

Chapter 24: The Edge of Everything

Maurya Mansion

The hall was alive with gentle music and the soft clink of glasses. Laughter echoed through corridors laced with fairy lights. Yet, somewhere in a quiet corner Ivaan knelt down to adjust Miransh's little bowtie.

“Thank you, Superhero!” Miransh grinned, eyes shining with joy, and darted off into the buzzing crowd.

A quiet chuckle escaped Ivaan, but as he rose to his feet, his gaze drifted—and landed on her.

His wife.

His queen.

She was already looking at him.

And just like that... the world slowed.

She stood under the soft chandelier light, her gown brushing the floor like flowing silk, her eyes holding galaxies only he could see. Everything else faded into the background—voices, footsteps, music. There was only her... and the space between them.

His heart led the way.

Without realizing, he moved closer—each step gentle, as if afraid to break the spell.

He stopped in front of her, close enough to feel her breath mix with his.

She didn't move.

Neither did he.

The silence between them whispered everything.

With tender fingers, he tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear.

She blinked—but didn't look away.

A faint smile ghosted her lips, the kind that once made him believe in forever.

His hands found her face, cupping it softly—reverently.

His thumb brushed her lower lip like it was the most delicate thing in the world.

And then... slowly, gently... he leaned in.
Eyes closed.
Breaths tangled.
His lips met hers.
It wasn't just a kiss.
It was a memory of what they were, and a dream of what they could still be.
Soft. Still. Infinite.
In that moment, there was no pain, no distance.
Only love—silent, aching, and pure.
Time stopped.
The world vanished.
Only they remained.
Until—
“Jharna!”
The voice sliced through the silence like a crack of thunder.
Ivaan's eyes snapped open.
He was standing still.
Far from her.
The kiss had never happened.
It was just a dream.
A beautiful, aching, impossible dream.
Jharna was looking at him. But she quickly turned her attention when she heard Aashiya's voice approaching.
Aashiya looked unsettled. Her steps quickened as she came near. Sensing Ivaan's presence, she shifted into a polite act.
“Oh! Ma'am, you had asked me for a safety pin earlier,” she said sweetly.
Jharna glanced at Ivaan. He pretended to be occupied on his phone and casually walked away, creating space between them.
Now only Jharna and Aashiya remained.

Suddenly, Aashiya got agitated. “Jharna... Jharna... I don’t know how to say this but... I... I think I saw her.”

Jharna frowned. “Saw who?”

“I’m not sure,” Aashiya said breathlessly. “But I think... it was her. I saw her. I mean—I’m not certain—but it felt like her.”

Jharna tried to process Aashiya’s fragmented words, but before she could say anything, Miransh ran up to her.

“Momma! Come on! The party’s about to start!”

He tugged at her hand, pulling her along with his usual excitement.

And just like that, the moment passed—leaving behind unspoken emotions, and a mystery that now began to breathe.

The candles flickered gently on the cake as Jharna leaned forward and blew them out.

Everyone clapped and cheered.

The birthday song echoed through the grand hall, voices overlapping in joy and celebration.

And just like that—the party began.

The music picked up, glasses clinked, and laughter filled every corner of Maurya Mansion.

The crowd naturally gravitated toward Jharna, turning her into the center of attention. People pulled her into conversations, others clicked photos beside her, and some simply watched with affection.

She laughed freely.

Clapped to the rhythm.

For once, she didn’t hold herself back.

But then—

Her eyes flicked toward the far end of the hall.

Something—or someone—moved in the shadows. A fleeting shape. A presence.

Her smile faltered for half a second.
Before she could excuse herself and investigate, Sagarika suddenly appeared beside her.
“There you are!” she said, grabbing Jharna’s wrist. “You’re not escaping the dance floor tonight.”
Jharna blinked. “But I—”
“No buts! Come on, birthday girl!”
Without giving her a chance, Sagarika twirled her into the dance circle.
The beat dropped, and soon everyone joined in.
Laughter bubbled up around her.
The music vibrated through the floor.
Joy rippled across faces.
And slowly, the tension that had crept into her mind began to melt away.
As people danced around them in circles, Jharna and Ivaan found themselves unintentionally stepping closer.
The crowd noticed.
A few hoots.
A couple of whistles.
And then Adhik called out, “Couple dance! Come on!”
Everyone joined in, chanting for them.
Jharna looked at Ivaan.
He hesitated for a heartbeat.
Then, slowly, he extended his hand toward her.
An invitation.
Her lips curled into a soft smile.
Without a word, she placed her hand into his.
The room dimmed.
Lights lowered.
And a gentle spotlight fell upon them—casting a soft halo around just the two of them.

The music changed.
A soft instrumental melody floated in the air, slow and dreamy.
They began to dance.
His hand on her waist.
Her hand on his shoulder.
Their fingers intertwined.
Their movements gentle. In sync.
It wasn't practiced. It wasn't perfect.
But it was theirs.
They didn't speak.
They didn't need to.
Every step, every breath, every glance between them whispered all the things they still couldn't say out loud.
From the edge of the room, everyone watched—smiling, filming, swaying.
It looked like a fairytale.
But—
From somewhere beyond the lights,
in the shadows...
someone was watching.
Eyes fixed.
Unmoving.
A presence cloaked in silence, invisible to all—
Except the night itself.

While the dance floor still echoed with soft music and scattered laughter, Miransh wandered toward the catering area, searching for something sweet to munch on.
He stood by the dessert table, carefully eyeing the strawberry pastries.
That's when a woman appeared.
She moved slowly, almost cautiously. Her face was hidden behind a white

medical mask, her eyes red and glossy, as if holding back waves of emotion.

She stopped a few steps away from him.

And then, almost in a whisper, a word escaped her mouth—

“Miransh.”

Startled, the little boy turned to face her.

His brows furrowed. “Yes? Do you want something?”

He didn’t recognize her.

And yet... she seemed to know him.

Still, brushing off the thought—assuming she might be a family friend—he spoke politely.

The woman dropped to her knees in front of him, cupping his face in her hands. Her eyes filled with longing behind the mask.

But Miransh pulled back immediately, frowning.

“Excuse me,” he said firmly. “Don’t you know it’s rude to touch someone without asking? That’s bad manners.”

The woman blinked.

Then slowly... she smiled behind her mask. “Okay. I’m sorry. Who taught you such good manners?”

Puffing his chest a little with pride, he replied,

“My Momma did!”

Her smile faltered.

Her eyes dimmed slightly at the mention of Jharna.

“Who is your momma?” she asked gently.

He pointed across the room. “There. That’s her. You came to her birthday and don’t even know her? That’s strange.”

The woman’s gaze followed his finger... to Jharna, who stood chatting with guests, laughing unaware of the eyes that watched her.

“I know her,” the woman whispered.

“Very well.”

Later That Night

The party had ended. Guests had left. The mansion was now wrapped in silence.

Jharna sat on the bed while Miransh, surrounded by colorful wrapping paper and ribbon, excitedly unboxed the gifts one by one.

She watched him, smiling softly at his joy.

“Momma,” he said, holding up the last gift. “I’ve opened all of them!”

Jharna leaned forward and kissed his forehead. “Thank you, Betu. You made this birthday really special.”

Just then, her phone buzzed.

She picked it up.

Aashiya.

She answered, “Yes, Aashiya? You were trying to tell me something at the party. What was it?”

As she listened Aashiya. Her entire body stiffened.

Her fingers curled around the bedsheet.

“What are you saying, Aashiya...?”

“I know it sounds impossible. But I couldn’t keep it to myself. You needed to know.”

Jharna ended the call slowly, her mind spiraling into chaos.

No. That’s not possible.

She must be mistaken.

It couldn’t be... it couldn’t be her...

Just then, Miransh came back into the room, holding a soft toy.

“Momma?”

She looked at him, forcing calm into her voice. “Yes, baby?”

“I forgot to tell you earlier... I met your friend.”

“My friend? You mean Aashiya?”

He shook his head. “No, not Aashiya aunty. It was another aunty. I couldn’t see her face clearly—she was wearing a mask. Maybe she had a

cold.”

Jharna slowly knelt in front of him, her voice sharp with concern.

“Ansh... how many times have I told you not to talk to strangers?”

“But she wasn’t a stranger, Momma. She said... she knows you.”

Jharna’s heartbeat grew louder.

Panic stirred under her skin.

Miransh tapped his head. “Oh! I forgot—she gave me a letter for you.

Wait!”

He ran to the corner where his party clothes were kept, fished something out from his coat pocket, and handed it to her.

A simple, folded envelope.

Unmarked.

Unspoken.

The moment her fingers touched it, something inside her shifted.

A cold shiver ran down her spine.

Her hands trembled as she unfolded the paper.

Her eyes scanned the words.

And then—

Tears.

They fell silently, one after another.

Miransh watched, confused and worried.

“Momma...? Why are you crying? What happened?”

But Jharna didn’t reply.

She stood up suddenly, clutching the letter, and rushed out of the room.

Miransh called after her—but she was already gone.

The sky had turned a deep shade of indigo.

Jharna stood alone at a quiet, hidden viewpoint, where city lights blurred into distant murmurs and the air smelled faintly of pine and dust.

The wind howled through the trees—cold, sharp, relentless.

It tugged at her dress. Pulled at her thoughts.
In her hand, the letter crumpled softly—creased from her grip, wet from the tears she hadn't wiped.
Her breath was uneven. Her chest heavy. Her steps unsure.
She scanned the dark horizon, heart pounding.
She didn't know what she hoped to find.
Someone.
Something.
Answers.
And then—
She saw her.
A woman stood at the edge of the viewpoint, back turned, hair wild in the wind.
Still. Silent. Unmoving.
Jharna's breath caught.
Her feet hesitated.
Then, slowly... she moved forward.
One step at a time.
The closer she got, the louder her heart thudded against her ribs—like a warning, like a prayer.
She raised her trembling hand...
...and gently placed it on the woman's shoulder.
The woman turned.
And time broke open.
Jharna stumbled back, eyes wide, lips parted in shock.
Their eyes locked.
No words.
Just years of silence crashing into a single glance.
So much unsaid.
So much unfinished.

So much... waiting.

The wind roared louder, as if nature itself was holding its breath.

And in Jharna's hand, the letter fluttered quietly.

The only thing brave enough to move between them.

Meanwhile – Inside Maurya Mansion

Ivaan sat in his study, typing something on his laptop. The house was quiet now, the warmth of the celebration long gone.

Suddenly, something near his neck itched—a light discomfort.

He instinctively reached up...

...and found something tucked beneath his collar.

He pulled it out.

A broken piece of jewelry.

Small. Shimmering. And unmistakably hers.

It had fallen from Jharna's gown—somewhere between the dance.

He held it between his fingers, watching how the light caught its edges.

A soft smile played on his lips.

He closed his eyes.

And let himself return to that moment—

Their closeness.

Their silence.

Their breaths almost touching.

The kiss that only happened inside his head.

He opened his eyes again, gazing at the little broken piece.

“So...” he whispered to it,

“you’re going into the memory box too.”

He smiled.

Just then—

Miransh burst into the room.

“Superhero!!!” he yelled, breathless and upset.

Ivaan straightened immediately. “Hey! What happened, champ?”

Miransh's voice tumbled out in a rush. “Momma... she left! I told her about that aunty—the one in the mask—and then she got really worried... and then she just left!”

Ivaan froze.

All traces of light-heartedness disappeared from his face.

His expression shifted—from warmth to worry, from memory to mission.

Miransh's voice cracked. “Please... please bring her back. I’m scared.”

Ivaan crouched down and hugged him tightly.

“I promise,” he whispered, brushing a hand through the boy’s hair.

“I’ll bring her back. Always.”

But behind that calm voice—

his mind was racing.

The woman.

The letter.

The broken rhythm in Jharna’s eyes.

Something had changed.

And he knew—

This night wasn’t done revealing itself yet.

Sitara's Note

Sometimes...

we think we've survived something.

Moved on.

Healed.

Until one night...

a letter appears.

A glance lingers too long.

A piece of jewelry breaks off during a dance and slips quietly into the pocket of memory.

This chapter wasn't about a confrontation.

It was about a crack.

A crack in a carefully built world.

A moment when love almost reached its lips, but chose silence.

When a child unknowingly carried a secret in his coat.

When a woman stood at the edge of a viewpoint, not knowing whether to fall into the past or step away from it.

And through all of it, another man waited quietly.

Holding a memory.

And a promise.

"I'll bring her back. Always."

If you've ever held your breath before hearing someone say your name—

If you've ever kept a letter you couldn't read all at once—

If you've ever stared at someone who used to be everything...

Then maybe this chapter was yours, too.

We are all made of pieces.

Some fall apart.

Some stay broken.

And some... return with the wind.
Until next time,
with stories still unraveling,
— Sitara Chandria