

Chapter 22: Lost & Found

A car halted at a red light. The night breeze flowed gently, brushing past the silence inside.

Aashiya sat in the passenger seat, her eyes glued to the window—not to admire the city lights, but to avoid Amaan’s gaze.

Just then, another car pulled up beside them. Something about it made her glance. She peered into the back seat. A woman sat there—her face hidden behind long hair, posture still, mysterious.

Aashiya narrowed her eyes. Who is she?

Before her thoughts could find an answer, the traffic light turned green. The cars rolled forward. But then, the wind shifted, and the woman’s hair lifted.

The moment her face was revealed—Aashiya gasped. Her heart skipped a beat. Her hand instinctively shot out of the window, as if trying to stop time, or that car.

Amaan immediately pulled her back inside, shocked.

“What are you doing?!” he snapped. “Do you have a death wish or what?!”

Aashiya sat back, still shaken, her breath shallow. She turned her head back toward the window, scanning for the car—but it had vanished.

“Where did she go?” she whispered.

“Who?” Amaan asked, confused.

Aashiya turned to look at him. Her lips parted slightly—but no words came out.

Finally, she muttered, “Nothing...”

Amaan looked at her more seriously now. “You’re just too exhausted. Go home and rest.”

But Aashiya couldn’t let go of the image she saw.

Was it real? Or am I just imagining things? Maybe it was the darkness.

Maybe I misunderstood... Yes. That’s it. Otherwise, it’s impossible for her to be here.

Next Morning – Maurya Mansion

The morning sun streamed through the kitchen window. Jharna stood at the stove, boiling milk, but her mind was far from the present. Memories from last night flickered in her eyes like silent flames.

She didn't notice the milk rising.

“Jharna!” Deepa turned off the gas just in time.

Jharna snapped out of her thoughts to find Deepa standing there, concerned.

“You okay?” Deepa asked.

Jharna nodded quickly, trying to compose herself. “Yes, Bua ji. I was just... distracted.”

Deepa gave a small nod, turned to leave, but paused midway—something caught her attention.

As Jharna began pouring the milk into a glass for Miransh, Deepa said teasingly, “Well, I may be old-fashioned, but I didn't know fashion had changed this much.”

Jharna frowned. “What do you mean?”

Deepa smirked and pointed at her ears. “You're wearing mismatched earrings.”

Jharna touched her ears—and froze.

One earring was round and golden. The other was a silver stud.

She stood still for a moment, her heartbeat growing louder. Deepa left with a chuckle, unaware of the storm she had stirred.

Jharna quickly left the kitchen, holding the glass of milk, and walked up to the room. She found Miransh rummaging through drawers.

“What are you searching for?” she asked, puzzled.

He looked up at her, fidgeting.

“I made a drawing for you,” he said quietly. “It was supposed to be your birthday gift. But I lost it.”

Jharna stared at him.

“My... birthday?”

Miransh pouted. “Yes, Momma. Tomorrow’s your birthday. You forgot again!”

Her face fell.

“You always forget your birthday, Momma,” he mumbled, still searching.

“How can someone forget their own birthday?”

Jharna shut her eyes. Her breath grew heavy.

Flashback – Shimla

A girl was racing up a hill, her laughter echoing through the crisp mountain air. Her honey-brown eyes sparkled in the morning sun. Her long lashes framed her eyes like poetry in motion.

It was Jharna, filled with wild joy.

Behind her, Aashiya chased, panting hard.

“Jharna, stop! How much further are you going to climb?”

Jharna turned with a playful grin. “Tired already, Aashi? Come on, just a little more!”

“I’m done! I’m seriously done!” Aashiya gasped.

Jharna laughed and called, “It’s worth it, I promise!”

She climbed the last stretch of the hill and stood at the peak, arms wide open. Sunlight hit her face, making it glow like gold. Her smile was unfiltered, her joy untouched.

Suddenly, she yelled into the valley below:

“Mumma! Papa! Meera di... I love you!!”

Her voice echoed across the mountains.

Aashiya stared at her, bewildered. “You dragged me up here just to do that?! Who does this, Jharna?”

Jharna turned around with a wink. “Jharna Kashyap does! What’s wrong with telling the world I love my family?”

“You’re crazy,” Aashiya muttered, half-laughing. “Your weird hobbies...”

Jharna flipped her hair. “That’s just who I am. And it’s my birthday month—so I get to do what I want!”

“Now let’s go home,” she said, skipping down the hill.

Kashyap Residence

A woman watered her garden. The breeze was calm, the plants lush. Just then—

“Mumma!” a voice rang out.

Her eyes lit up. She turned, smiling. “Oh look, the storm has arrived!”

She put the watering can down and walked inside.

Jharna stood at the door, arms crossed, mock-annoyed. “What took you so long to open the door? It’s your daughter’s birthday, and you don’t even care!”

Her mother, Surbhi, pulled her into a hug. “How could I not care? It’s Jharna Kashyap’s birthday! That’s no ordinary day.”

Jharna smiled, satisfied. “Good!”

She looked at her watch. “Papa’s still not home?”

A familiar voice called out from the hallway. “Right here!”

Her father, in his police uniform, entered and removed his cap. Jharna rushed into his arms.

“Did you take leave?” she asked.

“Yes,” he laughed. “A full week. My senior asked why I’m taking leave three days early. I told him—no reason needed. It’s my daughter’s birthday. That’s enough.”

“Very good, DSP Dinesh Kashyap,” Jharna teased proudly.

She turned suddenly. “Where’s Mee—?”

A cheerful voice interrupted her, “I’m here!”

Meera, her elder sister, walked in with bags of gifts. Jharna’s eyes lit up.

“What’s in all these bags?”

Meera grinned. “Presents.”

“For me?” Jharna asked like a child.

Meera nodded. “Of course. For our birthday girl.”

Jharna tried to peek inside the bags, but Meera pulled them away.

“You’ll get them only on your birthday. No cheating!”

Jharna pouted. Everyone laughed.

Flashback Ends

Jharna opened her eyes—wet with tears. Not just for the birthday she had forgotten...

But for the family she had once belonged to. The warmth. The laughter.

The way her name used to echo in those mountains.

Now, it was all a memory.

A heartbeat... from a life she no longer lived.

She glanced at Miransh, who was still on his knees, looking under the bed and behind cushions—his small face scrunched in determination.

She wiped away the last trace of tears and walked over to him with a smile.

“I’ll find it,” she said softly, brushing his hair with her fingers. “You go finish your milk—you’re getting late for school.”

Miransh looked up, nodded quickly, and ran to the table. He lifted the glass and drank it all in one go.

Jharna watched him, her heart melting.

You are the best present of my life, Ansh.

Once he finished, he rushed back to her and declared, “Momma, tomorrow I won’t go to school!”

She blinked, surprised.

“I’ll stay with you and celebrate your birthday. Promise!” he said, pressing a loud kiss on her cheek, then running out with his schoolbag bouncing behind him.

Jharna stood there, frozen for a second—then broke into a gentle smile.

She turned back toward the room, now messy with books, crayons, and toys scattered everywhere. Letting out a sigh, she began to tidy up. As she

reached under the bed to straighten things, her hand touched something hard.

A small box.

Curious, she pulled it out and opened it—and gasped.

Inside were all her lost belongings—one by one, carefully kept: her missing earring, the anklet she thought she'd misplaced months ago, her favorite bracelet, a few of her old hair clips, and even the broken latkan from her saree. All tiny things she had lost.

She was still processing this discovery when she heard a voice behind her.

“I don't care how you do it,” Ivaan said on the phone from the hallway.

“But I want it done by this evening.”

His voice was firm.

Jharna looked up. Ivaan walked in and caught sight of the open box in her hands. He immediately ended the call and approached her.

She looked at him, confused. “All this...?”

He smiled, a little sheepishly. “Well... since I don't get to keep you close... I've been keeping your things close instead.”

Their eyes met. Jharna's chest tightened.

How can you do this, Ivaan? For a woman who doesn't even give you a place in her heart...

She quickly looked away and began to walk past him.

But he stopped her with a question. “What gift should I give you?”

She paused, turning her face slightly toward him.

“I mean,” he said. “Jewellery? Expensive clothes? Foreign trips? You don't seem interested in any of that. So what gift can I give... that might win even a corner of your heart?”

Jharna took a deep breath and spoke without looking at him. “You've already done too much. You don't need to do anything else.”

She hesitated, then added, “And... I don't even like birthdays. We only cut cake every year because Ansh insists. That's it. No celebration. No

gifts.”

She walked away before he could say more.

Ivaan stood there for a moment, watching her leave. Then he looked at the box in his hands and whispered to himself, a small smile tugging at his lips.

“I promise you... this birthday will be your best—better than any in the last five years.”

His eyes gleamed with silent determination.

Sitara's Note

Sometimes, we don't realize how quietly love weaves itself around us—through small gestures, a found earring, a child's innocent kiss, or a voice whispering, "What gift can I give you that could reach your heart?"

In this chapter, I didn't just write Jharna—I felt her.

I paused when she smiled at Miransh.

I blinked back tears with her when she opened that forgotten box.

And I smiled with a soft ache when Ivaan promised her the best birthday of her life—knowing she didn't even want one.

And Aashiya... her silence said more than words. That moment—when someone from the past blurs into the present—left even me with goosebumps while writing it.

This story is no longer just fiction to me.

It's a heartbeat.

A mirror of the unspoken things we all carry—the fears, the forgotten joys, the people we push away even when we need them most.

If you've ever felt lost on your own birthday...

If you've ever hidden your tears behind a smile...

Or if you've ever asked yourself, "Do I even deserve this love?"

Then know that this chapter was meant for you too.

Thank you for feeling with me.

For walking with Jharna, with Aashiya, and with me—Sitara.

Until the next whisper of fate...

With all my heart,

– Sitara Chandria