

Chapter 12: Crossroads Of Care

Jharna was unconscious, tied to a chair inside a dark, unfamiliar room. Several masked men stood around her. One of them approached, removed his mask slightly, and sneered.

“Your only mistake,” he said, “was becoming Ivaan Maurya’s wife. The fact that he loves you is enough reason for me to hate you.”

He splashed water on her face.

Jharna jerked awake, dazed, and looked around.

“Who are you? Where am I?”

“You’re in death’s waiting room,” he said coldly. “Once your beloved husband arrives, I’ll personally send you to heaven.”

But Jharna only smiled.

“My husband doesn’t need to come. I can handle you all by myself.”

With that, she kicked the man where it hurt the most. He doubled over, groaning in pain.

Furious, he roared,

“You were going to die an easy death. But now? Now, you’ll beg for it.”

He turned to his men.

“Beat her... until there’s no breath left in her body.”

Everyone had surrounded Jharna like a pack of wolves. Their leader raised his voice, “Go one by one. If you all rush at her together, this girl will die on the spot.”

At his command, a man stepped forward, lifting his hand to strike Jharna. She squeezed her eyes shut in fear. A gunshot rang out, followed by a man's agonized scream.

She opened her eyes to see Ivaan, standing like a storm at the doorway, gun in hand. The man who had dared to strike her now lay writhing on the ground. Jharna stared, stunned.

Ivaan stepped further in. “So many of you against one girl? At least untie her hands—then let’s call it a fair fight.” Without waiting for a response, he strode forward, untied Jharna, helped her to her feet, and casually sat

on a chair like a man watching a show he owned.

Everyone stood frozen. Their leader barked, “What are you staring at? Kill them both!”

At his command, the crowd surged forward. Ivaan turned to Jharna with a smirk. “Weren’t you mad at me? Here's your chance. Let it all out.”

Jharna gave a fierce look, tucked the pallu of her saree at her waist, and charged like a lioness. Blow after blow, she took them down, one by one. Ivaan, legs crossed, watched like a proud king on his throne, grinning as each man fell—ironically—at his feet.

The leader, fuming, lunged from behind and yanked Jharna’s pallu. She halted mid-fight. But before she could react, Ivaan punched him square in the face. The man crumpled at Jharna’s feet.

Ivaan’s eyes burned with rage. “That,” he growled, “was the one thing you shouldn't have done.”

He unleashed his fury. Jharna stood motionless, awestruck. She had seen Ivaan angry before, but never like this—this wasn’t just rage, it was fury laced with something darker. He beat the man mercilessly until he was barely conscious.

Amaan arrived just then. Without a word, Ivaan handed the man over. “Take him.”

Once Amaan left, Ivaan turned to Jharna, who was visibly unsettled. As he approached, she instinctively stepped back, bumping into a table with a soft cry of pain.

She sat down and began inspecting her foot. Ivaan crouched beside her, reaching out, but she snapped, “Don’t touch me. This is all because of you! That stupid 'I love you' you blurted in the interview—this kidnapping happened because of that!”

Ivaan rolled his eyes. “Really? I just saved your life. A little gratitude wouldn’t hurt.”

“I didn’t ask you to come,” she huffed. “And even if you hadn’t, I

could've handled it myself.”

He raised an eyebrow. “Oh really? Then you won't need my help to get home either, right?”

“Absolutely not.”

She tried to stand, but the moment she stepped forward, she stumbled straight into Ivaan's arms.

He caught her effortlessly. “Still don't need help?”

Pushing away, she retorted, “I'm used to getting hurt. I've handled worse alone. I'll manage now too.”

Her stubbornness made him shake his head. As she limped slowly forward, he called out, “At this rate, we'll reach home next week. Your Ansh is probably waiting.”

The mention of Miransh snapped her into focus. “Ansh... I haven't seen him since morning.” She picked up her pace, despite the pain etched on her face.

Ivaan watched her in silence, then suddenly swept her into his arms.

“What are you doing? Put me down!” she protested.

Walking forward, Ivaan said calmly, “Maybe you don't need help, but I want to help. And if you say one more word, I might just toss you off this mountain.”

She clutched his shirt, terrified he might actually do it. Miransh... what would happen to him? Ivaan smirked and carried her to the car.

Maurya Mansion

The living room was filled with tension. Deepa tended to Shikha, Abhimaan sat with his head in his hands, while Adhik and Vihaan anxiously checked their phones.

Suddenly, Miransh ran toward the stairs. Spotting the door, he squealed, “Momma! Superhero!”

Everyone turned. Ivaan stood at the entrance, Jharna cradled in his arms. Miransh dashed down the stairs.

“Careful,” both Ivaan and Jharna said simultaneously. They glanced at each other.

Questions flew from every corner—

“What happened?”

“Bhabhi, are you alright?”

“Why is Bhai carrying you?”

“Will someone explain?!”

Ivaan, “Enough guys. Everything’s fine.”

Jharna added, “Yeah, just a small injury on my foot. That’s why he...” she glanced at Ivaan and whispered, “Put me down.”

Ivaan ignored her. Miransh rushed over. “Momma, what happened to your foot?”

She stroked his hair. “Just a little pain, betu.”

Ivaan chimed in, “Don’t worry, champ. I’ll fix this too.” With that, he carried her upstairs.

Adhik leaned over and said, “Looks like Bhai’s going to give her some special treatment.” Everyone turned to glare at him. This guy really says anything.

In the room, Ivaan placed Jharna on the bed while she continued grumbling.

“You’re so shameless! Carrying me like that in front of everyone... what must they be thinking!”

Ignoring her, Ivaan fetched the first-aid kit and knelt beside her. As he lifted the edge of her saree, she jerked her leg away. “What are you doing! Touch me again and I’ll... I’ll...” She faltered.

Ivaan sighed. “You seriously have a dirty mind.” Without warning, he grabbed her foot and sprayed it.

“What are you d—”

“Quiet. Not a word. You’ve already talked more than enough.”

“But—”

“Quiet.”

“My—”

“I said quiet.”

He gently massaged her foot. “Better now?”

She frowned. “No. Because that’s the wrong foot. The injury is on the other one.”

He blinked. “What?! You’re telling me now? Is your brain even functional?”

“Oh hello! I was trying to tell you but you didn’t want to hear anything!”

He stared at her, speechless.

Ivaan reached for the correct foot, but she stopped him. “I’ll do it myself. You go rest.”

He snatched the spray back. “You don’t need to act like a heroine. Let me.”

As he massaged her foot, Jharna stared at him. “Who are you, Ivaan? The man I met first? The one who forced me into marriage? The one who loves Miransh like a father—or the one who beat a man to a pulp? Who are you really?”

Ivaan met her gaze. Maybe no one had ever tried to understand him like this. Finishing the massage, he said quietly, “You’ll never know who I am. And trust me, it’s better that way.”

With that, he stood and walked into the bathroom. Jharna stared at the door.

“To be honest, Ivaan,” she whispered, “I want to know.”

Her eyes drifted to her foot, where his warmth still lingered.

In the stillness of the night, the soft hum of the refrigerator filled the kitchen. Little Miransh stood on his toes, struggling to reach the kitchen slab. Just then, Abhimaan entered, his sharp eyes softening at the sight. Without a word, he walked over and gently lifted Miransh, settling him

him safely on the counter.

Miransh blinked up at him, his innocent eyes wide.

“What are you doing here so late?” Abhimaan asked, brows raised.

“When I get hurt, Momma gives me turmeric milk,” Miransh replied.

“Now she’s hurt, so she needs turmeric milk too. But I can’t even reach the slab... how will I make it for her?”

Abhimaan’s stern face cracked into a rare smile. “With my help.”

Miransh was stunned. It was the first time he had ever seen Abhimaan smile.

“Tell me how your Momma makes it. I’ll follow your instructions perfectly.”

Beaming, Miransh nodded eagerly. Together, they began preparing the turmeric milk for Jharna, the kitchen now filled with a rare warmth.

Meanwhile, in the room, Jharna lay on the bed, lost in her own thoughts, when the door creaked open. Abhimaan and Miransh entered, breaking her reverie. She tried to sit up, but Miransh stopped her gently.

“No, Momma. You rest. Dadu and I made turmeric milk for you.”

“Dadu?” Jharna repeated in surprise.

“Yes! Dadu,” Miransh confirmed proudly, looking up at Abhimaan.

At that moment, Ivaan stepped out of the bathroom. His eyes met Abhimaan’s. A flicker of unspoken tension passed before Abhimaan looked away, walking over to Jharna and handing her the glass.

“Here. Drink this. It’ll help with the pain.”

“Yes, Momma!” Miransh chimed in. “Just like you make for me when I get hurt. Dadu helped me this time.”

Ivaan raised a brow, skeptical. Mr. Abhimaan Maurya? He hasn’t ever boiled water himself!

Jharna took the glass, but the moment she sipped it, her expression changed. Ivaan smirked knowingly.

“How is it, Momma?” Miransh asked eagerly.

Abhimaan, a little nervous, added, “Yeah... it’s my first time making something.”

Jharna hesitated, then forced a smile. “It doesn’t taste like a first attempt at all... It’s really good.”

Abhimaan’s face lit up.

“Momma, I gave the recipe,” Miransh grinned. “Dadu just helped with the quantities.”

Ivaan couldn’t help but chuckle softly.

Jharna smiled. “You both made it with so much love—it tastes even better because of that.”

“Well then,” Ivaan said with a smirk, “finish it up. It’s good for your health.” He stepped forward—only to trip on the edge of the carpet, stumbling straight into Jharna. The glass slipped from her hands and shattered.

Jharna gasped. Ivaan quickly got off her. “Sorry... it was the carpet.”

Abhimaan frowned. “She’s already hurt. You made it worse—”

“I said it was an accident,” Ivaan snapped.

Before the tension could rise, Miransh said innocently, “But the milk spilled... what do we do now?” He looked up at Abhimaan.

“We’ll make it again,” Abhimaan said confidently.

Jharna sat up quickly. “No—! I mean... my foot feels better. I don’t need it anymore. I was only drinking it because you two made it with love. Really, I’m fine.”

“Sure?” Abhimaan asked.

“Absolutely. You both go get some sleep now. Ansh, come lie down.”

But Miransh shook his head. “No, Momma. I’ll sleep with both Chachus tonight. They made a tent in their room for me!”

Jharna froze. Since the wedding, Miransh had slept between her and Ivaan—offering her comfort and distance at the same time. Now, if he left...

“You’ll sleep with me,” she said quickly. “I can’t sleep without you.”

“But Momma, I promised Chachus. Ohhh, I get it!” Miransh giggled. “Superhero—you need to hug momma to sleep! She can’t sleep without hugging someone!”

Jharna was speechless. Even Ivaan looked baffled. Abhimaan bit back a smile.

Miransh hugged Jharna, whispered, “Goodnight, Momma,” and ran off to the tent.

Abhimaan stroked Jharna’s hair gently. “Good night. Take care.” He left too.

Jharna was mortified, just then Ivaan's phone rang, and he went to the balcony to answer it. As soon as he left, she buried her face in her hands.

Two girls sat in a dimly lit room, drinks in hand. One of them was Chhaya, her voice slurred.

“Ivaan’s not under my control anymore... He’s in love with that roadside girl. Everything’s ruined.”

The other girl scoffed. “You couldn’t even control yourself. And now you’ve ruined my plans too. I should’ve never trusted you.”

“Shut up,” Chhaya growled. “I’m a woman too. I have feelings. Ivaan was always busy with his work, what could I do? I had to do something. It’s not my fault he showed up at that hotel. It’s not like I loved him.”

The other girl’s eyes blazed. She slammed her glass on the floor. “Exactly what I expected. You’re useless. I don’t need you. I can handle the Mauryas on my own.”

She stormed out. Chhaya slumped on the sofa. “You’re ruining your life...” she muttered before passing out.

Maurya Villa, Later That Night

Ivaan returned to the room to find Jharna sleeping curled on the sofa. He rolled his eyes and walked over.

“What are you doing?” Jharna jolted as he scooped her up.

“Stop this drama and sleep on the bed,” he said, laying her down.

“I don’t want to sleep on your bed.”

“Well, the sofa’s mine too. So where do you plan to sleep, exactly?”

Jharna huffed and turned her back to him. “Just... stay away from me.”

“Trust me, I’m not dying to come close either.” Ivaan lay down.

But the silence was thick. Minutes passed. Jharna tossed and turned, clearly uncomfortable. Miransh was right—she had gotten used to hugging someone to sleep.

Ivaan watched quietly, then sighed. He reached out, wrapping his arm around her waist and pulling her close.

Jharna stiffened, her heart pounding. She tried to pull away, but Ivaan only held her closer. His breath warmed her neck, his touch oddly calming.

Eventually, her body relaxed. Her eyes closed, and sleep claimed her.

Ivaan smiled.

Just then, the door creaked open again—Miransh peeked in.

Startled, Ivaan stood. “What happened, champ?”

Miransh didn’t answer. He walked past him straight to Jharna, curled up beside her, and hugged her tightly. Even in her sleep, Jharna held him close.

Ivaan shook his head with a soft chuckle. “Like mother, like son.” He climbed into bed.

Next Morning

Jharna stood on the first-floor landing, gripping the railing tightly, her injured leg making even the thought of descending the stairs a challenge. Frustration and helplessness danced in her eyes—she had to go downstairs, but every step felt impossible.

Just then, Ivaan appeared. His brows knitted in confusion as he glanced between Jharna and the stairs.

“If you're planning suicide,” he said dryly, “this floor won’t do much damage. At least go up to the fourth.”

Jharna shot him a sharp glare. Before she could respond, Ivaan suddenly bent down. Alarmed, Jharna stepped back quickly and snapped, “Don’t even think about it.”

Startled by her tone, Ivaan stood up straight, still confused.

“I will manage on my own,” she said firmly, placing her hand on the railing. “I’ll go down step by step. But you—you’re not carrying me again.”

Only then did realization dawn on Ivaan’s face. He let out a small chuckle and held up the object in his hand.

“I was picking up my wristband,” he said, amused. “Not you.”

Jharna's face flushed with embarrassment, her confidence faltering for just a moment.

Ivaan stepped closer and extended his hand toward her.

“Hold it,” he said gently. “I promise—I won’t let you fall.”

Jharna stared at his hand, uncertainty flickering in her eyes. But after a heartbeat, she reached out and took it. His grip was firm, reassuring.

Side by side, they began their descent—slow, cautious, but steady. Every few steps, their eyes met briefly, words unnecessary in the warmth that passed between them.

Sitara's Note

Sometimes, it's not the grand gestures but the quiet moments—the hesitant hand held on a staircase, the unspoken understanding between two hearts—that leave the deepest impact. In this chapter, I wanted to capture that fragile space where pride and vulnerability meet, where two people slowly begin to lean on each other, even if they pretend otherwise. Jharna's struggle isn't just physical—it's emotional too. Her fierce independence is her shield, but Ivaan, in his own sarcastic and oddly sincere way, is gently chipping away at it. And isn't that how real connections begin? Not with fireworks, but with small, stubborn steps and silent promises.

As their bond begins to form, so does the tension of the unknown. Who is the girl with Chhaya? What storms await them? From here, the story deepens—and I hope you'll walk every step of it with me.

With ink-stained fingers and a heart full of stories,
— Sitara Chandria