

Ch 35: Echoes of Hope

Cape Town

Jharna's eyes glistened as she stared at the cake, her face unreadable, as though holding back a storm of emotions. Just then, the doorbell rang. A faint smile curved her lips—fragile, but real. She rose, opened the door, and found a tiny figure standing there, dressed in a fluffy teddy bear costume.

Jharna's smile widened. Bending down to the child's height, she greeted softly,

“Hello, Ms. Teddy Bear. How are you today?”

The little teddy bear squealed and wrapped its arms around her. Jharna chuckled and returned the hug warmly.

Just then, a young woman came rushing in, her voice anxious.

“Palki!”

Startled, Jharna stood upright, while the little teddy bear—Palki—quickly hid behind her, peeking out shyly.

The woman sighed and said to Jharna,

“You've spoiled her, Jharna. The moment I scold her even a little, she runs straight to you.”

From behind Jharna, Palki pouted and retorted,

“Then why did you scold me? Very bad, Mumma.”

Her mother looked at Jharna, exasperated.

“See? Do you see how she talks back now?”

Before Jharna could answer, Palki giggled, slipped free of her arms, and dashed into the house. Swati—her mother—hurried after her, trying to stop her.

“Swati ji, please,” Jharna followed them calmly, “Don't be upset. She's kid.”

Jharna knelt beside Palki and gently helped her remove the oversized teddy costume. Palki's face brightened instantly as she declared,

“Best friend, don’t let Mumma scold me! She keeps telling me to study, study, study. But I’m only seven years old! How can I study so much? Games are important too, right?”

Swati crossed her arms.

“For you, Ms. Seven year old, only games seem important.”

Palki made a sulky face. Jharna noticed and cupped her little cheeks, smiling tenderly.

“Hey, don’t be sad. Look, you can play a little and study a little too.

Balance is the key. Okay?”

Palki’s frown melted into a grin.

“Okay, okay!” she chirped.

Excitedly, she picked up her teddy bear costume and began fumbling with it as though searching for something. Jharna watched, puzzled.

“Found it!” Palki announced, her eyes sparkling.

She quickly hid her hand behind her back and looked up at Jharna mischievously.

“Close your eyes!”

Jharna chuckled at her dramatic tone but obliged, shutting her eyes. A small, warm hand slipped something into her palm.

When Jharna opened her eyes, she found a tiny toy car resting there. She blinked, then turned to Palki, who was beaming with pride.

“It’s Ansh’s birthday today, right?” Palki said innocently. “So this is my gift. When you meet him, give this to him.”

Jharna’s heart clenched, and her eyes welled up again.

Palki gasped and covered her mouth.

“Oh no! I made you sad.”

But Jharna only smiled through her tears and pulled her into a tight embrace.

“No, Palki... you gave me hope. Thank you, my little best friend.”

Palki’s little face lit up like sunshine as she winked playfully at her mother.

Swati, meanwhile, could only shake her head in disbelief, her expression torn between annoyance and affection.

Mumbai — India

Sagarika (Tia) was strolling through the cafe, her eyes glued to her phone as she walked. Suddenly, a hand tapped her shoulder. She turned, startled, and found herself face-to-face with Chhaya.

“You?” Tia exclaimed.

Chhaya frowned. “What are you doing here, Tia di?”

Tia shrugged carelessly.

“Oh, it’s Miransh’s birthday today. I came to pick up a few gifts for him. Then I saw this cafe and thought I’d grab some pancakes. Vihaan loves the pancakes here, so... that’s why.”

Chhaya’s eyes lingered on her, a silent question shimmering within them.

Tia frowned. “What? Why are you staring at me like that?”

Chhaya leaned in slightly, her voice laced with suspicion.

“After hating Ivaan so much... don’t tell me you’ve fallen in love with Vihaan?”

For a moment, Tia froze, then let out a sharp smike.

“Shut up! Don’t be ridiculous. This is all an act—a drama I have to play. It’s the only way to earn Vihaan’s trust so he never doubts me. Do you understand?”

Chhaya gave a bitter smile.

“Right. How could you ever fall in love? The only thing you’ve ever loved is your revenge. And now you’ve achieved it—by killing Jharna.”

Tia rolled her eyes.

“I’ve told you before, and I’m telling you again—I didn’t kill Jharna. My plan was only to hurt them, not to kill. There’s a difference.”

Chhaya’s voice sharpened.

“Is that why you lured them into a landmine field? Why did you delayed the bomb squad in traffic?”

Tia’s jaw tightened, but her tone remained cold.

“Those landmines had a seven-second delay before exploding. If they wanted, they could have run and escaped. At worst, they would have been injured—maybe hospitalized—but not killed. And as for their helicopter escape? I didn’t know anything about it. So tell me—how could I have killed Jharna?”

Chhaya’s brows knitted in confusion.

“Then how did Jharna die? And why was her body never found? Ivaan is still searching for her, but nothing. No evidence, no remains—almost as if she never existed at all.”

Tia stiffened, her thoughts spiraling.

Apart from me, only he knew about that landmine field. Could he be the reason behind Jharna disappeared? But if he wanted to make someone vanish, it should have been Ivaan, not her. What enmity could he possibly have with Jharna? Unless... he wanted to weaken Ivaan. But if that’s true, then where is Jharna? Why hasn’t she been found, even after all this time?

Evening — Maurya Mansion

The family had gathered in the living room. There were simple decorations, a modest cake placed on the table. Miransh stood before it, holding a knife in his small hands. But instead of the cake, his eyes were fixed on Ivaan, who was still on a call.

Ivaan ended the call with a distracted hum. When he looked up, he found Miransh watching him with quiet hope. He understood what this little kid wanted—but had no answer to give. A heavy silence fell over the room, sadness clouding every heart.

Breaking it, Miransh stepped forward, smiling bravely.

“Dadda, don’t worry. Next birthday, Momma will definitely be here.”

Ivaan’s chest tightened. He looked at his son—hurt, yet smiling.

Sitting down, Ivaan whispered, “You know... you’re growing up too fast.” Miransh blinked in surprise.

“You should be stubborn, throw tantrums, cry, laugh, dream...” Ivaan’s voice cracked. “At your age, I was never this understanding.”

Miransh cupped Ivaan’s face with his little hands.

“Dadda, I’m so relaxed because I know you’ll find Momma soon. You’re my superhero—that’s why I always called you that.” He grinned.

Ivaan smiled through the sting in his eyes and pulled his son into a hug.

Around them, the family grew emotional, their tears softening into faint smiles at the sight of father and son holding on to each other.

Next Day — Vertigo Office

Ivaan stood before a massive map of India. Nearly every state was circled in red.

“Boss,” Amaan reported quietly, “we’ve searched almost all over India for Jharna ma’am. But so far, no trace, no information.”

Ivaan leaned back in his chair, eyes closed, his exhaustion heavy.

Amaan hesitated, then continued,

“Boss... after falling from such a height, and then vanishing immediately... it’s impossible for her to leave on her own. The way you both got trapped in that landmine field, and then her sudden disappearance—it points to someone else’s involvement. Maybe one of your enemies kidnapped her. Otherwise, in all these years, ma’am would’ve returned on her own.”

Ivaan remained silent.

Amaan exhaled and finally asked, “Boss...” His voice faltered.

Ivaan gave a bitter smile. “Say it. Don’t stop halfway. You also think Jharna is dead, right? And that we’re wasting our time?”

Amaan lowered his gaze.

Ivaan rose from his chair, walking to the glass wall of his office. He stood

there, staring at the cityscape, his eyes closing as Jharna's face flashed in his mind.

"She's alive," he whispered. "I know it sounds illogical, but my heart knows. She's alive. And I'll find her."

He took a deep breath, then turned sharply.

"If she were with an enemy, by now that person would've contacted me—issued a threat, demanded something. But there's been nothing. That means she isn't with them. Which leaves only one option."

He looked at Amaan with steel in his voice.

"Start searching outside India."

"What?" Amaan was stunned.

Ivaan's gaze was unflinching.

Realizing his slip, Amaan quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, boss. But the world is so vast... where do we even begin?"

Ivaan's voice turned cold.

"You have a world map, don't you? Start marking places. Search everywhere. And if you find even a one percent chance that Jharna might be there—I want to know immediately."

Confusion clouded Amaan's face, but he didn't argue further.

"Is that clear, Amaan?"

"Yes, boss," he replied firmly.

"Good," Ivaan said, walking out, his determination echoing louder than his footsteps.

Cape Town

The park was quiet, the evening breeze brushing against Jharna's face. She closed her eyes for a moment, breathing in the freshness. When she turned, she froze—someone was on his knees before her, holding a bouquet so large it hid his face.

Softly, almost uncertainly, Jharna whispered, "Manav?"

The bouquet lowered, revealing his smiling face.

“In this beautiful weather,” he said warmly, “these beautiful flowers belong to an even more beautiful woman.”

He extended the bouquet toward her. Jharna hesitated, her fingers trembling slightly.

Sensing her unease, Manav quickly rose to his feet.

“Okay, okay,” he said gently, “don’t be nervous. I’m not forcing you. But sometimes... it’s important to make special people feel special.”

Jharna parted her lips to reply, but he spoke before she could.

“I know. I know you’re married—and that you love your husband deeply. But my heart... it refuses to accept what my mind already knows.”

Jharna lowered her gaze, guilt pressing on her chest.

“Hey,” Manav’s voice softened, “don’t feel sorry. None of this is your fault. You don’t need to feel guilty. Believe me, I don’t want to be this way either... but I can’t stop myself.”

He ran a hand through his hair.

Quietly, Jharna reached out and accepted the bouquet. For a brief second, Manav’s smile faltered. He sighed.

“You only took it because you feel I did you a favor, didn’t you?”

Jharna lost in her thought.

Flashback — 3 years ago

Jharna lay on a hospital bed, her body bandaged, her face pale. Slowly, her eyes fluttered open. In a broken whisper she murmured, “Ivaan... Ansh...”

Her vision was blurry. Through the haze, she saw the outline of a man leaning over her. Weakly, she lifted her hand. “Ivaan...”

But the man clasped her trembling hand and said softly, “I’m sorry. I’m not Ivaan. My name is Manav.”

Jharna snatched her hand back instantly, her breath coming fast and

shallow, panic flooding her.

“Please,” Manav urged, trying to calm her, “breathe... relax. If you strain yourself like this, your condition will only get worse. You barely survived. Do you really want Ivaan to see you like this—weak and struggling?”

Something in his words soothed her. Slowly, her breathing steadied. Her vision cleared, and for the first time, she saw his face clearly.

“Who are you?” she asked, her voice fragile.

“An angel,” he replied with a teasing smile.

Jharna blinked in confusion.

“I’m kidding,” he said quickly. “The truth is—I was visiting Mumbai for the first time. My friends and I went trekking, but I got separated and lost. No signal on my phone, no directions... I wandered for hours until I stumbled upon you, bleeding and barely conscious. Luckily, at that exact moment, I found my friends too. With their help, I brought you to the hospital. You were in a critical state, but you fought through. Now, you’re safe. When you’re better, just give me Ivaan’s number—I’ll call him right away. I’ve already heard his name a hundred times from your lips since yesterday.”

He smiled softly, but Jharna could only stare at him in silent bewilderment.

Flashback Ends

Back in the present, Manav gently took the bouquet back into his hands, forcing a faint smile.

“Jharna, treat me as a stranger if you want—but don’t keep this... out of obligation.”

With those words, he stepped back slowly, then turned and walked away. Jharna’s chest tightened. Watching his retreating figure, she whispered bitterly to herself, “This is why everything always goes wrong with you. You keep hurting everyone, and then expect happiness. That’s why God has taken everything away from you... That’s why he’s kept you so far

from the ones you love. It's what you deserve.”

Tears slipped silently down her cheeks as she stood there.

Sitara's Note

Sometimes life takes us far away from the people we love most, not because we chose to leave, but because destiny decided we needed a different path. This chapter is about those quiet moments of waiting, of searching, of holding onto faith when everything around whispers otherwise.

Ivaan's determination, Miransh's innocent faith, Jharna's silent tears, and even Manav's unspoken love — each of them reflects a truth: hope doesn't always roar; sometimes, it simply whispers in the background, refusing to die.

And perhaps that's what keeps us alive through the storms — the little hands of a child offering a toy car, the smile of someone who believes in us, or the heart that still beats for someone miles away.

Yours in words

—Sitara Chandria