

Chapter 20: Heartbeats

She could hear her own breathing now.

"I..."

And then—

Lights on.

Their daze shattered instantly.

Both blinked, momentarily blinded by the brightness—and then froze like statues as they realized their positions.

Click.

The door creaked open.

Shikha stood in the doorway with her arms folded, a knowing smirk tugging at her lips.

Deepa peeked from behind, eyes widening in delight.

“Well,” Deepa grinned, “seems like our plan worked really well.”

Jharna took a step back quickly, her face flushed—not just from the cold anymore.

Shikha chuckled, “No need to explain, beta. Everything’s written all over your faces.”

Jharna awkwardly avoiding eye contact, and walked past them, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear.

Ivaan remained still for a second, then bent down, picked up his blazer, and walked out—his heart still hammering in his chest.

Behind them, Deepa and Shikha shared a victorious smile.

Operation Patch-Up?

Successful... and sizzling.

Vertigo Office

Aashiya’s fingers moved swiftly across the keyboard, but her brows were furrowed, lips slightly pursed—tension radiated from her. She kept sneaking glances at the towering figure beside her. Amaan stood like a statue, arms crossed, eyes fixed on the screen like a strict invigilator.

Finally, she broke the silence.

"Sir... can I take a 15-minute break?" she asked, barely hiding the exhaustion in her voice.

Amaan narrowed his eyes, leaning slightly forward. "Break? You've already taken two coffee breaks today, Miss Aashiya."

She turned her face to him and muttered under her breath, "One was for survival, the other was to tolerate you."

Amaan raised a brow. "What did you say?"

She quickly smiled, "Nothing, sir."

He tilted his head, stepping just a little closer. "You sure?" His voice was calm but laced with teasing.

She looked up—and for a second, their eyes locked.

A strange silence fell. Not the awkward kind. The kind where the air thins just a bit, and everything else fades.

Amaan's voice softened, "You look tired."

"I am," she admitted honestly.

He walked to the desk drawer, pulled out a chocolate bar, and placed it in front of her without a word.

Aashiya blinked in surprise. "Chocolate?"

"I read somewhere it reduces stress," he said, feigning nonchalance. Then added under his breath, "And maybe your sarcasm too."

She smirked, took the chocolate.

He turned to walk away, hiding his own smile. "Back to work in 15 minutes. That's your deadline."

But the way he walked away—his shoulders just a little looser, his pace just a bit slower—told a different story.

And Aashiya? She looked at the chocolate, smiled, and shook her head.

Ivaan's Office – Later

Ivaan was rolling on his chair, smiling like a complete idiot—lost in her thoughts.

She didn't say yes... but she didn't slap me either. That means she has

feelings too, right?

But ugh... Miss Unpredictable can do anything, anytime. What if she refuses?

But, who in their right mind would reject such a handsome, dashing, smart man like me?

And she's definitely smart... which means her answer must be yes!

But... what if it's a no?

Ugh! Why couldn't Mom and Bua come five minutes later? If they had, she might've said it...

He was whispering all this to himself, completely immersed in his own rom-com daydream. Just then, a sudden cough from Amaan brought him crashing back to reality.

Amaan stood at the door, eyeing him cautiously.

“Boss... everything okay?”

Ivaan cleared his throat, straightened up, and acted like nothing had happened. “Yeah! All good.”

Amaan walked in, handed over a file. “This proposal came from a small competitor. Personally, I don't think we should accept it.”

Ivaan, still in lala-land, reacted too quickly, “Why?! What do you mean? She will accept my proposal. How can you say she won't?”

Amaan blinked in confusion. “Uhh... I was talking about this project proposal.”

Realizing what he just said, Ivaan pressed his fingers to his temples.

Another awkward throat-clear.

“Right, right. You handle this one as you like.”

Amaan nodded slowly. “Should I... leave then?”

“Yeah, go,” Ivaan muttered, trying not to look as embarrassed as he felt.

Amaan turned toward the door, but something made him pause. He looked back at Ivaan and said with a knowing smirk,

“By the way, she is your wife, boss.”

Ivaan gave him a confused look as he left.

Once alone, Ivaan leaned back in his chair and murmured to himself,

“Yeah... she is my wife.”

And a smile tugged at his lips.

Bakery

Meanwhile, Jharna sat at a corner table, nervously digging into a slice of cake. Her mind played flashbacks of the moment—his words, the nearness, the confession. She took another bite. And another.

Tension was written all over her face.

Her phone rang. It was Aashiya.

“Hello?” she answered.

“Thank you!” Aashiya said, her voice cheerful.

“Thank you? For what?” Jharna asked, puzzled.

“Because of you,” Aashiya grinned over the phone, “I’m getting a treat here.”

“Here? You mean, in the office?”

“Yep,” Aashiya said, taking a sip of her drink. “Ivaan sir is so happy today, he’s treating the entire team! And let’s be real—behind every happy man is a certain woman. So, thank you, ma’am.”

Jharna grumbled, “Right... here I am dying of anxiety, and he’s out there throwing parties.”

“What do you mean?” Aashiya asked curiously.

“He proposed to me.”

“What!!” Aashiya squealed. “That’s amazing!”

“Amazing?!” Jharna exclaimed. “I’m freaking out and you’re celebrating?”

“Why are you freaking out, though? Just say yes! You’re already married, Jharna. What’s the big deal?”

“I can’t accept his proposal. If I do... he’ll try to get closer. And then...”

“...he’ll find out you’re not Miransh’s real mother,” Aashiya finished, her voice dropping.

“Exactly.”

Aashiya sighed. “Oh god. This is trouble.”

“That’s why I’m panicking. My brain’s stopped working,” Jharna said, massaging her forehead.

“Okay, okay,” Aashiya soothed her. “First, take a deep breath. Calm mind thinks better, remember? We’ll figure this out, okay? I’m thinking too. Just... breathe.”

“Hm...” Jharna nodded softly.

The call disconnected.

But the weight in Jharna’s heart didn’t. The cake on her plate was untouched now.

Evening – Bakery

The bakery was almost empty now, golden hour light melting over the counters. Jharna quietly packed her things, but her hands moved mechanically—placing napkins, checking stock, adjusting trays—yet her mind was miles away.

Her phone rang on the counter beside her.

She didn’t notice.

Malini stepped out from the back room, pausing at the sound. Her eyes shifted from the flashing screen to the faraway look on Jharna’s face.

Something wasn’t right.

She walked over gently and placed a warm hand on Jharna’s shoulder.

“Jharna?” she asked softly. “Your phone’s been ringing for a while... what’s the matter, beta?”

Jharna blinked back into the moment, flustered. “Ah... yes, Aunty. Sorry.”

She picked up the phone and quickly answered, “Hello?”

A beat passed.

And then—her heart dropped.

The colour drained from her face. Her lips parted slightly, but no words came out. The phone slipped from her hands and clattered to the floor.

A single tear rolled down her cheek.

Without a word, she turned and rushed out the door toward her car—leaving behind a half-packed bakery and a very worried Malini calling after her.

Sitara's Note

Some chapters start with giggles... and end with goosebumps.
This one held both.

We had teasing smiles, daydreaming boys, shared chocolates, and
a love that's finally peeking out from behind all the fear.

But just when Jharna started to feel again... life whispered a
reminder. One phone call, and the world shifted.

That's how life is, isn't it?

Moments of softness, tangled with sudden weight.

Love trying to bloom... while truth quietly knocks on the door.

Writing this chapter felt like holding my breath. Smiling one
second, aching the next.

If you felt that too... we're reading it with the same heart.

— Yours,

Sitara Chandria