

Chapter 23: The Day She Came Home

The next morning

Jharna lay on the bed, surrounded by darkness. Her lashes fluttered open, confusion clouding her mind. The room... it felt strange. Unfamiliar.

She reached out instinctively to the side.

No Miransh.

She was alone.

A dull heaviness pulsed in her head. Sitting up slowly, she placed her feet on the floor—only to hear a sudden pop beneath her toes.

She gasped.

What was that?

Grabbing her phone in alarm, she switched on the flashlight. Her breath caught.

Balloons. Everywhere.

Scattered across the floor in soft pastels and bright colors, they gleamed back at her in the phone's light.

She stood, confused, and walked to the door. Tried to open it.

Locked.

Panic stirred in her chest.

She turned quickly to the window, pulled the curtains apart—and froze.

Her heartbeat slowed.

Her breath hitched.

Was she... dreaming?

She slid the window open and stepped out into the balcony. The chill in the breeze kissed her cheeks. A gentle wind ruffled her hair, carrying the crisp scent of pine.

Birds chirped nearby.

Mountains stretched out before her.

Golden light from a not-yet-risen sun colored the sky.

Shimla.

Her Shimla.

Her breath trembled.

Her smile rose slowly—but faded just as quickly.

Wait...

She had fallen asleep in Mumbai.

How... how was she here?

And most importantly—where was Ansh?

She shook her head. This has to be a dream. It had to be.

To confirm, she pinched her wrist. Then slapped her cheek.

Nothing.

Still there.

Still Shimla.

Still those mountains whispering her name.

Her eyes widened.

It isn't a dream.

She turned to go back inside—when pop! — another party popper exploded right above her head, raining confetti.

She jumped back, startled.

And then came a soft duo of voices:

“Happy Birthday!”

Jharna looked up in shock.

There, standing with the widest grins, were Miransh and Ivaan.

Miransh rushed into her arms, hugging her tight, while she stood there, mouth still open, eyes blinking in disbelief.

Ivaan stepped forward, gently placing a finger under her chin, closing her gaping mouth with a teasing smile.

“Happy Birthday, Momma!” Miransh giggled.

Jharna finally found her voice. “Thank you, Betu... but what is all this?

How are we... here?” she asked, turning a stunned gaze toward Ivaan.

Ivaan didn't say anything at first. He reached into her hair and pulled out a small curled paper stuck from the party popper. Holding it up, he read

dramatically:

“It’s your day. Just enjoy. Leave the rest to me.”

She narrowed her eyes.

Anger flickered across her face. “I told you not to do all this, Ivaan,” she said sharply.

But before she could say more, Ivaan gently pressed his finger to her lips.

“Shhh...” he whispered softly, his eyes calm and warm.

“I told you—just enjoy today. You’ll have a whole lifetime to scold me if you wish.”

Jharna looked into his eyes—surprised, emotional, overwhelmed.

And for a second... just one second... she allowed herself to pause.

To feel.

To be held by the morning.

By the balloons.

By her son’s giggles.

And by the man who, silently, kept proving that love doesn't always need a yes to give everything it has.

Evening – Mumbai

The city lights flickered outside as the car glided through the familiar roads of Mumbai.

Jharna sat in the passenger seat, eyes closed.

Not asleep.

Just... still.

A soft smile tugged at her lips.

Not the kind you wear for others.

The kind that rises quietly when your soul has just returned from someplace beautiful.

Ivaan glanced sideways. He didn’t say anything—just noticed.

How her face looked softer now.

How her brows, usually drawn in worry, were finally at rest.

How her silence wasn't hollow anymore.

It was peaceful.

Inside her mind, memories bloomed.

Flashback – Shimla

Laughter echoed across pine trees.

Miransh was chasing butterflies in the meadows, slipping and giggling.

Jharna ran behind him, breathless with joy.

“Slow down, Ansh!” she called out, laughing.

At a tiny local cafe, the three of them huddled over hot chocolate and steaming maggi.

“Is this your favorite place too, Momma?” Miransh asked.

Jharna smiled. “It used to be. Now... I think this moment is.”

On Mall Road, she tried on woolen caps from a roadside stall.

Ivaan handed her a red one with pompoms.

“No way,” she said.

“Exactly why you should try it,” he replied, teasing.

When she put it on, Miransh burst out laughing—and so did she.

Her laughter didn't stop for a long time.

The sun had disappeared behind clouds by afternoon.

And then...

It began to rain.

Not the Mumbai kind.

But the soft, cold drizzle of the hills—the kind that makes you want to pause, breathe in, and forget the world.

They were walking through a narrow trail when the first drop hit Jharna's

nose. She looked up, surprised.

“Rain!” Miransh squealed, arms in the air.

Before anyone could rush for cover, he had already begun jumping in muddy puddles, laughing like only children can.

Jharna stared for a moment, half-smiling, half-scolding.

“Ansh! Your clothes—”

But the next second, she couldn’t stop herself.

She joined him.

Shoes abandoned. Hair drenched.

She twirled once, twice—like she used to years ago.

The rain washed over her face like a blessing, like a cleansing.

And Ivaan?

He just stood there for a moment.

Mesmerized.

This wasn’t the careful, reserved Jharna he had known for the past few months.

This was someone else.

Someone freer.

The Jharna whose laughter echoed through valleys.

The Jharna who didn't hold back.

He slowly walked toward her, rain dripping from his hair, and extended a hand.

“Come under the shade, you’ll catch a cold,” he said, softly.

She smiled, brushing a wet strand from her cheek. “Not today.”

And just for a heartbeat, they stood in the rain together.

Not as strangers. Not as a broken past.

But as something unnamed—gently growing.

Near sunset, they hiked to a quiet viewpoint.

She stood at the edge, arms wide open.

Eyes closed.

Just like before.

The breeze brushed her face, and she whispered into the wind:

“Mumma... Papa... Meera di... I’m back.”

Later, they lit a bonfire in a cottage garden. Under the blanket of stars, Jharna sang a tune from her childhood. Her voice cracked halfway, and she laughed through it.

Ivaan handed her a marshmallow. “You're completely mad,” he said softly.

She smiled.

Maybe she is just finally... alive.

Back to Present – Mumbai Car

The car slowed near a traffic signal.

Jharna finally opened her eyes.

Ivaan glanced at her. “So... did we do okay?”

She looked at him.

That same peaceful smile remained.

“You did more than okay,” she said.

He didn't reply—just nodded, eyes warm with quiet victory.

You brought me home... even if just for a while.

She thought.

As the light turned green, the car moved forward again. The air was warmer now, filled with the hum of distant traffic and... something else.

The car rolled to a gentle halt outside Maurya Mansion.

Jharna glanced out the window, her brows furrowed. The gates stood wide open. Fairy lights draped the tall pillars, glowing softly in the evening haze.

From inside, faint sounds drifted toward her—

Laughter. Music. Voices.

She turned sharply to Ivaan.

“What is this?” she asked, confused. “Where are we?”

Ivaan gave her a calm smile as he stepped out of the driver’s seat. “It’s ours. We live here, remember?”

She narrowed her eyes at him, clearly unconvinced.

Before she could press further, Miransh had already wriggled out of his seatbelt and flung the door open.

“Come on, Momma!” he called excitedly. “There’s one more surprise!”

“One more?” she echoed, spinning toward him.

He grabbed her hand, tugging her toward the open gate like a child holding a secret too big to contain.

Ivaan followed behind, quiet, but glowing with a kind of pride that couldn’t be hidden anymore.

Inside the Mansion

Jharna stepped in—

And froze.

The entire front hall was decorated in soft gold and pastel tones. Elegant drapes, twinkling lights, candles flickering in corners. And standing in the middle, beaming at her with warm smiles, were all the people who had slowly become her world:

Shikha, Abhimaan, Deepa, Vihaan, Adhik, Sagarika, Amaan, Aashiya... even Malini.

Everyone was there.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Her eyes widened.

She instinctively looked at Ivaan, who had stepped beside her.

He leaned closer and said with a grin,

“We had our celebration in Shimla. But family matters too, right?”

Blessings and all.”

Just then, someone began singing:

“Happy Birthday to you...”

And slowly, one by one, everyone joined in.

Jharna stood in the middle of it all, quietly stunned, until the smile on her lips bloomed naturally—gentle, grateful.

Suddenly, a young girl approached her, dressed in a neat black uniform.

“Ma’am, please come with me,” she said politely. “We need to get you ready for the party.”

Jharna looked questioningly at Ivaan again.

He raised his eyebrows and made a small gesture — Go ahead.

So, without protest, Jharna followed the girl upstairs.

Later That Evening

When she returned, silence fell.

Jharna stood at the top of the staircase, wearing a soft blush pink sleeveless gown, the fabric flowing around her like mist. Her hair fell in gentle waves down her shoulders, and there was a soft glow on her face she hadn’t worn in years.

She didn’t look like a queen.

She looked like the Jharna everyone remembered. A woman reborn in quiet beauty.

As her eyes scanned the room, they landed on Ivaan, standing by the corner, busy on a call. He didn’t notice her.

And somehow... she couldn’t stop looking at him.

There was something peaceful in the way he stood—present, but not trying to take credit. Always in the background. Always steady.

She didn’t realize she was smiling.

Just then, Miransh ran up to him.

“Superhero,” he said, tugging at his jacket. “This tie isn’t sitting right. Can you fix it?”

Ivaan ended his call, crouched down without a word, and gently adjusted the little bowtie with practiced hands.

Jharna watched from above, her heart full.

And a thought whispered in her chest:

Even after knowing everything...

Will you still love Ansh and me this way?

I won't hide anymore.

After tonight—

Whatever your decision is... I'll accept it.

Her eyes softened.

This time, she wasn't afraid.

But just then—

as warmth bloomed in every corner of the mansion—

a shadow fell across the threshold.

Unfamiliar.

Uninvited.

And waiting.

Sitara's Note

They say birthdays are just dates.

But some days...

become answers to the questions we never dared to ask.

This chapter wasn't just about balloons or rain or parties.

It was about a woman finding herself in the silence of mountains,

in the laughter of her son,

in the steady gaze of a man who never stopped seeing her.

It was about Jharna.

And maybe, a little bit...

about all of us.

We've all stood at windows, asking if it's a dream.

We've all danced in rain we didn't expect.

And sometimes, we've walked into rooms filled with people who remind us:

You were never as alone as you thought you were.

If you've ever smiled after months of forgetting how to —

if your heart has ever felt heavy and light at the same time —

then this birthday was yours too.

Thank you for walking with Jharna.

For letting love surprise you.

Until the next chapter —

With all my heart,

– Sitara Chandria