after the exam as he promised, maybe he meant it all along."*

She'd forgotten about this. Forgotten that even while building her walls and pretending to move on, a part of her had been holding onto hope.

He came back. He kept his promise.

And she'd shut him out.

Her phone sat on the desk, silent and waiting. One message. That's all it would take. One message, and she could hear what he had to say. Finally get the closure or the clarity or whatever it was she'd been waiting for.

Her fingers hovered over the keyboard.

But what if—

No. She was done with "what ifs."

She typed quickly, before she could overthink it:

Priyanshi: Okay.

She hit send and immediately felt panic flood through her. That was it? Just "okay"? After a week of ignoring him, she responds with one word?

Before she could send anything else, the typing indicator appeared.

He was online. He'd been waiting.

Chinmoy: Okay?

Priyanshi: Okay, we can talk. But not over text. And not right now. I need time to prepare myself.

Chinmoy: Whenever you're ready. Call me, or I'll call you, or we can meet in person. Whatever you're comfortable with.

Priyanshi: I'll call you. Tomorrow evening. 7 PM.

Chinmoy: I'll be waiting.

Priyanshi: And Chinmoy?

Chinmoy: Yeah?

Priyanshi: You get one chance to explain. One conversation. After that, I decide whether this—whatever this is—is worth keeping or if we end it for good. Understood?

Chinmoy: Understood. Thank you for giving me this chance.

Priyanshi set her phone down, her hands shaking.

Tomorrow. Tomorrow she'd finally get the answers she'd been waiting a year for.

The question was: would they be enough?

Scene 4: The Night Before

Chinmoy's POV - 11 PM, The Night Before The Call

Chinmoy couldn't sleep. He'd been lying in bed for two hours, staring at the ceiling, mentally rehearsing what he'd say to Priyanshi.

One chance. She'd given him one chance.

He got up, opened his laptop, and did something he hadn't done since high school: he started writing notes. Actual, physical notes about what he needed to say.

Things I need to explain:

1. Why was I scared
2. Why I pulled away
3. Why I asked for her number and then didn't call
4. Why I promised to meet during Puja and then didn't
5. Why I needed the year
6. Why I'm different now
7. What I actually feel

He stared at the list. How did he condense a year of confusion, fear, growth, and realisation into one conversation?

Just tell the truth. That's all she's asking for. The truth.

He started writing, trying to find the right words:

"Priyanshi, I was scared of you, not of you as a person, but of what you represented. You were chaos in my structured world. You felt everything so deeply, and I'd spent my whole life learning not to feel. You wanted answers I didn't know how to give. You wanted

consistency, but I didn't know how to provide it. So I panicked. I pulled away. Was that right? Was that enough?

He kept writing, crossing out, rewriting, trying to capture the complexity of what he'd been feeling without making excuses.

At 2 AM, Karthik woke up to find him still typing.

"Dude, are you writing her a novel?"

"I'm trying to figure out how to explain a year of stupidity in one conversation."

"Here's a thought: just tell her you were an idiot, you're sorry, and you love her."

Chinmoy's fingers froze on the keyboard.

"What?"

"You heard me. All this complicated explanation? It boils down to that. You were scared of falling in love with her, so you sabotaged it. Then you realised you had already fallen, and by then, it was too late. Now you want her back. Just say that."

"It's not that simple."

"It is, actually. You're the one making it complicated. She doesn't need a thesis defence. She needs honesty."

After Karthik went back to sleep, Chinmoy stared at his pages of notes.

Just say that.

Could he? Could he actually use that word—love—after everything he'd put her through? Did he have the right?

But it was true. That was the terrifying, undeniable truth.

He'd fallen in love with her. Probably from that first Instagram message. Definitely by the time she'd visited his campus, absolutely, by the time he'd watched her ignore his messages for a week and felt like his chest was caving in.

He loved her. He'd always loved her. That's why he'd pushed her away—because loving someone meant they could destroy you, and he'd been too scared to hand her that power.

Now, he'd spent a year without her, and he'd learned something: being destroyed by love would hurt less than this slow, aching absence.

Chapter 16
The Call That Changed Everything

PART ONE: The Hours Before

Priyanshi's POV - Morning of The Call

The morning of the call, Priyanshi woke at 5 AM, two hours before her alarm. Her heart was already racing, her mind spinning through scenarios she couldn't control.

What if he doesn't have good answers? What if he does, and I'm too broken to accept them? What if I forgive him and he hurts me again?

She abandoned sleep and went to the window. The campus was still dark, streetlights casting long shadows across empty pathways. Somewhere, in another city, he was probably awake too, preparing for the same conversation.

The thought felt intimate in a way that made her chest ache.

Aditi found her there an hour later, still in her pyjamas, staring at nothing.

"You look like you're preparing for war," Aditi said gently, handing her tea.

"Maybe I am." Priyanshi took the cup but didn't drink. "What if this is a mistake? What if I'm about to undo a year of healing just to get hurt again?"

"Or what if you're about to get the closure you've been waiting for? Either way, you'll know. And knowing is better than this limbo."

"Is it? At least in limbo, I have hope. After tonight, I might have nothing."

"You'll have truth. And truth is worth more than hope built on uncertainty."

Priyanshi finally sipped the tea. It burned her tongue, but the pain was grounding. Real.

"I wrote down seventeen questions," she admitted quietly. "Things I need him to answer. Things that kept me up at night for months."

"Are you going to ask them all?"

"Part of me wants to interrogate him. Make him answer for every hurt, every confusion, every broken promise. But another part..." She trailed off.

"Another part just wants to hear him say he loves you," Aditi finished softly.

Priyanshi's eyes filled with tears. "Is that pathetic?"

"It's human. You loved him. Maybe you still do. There's no shame in wanting that love reciprocated."

"But what if love isn't enough? What if he says all the right things and I still can't trust him?"

"Then you'll know that too. And you'll walk away with your head high."

After Aditi left, Priyanshi tried working on her research. She managed fifteen minutes before giving up. She showered, hoping water would wash away anxiety. It didn't. She tried eating lunch—three bites before her stomach rebelled. She attempted painting for the first time in months, but her hands shook too badly.

Finally, at 3 PM, she opened their old messages and read through everything. From the first "Hey! You're from St. Thomas' College, right?" to her last, cold "Goodbye, Chinmoy."

Reading their history was like watching a slow-motion car crash. She could see where things went wrong, where they'd both failed each other. But she could also see something else: a genuine

connection. Real affection. The potential for something beautiful that neither had been mature enough to handle.

Were we doomed from the start? Or did we just need time to grow?

At 6 PM, she sat at her desk with her list of seventeen questions:

1. Why did you ask for my number if you knew you wouldn't call?
2. What did "more than friends" actually mean to you?
3. Were you playing with my feelings, or genuinely confused?
4. Why did meeting your friend take priority over meeting me?
5. Did you ever actually care, or was I just a distraction?
6. When you said you needed time, were you being honest or avoiding commitment?
7. What changed during this year?
8. How do I know you won't do this again?
9. What do you actually want from me now?
10. Did you think about me during the year of silence?
11. Do you understand how much you hurt me?
12. Can you comprehend what it took for me to rebuild myself?
13. Why should I believe anything you say now?
14. What makes you think you deserve a second chance?
15. Are you ready to actually commit, or still scared?
16. What happens when the next big thing comes along?
17. Do you love me, or do you just miss having me around?

She stared at the questions—her carefully constructed ammunition. Each was valid. Each deserved an answer.

But as 7 PM approached, she realised something: these questions weren't about getting answers. They were about protecting herself.

She took fresh paper and wrote just one question:

What do you actually feel for me?

Everything else would stem from that answer.

Chinmoy's POV - Afternoon Before The Call

Chinmoy woke at noon after a sleepless night, his room littered with crumpled papers—failed attempts at writing what he wanted to say. Karthik had retreated to the library around 3 AM, leaving him alone with spiralling thoughts.

Seven hours until the call. Seven hours to condense a year of regret, growth, and revelation into one conversation that would determine his future.

No pressure.

He couldn't eat breakfast. He tried studying, but equations swam before his eyes, meaningless.

At 2 PM, he walked on campus, hoping movement would clear his head. It didn't. Every path reminded him of something—the bench where he'd debated messaging her for the hundredth time, the café where he'd imagined bringing her, the library where he'd buried himself to avoid thinking about her.

Except I thought about her anyway. Every single day.

He returned and did something he hadn't allowed himself in months: opened her Instagram profile properly. He scrolled through her transformation—from colourful art posts to academic achievements, from emotional captions to professional ones.

I did this. I made her believe emotions were a weakness. That being herself was too much.

The guilt was crushing. But underneath was determination. He'd spent a year becoming someone worthy of her. Now he needed to prove it.

He opened a fresh document and started writing—not a speech, but a letter. The letter he should have sent a year ago:

Priyanshi,

I'm going to start with the scariest thing I've ever had to admit: I love you. I've loved you since before I knew what that word meant in context to us. I've loved you through every moment I pushed you away, every wall I built, every time I chose fear over honesty.

You asked me once what we were. I said "more than friends" because I was too scared to say "I'm falling in love with you and it terrifies me." You asked if I felt something for you. I said "I need time" because I was too scared to say "I feel everything for you, and I don't know how to handle it."

I spent this year thinking I was preparing for an exam. But really, I was preparing for this moment. For the courage to say: I choose you. I choose us. I choose the beautiful, terrifying chaos of love over the safe, lonely logic of fear.

I know you've built walls. I helped you build them with every mixed signal, every disappearance, every broken promise. And I'm not asking you to tear them down tonight. I'm just asking for permission to stand at the base of those walls and prove, day by day, that I'm not going anywhere.

Whatever happens on this call, I need you to know: you were never a distraction. You were never too much. You were exactly what I needed, at a time when I was too broken to accept something that good.

I'm not broken anymore. Or maybe I am, but now I'm brave enough to hand you the broken pieces and trust you with them.

That's what love is, isn't it? Not being perfect, but being real. Being vulnerable. Being brave enough to say "I'm terrified, but I'm choosing this anyway."

I'm choosing you. I hope you'll choose me too.

- Chinmoy

He read it three times. It wasn't logical. It wasn't structured. It was raw and messy and completely honest.

Perfect.

He didn't send it. This wasn't a conversation for text. But having written it, having crystallised his feelings into words, he felt ready.

At 6:30 PM, he showered. Put on a fresh shirt—silly, since she wouldn't see him, but it made him feel prepared. He sat at his desk, phone charged, notes visible but pushed aside. He wouldn't need them. He knew what to say.

Karthik returned at 6:45. "Good luck, man. And hey—if she gives you another chance? Don't fuck it up this time."

"I won't," Chinmoy promised. "I can't. I won't survive losing her twice."

At 6:55, his phone sat on the desk. Five minutes until 7. Five minutes until everything changed.

His hands shook. His heart pounded. He felt like he might throw up.

This is what courage feels like. Not the absence of fear, but choosing to act despite it.

At 7:00 exactly, his phone rang.

He'd expected to wait, thought maybe she'd call late to prove a point.

But no. 7:00 on the dot. Because that was Priyanshi—when she committed to something, she showed up.

God, I love her.

He took a deep breath and answered.

"Hi."

PART TWO: The Conversation

The First Five Minutes

"Hi," Priyanshi's voice came through, softer than he remembered but with steel underneath. Nervous but guarded.

"Hi," he replied, immediately cursing himself. *Brilliant opening.*

Silence. He could hear her breathing, that familiar rhythm that used to calm him during late-night calls.

"Thank you," he said, voice rough with emotion. "Thank you for calling. For giving me this chance. I know I don't deserve it."

"You don't," she agreed, no malice, just honesty. "But I'm hoping you've earned it. So... talk."

He looked at his organised notes. Then, at the raw, honest letter. He chose honesty.

"I had a whole speech prepared. Pages of it. I was going to explain my fear with logic, break it down like an engineering problem."

"That sounds very you," she said, and he couldn't tell if it was criticism or observation.

"It does. But that's the problem, Priyanshi. I spent so long trying to logic my way through emotions that I forgot... emotions aren't problems to solve. They're experiences to feel. And I've been so scared of feeling that I hurt the one person who made me want to feel everything."

Her breath hitched. He heard it—that small catch that meant his words had landed.

"I fell in love with you," he said, and the words trapped in his chest for years finally broke free. "Probably from that first Instagram message. Definitely by the time you visited campus. Absolutely, by the time I realised I'd lost you. And I was so terrified of that feeling that I sabotaged us before we even had a chance to begin."

"Why?" Her voice cracked. "Why was loving me so scary?"

He closed his eyes, forcing himself to dig deep.

"Because you were chaos, and I was order. You felt everything intensely, and I'd spent my life learning not to feel. My parents raised me to value logic over emotion, achievement over connection. I learned early that feelings were liabilities. That caring too much would only lead to disappointment."

He paused. "And then you came along, with your paintings and emotions and beautiful, terrifying authenticity. You didn't hide what you felt. You demanded honesty when I'd been trained to give carefully crafted responses. You wanted vulnerability when vulnerability felt like handing someone a loaded gun."

"So you pushed me away," Priyanshi said quietly. "Over and over. You'd let me in just enough to hope, then slam the door."

"Yes." The admission burned. "And I'm so sorry. You deserved better than my half-commitments and cryptic promises."

The Ugly Truth

"Then why did you keep coming back?" Her voice was stronger now, anger bleeding through. "If you were so scared, why didn't you just leave me alone? Why keep messaging me, watching my stories, giving me just enough attention to keep me waiting?"

This was the hard part. The ugly truth.

"Because I was selfish," he said, words tasting like ash. "I wanted you in my life, but only on my terms. I wanted the warmth of your attention without the risk of real commitment. I wanted to know

you were there, thinking about me, waiting for me, but I didn't want to give you the same certainty."

He heard her sharp intake of breath, the tears she was trying to hold back.

"That's cruel," she whispered.

"I know. It was unforgivably cruel. I kept you in limbo because it felt safe for me, and I didn't think enough about what it was doing to you. Or maybe I did, and I just... convinced myself you understood. That you'd wait forever."

"I almost did," she said, bitterness in her voice. "I waited so long, Chinmoy. I made excuses for you. I convinced myself your silence meant you were protecting something precious, not that you just didn't care enough to show up."

"I cared," he said urgently. "Priyanshi, I cared so much it terrified me."

"Then why—" Her voice broke. "Why was I never enough to make you face that fear? Why did it take losing me for you to finally be brave?"

The question hit like a physical blow.

"Because I'm a coward," he said simply. "I wish I had a better answer. But the truth is, I was just scared. Scared that if I let myself love you completely, if I gave you everything, you'd eventually see I wasn't worth it. That you'd leave. And losing you after giving you everything felt more terrifying than keeping you at arm's length forever."

"That's..." Priyanshi struggled. "That's the most backwards logic I've ever heard."

"I know. But fear isn't logical. And I'd built my entire identity around being the logical one. Admitting I was acting out of emotion felt like admitting my entire foundation was cracked."

The Breaking Point

Silence stretched between them, thick with years of hurt.

"The day you met your friend instead of me during Puja," Priyanshi said, voice small. "That day broke something in me. You'd promised. And then you chose someone else."

He winced. "I know. And I can't fully explain except to say... your friend didn't expect anything from me. There was no pressure, no questions about what we were. It was easy. You were never easy, Priyanshi, because you mattered too much."

"So you punished me for mattering?"

"I punished myself by denying myself what I wanted most. And you got caught in the crossfire."

"And then you thanked me," she said, tears falling freely now. "When I said I'd never bother you again, you said 'Uff... finally... thanks.' Like my absence was relief. Like I'd been a burden you were finally free of."

"God, Priyanshi, no." His voice was thick with emotion. "That wasn't relief. That was... I convinced myself I was relieved because the alternative was admitting how devastated I was. I thought if I could make myself believe I wanted you gone, it wouldn't hurt so much."

"Did it work?"

"No. It hurt more than anything. Every day without you was proof I'd made the biggest mistake of my life."

When Walls Crumble

"Then why didn't you reach out?" Priyanshi's question was barely a whisper. "You had a whole year. But you chose silence."

"I promised I'd focus on my exam. I promised I'd come back after. I thought I was doing the right thing—giving you space, becoming someone worthy of you."

"That's not your decision to make!" Her voice rose, anger breaking through. "You don't get to decide what's best for me! You don't get to disappear for a year and expect me to just... be here when you're finally ready!"

"You're right," he said immediately. "Absolutely right. I should have asked what you needed. I should have checked in, given you something to hold onto instead of just... nothing."

"Yes!" She was crying openly. "That's exactly what I needed! Not constant messages, just... proof I wasn't completely erased from your life. That you were still thinking about me, still wanted me, still planned to come back. Instead, I had nothing. Just silence and hope and my own stupid heart."

"I was thinking about you," he said desperately. "Every single day. Every time I saw something funny, you were the first person I wanted to tell. You were there, in every margin of every textbook."

"But I didn't know that!" Her voice cracked. "I didn't know because you didn't tell me! Do you know what that does to a person? Waiting for someone who might never come back?"

"I'm sorry. God, Priyanshi, I'm so sorry." His own tears are falling now. "You deserved proof, evidence, reassurance. You deserved someone brave enough to say, 'I'm scared, but I'm choosing you anyway.' And I wasn't. I chose my fear over your peace of mind."

The Cost of Silence

Silence again. Different this time. Less angry, more exhausted.

"I built a whole new life," Priyanshi said finally. Published four papers. Presented at conferences. Became the star researcher. I did it all to prove I didn't need you."

"I know. I saw. You were incredible."

"But I was miserable," she admitted, words barely audible. "Every achievement felt empty because the person I wanted to share it with was gone. I stopped painting. Did you notice? I completely stopped creating art because art required feeling, and feeling was what got me hurt."

His heart shattered. "Priyanshi..."

"You took that from me," she said, profound sadness in her voice. "Not intentionally, maybe, but you did. You made me believe that being emotional, being creative, and being myself was too much. So I became less. I became smaller. I became someone who didn't feel deeply because feeling deeply made me vulnerable to you."

"I never wanted that," he said, voice breaking. "I never wanted you to become less. You were perfect as you were. Your emotions, your art, your intensity—that wasn't too much. It was everything."

"Then why did you call me a distraction?"

"Because I was an idiot who didn't know how to say 'you're so important I can't focus on anything else, and that terrifies me.' I used the wrong word because I didn't have the courage for the right ones."

"Which were?"

"That you were my priority. My favourite person. The thing I wanted most but was too scared to reach for."

He heard her crying, soft sobs breaking his heart into smaller pieces.

"I thought about calling you so many times during the year," she said through tears. "I'd pick up my phone, type messages, and delete them. I'd compose entire paragraphs in my head, then remember I couldn't."

"Why couldn't you?"

"Because you'd asked for space. And I'd already spent so long chasing you, waiting for you. I didn't want to be that person anymore. The one who cared more, loved harder, waited longer. So I forced myself to stop."

"Did you? Stop caring?"

Long, heavy pause.

"No," she finally whispered. "I never stopped. I just got better at pretending."

Where Understanding Begins

"Can I ask you something?" Chinmoy said softly.

"You can ask."

"When you watched my stories, read my messages, left me on read... were you testing me? Or were you genuinely done?"

Priyanshi was quiet for so long that he thought the call had dropped.

"Both. Neither. I don't know." Shaky breath. "I wanted to be done. But I also wanted to see if you'd fight for me the way I fought for you. If you'd persist when I pushed you away."

"That's not fair, though, is it?" he said gently. "Asking me to prove myself while giving me nothing?"

"No, it's not fair," she agreed. "But neither was making me wait in limbo for years. We've both been unfair, Chinmoy."

He absorbed that truth. They'd both operated from fear, both protected themselves in ways that hurt the other.

"You're right," he said. "We've both made mistakes. The question is... do we want to keep making them? Or try something different?"

"Like what?"

"Like honesty. Real, uncomfortable, terrifying honesty. No more games, no more tests, no more walls."

"That's easy to say. Harder to do."

"I know. But I'm willing to try if you are. To be uncomfortable, vulnerable, to risk getting hurt, if it means we get a real chance."

"Why now? Why are you suddenly ready?"

He thought about that, really thought.

"Because I spent a year without you," he finally said. "A year achieving everything I thought I wanted—good rank, family pride, secured future—and realising none of it meant anything if I couldn't share it with you. I learned that success without connection is empty. That being safe and alone is worse than being vulnerable with someone who matters."

"How do I know you won't run again?" Her voice is small. "The next time you're scared, the next time things get hard, how do I know you won't choose it over me?"

"You don't," he admitted. "I can't guarantee perfection. But I can promise I'll try. I'll communicate instead of disappearing. If I'm scared, I'll tell you instead of pushing you away. You'll be my priority, not an afterthought."

"Promises are easy. You've made promises before."

"I know. So don't believe my promises. Watch my actions. Judge me on what I do. Give me a chance to prove it through consistency, through showing up, through choosing you every single day."

"And if you fail?"

"Then you walk away knowing you gave me every opportunity. But Priyanshi... I won't fail. Not this time. Because I finally understand what I have to lose."

The Deepest Wound

"Do you know what the worst part was?" Priyanshi asked suddenly, voice raw. "It wasn't the confusion or mixed signals or even the silence."

"What was it?"

"Feeling like I was never going to be enough. Like no matter what I did, how patient I was, there would always be something more important. Your exam, your fear, your need for space. I was always on the list, but never at the top."

The words cut deep because they were true.

"You were at the top," he said quietly. "But I was so scared of letting you know that, of giving you that power, that I acted like you weren't. I treated the most important thing in my life like it was optional."

"Why was giving me that power so scary?"

All the polished answers fled. She deserved the ugly truth.

"Because everyone I've ever loved has disappointed me or left. Not dramatically—just quiet disappointments. Friends who drifted. Relationships that ended. People who promised forever and meant six months. I learned not to invest too much because people are temporary."

"So you kept me temporary on purpose."

"Yes. I thought if I never made you permanent, when you eventually left, it wouldn't hurt as much."

"Did it work?"

"No. It hurt more. Because I lost you, not because you left, but because I pushed you away. I created the exact outcome I was trying to avoid."

Priyanshi is crying again, softer now. "I wouldn't have left, Chinmoy. I waited for you. For years. Through all your nonsense, I stayed. You were the one who kept leaving."

"I know. And that's something I have to live with. But I'm here now. Completely. No more running, no more keeping one foot out the door."

"What changed?"

"Losing you. Spending a year without you made me realise the pain of vulnerability is nothing compared to living without you. I'd rather risk my heart and potentially lose than keep it safe and definitely lose you."

"That sounds like growth," she said with a hint of humor through tears.

"It's been a long year of therapy," he admitted. "Literal—I started seeing a counsellor. Karthik dragged me after I spent three weeks non-functional post-GATE. I was a mess. I had everything I thought I wanted, and I couldn't be happy because you weren't there."

Something vulnerable in that admission made her walls crack more.

"I almost called you so many times," she confessed. "The day I got my fourth publication, I had my phone in hand, your number on screen. My finger is hovering over call."

"Why didn't you?"

"Pride. Fear. Same reasons you didn't. I thought if you really wanted me, you'd reach out. You didn't."

"I thought the same. When you didn't reach out during the year, I convinced myself you'd moved on."

"So we both waited for the other to be brave first."

"Which is the most ridiculous thing two supposedly intelligent people could do?"

She laughed, wet and broken, but a laugh. "We really are idiots."

"The biggest idiots. PhD-level idiocy."

PART THREE: The Decision

They fell into silence—different from earlier. Less fraught, more thoughtful. Processing everything said, all wounds exposed, all truths spoken.

"I have a question," Priyanshi said finally.

"Anything."

"If I give you another chance—and I'm not saying I am—what does that look like? Because I can't go back to what we were. The uncertainty, mixed signals, and waiting. I can't survive that again."

"We'd start fresh," Chinmoy said immediately. "Not pretending the past didn't happen, but not letting it define us. We'd be honest. Stupidly honest. If I'm scared, I tell you. If you're hurt, you tell me. If something isn't working, we talk instead of letting it fester."

"And the distance? Your placements, my research—we're still in different cities."

"We make it work. Video calls, visits when possible, and actual communication. I'm not saying it'll be easy, but I'm willing to try. To put in effort. To make you a priority in action, not just words."

"What about when you get busy again?"

"I scheduled you in. Like an appointment I can't miss. We set specific times to talk, specific plans to meet. You become part of my routine, not something I fit in when convenient."

"That sounds clinical."

"Maybe at first. But structure doesn't mean lack of feeling. It means I'm taking your needs seriously enough to plan for them. That you're important enough to be non-negotiable."

Priyanshi considered that. Very logical, organised, systematic. But she was starting to understand his logic wasn't the opposite of emotion—it was how he expressed it.

"I need time," she said. "Not a year," she added quickly. "But time to think. To decide if I'm ready to be vulnerable with you again."

"That's fair. How much time?"

"I don't know. Days? Weeks? I need to figure out if I can trust you again."

"Take all the time you need," he said. "But Priyanshi? While you're thinking, can we stay in contact? Not like before, but... I don't want another year of silence. I don't want you thinking I've disappeared again."

"What are you suggesting?"

"I'll message you. Every day. Just small things—how my day was, something that reminded me of you. No pressure to respond. Just... proof I'm here. That I'm thinking of you. That this time, I'm not running."

"Every day?"

"Every day. Until you tell me to stop or decide what you want."

She thought about that. It was a risk—letting him back into her daily life, even this small way. But it was also what she'd needed. Consistency. Proof. Evidence that she mattered.

"Okay," she said softly. "Every day. But Chinmoy?"

"Yeah?"

"If you miss a day, if you disappear even once—I'm done. For real. No more chances."

"Understood. I won't miss a day."

"And I might not respond. Sometimes I might just read them."

"That's okay. I'm not doing it for responses. I'm doing it to show up."

They sat with that moment—this new boundary. It wasn't a relationship. Not even friendship. It was a test period. Probation. A chance for him to prove through actions he meant what he said.

"I should go," Priyanshi said, though she didn't want to. "It's late and I... need to process all this."

"Okay. Thank you for hearing me out. Thank you for this chance."

"Thank you for finally being honest."

"Priyanshi?"

"Yeah?"

"I meant what I said. I love you. I'm in love with you. And I know I've given you no reason to believe it. But I'll spend however long it takes proving it's true."

Her breath caught. For so long, she'd wanted to hear those words. Now that she had them, they felt both terrifying and exactly right.

"It's going to take time," she said finally, setting a boundary not from punishment, but self-preservation. "You have to prove this. Every single day. With actions, not just words."

She could almost hear relief flooding through him. "Just tell me where to start."

A small, genuine smile touched Priyanshi's lips for the first time in weeks. It felt foreign, but good. She looked around her quiet room, at the life she'd built. It was a good life. A strong one. And maybe, just maybe, there was room for this new, brave version of him.

She took a deep, cleansing breath, her heart lighter than it had been in a year.

"Okay," she said, voice soft but clear. "Tell me about your day. The real version."

And as Chinmoy began to speak—not about circuits or algorithms, but about the nervous coffee he'd spilled, the proud, tearful look on his mother's face, the quiet emptiness of his room after celebrations died down—Priyanshi settled back against her pillows.

The labyrinth was gone. No more walls, no more mixed signals. Just a path forward, uncertain and fragile, but bathed in the warm, hopeful light of truth finally spoken.

The story that started with a notification on a screen was no longer digital, no longer a mystery. It was real. And for the first time, it felt like it was truly beginning.

Chapter 17
Building Trust

The Days That Follow

Day 1: The First Message

Priyanshi's POV

Priyanshi woke the morning after their call with an unfamiliar feeling in her chest—not quite hope, not quite peace, but something lighter than the weight she'd carried for a year.

Her phone buzzed at 8:47 AM.

Chinmoy: Good morning. I know you said I might not get responses, and that's okay. But I wanted you to know: I woke up thinking about our conversation last night. About how brave you were to hear me out. About how much I don't deserve this chance, but how grateful I am for it.

Chinmoy: Today, I'm meeting with my project guide to discuss placements. I'm nervous, which is stupid because the hard part (GATE) is done. But I realised something, I'm nervous because I want to tell you about it afterwards. I want to share things with you again. Small things. Big things. Everything.

Chinmoy: That's all. No pressure to respond. Just wanted you to know: Day 1, I'm here. I'm showing up.

Priyanshi read the messages three times, her thumb hovering over the keyboard.

Don't respond yet, she told herself. *Make him prove it first.*

But a small smile touched her lips as she set the phone down.

He'd shown up.

Day 3: The Small Details

Chinmoy: Good morning. Day 3. I spilt coffee on my shirt this morning because I was distracted thinking about something you said on the call—about how you stopped painting. I keep wondering what it would take for you to pick up a brush again. Not for me. For you.

Chinmoy: Met Karthik for lunch. He asked about you. Asked if I'd "fucked it up yet." I told him I'm trying very hard not to. He said, and I quote, "Good. She deserves someone who actually shows up." He's right.

Chinmoy: It's raining here. Heavy monsoon rain that floods the campus. I thought of you immediately—remembered that call we had during the rain last year. How your voice sounded. I felt brave enough to almost say everything, but chickened out at the last second. I'm not chickening out anymore.

Chinmoy: That's today. Still here. Still thinking of you.

This time, Priyanshi's fingers moved before she could stop them.

Priyanshi: It's raining here too.

Three words. But she hit send.

Her phone rang within seconds. She stared at his name on the screen, heart pounding.

Too fast. This is too fast.

She let it ring through to voicemail.

A minute later, a message appeared.

Chinmoy: Sorry. That was too eager. I just got excited that you responded. I won't call unless you want me to. Back to messages. I can do messages.

Despite herself, Priyanshi laughed.

Day 7: The First Real Conversation

By day seven, their messages had developed a rhythm. He sent his daily updates—sometimes long, sometimes just a sentence. She responded sporadically, small acknowledgements that she was reading, that she was still there.

Chinmoy: Good morning. Day 7. One week of showing up. Six more to go until you said you'd decide. (Yes, I'm counting. Yes, I know that's very me.)

Chinmoy: I did something today. I printed out that letter I wrote before our call—the one I never sent. I'm keeping it on my desk. Every time I feel scared or want to retreat into old patterns, I read it. Reminds me why I'm doing this.

Chinmoy: Question: Are you still reading that Murakami book? The one you were halfway through last year? I started it this week. Trying to understand the things you love. Trying to understand you better.

This time, Priyanshi didn't hesitate.

Priyanshi: I finished it months ago. It broke my heart. Be prepared.

Chinmoy: All the best books do. What are you reading now?

Priyanshi: Research papers, mostly. I have a submission deadline next week.

Chinmoy: That's not reading. That's work. What are you reading for yourself?

Priyanshi looked at her nightstand. The stack of novels sat untouched, gathering dust. She'd been too focused on work to read for pleasure in months.

Priyanshi: Nothing, I guess.

Chinmoy: That's sad. You used to read all the time. You used to send me screenshots of beautiful passages at 2 AM.

Priyanshi: Yeah, well. A lot changed.

Chinmoy: I know. And I know I'm part of why it changed. But maybe... maybe you could start again? Not for me. For yourself. You deserve to do things that make you happy.

Priyanshi stared at that message for a long time.

Priyanshi: Maybe.

Chinmoy: That's enough. Maybe is enough.

Day 12: The Stumble

Day twelve was the first time he almost broke his promise.

Priyanshi woke up and checked her phone. 9 AM. 10 AM. 11 AM.

No message.

Her stomach twisted. *He forgot. He finally forgot.*

The familiar anxiety crept back—the old pattern, the inevitable disappointment. She'd been stupid to hope, stupid to think this time would be different.

At 11:47 AM, her phone finally buzzed.

Chinmoy: I'm so sorry. I know I'm late. My phone died last night, and I forgot to charge it. I woke up in a panic because I realised I'd almost broken my promise. This is Day 12, and I'm here. I'm still here. I'm sorry I made you wait this morning.

Chinmoy: I know "my phone died" sounds like an excuse. It's not. It's what happened. But I also know that you spent a year hearing excuses from me, so I understand if you don't believe it. All I can do is promise it won't happen again. I'm setting three alarms now. Charging my phone across the room. Whatever it takes.

Chinmoy: Please don't give up on this. On me. On us.

Priyanshi's hands shook as she typed.

Priyanshi: You scared me.

Chinmoy: I know. I'm so sorry.

Priyanshi: I thought you'd finally given up. That this was it. The pattern repeats.

Chinmoy: I'm not giving up. I will never give up. You can trust that.

Priyanshi: Can I?

Chinmoy: Let me prove it. Not with words. With time.

She didn't respond. But she didn't block him either.

Day 15: The Breakthrough

Chinmoy: Good morning. Day 15. Halfway through my promised month.

Chinmoy: I have something to confess. I've been keeping a journal. About this. About us. About what I'm learning. My therapist suggested it. Want to know what I wrote yesterday?

Priyanshi: What?

Chinmoy: "I used to think love was about finding someone who completed you. Who filled in your gaps? But I'm learning love is about finding someone who makes you want to be complete on your own. Who makes you want to grow? Priyanshi made me realise I was broken in ways I didn't even see. And instead of resenting that, I'm grateful. Because now I'm fixing those broken pieces. Not for her. For me. So that when she decides—whatever she decides, I'll know I tried to become someone worthy."

Priyanshi: You're in therapy?

Chinmoy: Twice a week. Since December. Karthik literally dragged me after I spent three weeks being non-functional.

Priyanshi: What do you talk about?

Chinmoy: You, mostly. My fear of vulnerability. My tendency to self-sabotage. Why I kept pushing away the best thing that ever happened to me. Dr Sharma (my therapist) said something that stuck with me: "You can't selectively numb emotions. When you shut down fear, you shut down joy too."

Chinmoy: I spent so long shutting down fear that I forgot how to feel joy. But when I was with you—in those messages, those calls, that day on campus—I felt it again. And it terrified me because I knew losing it would destroy me.

Priyanshi: So you destroyed it first.

Chinmoy: Yes. Exactly yes. I destroyed it first so it couldn't destroy me. Except it destroyed me anyway.

A long pause. Then:

Priyanshi: I'm proud of you. For doing the work. For going to therapy. That takes courage.

Chinmoy: I should have done it a year ago. Before I hurt you.

Priyanshi: Maybe. But you're doing it now. That counts for something.

Chinmoy: Does it count for enough?

Priyanshi: I don't know yet. Ask me in two weeks.

Day 21: The Question

Priyanshi's POV

Three weeks. Twenty-one days of messages. Some long, some short, some mundane (he'd discovered a new café near campus), some profound (he'd written about his fear of abandonment stemming from his parents' emotional unavailability).

And slowly, almost imperceptibly, something in Priyanshi's chest had begun to unknot.

She found herself waiting for his messages now. Not with the anxious desperation of before, but with a quiet anticipation. She'd started responding more—not matching his length, but engaging. Asking questions. Sharing small pieces of her own day.

She'd even picked up a novel. Started painting again, just small sketches, nothing serious. But it was something.

Aditi had noticed.

"You're smiling at your phone again," she observed one evening, settling onto Priyanshi's bed.

"I'm not."

"You absolutely are. Is he still messaging every day?"

"Yeah."

"And?"

Priyanshi set her phone down. "And... I think he means it this time. I think he's actually changed."

"So what are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I told him I needed a month. I still have a week left."

"Do you need the full week? Or do you already know what you're going to say?"

Priyanshi looked at her friend. "I'm scared, Rupa. What if I say yes and he reverts? What if this is just temporary? What if I let myself hope and he crushes me again?"

"What if he doesn't? What if he actually shows up every day for the rest of your life?"

"That seems too good to be true."

"Maybe. But isn't it worth finding out?"

That night, Priyanshi did something she hadn't done in weeks. She scrolled through their entire message history—all twenty-one days.

She could see the evolution. The first messages were cautious, almost formal. Then gradually, they'd become more natural. More like the conversations they used to have, but healthier. More honest.

He'd shared things he'd never shared before—his therapy sessions, his fears, his understanding of where he'd gone wrong. He hadn't made excuses. He'd owned his mistakes.

And he'd shown up. Every single day. Even that one morning when his phone died, he'd messaged the moment it charged, apologizing, explaining, promising.

Is this enough? Is twenty-one days of consistency enough to erase two years of chaos?

She didn't know. But maybe that was okay. Maybe she didn't need certainty. Maybe she just needed enough trust to take the next step.

She picked up her phone.

Priyanshi: Are you awake?

The response was immediate.

Chinmoy: Always. For you, always.

Priyanshi: Can you call?

Her phone rang before she could second-guess herself.

The Second Call

"Hi," his voice came through, warm and slightly nervous.

"Hi," she said, and suddenly her carefully prepared speech evaporated.

"Are you okay? Did something happen?"

"No, I just... I wanted to hear your voice. Is that okay?"

"It's more than okay." She could hear his smile. "I've been hoping you'd want to talk. Really talk, not just text."

They fell into an easy silence, just breathing together across the distance.

"Chinmoy?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For these three weeks. For showing up. For doing the work. For being honest."

"You don't have to thank me. It's the least I could do."

"No, I do have to thank you. Because you didn't have to do any of this. You could have given up after that first week when I barely responded. You could have decided I was being too difficult. But you didn't."

"I told you I wouldn't give up on us. I meant it."

"I know. I believe you now."

His breath caught. "You do?"

"Yeah. I do."

"Priyanshi, does that mean—"

"It means I want to try," she said, her voice steady despite her racing heart. "I want to try this. For real. Not the confused, undefined thing we had before. Something real."

"Yes." The word came out choked with emotion. "God, yes. Whatever you want. However, you want to do this. I'm in."

"I have conditions."

"Anything."

"Weekly video calls. Minimum. Not just texts. I need to see your face, hear your voice. I need that connection."

"Done. What else?"

"Honesty. Complete honesty. If you're scared, you tell me. If something's wrong, you tell me. No more disappearing, no more mixed signals. We communicate even when it's hard."

"I promise."

"And therapy. You keep going. This isn't negotiable."

"I will. I want to. It's helping."

"And Chinmoy?"

"Yeah?"

"If you hurt me again—if you revert to old patterns, if you start pulling away—I won't wait. I won't make excuses. I'll leave. For good. Understood?"

"Understood. I won't hurt you again. I can't. I won't survive it."

They sat with that for a moment, the weight of the promise hanging between them.

"So," Chinmoy said, voice soft. "What are we?"

Priyanshi smiled, tears streaming down her face. "We're a work in progress. But we're trying. Together."

"Together," he repeated. "I like the sound of that."

"Me too."

Day 30: The Visit

One Week Later

Priyanshi stood outside the IIT Guwahati campus gate, her heart hammering against her ribs. It had been months since she'd been here. Since the day she'd fallen and he'd cared for her with such fierce protectiveness.

She'd taken a train overnight, telling him only that she had "something important" to do. He'd respected that, hadn't pushed, hadn't demanded to know.

He was learning.

She called him.

"Hi," he answered on the first ring. "How's your important thing going?"

"Good. Very good. What are you doing right now?"

"Just left class. Heading back to my room. Why?"

"Turn around."

She heard his footsteps stop. "What?"

"I said turn around."

A pause. Then she heard him moving, his breath quickening. And suddenly, there he was—fifty feet away, phone pressed to his ear, staring at her in absolute disbelief.

They stood there for a moment, just looking at each other. Then he started running.

He closed the distance in seconds, stopping just short of touching her, as if he was afraid she might disappear.

"You're here," he breathed. "You're actually here."

"I'm here."

"Why?"

"Because a month ago, you asked me what I needed to trust you again. I needed consistency. You gave me that. I needed honesty. You gave me that. I needed to know you wouldn't disappear. You proved that."

She took a step closer.

"But I also needed to see if this could work in person. Not just through screens and messages. I needed to know if what we're building can exist in the real world."

"And?" His voice was barely a whisper.

"And I think it can. But I need you to understand something, Chinmoy. This is me being brave. This is me choosing to trust you again despite everything. Don't make me regret it."

"I won't. I swear to you, I won't."

"Prove it."

"How?"

She smiled, reaching up to touch his face—the first physical contact they'd had in over a year.

"Start by taking me to that café you keep talking about. The one with the good coffee."

His face broke into the most genuine, unguarded smile she'd ever seen from him.

"I can do that. I can definitely do that."

As they walked together across campus, his hand tentatively finding hers, Priyanshi felt something she hadn't felt in two years: peace.

Not the absence of fear—she was still scared. Scared of being hurt again, scared of hoping too much, scared of what tomorrow might bring.

But she was also hopeful. Hopeful that this time, the person walking beside her was ready. That he'd done the work, faced his fears, and chosen to be brave enough for both of them when she couldn't be.

"Priyanshi?" Chinmoy said as they reached the café.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you. For giving me this chance. For being here. For being you."

"Thank you for becoming someone worth taking a chance on."

He held the door open for her, and as she stepped into the warm, coffee-scented space, she thought about the journey that had brought them here. The Instagram follow request that started it all. The months of confusion and mixed signals. The year of silence and growth. The thirty days of rebuilding trust.

It had been messy. Painful. Full of mistakes and missteps and moments when giving up seemed easier than holding on.

But they hadn't given up.

And now, sitting across from each other with steaming cups of coffee, they were finally ready to begin, actually present in the same physical space.

Three Months Later

Priyanshi's POV - The Ending That Feels Like A Beginning

Priyanshi sat in her dorm room, her laptop open to a blank document. The cursor blinked at her, patient and waiting.

She'd been thinking about this for weeks. About everything that had happened. About the story that had unfolded between her and Chinmoy—the confusion, the hurt, the growth, the healing.

Aditi had asked her once, months ago, during the darkest part of their separation: "What are you going to do with all this pain?"

At the time, Priyanshi hadn't had an answer. Now she did.

She was going to write it down. All of it. The good, the bad, the beautiful, the ugly. She was going to turn their story into something that might help someone else who was living in their own space

between words—caught in the limbo of "what are we?" and "will this ever become something real?"

Her phone buzzed. A video call from Chinmoy. Their Tuesday evening ritual.

She answered, his face filling her screen—familiar now in a way it hadn't been before. Open. Honest. Present.

"Hey, you," he said, smiling. "How was your day?"

"Good. Productive. I started writing something."

"The novel? The one you threatened to write with me as the final chapter?"

She laughed. "Maybe. Would you mind? If I wrote about us?"

He was quiet for a moment, considering. "As long as you tell the truth. The whole truth. My mistakes included. People should know that love isn't perfect, that it takes work. That sometimes you have to break before you can rebuild stronger."

"You're okay being the complicated male lead who drives the protagonist crazy?"

"Only if you're okay being the protagonist who was brave enough to wait for me to get my shit together."

"I didn't wait. I grew. There's a difference."

"Fair point. You grew. I grew. And somehow, we grew toward each other instead of apart."

She smiled, warmth spreading through her chest. "Yeah. Somehow we did."

They talked for two hours—about everything and nothing. His placement interviews are coming up. Her latest research findings. The book he'd finally finished (Murakami had indeed broken his heart). The painting she'd completed (her first real piece in over a year).

When they finally said goodbye, Priyanshi returned to her blank document.

She typed the first line:

"The Space Between Words: A Story About Modern Love, Mixed Signals, and the Courage It Takes to Say What You Mean Before It's Too Late."

Then she began to write.

Six Months Later - The Real Ending

Chinmoy's POV

Chinmoy stood outside Priyanshi's university gate, bouquet in hand, feeling more nervous than he'd felt during his GATE exam.

Six months. Six months of video calls and visits. Six months of consistent communication and honest conversations. Six months of proving, day by day, that he was serious. That he was different.

Six months of falling more in love with her.

His phone buzzed.

Priyanshi: Are you just going to stand outside, or are you going to come in?

He looked up to see her leaning out of her dorm window, waving at him with that smile that still made his heart skip.

He'd visited her before—three times in the past six months. But this time was different.

This time, he had a question to ask.

They met in their spot—the campus garden where they'd had their first real date, three months ago. Where they'd talked for six hours straight and he'd finally, properly kissed her for the first time.

"You're nervous," Priyanshi observed, settling onto their bench. "Why?"

"Because I have something to say, and I want to get it right."

"Chinmoy, we're past the point where you need to rehearse conversations with me."

"I know, but this one matters."

He took her hands, looking directly into her eyes—those eyes that had seen him at his worst and chosen to give him a chance anyway.

"Six months ago, you asked me what we were building. I said, 'a work in progress.' And we have been. We still are. But Priyanshi, I don't want to be a work in progress anymore. I want to be yours. Officially. Completely."

Her breath caught.

"I'm not asking you to forget the past. I'm not pretending those two years of confusion didn't happen. But I'm asking you to believe in the present. In the person I've become. In the us we've built together."

He pulled out a small box from his pocket. Not a ring box—they were too young for that, too early in their healing for forever promises. But inside was a delicate silver bracelet with a small charm: a heart with a keyhole.

"It's symbolic," he said, suddenly self-conscious. "You hold the key. You've always held the key. I was just too scared to let you use it. But I'm not scared anymore. Or maybe I am, but I'm choosing you anyway."

Priyanshi's eyes filled with tears as she looked at the bracelet.

"Will you be my girlfriend?" he asked, the words that should have been spoken two years ago finally finding their voice. "Not 'more than friends' or 'it's complicated' or 'give me time.' Just... mine. And I'll be yours. Completely. Honestly. For real."

She was crying now, but she was also laughing. "You're such an engineer. You brought props and a presentation."

"Is that a yes?"

"That depends. Are you going to write me a thesis on the structural integrity of our relationship?"

"I could. With graphs and everything. I have a whole PowerPoint prepared—"

She kissed him, cutting off his nervous rambling. When they pulled apart, she was smiling through tears.

"Yes, you ridiculous, overthinking, wonderful man. Yes, I'll be your girlfriend. Yes, we're official. Yes, this is real."

He slid the bracelet onto her wrist, his hands shaking slightly.

"I have something for you, too," she said softly. She pulled out her phone and showed him a document. "I finished it. The novel. Our story."

"Really?"

"Really. Want to know how it ends?"

"How?"

"With two imperfect people choosing each other. Not because it's easy, but because it's worth it. With a girl who learned to love herself first. And a boy who learned that vulnerability isn't weakness—it's the bravest thing you can do."

Chinmoy pulled her close, pressing his forehead against hers.

"I love you," he whispered. "I know I've said it before, but I need you to hear it again. I love you. I'm in love with you. And I'm going to spend every day proving it's not just words."

"I love you too," she whispered back. "And I'm terrified. And excited. And so, so ready for this."

They sat there in their garden, in their spot, holding each other as the sun set over the campus. Two people who'd spent two years in confusion, one year in silence, six months in rebuilding, and were now finally, finally ready for their beginning.

Epilogue: One Year Later

Priyanshi's POV

The book launch was smaller than she'd imagined—just a local bookstore in her hometown, some friends and family, and Chinmoy sitting in the front row with the proudest smile she'd ever seen.

"The Space Between Words" had found a publisher—a small press that specialised in contemporary romance. It wouldn't be a bestseller. It wouldn't make her famous.

But it was hers. Their story, transformed into something that might help someone else navigate the confusing waters of modern love.

As she read an excerpt to the small crowd, her eyes kept drifting to Chinmoy. He was crying—actually crying—during the scene where the male protagonist finally admits he's been in love with her all along.

After the reading, during the Q&A, someone asked: "Is it based on a true story?"

Priyanshi looked at Chinmoy, who nodded encouragingly.

"Yes," she said. "It's based on my story. Our story. It's about two people who took the longest possible route to get to each other. Who hurt each other and healed and chose to try anyway."

"Is there a happy ending?" another person asked.

Chinmoy stood up from the audience. "Can I answer that?"

Priyanshi laughed, nodding.

He walked to the front, taking her hand.

"There's a real ending," he said to the crowd. "Which is better than a happy one. Because real relationships aren't about perfect happiness. They're about choosing each other on the hard days and the good days. They're about communication and growth and being brave enough to be vulnerable."

He turned to Priyanshi.

"The book ends with them finally being honest with each other. Real life? We're still learning how to do that every day. But we're doing it together. And that's the best ending I could ask for."

Later that night, back in her room, Priyanshi opened Instagram—the app where it had all started.

She posted a photo: her book next to the bracelet he'd given her six months ago, now worn and loved.

Caption: *"Some stories start with 'once upon a time.' Ours started with a follow request. Some stories end with 'happily ever after.' Ours ends with 'we're still writing it.' To everyone living in the space between words—waiting for clarity, hoping for courage—this one's for you. Your story isn't over. It's just beginning.* 💙"

Within minutes, the comments flooded in. From friends. From readers. From people she'd never met who said, "I needed this."

But the comment that mattered most came from @chinmoy_Madhukulyo:

"From that first follow request to this moment—watching you shine, watching you inspire, watching you be exactly who you were always meant to be—has been the greatest privilege of my life. I love you. Today, tomorrow, and every day after. No more confusion. No more silence. Just us. Always us."

Priyanshi smiled, typing back:

"Always us. 💔"

She set her phone down and looked around her room—at her paintings back on the walls, at her bookshelf full of novels she was finally reading again, at the life she'd rebuilt.

She'd waited. She'd grown. She'd learned to love herself first.

And then, when she was finally whole on her own, she'd let someone in. Not to complete her, but to complement her. Not to fix her, but to grow alongside her.

It had taken two years of confusion, one year of silence, and six months of rebuilding.

But they'd made it.

And as she climbed into bed, her phone lighting up with messages from Chinmoy—their nightly routine of saying goodnight, of checking in, of maintaining the connection they'd fought so hard to build—she realised something.

The space between words had finally been filled.

Not with pretty promises or vague assurances.

But with honesty. With consistency. With love that showed up every single day.

And that was worth everything.

THE END

Author's Note:

Dear Reader,

If you've made it to this final page, thank you. Thank you for living in the confusion with Priyanshi, for being frustrated with Chinmoy, for hoping against hope that they'd find their way to each other.

This story is for everyone who's ever been stuck in the "what are we?" limbo. For everyone who's waited for someone to be ready. For everyone who's had to choose between holding on and letting go.

But most importantly, this story is for everyone who's learned that the bravest thing you can do is love yourself first. Build yourself first. Become whole on your own first.

Because the right person won't ask you to wait forever, they'll do the work. They'll show up. They'll prove through actions, not just words, that they're worthy of your time.

Priyanshi and Chinmoy's story is messy. It's imperfect. It's frustratingly realistic. Because real love isn't about grand gestures—it's about consistent, small acts of choosing each other.

If you're currently living in your own space between words, here's what I hope you take away:

1. Your patience is not weakness, but don't mistake waiting for growth. 2. You deserve someone sure about you. 3. Actions speak louder than promises. 4. It's okay to walk away from confusion. 5. And sometimes, just sometimes, people do change. They do the work. They become ready.

But you can't wait around hoping for that. You have to live your life. Build your dreams. Love yourself fiercely.

And if they come back ready? Then you get to decide if they've earned a second chance.

May you find the courage to say what you mean. May you attract people who are brave enough to do the same. And may you never settle for breadcrumbs when you deserve the whole feast.

With love and hope for your own beautiful, honest story,

Prerona Deb

Author's Bio:

Prerona Deb is a fresh and compelling voice in contemporary Indian fiction, hailing from the culturally rich landscapes of Assam. Her deep-seated love for storytelling is beautifully paralleled by her academic rigour, having recently completed her Master's degree in Economics. Prerona's life is a vibrant tapestry woven from the analytical and the artistic. When she is not focused on her research in economics—a field that has seen her present papers at numerous national and international seminars and publish three articles in reputed books, yet her soul finds its truest language in the rhythm of dance and the poetry of painting. This beautiful duality—a mind that analyses data and a heart that speaks in colour and movement—breathes life into every page she writes. A lifelong fiction lover, Prerona has honed her craft through literary competitions. These experiences have sharpened her voice, teaching her the delicate balance between emotional resonance and narrative structure. The Space Between Words is a poignant and insightful debut that captures the search for love and identity, leaving a lasting impression long after the final page.