

Ch 36: Found You

Cape Town

Jharna sat quietly on the edge of her bed, lost in thought. Her fingers hovered over her phone screen, trembling slightly. After a moment's hesitation, she typed a number—one she had memorized by heart, yet feared to dial.

Her breath quickened as she pressed call. She held the phone to her ear, her heartbeat thundering in her chest. Each passing second felt heavier, but no one answered on the other end.

A single tear slipped down her cheek. With a quiet sob, she tossed the phone onto the bed and buried her face in her hands, struggling to steady her breath.

Just then, the doorbell rang.

Startled, Jharna wiped her tears quickly and forced herself to stand. She opened the door to find Swati standing there—with little Palki by her side, and two suitcases resting at their feet.

Confused, Jharna frowned.

“Swati ji... are you going somewhere?”

Swati glanced down at Palki and spoke softly, “Palki, baby, go inside for a while. I need to talk to Jharna.”

Obediently, Palki ran toward Jharna's room, humming to herself. Swati and Jharna moved to the couch.

Swati's eyes were restless. “Jharna, I have to leave urgently for some important work. But I can't take Palki with me. And here in Cape Town... you're the only person I trust. No one else. So, if it isn't too much trouble, will you keep Palki with you for some time?”

Jharna's eyes widened. “But Swati ji... how can you leave your daughter behind like this?”

Swati's voice cracked. “If it wasn't a compulsion, I wouldn't stay away from her even for a single second. But I don't have a choice. Please

understand—Palki is happiest with you. She listens to you. And in this world... you're the only one I can rely on."

Jharna's heart softened. "It's not a problem for me. I was just worried... she's just 7 seven years. How will she manage without you?"

A faint smile touched Swati's lips. "That's exactly why I'm leaving her with you."

Jharna took a deep breath and nodded. "Alright. Don't worry—I'll take care of her as if she were my own. But... when will you be back?"

Swati lowered her gaze. "I don't know. As soon as I'm free, I'll call you. Until then... please, take care of her."

Jharna smiled faintly, hiding her unease. "You have my word."

Swati squeezed her hand gratefully, then stood up and left. Jharna closed the door behind her, the weight of responsibility pressing on her shoulders. She carried Palki's small bag to the room.

Inside, she found Palki fiddling with her phone.

"What are you doing, little one?" Jharna asked gently.

Palki pouted, "I was trying passwords... but now the phone is locked. It turned off!"

Jharna chuckled softly. "That's what happens when you keep guessing. Now the poor phone needs a break."

Palki yawned, rubbing her eyes. "Me too" She climbed onto the bed and sprawled across it like a carefree kitten.

Jharna watched her with a tender smile.

Mumbai — India

Amaan loosened his tie as he unlocked the door to his home. Stepping inside, he flicked on the lights—only to freeze at the sight before him. The dining table was set like a dream, glowing under the soft light of candles, adorned with delicate flowers. The warm aroma of freshly cooked food lingered in the air, wrapping the room in comfort. Before he could

take it all in, a pair of arms wrapped around him from behind. The touch melted away the weight of his day, a wave of relief rushing through him. He turned—and there she was.

Aashiya.

Draped in a sapphire-blue saree, she looked breathtaking. Her eyes sparkled as she smiled, a hint of mischief dancing on her lips.

“Surprise,” she whispered. “A candlelight dinner.” She gestured toward the table with a playful tilt of her head.

But Amaan’s gaze remained fixed only on her, unwavering. Her smile faltered, a flicker of worry crossing her face.

“What happened? You didn’t like it?” she asked softly.

He pulled her into his arms, his voice low and teasing.

“I was just wondering... how on earth did I get lucky enough to have you?”

Aashiya pouted, her eyes narrowing in mock annoyance.

“Excuse me,” she said, tapping his chest lightly. “I am the lucky one, to have you as my future husband.”

His laughter rumbled as he held her tighter, his embrace saying more than words ever could.

Next Day — Cape Town

The park buzzed with life. Locals pedaled along the cycling tracks, laughter echoing in the crisp morning air. Among them, little Palki rode her small bicycle with determination, while Jharna sat quietly on a bench, her eyes following the child with a soft smile.

Just then, Manav appeared and sat beside her.

Before she could say anything, he raised his hands in mock surrender.

“Don’t worry,” he said quickly with a crooked grin, “no bouquet today.”

Jharna lowered her gaze. “I... I’m sorry for my behavior yesterday.”

“Arey, come on yaar,” Manav chuckled lightly, “Just like my heart isn’t in

my control, yours isn't either. And you know what? Now, I've fallen for you more. Seeing your loyalty... I wish I'd met you earlier. Maybe then, this loyalty would've been mine."

Jharna didn't reply. A silence hung between them until Palki came running, her bicycle abandoned, eyes wide with excitement.

"Ice cream!" she demanded.

Jharna frowned at her. "What? Ice cream? No, not now. You just finished cycling, and now immediately ice cream? Absolutely not."

Palki clasped her hands together dramatically, pleading, "Please, Best Friend. Just one bite. Pleeease." She made a puppy face.

Manav laughed. "Aww, come on, little one. I'll buy you ice cream."

Palki squealed with joy and jumped in excitement.

Jharna shook her head firmly. "No, Manav. She'll get a sore throat."

"Relax," Manav assured, "I won't give her the whole thing, just a little."

Without waiting for further protest, he took Palki by the hand and led her toward the ice-cream cart. Their laughter drifted back, leaving Jharna alone on the bench.

She sighed softly, rising to her feet, and began strolling down the park's path. The wind brushed against her face, carrying the faint fragrance of flowers. A gentle smile tugged at her lips—until suddenly, her smile faltered.

Her heartbeat quickened. A strange pull made her place her hand against her chest. Slowly, almost fearfully, she turned—and froze.

A tear slipped from her eye.

"No... this is a dream," she whispered, trembling. "Another illusion. This can't be real."

But for the first time in three years... it wasn't an illusion.

It was real.

Ivaan.

He was standing a few feet away, his eyes glistening, locked on hers. Jharna gasped and quickly turned her back, her mind spinning. No. This can't be real. How could Ivaan be here, in Cape Town? And then—his hand touched her shoulder. His voice, trembling yet firm, called her name.

“Jharna.”

Her heart stopped. She turned slowly, her eyes meeting his. Shakily, she raised her hand to his face. The warmth of his skin beneath her fingers told her this wasn't her mind playing tricks. It was him.

A sob escaped her as Ivaan pulled her into his arms.

For three years they had waited for this moment, endured distance, silence, and endless pain. Now, finally, they clung to each other desperately, as though if they loosened their hold, the moment would shatter like glass.

“I found you,” Ivaan whispered, his voice breaking as a tear rolled down his cheek.

Flashback

The previous day...

When Jharna had gathered the courage to dial Ivaan's number, he hadn't answered—he was in the washroom. But later, when he returned and saw the missed call from an unknown international number, his heart stirred with suspicion. Without a second thought, he called back.

At that very moment, inside Jharna's home, Swati had asked Palki to go to the room. But when Palki spotted Jharna's phone ringing, she answered innocently.

“Hello? Who are you?”

On the other end, Ivaan froze. The voice was that of a child. Frowning, he rubbed his forehead.

“You called me. Shouldn't you answer who you are?”

Palki giggled. “No, I didn’t call you. Maybe my Best Friend did. Anyway—I’m Palki. From Cape Town.”

“Cape Town?” Ivaan’s brows knitted in confusion.

“Yes, yes,” she said proudly. “I live here. Where do you live?”

Ivaan thought quickly.

Cape Town? Why would someone from there call me? Could it be... related to Jharna? Maybe Amaan’s contacts turned up something?

When he didn’t answer immediately, Palki prodded, “Hello? Hello?”

“Yes... I’m from India,” Ivaan finally said. “Who is this Best Friend of yours? Can you give her the phone?”

Palki puffed her cheeks. “No. I can’t. Mumma and Best Friend are talking about something important. My mumma says children shouldn’t interrupt grown-ups.”

“Grown-ups?” Ivaan frowned. “How old are you?”

“I’m seven,” Palki replied proudly.

“And your Best Friend?”

“She’s big. I don’t know her age.”

“A grown woman is your best friend?”

“Yes,” Palki said matter-of-factly.

Ivaan’s pulse quickened. “And how did she become your friend?”

“Oh! Three years ago, when she came to Cape Town, she was always quiet. She never talked to anyone. But one day, I fell in the park and got a small cut. She bandaged it. Since then, she’s been my Best Friend.”

The words three years ago made Ivaan’s blood run cold. His chest tightened. His voice trembled as he asked, “What’s her name?”

Palki answered innocently, “I call her Best Friend. But Mumma calls her... Jharna.”

The name echoed in Ivaan’s ears like thunder.

Flashback Ends

They were still lost in each other. Around them, curious onlookers paused, smiling softly at the sight.

“Lovely couple,” someone murmured.

But Ivaan and Jharna were oblivious to the world. For them, only this moment existed.

“I missed you,” Ivaan whispered, his voice trembling. “I missed you so much. I’m sorry... sorry I couldn’t save you that day. But now... now I won’t let a single shadow fall on you. Everything will be alright. We’ll be together—you, me... and Miransh.”

Hearing him, she froze. The faint smile that had been playing on Jharna’s lips vanished instantly. Her eyes opened wide, and her grip on him loosened.

Ivaan, unaware, kept speaking, his tone soft with hope.

“I haven’t told Miransh—or anyone—about you yet. Just imagine their faces when they see you. They’ll all be so happy. Especially Miransh.”

It was only then that he noticed—Jharna’s arms had fallen away from him. She was no longer holding him. She stepped back, her face pale.

“What happened? Are you alright?” Ivaan asked, worry lining his forehead.

She didn’t answer.

“Jharna...” He called her name, almost pleading.

Her eyes lifted to his, full of conflict, then she quickly pulled herself free from his embrace and took a step back. Ivaan’s chest tightened in confusion.

“What are you doing?”

He instinctively moved forward, but she raised her hand like a shield.

“Go,” she said coldly, her voice breaking. “Just go from here.”

She turned to leave, but Ivaan grabbed her wrist, stepping in front of her, his eyes searching hers desperately.

“Go? Why would I go? Tell me why? And you... you remembered me.

You had my number. My address. Then why didn't you come back?" His voice cracked, raw with anguish.

Questions swirled in his eyes, burning for answers.

"I can understand if you were injured," he said, his tone rising. "Injuries take time—maybe a week, a month... even a year. But three years, Jharna? Three long years? Why didn't you return to me?"

She freed her wrist, stepping back, but he caught her again, refusing to let go. Their faces were inches apart now, both trembling with emotions too big to contain.

"You really think I'll let you go now?" Ivaan whispered fiercely.

Jharna's eyes hardened. Her voice turned cold, though it trembled beneath the surface.

"Let go of my hand."

But Ivaan's grip only tightened.

Her voice rose sharply, "Ivaan, let go of me!" She struggled against him, her breath uneven.

"Not until you tell me," Ivaan demanded, pain flooding his voice. "Why didn't you come back? Why?"

And then—her breaking point.

Almost shouting, Jharna cried, "Because I didn't want to live with you!"

Her words struck him like a blade. His hands, once gripping with desperation, fell loose at his sides. His eyes widened, disbelief etched across his face.

The silence between them was heavier than any scream.

Sitara's Note

Three years.

Three winters, three monsoons, three summers—lived apart, yet carrying the same ache.

When Jharna and Ivaan finally stood face to face, time bent. It gave them a moment of warmth, of tears, of long-forgotten embraces. But love, when left wounded too long, does not return unscarred.

This chapter is not just a reunion—it is a reminder that even the deepest love must survive truth, betrayal, and the silence of years.

—With a trembling pen,

Sitara Chandria