

The Forgotten Ones of Ashford

Some Truths Refuse to Die

Written by
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And to you, my dear reader: thank you for stepping into this little world I made. I hope it lifted your spirits and sparked your imagination.

**With all my love,
Tanvi Sai Akella**

Preface

Ashford is the kind of town you pass through without noticing.

Quiet streets. Familiar smiles. A place where nothing really changes—at least, not in ways people talk about. It's a town that carries on like everything's fine. Like nothing strange has ever happened.

But if you stay long enough, you'll begin to feel it.

The stillness that creeps in after sunset. The way some houses seem to breathe with the wind. The unspoken glances exchanged between the oldest residents—like they know something the rest of us don't. Like they've been waiting for a truth no one dares to name.

And maybe you'll start to feel like something's missing.

A person. A moment. A memory. You'll check again, certain you forgot something. But the more you look, the less you find. It eludes you more the harder you try to recall it.

Ashford doesn't readily divulge its secrets. It buries them deep—in silence, in shadows, in dusty stories. Additionally, the town completely forgets when something is forgotten.

However, some things are meant to be remembered.

After being removed, some names reappear.

And Ashford will be forced to remember when they do.

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CHAPTER ONE

A Quiet Town

The wet pavements beneath Riya's feet were clashing with every step as she walked through the familiar streets of her hometown. It was too early, yes, for most folks, but there were no netting disagreements on it in Riya's mind. The cool and crisp air promised something nice on the cards for the day. Mornings fresh with the air were her favorite, as while the day was yet dawning, the world was still waiting, with only an echo left for troublesome talks in the background.

The town of Ashford was small, the sort of place where you could be sure everybody knew each other. There was something very old-world about it-cobbled streets unrolled like dusty carpet, houses draped with ivy, and a warm face on every corner. The sort of place where things simply could not go wrong, at least they weren't up until this point.

Riya paused momentarily, tightening her long military coat, and glanced at her watch in the gusty wind. *8:05 AM*. Aarav would have gotten to the corner by now. Neha at all times was bound to her phone, headphones snug in her ears, oblivious of the world surrounding her.

She picked up her pace as she approached her friends, but there was some sort of gnawing, a small flutter of wrongness, a beating in the pit of her stomach that quickly transitioned into a full-blown warning. It had been building up for weeks; this queer feeling that told her something was... wrong... but she could not put her fingers on it.

The town was silent; life was unfolding, yet she felt like an outsider looking in. Everyone went about their business, smiling, greeting each other, and following the same routines. It should have been comforting. But lately, it just felt... hollow.

As Riya rounded the corner, she saw Aarav standing beside an old lamppost, hands in his jacket pockets, the expression on his face hard to read. Neha was leaning against the wall, earbuds in place, humming along to a song.

"Late as usual," Aarav said, half-smiling as Riya advanced toward him.

"Sorry!" She grinned, pushing her hair out of her face. "I just got distracted."

Neha popped out her earbuds and raised an eyebrow. "Distracted by what? You have been quite off lately. What's with you?"

Riya opened her mouth almost immediately, ready to dismiss it, but then closed it again. Neha had a way of reading Riya, able to see when something was wrong, even if Riya tried to hide it.

"I don't know," she finally said, in a voice quieter than usual. "Like...everything seems way too normal, you know? As if I am missing out on something."

Aarav raised an eyebrow. "We all are tired of the same old routine. This place has not changed in years!"

Neha nodded, softening in her expression. "I feel you. Things really seem a bit stuck in one loop. But maybe that's not so bad. It is peaceful here."

Riya didn't respond, though. She wished she could agree, but something about that serenity felt like the cover of a mask hiding something within. The more she lingered on the thought, the more she felt that even given the absolutely still Ashford, there was a strange undercurrent of tension- something unspoken.

"Well, I'm ready to call it a day," she finally said, trying to brush off the unsettling contemplation.

"Come on." They walked along, footsteps echoing down the street with the three as close as ever. But Riya's thoughts wandered, and her eyes were scanning the houses and trees alongside their path view. She couldn't shake the feeling that something was just beyond her reach, something she was missing.

Upon reaching the school gates, Riya once again felt the familiar comforts of the place she had spent so many formative years in. Students were milling around, chatting and laughing, infused with the buzz of morning energy. Riya looked in the direction of Aarav and Neha, feeling just a little more comfortable in their company.

But as they entered, Riya turned back once again toward the town. A feeling lingered, something she

could not place, and she found herself wondering just for a moment—what it would be like if things were ever to change.

And whether she would take notice of it.

CHAPTER TWO

The First Piece Missing

The scratching of pencils, the faint hum of the heater, and the slow, rhythmic ticking of the classroom clock. The same course, the same dull monotone that was pushing Riya's eyelids almost to a close. While Mr. Douglas droned on at the front of the room, day in and day out, his high-pitched voice monotonously writing dates and names across the board.

Normally, Riya could at least pretend to pay attention, but today something felt...very wrong.

What it actually was, she did not know. But somehow a knot of discomfort kept twisting tighter in her stomach.

Her fingers played lightly against her desk as her eyes wandered and swept her classmates' familiar faces. Most had been her classmates for ages. There was Aaron who thought it was pretty funny to chew his ink pen's cap until it was all but unrecognizable. Leah doodled flowers in the margins when the rest of the class took notes.

Until her eyes hit an empty desk near the window.

Riya frowned. There was something about that desk that was troubling her; it was not only devoid of a child but also felt...wrong.

She kept staring at it, as if her brain was groping for some elusive thing just beyond her grasp. Someone was supposed to be sitting there. She was absolutely positive about that.

The realization came to her like a bolt from the blue, thus taking her breath away sharply.

Who?

Riya didn't know.

The thought sent a shiver down her spine. She knew all of the students in this class. She could list them off with ease, so why did it feel like someone was missing?

Riya bit nervously on the inside of her cheek, willing the strange feeling away. Maybe she was just tired. Maybe the empty desk had always been empty, and her mind was just playing tricks on her.

But then, she saw something else.

No one else was looking at the desk. No one had even glanced at it. It was not only that they said nothing about the missing student. They acted as if there had never been anyone sitting there at all.

Riya's fingers closed around her pen, squeezing it tighter.

Something was wrong.

The bell rang, causing her to jump. The students around her seized the moment to spring back to life, stuffing books into their bags, trying to catch up with each other as they poured out of the classroom. Riya paused before rising to her feet, glancing back at the empty desk one last time.

Still empty. Still wrong.

Aarav came to her side, slinging his backpack over one shoulder. "You all right? You were daydreaming."

Riya seemed to ponder for a long while; then pointed toward the desk. "Who sat there?"

Aarav followed her gaze, then looked back at her in puzzlement. "Nobody."

"No, someone definitely did," she urged on. "I know that for a fact."

Aarav shook his head and regarded her with a look just shy of strange. "That desk's been empty all year. You good?"

Riya opened her mouth and then shut it again.

What exactly was she supposed to say? I feel that someone existed, and now they don't, and you don't even remember?

Confused thoughts twisted in her mind, but she could only nod. "Yeah. Just... tired."

Aarav didn't seem too convinced but let it go. "Come on, let us leave before Neha starts shouting for ditching her."

She slipped through the tons of students in the hallway after him, still spinning in confusion.

Maybe she was imagining things. Maybe it was so strange, she thought something happened when it really didn't.

But for some reason, deep within, she didn't believe that.

The sensation of emptiness: something—someone—missing curled into her very bones.

And it wouldn't leave.

Later That Day

Riya didn't mention anything again but kept it in her mind all day long.

Now and then, it happened; she herself stole a glance toward that desk, half-expecting someone to show up and half-expecting her memory to kick back in. But the more she thought about it, no matter how hard she tried, it became like grasping on to a vanishing dream—sand slipping through her fingers.

She had lunch with Aarav and Neha at their usual table. The cafeteria buzzed with noise, but Riya could hardly hear anything.

"Something is up now," Neha said, pointing some French fries at her. "What's going on in that overthinking brain of yours?"

Riya hesitated. She was sure of her friends more than anybody else, but even she knew that she sounded insane.

But she must tell.

“This is going to sound weird,” she poked at her food, “but do you... do you guys sometimes feel like something is missing? I mean, like, really missing?”

Neha tilted her head. “What do you mean?”

Riya hesitated a bit and lowered her voice. “A person.”

Aarav exchanged glances with Neha.

Neha raised an eyebrow. “Um... like a dead person?”

“No,” Riya said quickly. “Like, someone who was here, in school, but now they’re just... gone. And no one remembers them.”

Aarav frowned. “Are you talking about that desk again?”

“Yes,” Riya said, exasperated. “I know someone was sitting there. But when I think of their name, I just—I can’t. It’s like they...did not just disappear. It’s like they never even existed at all.”

Neha studied her for a moment and then sighed. “Riya, I think you just—”

But she stopped. Just there.

Her eyebrows knitted into a frown, her lips just slightly parted, as if recollecting what she was about to say.

Riya stared at her. "Neha?"

Neha just blinked. "Uh?"

"You just... stopped talking," Riya said with exquisite slowness.

Neha frowned, confused. "No, I didn't."

"You did," Aarav said weirdly, as he turned towards her. "You started to say something, and then you blanked out."

Neha looked between them, and shook her head. "I don't remember that."

Riya's stomach churned.

Neha had never gone blank before. Ever.

Nothing. It had to be nothing.

But it didn't feel like nothing.

She had hardly touched the rest of her food.

The rest of the day, she felt a weight on her chest.

Something was terribly off about this town.

And she was starting to think it really wasn't all in her head!

CHAPTER THREE

Cracks in the Memory

Riya was restless.

Even after school, back at home, when she tried to keep herself busy with homework, the thought was still there to bother her.

She had always been guided by her instincts, and right now, every fiber of her being was screaming that something was not right.

The missing student. The empty desk. The way Neha just *stopped* speaking as if something had erased her train of thought.

It wasn't normal.

And the worst part: Riya knew she wasn't going mad.

The next morning, she went to school with a purpose. She needed to find answers.

She found Aarav waiting there at their usual spot by the lockers, looking groggy and going through his backpack.

"Morning," he grumbled.

Riya opened her mouth to greet him, but the tension on his face caught her off-guard. "You okay?"

Aarav was hesitant. "Yeah, just... I don't know. Weird morning."

She felt her heart skip a beat. "Weird how?"

Aarav blew through his nose. "I couldn't sleep. Kept thinking about what you said yesterday."

She felt a jolt of relief—she wasn't the only one.

Aarav continued, speaking even quieter now. "I—I don't know if I believe you yet. But I tried to picture our class from memory. And when I got to that desk..."

He trailed off.

Riya leaned in closer. "You couldn't remember who sat there."

Aarav nodded slowly. "It's like... I know someone should be there. But the name, the face—just gone. It's like my mind hits a wall every time I try to think about it."

Riya breathed out. She didn't realize she had been holding her breath.

This was it. She wasn't alone in this.

Aarav shoved his hands into his pockets. "I thought I was just imagining things, but I went through my old notes last night. You know sometimes I doodle on my worksheets?"

Riya nodded.

"I found one from about two months ago," Aarav continued. "It had a seating chart. Our seating chart."

Riya felt her stomach knot. "And?"

Aarav pulled a crumpled paper from his pocket and unfolded it.

He pointed to the small boxes where every seat was indicated.

And there it was.

A desk. A name.

Only...

The name had been scratched out.

Not erased. Not left blank.

Scratched out.

Like pencil scratches had followed the force of an angry hand across the page. There was no way to tell whether someone—Aarav himself?—tried to erase it yet stopped partway.

Riya stared at it, setting the hairs on her arms to rise. "Do you remember writing this?"

Aarav shook his head. "No. But I know that I wouldn't have scratched something out like that unless I was trying to get rid of it entirely."

They exchanged a glance full of meaning, as if they were absorbed in one understanding.

That something or someone had been erased.

And not just from the school.

From *their* minds.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Missing Pieces

The cafeteria was noisy as usual, and in the corner sat Riya, Aarav, and Neha, leaning in together.

"So, you mean to tell me you two are convinced that someone disappeared?" Neha asked, folding her arms.

"We *know* someone disappeared," Riya interrupted. "I have a feeling this is more serious than that. It's not just that someone disappeared; it's as if every trace of that person was erased."

Aarav placed his seating chart on the table. "This seating chart was made months ago. It looks like the name has been scratched out, but I've got no recollection of it whatsoever."

Neha leaned in. "That's kind of weird, I admit."

Aarav crossed his arms. "Riya, you mentioned noticing something else, right? About whatever Neha just zapped out of existence yesterday?"

Neha frowned. "What?"

"You were talking," Riya stated. "And in the middle of a sentence, you just stopped. You had no recollection of doing that when we pointed it out."

Neha's expression changed from one of skepticism to a tiny bit of concern. "Okay, that *does* sound kind of creepy."

Riya pressed on. "What if that's part of it? What if people don't just vanish—what if our memories are *being erased*?"

"That's insane," Aarav scoffed.

"But it makes sense," Riya insisted. "If someone normally went missing, we'd know them. We'd have questions. You have a missing person's report. But if no one remembers they ever existed... then there wouldn't be anything to question."

Aarav and Neha exchanged glances.

Riya swallowed. "What if this has happened before? What if this isn't new? This has been going on for quite some time now. And nobody even knows."

A heavy silence fell over the table.

Finally, Aarav was the one to break the silence.

"Let's say you are right. What are we supposed to do?" he said in a slow tone while rubbing his forehead.

Riya hesitated. She hadn't thought that far into the future yet.

But now that they were getting aware of something going on, they couldn't just ignore it.

"We need to start monitoring," she said. "We start writing things down; we take notes. Note anything strange—any gaps in memory or empty spaces where

there shouldn't be and we have to write them down before they are wiped off of our minds also."

Neha drummed the table with her fingertips. "And what if that is true? What if people are actually being erased?"

Riya cast her eyes around the cafeteria, a mixture of happy children engaging in laughter and conversation, unaware that there might be someone missing among them.

She then met Neha's stare. "Then we'll figure out who or what it is."

CHAPTER FIVE

Pieces That Don't Fit

Riya opened her diary, the pen making a heartbeat against the page.

Date: March 10

- Checked all notes. Any gaps left?
- Seating chart from Aarav; a name is totally scratched out.
- Neha went blank when she was supposed to provide some details; why?

She sighed heavily. They tried to crack something, but from where she stood, it was like working on a jigsaw puzzle with half its pieces missing.

Aarav leaned back in his desk and stared down at his notes. "This is pointless."

Neha sighed, and fiddled with her pen in a lazy circle. "This is so wrong. We keep writing things down, but if this thing is erasing people and our memories, what will stop it from erasing our notes too?"

Riya knitted her brows. "You have a point." She dug into her backpack and fished out a Polaroid.

Aarav raised an eyebrow. "Where did you get it from?"

"My dad's old camera. If we take pictures, at least we have proof in our hands, right? Also, this is so much harder to erase."

Neha nodded slowly. "That makes sense. But it still doesn't place us back to where we want to be. No names, no faces, no nothing."

Riya tapped the pen in rhythm against her notebook and suddenly froze.

"No names... but we do have a place missing."

Aarav and Neha exchanged glances.

"The desk," said Riya. "Someone was sitting there. We don't remember who, but it was occupied."

Aarav's back became a little straighter. "So whoever could have made it should give us a real clue."

Neha finished. "We get our first real clue."

Riya took her phone. "Let's check the attendance records."

Neha frowned. "Do you think they keep that lying around in the school?"

"Not at school, but I have an idea where we may find them," Riya said.

The Library Search

The town library was almost empty; just the librarian and one or two stray visitors remained. They grouped together around one of the public computers, searching through old yearbooks and attendance lists.

“Okay, here are last year's class lists...wait up.”

“What?” Riya asked, drawing closer.

“There's something off about the list.” Aarav squinted at the screen.

Neha frowned. “How do you know that?”

Aarav paused briefly, then gestured toward the screen. “There was a name missing.”

Riya took a deep breath in. “How do you know?”

Aarav exhaled. “I don't know. Just check the format. The names for this one are in alphabetical order, right? There's a space between 'Patel, Arjun' and 'Ramirez, Sofia.' This should not happen. Like something was... removed.”

Neha's eyes grew wide. “Oh my gosh. So someone was here.”

They gazed at the screen.

Finally, they had proof.

An actual, physical hole in reality.

Riya took out her Polaroid camera and clicked the shot. The photo began to print, slowly developing.

“This is it,” she said in a hush. “This is our first real clue.”

Aarav and Neha nodded in tacit agreement to the gravity of the moment.

And right before their eyes—

The name vanished.

The screen flickered; the void in the list was over. The names readjusted themselves as though nothing had ever been amiss.

Aarav pushed back from the chair. "What the—"

Riya found herself staring at the picture she held in her hands.

Except... It was empty.

The picture had developed; it was a yearbook page. The hole, the name that was missing—is gone.

It has erased itself.

Their first real clue—shattered.

Neha swallowed. "Guys... whatever's doing this, it knows we're looking."

Riya clenched her fists. "Then, we just need to look harder."

CHAPTER SIX

If You Blink, It's Gone

Riya's fingers trembled.

She looked at the blank Polaroid, willing it to come back with a name. Nothing happened.

Neha whispered, "This is impossible. The picture was there—we all saw it."

"I know," Aarav said, rubbing his temples. "We can't pretend this is normal anymore. This isn't just people disappearing; reality is shifting to cover this up."

Riya took a deep breath, forcing her mind to work. If that thing—whatever it was—could wipe memories and physical evidence, how could they fight it?

The place was quiet as the heart of a library should be. The same normality surrounded her, with two children studying and an old man flipping through the pages of a newspaper.

None had noticed what just took place.

That sent a shiver down her spine.

If this could happen before their eyes and people could carry on normally as if nothing happened...How many other things had they already forgotten?

Neha cleared her throat before she spoke, "So, what do we do now? Because I don't know about you guys, but I'd definitely prefer not to be erased from existence."

Aarav drummed his fingers on the table. "We need something that cannot be changed. Something it cannot erase."

Riya's mind raced. "We thought pictures would work, but whatever's doing this can reach them too." She looked up and then tapped the table. "What if we go analog? No cameras, no tech. What if we write things down in a way that cannot be tampered with?"

Neha frowned. "Like what? Bedrock?"

Aarav snapped his fingers. "No. Ink."

Riya's eyes widened. "Ink that can't be washed off."

Neha was on a roll. "If we write things down with a pen and flesh them out in a way that can't be altered, it probably won't erase it just like that."

They were clutching at straws, but it really was the only theory they had.

"A controlled test," Riya said. "Something small. Something recent."

Aarav got out a pen and his notebook. "Okay. What do we clearly know about it?"

Riya and Neha leaned in. Aarav began writing.

- **People have disappeared, leaving no memories of them.**

- They disappear and only the three of us remember.
- All sorts of physical proof disappear.
- Reality shifts in order to cover this gap.

He clicked the pen shut. "Now, we wait."

Something's Watching

The rest of the day slipped by in a haze. Again and again, Riya surprised herself by looking back over her shoulder, half-expecting something to spring forth at her.

Yet nothing ever did.

Finally, by the time the bell rang to signal the end of the school day, Riya felt completely exhausted.

Aarav was waiting by the lockers. "Notebook's still here." He flipped it open and, tapping lightly on one page, said, "Everything's still the same."

Neha sighed with relief. "Then it can't erase ink?"

Aarav just shrugged. "Or maybe it just *hasn't* yet."

Riya frowned. Something felt... *off*.

The hallway was almost empty, as most of the other students had already left. The fluorescent lights flickered just a tad bit.

And then— A whisper.

Riya stopped moving. It was not really a voice. More like a breath: a *presence*.

She turned quickly and scanned the hallway.

Nothing.

Just a janitor mopping the floor. A couple of posters on the walls.

Neha caught sight of her stiff posture. "Riya?"

Riya brushed it away. "Nothing. Let's just go."

But even as they were leaving, she couldn't shake off the feeling that something-*someone* was watching.....

And waiting.

CHAPTER SEVEN

The First Test

Riya had hardly slept that night. Every shadow in her room felt too deep; every noise, too sharp.

Checking her phone the next morning, she sat straight up: **6:42 AM.**

She grabbed her backpack and rushed to meet the others before school.

Aarav was already flipping through his notebook, and his expression made her stomach drop.

Neha arrived a beat later. "Okay, what's wrong?"

Aarav swallowed hard and turned the notebook toward them.

The words were still there.

But they weren't *right*.

Some letters were... smudged. Warped. Twisted into shapes that didn't make sense.

Her pulse thrummed faster. "That—"

Aarav's voice was tight. "It didn't erase them."

Neha finished the thought. "It *changed* them."

They all stared at the ink, at the words that had shifted overnight.

Like something that had reached into their reality and rewritten it.

Aarav's knuckles had turned white around the edges of the notebook. "Now we're not just dealing with vanishings," he said quietly.

Riya's mouth went dry.

Because he was right.

This thing—whatever it was—was no longer just erasing people.

It was rewriting *everything*.

And if it could do that...

How long would it be before it started rewriting them?

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Edge of a Memory

Something was not right.

The day just felt rather off, like some blurred dream that Riya was always on the verge of remembering but could just never quite manage to pin down while she was awake.

At lunchtime, Riya, Aarav, and Neha sat at their usual table with their trays pushed aside and forgotten. The cafeteria just buzzed around them—normal buzz. Well, normal except for them.

"We need to do something," whispered Riya.

"What? Our last test showed this thing is more powerful than we thought," Aarav tapped his pen against the table.

"But it didn't erase everything," Neha hesitated. "It changed your words, Aarav. That means it has limits."

Riya's stomach tightened. "So, there might be a way in which we can beat it."

Neha nodded, her expression suddenly clouded. "Hey, do you guys remember—" With that, she stopped.

Confused, she blinked.

"What do you mean by that?" Aarav raised an eyebrow.

Neha opened her mouth, then shut it again. Her expression tensed, as if she were straining to remember something that had just slipped away.

Riya's heart jumped into her throat. "Neha?"

"Uh—just wanted to say something important," Neha rubbed her temples. "But I can't remember what."

Riya felt a sharp chill run down her spine.

This isn't just the changing of the past; something was fiddling with the right here and right now.

Before they could say more, the bell rang.

And just like that, the conversation got lost....

The Missing Page

That night, Riya picked up her notebook. She wasn't going to let this slip away.

She opened it blank, writing large and clear:

If you forget, read this.

The next morning, she had a headache and reached for it.

Then she flipped to where she had written the note. And froze.

The page wasn't erased. It wasn't ripped out.

It was gone.

Not a single trace of it remained. Like it never existed.

Her hands shook.

This wasn't just erasing people.

This was erasing entire memories.

And if it could do that.....how long till they forgot themselves?

CHAPTER NINE

Breaking Point

Riya slammed her notebook shut, the pounding of her heart echoing in her ears.

This was no forgotten memory: That page had vanished.

She rushed to school, hardly waiting for Aarav and Neha before pulling them into a deserted hall.

"The page I wrote has disappeared," she blurted. "Not erased—gone."

Neha widened her eyes in shock.

Aarav swore under his breath. "This thing is getting bolder," he muttered. "First people, then words, now our thoughts?"

Neha clenched her fists. "So what now? How do we fight a thing that literally erases proof?"

Riya took a shaky breath. "We stop depending on writing. If it is erasing things that we write down, we have to outthink it."

Aarav nodded. "We memorized everything. And we said things out loud to one another so that we all remembered."

Neha hesitated. "But what if it can erase spoken words too?"

Silence.

They hadn't thought of that before.

Aarav exhaled sharply. "Then we use words as a touchstone and find out how far it goes before it slips up."

Riya met his eyes. She knew what he meant.

They needed a real test.

Something it couldn't erase so easily.

The Second Test

After classes, they met in her room at Riya's house.

Aarav took out his phone. "I'm gonna record something. If it disappears on us, we'll know it's more powerful than we thought."

He started recording and spoke clearly.

"If you're watching this, then that means something is taking people away, erasing them from existence. If this video was gone... then that means it can erase proof too."

He stopped recording and stared at the screen. "Check this in an hour."

Riya, trembling, looked at the clock.

One hour.

Would the video still be there?

Or would it go away along with everything else—
vanished, as if it never even existed?

CHAPTER TEN

The Message That Shouldn't Exist

Gone.
The video was gone.

Neha swore under her breath. Aarav gripped his phone like he could will the video back into existence.

Riya whispered, "This thing, whatever it is, doesn't just erase proof. It erases the idea of proof."

Aarav threw his phone onto the bed. "Then we're screwed."

Neha wasn't listening. She stared at the phone, her hands shaking. "Wait." Her voice was barely audible. "Check your messages."

Aarav frowned. "Why?"

"Just do it."

He took his phone and opened his text messages. His finger hovered over the messages, then stopped cold.

One unread message.

From an unknown number. No name. No history.
Just one message, sent exactly an hour ago.

“I saw the video.”

Riya’s breath caught.

“What the—” Aarav tapped on the message but found no other information. No reply option. There’s no way to trace the number.

Neha looked pale. “Someone saw it. Someone remembers.”

Riya’s heart raced. “But that’s impossible. If the video never existed—”

Aarav turned the phone around. “Then who the hell sent this?”

A shrill silence fell on the room. Somewhere out there, in the penumbra of the remembered and the forgotten...

Someone else knows the truth.

And they had just made contact.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The Unknown Sender

Aarav trembled as he lifted his phone.

"This must be a glitch," he muttered again and again, refreshing his messages. The text remained. Just sat there, mocking them.

"I saw the video."

Riya's mind was spinning. "But that doesn't make sense. The video was erased. There was nothing left!"

Neha grabbed Aarav's phone and tried to reply.

Nothing.

There was no typing bar, no send option. It was like the message had been dropped into existence by something that was highly improbable to be there.

Aarav swallowed hard. "Okay, we need to think. If someone saw the video, then that means-"

"They live in the outside world," Neha completed.

"They remember what has been erased."

Riya stood up, pacing. "But then we're not alone. Someone else knows what's going on."

Neha's voice was taut. "But do they want to help?"

Aarav's phone burst into life. The three of them jumped. A second message appeared.

"Come to the place where things go to be forgotten."

A stillness.

Riya felt the blood leave her face. "What does that mean?"

Aarav stared at the words as if they might shift if he blinked.

Neha's breath hitched. "I think I know."

They turned to her.

Neha's voice came out in little more than a whisper. "The abandoned library."

CHAPTER TWELVE

The Forgotten Library

The air sat heavier as Riya, Aarav, and Neha stood in front of the abandoned library.

A crumbling structure, half swallowed by vines and years of neglect. The town had shut it down years ago; no one so much as discussed why. They simply.....forgot it was here.

"This place gives me the creeps," Aarav muttered.

Neha folded her arms. "We got a cryptic text from a ghost number telling us to come here. What, exactly, could you have been expecting? A welcome sign?"

Riya ignored them. She moved ahead; the door hung slightly ajar, as if beckoning. She pushed. It creaked as it fought against the wind, then finally shrieked as it opened. Dust swirled in the air as they stepped in.

The library smelled of old paper and time itself. Shelves leaned, and books cluttered the floor, untouched for years.

Hollowly Aarav cheered, "All right, so here we are. Now what?"

A soft thudding sound from deeper within.

They froze.

Riya's heart raced. "We're not alone."

A shadow flitted between the shelves.

Aarav's fists tightened. "Show yourself!"

Silence.

Then —

"You actually came."

A voice. Deep, familiar — warped, really, like it half belonged.

Neha huffed once. "Who are you?"

A figure stepped into the dim light.

Riya's stomach dropped.

She eyed that face.

Knew it far too well.

Because this belonged to someone who had disappeared.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

A Face from the Void

Riya could hardly breathe.
She knew that face.

It was Ray Smith.

A boy from their school. A boy who had vanished two months ago. A boy who nobody except for them was supposed to remember.

And yet, here he was.

Standing in the ruins of the forgotten library, looking at them like they were ghosts.

Aarav stumbled back. “No. No way.”

Neha grabbed hold of Riya’s arm. “This isn’t possible. He—he was erased.”

Ray stepped closer; his dark eyes scanned their faces. “You remember me?” His voice was laced with something raw—hope mixed with fear and disbelief.

Riya’s throat felt dry. “Of course we do.”

Ray exhaled sharply, running his hand through his messy hair. “Then you’re like me.”

Aarav swallowed hard. “Like you? how?”

Ray hesitated. Then— “You haven’t been erased yet.”

A silence stretched between them, thick with unspoken terror.

Riya forced herself to speak. “What happened to you? Where did you go?”

Ray glanced around as if the shadows themselves were listening. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “One moment, I was here. Then... I wasn’t.” His fingers twitched. “Like being in a limbo no one can see—a place of no sound, no light—just...nothing.”

Neha shivered. “Then how did you come back?”

Ray tightened his jaw. “I don’t know. One day, I just was again. Here. In this library.”

His eyes locked onto Riya’s. “And I think I know why.”

Riya’s heart started pounding. “Why?”

Ray shook his head, then blinked. “Because something broke the pattern.”

Aarav frowned. “What does that even mean?”

A whisper came from Ray: “It means that whatever’s making people disappear—it isn’t perfect.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Cracks in the System

Ray's words hung in the air, heavy with unease.
The pattern's broken.

Riya couldn't wrap her head around it. "What do you mean, the pattern's broken?"

Ray paced in front of them, his hands running through his hair. "I don't know how to explain it... But it's like somebody's been pressing 'reset' on everything. Erasing memories, erasing people but it's not flawless. Something happened. I don't know what, but I'm back. And I think we have a shot at stopping it."

Neha shook her head, struggling to keep up. "You just... disappeared. And then you came back. How do we even begin to comprehend what just happened?"

Ray stopped before them, eyes dark and intense. "The library. It's important. I think there is some sort of key in here. A connection, or whatever is causing all of this."

Riya felt all the hair on the back of her neck rise. "So, you've been here the whole time?"

Ray bobbed his head slowly. "One day I woke up in the back room. I didn't even know how I got there."

Everything was wrong. No one remembered me. But I did. I remember you. I remember all of you."

His gaze connected with Riya's. "You guys didn't forget me."

Riya felt a strange warmth spread through her chest. She wanted to trust him. She had to trust him.

Aarav crossed his arms. "But how does it help us? If it's an important place, why hasn't it been erased?"

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

The Forgotten Pages

The library luxuriated in the smell of age, just like a place shut away from the outside world for too long. The dust stuck on every surface, every shelf, as if the place had been abandoned to time itself. The books, mostly in disarray on the shelves, looked old, the titles faded and the pages yellowing due to time spent on the shelves collecting dust without being opened.

"Okay," Riya said, ruining the silence. "If the key lies in these books, then we've just got to find something—anything—that doesn't belong here."

approached one of the shelves, his fingertips brushing over the spines of the long-abandoned books. "So you're saying these books are... not quite like this?"

Ray was nodding, scanning the room, as if the books themselves were going to tell him something. "Yeah, something's hidden here for sure. Somebody might have left us a message; a clue was waiting to be referred to all this time."

Neha gazed at the wall of books, her mind racing. "So we just start pulling books out of the shelves and hope that one of them will de-spell something?"

Ray gave her a dim smile. "Not exactly. But we need a pointer towards something... unusual.

Uncharacteristic for the state of abandoned libraries—a misplaced or simply forgotten book."

They dispersed around the room, examining everything that caught their attention. As Riya searched longer, she felt like they'd only been wasting their time. She needed a break. A break they could really scrabble on.

And then—

She found it.

A book hidden behind other volumes, almost as if someone had wanted to conceal it on purpose. It had no title on the cover, just a plain, faded black binding. It didn't belong here. An energy that one couldn't describe nearly hummed around it.

Riya pulled it off the shelf, a strange tugging at her chest as she opened the first page.

The book was empty.

Nothing but blank pages stared back at her.

"Hey, guys—come look at this," she called.

Aarav and Neha rushed over, their footsteps echoing in silence. The two stared at the empty pages, eyebrows raised.

"Is it some kind of prank?" Neha asked, touching the pages lightly.

"No," Riya whispered. "It's... it's not."

She flipped through more pages, page after page of emptiness. But then, something caught her eye: near the

end, it appeared. A single line lingered, printed on what was evidently the final page.

"The pattern is the key."

Riya froze.

Aarav leaned over her shoulder. "Did that just... appear?"

Riya's heart thundered within her. "Yes. And it means something. The pattern is the key to everything that's going on."

Ray stepped closer, a grim expression on his face. "It's here. The clue we've been waiting for."

In that moment, time stood still for the library as they all stared at the words.

The pattern.

The key.

What in the world could it mean?

Riya closed the book, her mind racing. The signal had they come upon something monumental? What does it mean for them? An answer they had sought or another web of confusion to tread carefully on?

Now she could feel it; they were getting closer. But closer to what?

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Cracking the Code

The words from the book echoed back and forth in Riya's mind. *The pattern is the key.* It felt....mostly irritating. It is a riddle the four of them had to solve...they were staring at a lock with no right keys.

"What pattern?" Aarav asked as if suddenly willfully back. "What pattern are we supposed to be looking for?"

Riya turned the book over in her hands. As if the cover has some other secret. "It is probably something in the town, right? The disappearances, the lapses in memory....that has to be the pattern."

Neha bit her lip. "But how do we see the pattern? We are not exactly dealing with a simple puzzle here."

Ray slowly shook his head. "It's not about seeing the pattern; it's about understanding the pattern. The erasures. The disappearance of people from the mind, yet they have not acknowledged it. All these connect. Just that we were searching in the wrong places."

Riya frowned. "But then where else is there to look?"

Ray's stare became sharp; he took a deep breath. "We need to return and investigate their source. The

library is only a part of it. The real key must be connected to the very existence of this town."

Aarav raised an eyebrow. "The whole town?"

Ray nodded. "It's not just the disappearances that matter, it's how they are happening. People vanish and, more importantly, are expunged from the very fabric of this place. It is like they were never here. Only if we derive the understanding of how that can happen can all our questions bear an answer."

Riya felt a chill run down her spine. They were talking about erasure like it was some abstract concept. But it wasn't. They spoke in reference to people who had not *existed*: people with memories, families, and lives seemingly forgotten by everyone else but them.

"How do we get to the source?" asked Riya, her voice almost trembling.

Ray's gaze became distant. "I don't know," he said. "But my intuition is that it connects to something even older than what we think. Something buried long ago."

Though this time with a plan, the library was a relics out-layed world for them. That evening, Riya wouldn't be able to shake off the unsettling feeling. They did not now possess real answers. There were only more questions.

The next day, they again met at the premises of the library.

"We need to find something that's hidden," said Riya, her eyes scanning the space around them. "Something that connects these disappearances."

Neha had crossed her arms while taking an interrupted examination of the room. "How do you think the one dusty, old building could hold any answers?"

Ray came in. "It's not only the library itself," explained Ray. "It's the history, the past that haunts us. The people that came before us. The stories left between these walls. Something we just missed for years."

Once again, they were scattered, browsing through the facts behind dusty, withered books and magazines while flipping through them. They surely knew they were closer, but every other road felt like another heading that took them nowhere. The deeper they went with the exploration, the more it seemed that the library thanks to its deep mysteries swallowed them whole.

And then Aarav let out a sharp gasp. "I found something!"

They hurried in his direction toward the bottom shelf. It was a thickly leather-bound journal. It was ancient. It looked like something that had lain wherever for centuries before.

"Is that...?" Neha started.

"Yeah," Aarav said while carefully flipping it open. "This looks like a diary. The name is on the front." He squinted his eyes to read it. "It says.....Eleanor Blackwood."

A cold shiver ran down Riya's spine. She recognized the name.

Eleanor Blackwood was an old family name that hadn't been spoken about for decades.

"What's so special about her?" Neha asked, peering over Aarav's shoulder.

"She is one of the founding families of this town," Riya mumbled close to a whisper.

Ray looked up from the book. "That's it. *Eleanor Blackwood* is the key to understanding all of this."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

The Secrets of Blackwood

Riya felt the weight of the journal in her hands, a heavy tome like one that contained more than just words: it was a legacy of hidden truths that had waited for them all along.

"Eleanor Blackwood," murmured Riya with soft softness in her voice. "One of the founders... But what does she have to do with all of this?"

Ray stepped closer and peered over Aarav's shoulder. "We're about to find out."

Aarav opened the journal, and the brittle pages cracked beneath his fingertips. The handwriting was elegant, and precise—a stark contrast to the worn and forgotten nature of the book.

"This is old, Riya. Way older than anything we've seen so far." Aarav traced a finger down the first entry. "Look at this—'The curse of the Blackwoods runs deeper than anyone understands. The foundation of this town is built on lies, and soon the truth will come crashing down, leaving nothing but shadows.'"

Neha leaned in, her eyes wide in curiosity. "The curse? What curse?"

Ray shook his head, staring at the page. "It's all connected. This town's history... it's not what we thought it was. This place—we—are tied to something much darker."

Riya's pulse quickened. "So Eleanor Blackwood knew about the curse. She knew what would happen."

Aarav nodded, his eyes scanning down the pages. "There's more." He began to read aloud:

"The foundation of the town wasn't laid in peace and hope, but it has made a pact long ago with something ancient and powerful. And for that, the price would be far too steep for one to realize. The people here will pay for their ignorance, and soon... the erasures will begin."

Riya's breath hitched. "Sacrifice? What does that mean?"

Ray was quiet for a long time, his brow furrowed in what could have seemed like thought. "It means the people who founded this town did something... something terrible. They made a deal with... with whatever force is behind all of this. A deal that binds the town in some sort of curse."

Neha shook her head like she just couldn't see the logic in it. "This doesn't make sense. Why would they have done a deal with something like this, and for what reason?"

Riya felt a pit form in her stomach. "What if the people that disappeared... they were part of the sacrifice? What if they're the ones paying the price for the town to prosper?"

Ray clenched his fists. "I think you are absolutely right."

"Look here," Aarav interrupted while flicking to a new page. "This part is different. It's in a separate section, almost like a warning." He read aloud yet again.

"The pattern's unbreakable. Only those who remember the forgotten can disrupt the cycle. But beware; the cost of breaking the curse is greater than anyone can imagine."

A chill ran down Riya's spine. "What is the cost?"

Ray's expression darkened. "I don't know, but whatever it is, it's bad. Really bad."

Neha shivered. "So then what do we do now? If the curse is unbreakable... what can we do to stop it?"

Riya looked at the journal and her friends. She felt the weight of that situation pressing her down, but deep inside she knew that they couldn't give up now. "We keep digging. The answers are here. They've been concealed, but they are here. We have to find them before it is too late."

For a moment, they all stood silent, and tension hung in the air. It was dark before them, beyond vision, but one thing was clear: they would go through it together. Turning back was not an option now, anyway.

They had a mystery to be solved. And no one had the courage to think of the price to sense failure.

The Curse of Ashford

The dust in the deserted library was thick, but beyond that—it pulsed, like something was alive and watching. The candle flame danced wildly, sending flickering shadows across the stone walls, as if something was shifting within them.

Riya clung to the journal, her breaths shallow. "We must know this," she whispered, opening the next yellowed page.

Aarav leaned forward. "The truth about Eleanor Blackwood."

The ink had been darkened to almost burnt onto the page:

"Eleanor Blackwood stood at the veil of worlds in winter, 1643. She had not been the first to ask for power from the Old Ones, but the first to suggest paying more than blood— a town, a future, a heritage for the power to command the land."

Neha grimaced. "The Old Ones?"

Ray's voice was tight. "Not gods. Not demons. Something else."

Riya read on, her shaking fingers moving to the next words.

"Beyond the power of time, they wait. The Old Ones do not rule with fire and fury, but with silence and shadows. They erase, they devour, and in return, they gift. But their gifts are always corrupted."

She flipped the page, and the writing appeared different, darker, as if it had been done in haste.

"Eleanor craved power, and They listened. She asked that her town flourish—crops that would never wilt, soil that would never give in, prosperity for everyone who lived within Ashford's walls. Good fortune comes with a cost, though. They granted her wish. And thus, They took their price: an offering that would last eternally."

Riya's breathing caught. "She made a sacrifice of her own people."

Aarav's air escaped him in a harsh whistle. "It's worse than that."

"The price was not only life. The price was forgettable. Every so often, someone would be taken—not just in body, but in mind. Their names, their faces, their very lives were erased, as if they never existed. Because of this, the town would prosper. So long as nobody remembered the disappeared, the cycle would never be broken."

Neha's whisper was barely audible. "That's why no one remembers them. The Old Ones don't take people. They erase them."

There was a thick silence between them. But Riya knew there was something more. There was always something more.

She turned another page.

And her blood turned cold.

"The cycle was never meant to end with Eleanor. When she died, the Old Ones did not take her—they made her one of Their own. She became Their Keeper, the guardian of the veil, the keeper of the curse. The one who watches. The one who chooses. The one who ensures the debt is always paid."

Aarav swore under his breath. "She's still here."

Neha's head jerked up. "What are you talking about?"

Riya felt the weight of the words seep into her marrow. Eleanor never really died.

Ray swallowed. "She got folded into the bargain. The Keeper. She's the one who takes them now. That's why the vanishings never stopped."

"The Keeper moves unseen, bound to Ashford, biding her time in the dark. She preserves the forgotten. She bides her time for those who remember. And when they do— she claims them."

The candle shook with an angry motion.

Somehow deep within the library, a floorboard creaked.

A shiver ran down Riya's back.

They were being watched.

And Eleanor Blackwood waited.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

The Unseen Hand

The air in the library felt thicker now, like something was closing in on them. The heavy sensation of the journal, laden with inscrutable words, sat in a deep fort on their minds to leave them more confused than filled with connection. There was a nagging feeling in Riya that they had charted a course for somewhere unknown but were forced to go on by something unseen—propelled toward whatever fate awaited them even if their instincts told them to run like hell.

She peered down at the pages they most recently flipped through, mind racing still. "Okay, so we know the curse is quite real. And we know that it has something to do with the history of the town. But how do we even get close to breaking it?"

Neha gaped at the journal, as if waiting for an answer to spring out at her. "Remember the forgotten about... Do you think that means we have to find people who know about the history? People who might remember things that others don't?"

Ray agreed: "Maybe. But this is way bigger than memory. It's like the whole town has been erased from existence—people disappearing and, in a way, just not ever having been here at all."

Aarav clenched his jaw. "Worse than that... we will be the only ones remembering. What if we are next? What if we are the next ones to be erased from everyone's mind?"

Riya's stomach dropped at the thought. "We just can't have that—a chance for anybody else to vanish."

"But how do we stop it?" Neha asked quietly, a shiver of fear hanging in her voice. "How could one stand up to something that erases people from existence?"

Ray snapped the journal shut. "Though we know only part of the story, we have to act. Time is running out. We have to find the connections between these disappearances and how exactly it connects with the curse."

The friends were at a loss for words, lost in their own thoughts. The library walls were beginning to close in, as if the very air that spiraled through them vibrated with secrets of the town. For Riya, it felt like standing on the edge of a cliff. One false step could send her falling into an abyss from which they would never escape.

It was then that Riya said, "We have got to go to the place where this town was founded. That is to say, if Eleanor Blackwood was aware of this curse, then so were the answers they were looking for. More than like it, the whole search is done in the dark. It is essential to figure out the point from which it all started."

Aarav nodded. "The founding site?" He mused. "Surely, it could be something there, maybe more clues that we have overlooked till now."

Ray stared at her with a mix of caution and agreement. "It'll be dangerous, I tell you," He said. "We don't know what we'll find out about or what's lying in wait for us."

"It's like we're walking into a lion's den," Neha said, shuddering again. "But we no longer have a choice, do we?" Riya shook her head.

"No. We do not. We have got to finish this, and that should be done at this moment."

Finding the spot where the town was established had not been easy. Over the years, Town had expanded, and most of the landmarks were either actually forgotten or so hidden that they were effectively forgotten. But the four friends knew that they could not afford to waste time. So, with courage, they set out toward the outskirts of Town where the founding site was supposedly located.

As they were walking, Riya began feeling that someone or something was watching them. The air was unnaturally still, moreover, the atmosphere thickened with dread as if they had just stepped into the pages of history itself. The trees lining the paths were bigger than life, with gnarled branches stretching out, trying to inhibit their every move.

With every step they took, Riya began wondering what they had really gotten themselves into. Who was the cause behind the curse? And why did Eleanor

Blackwood strongly warn them about the price they would have to pay for breaking it?

They arrived at the site just as the sun began to set, throwing long shadows across the ground. The locus was denoted by a crumbling stone monument, half-hidden by overgrown vines. Riya felt a shiver run down her spine as she approached it.

"This is it," she said, her voice barely above a whisper.

Neha pulled a strand of hair back from her face. "It looks... abandoned. And kind of eerie."

Ray examined the monument closely. "It's older than it looks. This isn't just a regular landmark—It is the heart of the town's origins. Whatever happened here is what is causing everything to fall apart."

Aarav stepped forward, his eyes scanning the area. "There's something off about this place. It feels like it's... waiting for something to happen."

Riya took a step closer, narrowing her eyes as she examined the monument closely and found engraved there a symbol she had identified in the journal: *the same pattern*.

"This is it," she whispered. "The pattern—this is where it all started."

With her friends now around the monument, a sudden chill swept through the air. Riya could feel the very ground beneath her begin to shift, as if something was rising from deep beneath it.

The very stones under her feet felt as though they were vibrating, and she heard a faint but very eerie whisper coming from the wind.

"Are we too late?" Aarav asked, his voice quivering.

"I don't think we are late," Ray muttered, the frown on his face becoming cut deep. "I think we're right on time."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The Awakening

The air around the monument felt heavy and oppressive, as if the very earth exhaling beneath their feet held its breath. Riya could feel the vibrations underfoot, pulsing like the heartbeat of something ancient and powerful, something that had been lying dormant for centuries. The wind whispered secrets in strange foreign languages, swirling unpredictably around them.

"Did you hear that?" Neha asked, her voice trembling. "It... it sounded like a voice. A woman's voice."

Riya's heart raced as she scanned the surroundings. "It's not just the wind. There's something here. Something we can't see."

Aarav drew closer to the monument, his brow furrowed as though concentrating hard. "This symbol... It's the same one in the journal. The one that's been guiding us all this time." His hands stretched out towards the sculpture, but as his fingertips brushed against the cold stone, he jumped back in a flash of sudden cold that startled him so much that he nearly fell.

"Are you okay?" Riya asked, rushing to his side.

"I'm fine. Just... felt something," Aarav replied, his voice shaky. "It's like it's alive."

Ray took a step back, his face pale. "Maybe we shouldn't touch it. If that symbol is really connected to some kind of curse, it might activate something that we're awakening. Something we don't want to deal with."

Riya's eyes stayed fixed on the symbol. As she looked longer and longer at it, she felt it draw to her with a magnetism like no other. Every line, every curve called out to her, beckoning her forward like an unseen magnetic field. There was a deep, primal part of her that knew this was the key to everything, but another part of her feared the consequences.

But she couldn't back away now. They were too close to the truth.

"We can't be afraid," Riya said, her voice firm. "We've come this far. We can't stop now."

She took a step forward and laid her hand down on the stone. Almost immediately, the vibrations underfoot intensified. The wind blew fiercely and eerie shadows grew long and reached out menacingly onto them. The temperature dropped, and Riya could see her breath in the air.

Then there seemed to be a soft sparkling response to her touch as a symbol engraved upon the stone ignited softly first, but it soon brightened and then burst to life with a deep, cold light that sent shivers down the spine. The ground shook beneath them, and a low rumbling sound echoed from deep within the earth.

“What is happening? Neha whispered, her voice filled with awe and terror.

Riya’s heart pounded in her chest. She felt like the whole town held its collective breath, waiting for some unimaginable thing to go down.

Then, a voice—soft and ethereal—echoed through the air.

"You’ve awakened what should have remained forgotten."

It was a clear voice, so distinct and beautiful, though it seemed like it was somehow from another realm, far off and ethereal.

Riya’s blood ran cold. "Who... who are you?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

And then the breeze died down, leaving an unsettling stillness. For a split second, nothing but the gentle shimmer of the mark and the thumping of their hearts.

Then, the voice spoke again, louder this time.

"I am the Keeper. The one bound to the curse. You’ve come to claim the truth, but be warned—every truth comes with a price. You’ve been looking for people who might have gone away times ago, erased from the memories of most. And now, so shall you."

Riya’s breath caught in her throat. She turned to her friends, and their faces showed shock and fear alike.

"What does that mean? Aarav whispered, his eyes wide with fear.

Ray clenched his fists. "It means we're running out of time."

The symbol glows and flares with light casting long and deep shadows everywhere. Suddenly this monument seems bigger, like a hard looking old guard standing over something dark and mysterious.

The ground trembled again, and Riya stumbled, barely catching herself on the stone.

"This is bad," Neha said, backing away. "We're making things worse. We need to leave—now."

But Riya shook her head. "We can't. We're in too deep. We need to know what's happening. We can't leave until we know the truth."

The voice returned, this time sounding colder, more final.

"The price has already been set. You cannot escape it. The curse calls for that which you owe and you'll be swept away like everyone who has gone before you. Don't count on going down without a fight though. As you've heard before, we're tough, and it won't be like that for you."

Riya's pulse quickened. "No... we won't let that happen. We'll fight it."

The voice grew quieter, almost mournful.

"The cycle cannot be broken. The forgotten ones will always return to the shadows. It is their fate. It is your fate."

Riya stood firm, refusing to give in. She was really scared, alright, but she knew she wasn't going to let this curse define them. She has got to stop it from making them who they are. Not when they were so close to understanding it all.

"We'll figure out a way to crack it," she ventured quietly, as much to herself as to anyone.

The voice fell quiet but the glow of that symbol wouldn't wane. It pulsed rhythmically, as if alive. The ground still trembled beneath their feet. The moment felt suspended in time—one breath away from something inevitable.

Aarav swallowed hard. "So what now?"

Riya locked eyes on that pulsing symbol and her resolve crystallized. "We keep going. We don't turn back."

The monument seemed to whisper again, but this time, Riya wasn't listening to the warning. She had a purpose now. She had to finish this.

They had no other choice but to move on and face what lurked in the darkness that stretched ahead.

CHAPTER TWENTY

The Unraveling

The friends stood in stunned silence, the monument's light casting an otherworldly glow on their faces. The voice that had resounded from the stone still echoed in the air, heavy and ominous. Each word had impressed itself on their minds, like a brand searing into their thoughts, ordering them to go back, to abandon their search for the truth. But Riya knew they could not turn back now.

"We have to break this," she said, her voice shaking but resolute. "We have to stop the curse before it erases us, too."

Aarav nodded, his expression grim. "But how? What if we're too late? The Keeper. That voice—it sounded so powerful."

Ray clenched his fists. "We can't turn back now. We've come too far. We have to know who or what the Keeper is and how they are related to the curse. We need to know where it comes from."

Neha faced away from the monument, her eyes wide with terror. "But what if we don't want to know? What if this is something better left alone?"

Riya stepped forward, placing her hand on Neha's shoulder. "I get it. I'm scared too. But we can't let this

happen. Otherwise, there'll be more missing people. They'll be erased from history, as if they never existed. And we'll never get the chance to set things right."

For a moment, Neha was silent, staring down at the floor. Then she gazed up, her face set in determination. "Fine. Let's be finished with it."

The group made deeper into the area, the strange thrumming of the ground still echoing through their boots. The forest they walked in grew quieter at each step, the earth itself being silent and still. The monument's light pulsed back and forth, its light causing odd, stretched shadows to be cast about them.

They came to a secret stone stairway, half-hidden by moss and tangled vines. Riya shivered when they entered the darkness beneath. The air was chilled, and there was a queer stillness in the air.

"This is like a tomb," Neha whispered, her voice barely audible.

Ray's voice was husky, his gaze directly before him. "Maybe it is."

At the bottom of the stairs, they were in a vast underground room, walls covered in yellowed symbols and markings. The air was stale, the stone floor scuffed from years of neglect. In the middle of the room was an ancient altar, dust and cobwebs on it.

Riya's heart was racing. "This is it. This is where it all began."

Aarav walked slowly towards the altar, his steps ringing in the large room. "What's this?"

Riya looked at the symbols on the walls, her mind racing as she tried to fit the clues from the journal together. The symbols were similar to the others they'd seen so far—surreal, looping hieroglyphs that appeared to have no recognizable meaning. But there was one thing that stood out to them. A familiar shape.

"That symbol," she said, pointing to a particular mark on the wall. "It's the same one from the monument."

Neha looked over Riya's shoulder. "It's as if the symbols are connected. Like a map, or a ritual."

Ray moved over to the altar, his eyes scanning it intently. "The altar... it's connected to the curse. I can feel it. But how do we use it to end the cycle?"

As if in answer to his question, the room itself began to vibrate with a low ominous hum. The air grew colder and the glow from the symbol on the monument intensified, casting its light upon the chamber. The floor shook beneath them once again, harder this time.

"What's going on?" Neha cried, stumbling backward.

Riya felt the floor slope beneath her, and suddenly the air was heavy, and oppressive. It was as if the room itself was stirring, reacting to their intrusion.

And then, from the center of the altar, a figure emerged. It was nothing at first—just shadow—black and indistinct—before it took shape. A woman, tall and ethereal, in shining robes. Her face was concealed, but the aura around her was unmistakable. She was the *Keeper*.

The friends froze, their chests pounding with racing hearts. The Keeper's aura was suffocating, a weight they could feel pressing down upon them. The air grew heavier with every passing second.

"You have come," the Keeper's voice resonated, not from her lips, but from all directions they could see. "And now, the final test begins."

Riya's breath caught in her throat. "What do you want from us?"

The Keeper's form quivered, her voice a whisper on the wind. "You cannot change the past. The curse is ancient. You cannot undo what has already been done."

"But we can stop it," Riya insisted. "We can end the disappearances. We can save the people who are being taken away."

The Keeper's smile was soft, almost condescending. "You can't fight fate. The lost ones are already gone. They will never return. And you, too, will be forgotten."

Ray took a step closer, his voice trembling. "No. We won't let you win. We'll find a way to break this curse."

The Keeper's eyes glowed weakly, and a gust of wind swept across the room. The air became cold to an unbearable level, and the ground began to creak beneath their feet. The figure began to fade away, but her voice lingered in the room.

"Then you will understand the cost."

And with that, the Keeper's form vanished completely, leaving the friends in stunned silence.

The room was silent, aside from the ground rolling beneath them. They just stood there, shocked and bewildered, and they knew whatever they were going to experience would be their greatest challenge so far.

The curse had spoken. But it was not finished with them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

The Cost of Truth

The corridor was ominously silent after the Keeper disappeared. The vibrations ceased, but there remained a residue chill that clung to the air, enveloping them in an unseen shroud of darkness. Riya, Aarav, Neha, and Ray stood frozen, caught in the shock of the Keeper's experience, their minds filled with questions that could never be answered. In their minds was the threat that the Keeper had left upon them: **"You will be forgotten."**

Riya couldn't help but sense that they were at the threshold of something much bigger than they could have ever imagined. They had thought they were simply trying to save people from disappearing—figuring out a puzzle. But it now appeared that the future itself was on the line.

"We have to figure out what that price is," Riya whispered, her voice unshaken while her stomach roiled.

Aarav shook his head. "The Keeper's words... they were not a warning. It felt like... like she was presenting us with an option." He looked at the others. "But what choice? And if we do fail?"

Neha's face was pale, her hands trembling as she looked around the hidden room. "She said that we'd be forgotten. Do you think... Do you think we could also disappear?"

Ray sucked in a quick breath. "I don't know. But we can't waste any more time guessing. We have to have answers. We need to know how to break this curse, because if we don't, we could all end up like the missing people—erased."

The weight of his words hit Riya like a ton of bricks. She already knew they were running out of time, but now she could hear the sound of the clock ticking louder in her ears. They had no clue what "the cost" the Keeper was referring to, but whatever it was, one thing was certain: they couldn't afford to lose any more ground.

She turned her back to the altar, her eyes scanning the worn stone surface. There has to be something here. Some clue.

"I think we're looking for something," she said, her voice firmer as a notion coalesced in her mind. "We've been trying to find answers everywhere but where we should be looking. The journal, the monument, the symbols—those have been leading us here, to this altar. But it's not just a ritual site. It's something more."

Aarav stepped closer, his brow furrowed. "What do you mean?"

Riya's eyes were on the stone, and she began to put together the pieces of information they had learned. "This site... this altar is a seal. Not just a place of power,

but a border. And the Keeper is its guardian. If we're going to break the curse, we need to understand how the seal works."

Neha chewed her lip, her eyes wide with concern. "So, we need to shatter the seal?"

Riya nodded uncertainly. "Yes. But it won't be easy. We've already learned how the curse reacts to us. It's fighting back. But if we can shatter the seal, then maybe we can stop the curse from continuing to destroy people."

Ray's fists clenched. "And how do we do that?"

Riya was still unsure of the answer, but she could sense the draw of the symbols, the ancient markings on the walls. They weren't random. They were a map—of sorts—but the map was missing pieces.

"If the symbols are a map," Riya said, her voice increasing in confidence, "then we need to find the missing pieces."

Aarav nodded, understanding what she was telling him. "You think the symbols are clues to how we can get the key to shatter the seal?"

"Worth a shot," Riya replied, determination growing inside her. "But first, we need to get out of here and find out where we can possibly get those pieces."

Neha looked towards the door, the urgency in the situation crashing down upon her shoulders. "We have to be careful. Whatever it is, whatever we do, we can't just do it on a whim. The Keeper is watching us, and I don't think we have yet seen the worst of it."

A cracking of something sounded through the walls. They all stood frozen.

"Did you hear that?" Ray whispered.

Riya's heart was pounding in her chest as she looked around. The Keeper was not visible, yet the sense of being observed returned. The symbols on the wall seemed to be flowing and changing, living and breathing. The earth trembled once more, and a shadow crossed the rear corner of the room.

"Get ready," Riya said, her voice firm. "We don't know what we're up against. But we're not leaving without those answers."

The friends made their way back up the stone staircase, their steps heavy in the oppressive silence. As they emerged into the forest, the light from the monument still cast its strange glow in the distance, illuminating the path they had to follow.

"We have to hold together," Riya said, beginning to lead the way back into town. "The further we're spread out, the easier it will be for the curse to knock us off individually. We must remain together."

Aarav nodded. "And we will locate those fragments. We'll break this curse. We cannot allow it to beat us."

The curse loomed over them like a thunderhead, but Riya felt a spark of hope. The Keeper had said they would be forgotten. But she was not going to forget. They had a hope—a thin one—but a hope nonetheless.

And if they could find the pieces they required, they could possibly stop the curse from claiming anyone else.

But unconsciously, Riya knew that the actual cost of this travel was higher than they could think. The higher they approached toward the truth, the higher the cost was going to be. And they never knew if they could bear it.

But right now, they had to keep moving. The time was coming to an end.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

The Pieces of the Puzzle

The walk back into town was taut, the trees around them were motionless like they were too afraid to exhale as well. The air crackled with it, the ground beneath heavier with each step. Riya felt like she could sense their being watched—but something much, much worse than the Keeper.

"I keep thinking about what she told me," Neha said, her own voice barely present as they walked down the path. "'The forgotten ones.' What is it even talking about?"

"I have no clue," Riya replied, still looking out ahead of them. "But whatever it is, it's connected with this curse. With the disappearing. And with the Keeper."

The trees' shadows lengthened in the fading light, and the distant monument still radiated a faint glow, calling them back. The closer they got to the town, the more insistently a queer sense of urgency seeped into her bones. They could not waste any more time.

Aarav broke the silence. "We need to figure out where the missing pieces of the map are. The symbols aren't complete. We've seen a few already, but there has to be more."

I understand," Riya said. "The problem is, we don't have much to work with. We have to find out where the symbols are hidden. If we can interpret them, then maybe we have a hope of breaking the curse."

"But where do we start?" Ray asked. "These symbols are everywhere. How do we know which are the clues?"

That's what we need to discover," Riya said. "The journal indicated that the symbols were everywhere in town. They're not just a component of the curse. They're also part of the solution. They have to be."

Neha actually stopped dead in her tracks on the street, her eyes widening. "Wait. The old library!"

Riya stared at her, surprised. "What about it?"

"It's not so far from here," Neha said, her voice bubbling with excitement. "I remember reading something about strange markings there. There may be something in there."

Ray shot her an incredulous look. "You believe we'll find more symbols there?"

"It's worth a shot," Neha replied. "If the journal had referred to the library, then it's got to mean something."

Riya nodded, a wave of urgency washing over her. "Let's do it. We don't have much time."

They hurried their pace, the air growing cold as they reached the outskirts of town. The old library loomed before them, its tall, ominous shape casting a long shadow across the road. It was a relic, its windows

boarded and its glass shattered, and the door creaked ominously when they pushed it open.

Inside, the musty smell of old books pervaded the atmosphere. Every surface was dusted, and the shelves were filled to capacity with dusty, ancient books that hadn't been seen in decades. Riya couldn't help but feel the sense of history present here. The walls themselves felt like they held secrets, murmurs of lost knowledge.

"Let's split up," she said. "We'll search the entire library. If there's a clue here, we'll find it."

The team disbanded, their footsteps soft on the squeaking wooden floor as they moved down between the rows of books. Riya's heart was racing as she pulled book after book off the shelves, looking for something that would assist them in breaking the next piece of the code. But each book she opened was another failure.

Minutes passed, then hours. She could feel the anger building up in her, but she couldn't give up.

Then, when she was about to give up on hope, her fingers touched something cold and metallic. She pulled on the book, and a small, hidden compartment opened within the shelf. Her heart skipped a beat.

A leather-bound, worn journal was within the compartment. It was almost exactly like the journal they had found before.

"Guys, over here!" Riya shouted, her voice a mixture of excitement and relief.

Aarav and Ray reached her first. Neha trailed behind. They all huddled around the small

compartment, Riya slowly extracting the journal. It was heavier than she had expected, the pages yellowed with age. The cover was embossed with foreign symbols—the same ones they saw on the monument.

This has to be it," Riya breathed. "This is the missing piece."

Neha opened the journal to the first page, scanning over the faded writing. "It's in code," she informed. "We have to crack the code."

Riya's heart skipped. "We don't have time. We must crack it now."

The journal pages were filled with cryptic symbols, much like the ones they had already observed. But when Riya looked at them more closely, she saw something. The symbols did not appear to be random. They formed a map.

"I think I know what it is," Riya said, indicating a line of symbols at the end of the book. "Those symbols... those are like the ones on the monument. This is the map we've been searching for."

Aarav slumped over her shoulder, reading from page to page. "But what do we do next? We know where the symbols are, but we don't know what to do with them."

"We'll figure it out," Riya said, her tone level despite the chaos whirling through her thoughts. "One thing at a time."

But as they were about to exit the library, there was a sudden change in mood. There was a low thudding sound in the air, and the walls began shaking.

Ray turned round, his eyes wide with fright. "What's that?"

The journal held by Riya began to emit a faint light, the symbols shifting on the pages before them.

"This isn't good," Neha spoke, trembling in fear. "Something's going on."

Suddenly, the ground beneath them shook terribly, and the library walls groaned. The shelves groaned under the pressure, and some books fell onto the floor with a ghastly thud.

"We must get out of here!" Riya shouted, grabbing the journal and running towards the door.

As they sprinted into the darkness, the library behind them appeared to collapse in on itself. The lights flickered out, and a massive crash rocked the town. The light of the monument had disappeared, but now, as they looked back, they could see something far worse.

A shadow loomed in the distance, growing by the second. And in that shadow, they could see it. The Keeper.

"She's coming," Riya whispered to her, her voice dripping with fear. "We can't waste time."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

The Final Countdown

It howled through the trees as Riya and her friends hurtled down the turning streets of their town, the distant boom of the collapsing library echoing in their ears. They dared not look back. The Keeper's shadow drew nearer moment by moment, and the pressure of immediacy clung to them like an anvil.

Run quicker!" Riya commanded, gasping. Her grip on the journal was clenched, as if responding to the peril around them, her faint glow intensifying in the palm of her hand.

Out of breath with the exertion, Aarav looked back over his shoulder. "We can't beat her. She's too strong.

Ray, the one who had always been the composed one, was visibly shaken. "What are we supposed to do now? The symbols, the map—it's our best chance, but we don't know where it leads."

Neha, who was keeping pace with Riya, was visibly scared but determined. "We must make it to the monument. The symbols are connected there. If we can get at whatever is hidden inside them, we might stand a chance against her."

Riya nodded, barely registering the weariness in her legs. The monument had always been their focal

point, the nub of the mystery. But now, more than ever, it felt like the final destination—the final stop where they would either prevail or lose.

As they took the turn and saw the monument shining, the atmosphere started to cool, as if the night itself was closing in on them. The faint glow from the bottom of the thing lit the road in front of them, but the shadows crawling across the ground seemed unwell, like they were trying to breathe.

"We're almost there," Riya said through gritted teeth, trying to push the fear from her mind. "We can do this."

Aarav and Neha exchanged uneasy glances, but none of them slowed down. They had no choice now.

Suddenly, a loud crack shattered the stillness, and the ground beneath them trembled. They all stumbled, almost falling, as the monument's light pulsed and flickered. Something was wrong.

"Get to the monument!" Riya cried out, fear creeping into her resolve. "Now!"

They sprinted towards the base of the radiant monument, but when they got near, they were stopped by an invisible wall. The air thickened around them, and Riya felt a pressure on her chest, as though something weighty was pressing down on her very essence.

"What is this?" Neha gasped, attempting to force her way through.

"The Keeper's doing this," Riya said, holding the journal tighter as its light began to intensify in her

hands. "We have to break this barrier. That's the last step."

But the power holding them back grew stronger, and the light from the monument started to flash wildly. The symbols etched on the stone itself seemed to shift, twisting and changing before their eyes. Riya could sense her terror growing in her chest—this was it. They were close, but the Keeper's power was choking them.

Aarav stepped ahead, his eyes on the journal. "We have the map. We just need to place it in the proper sequence. If we can match the symbols to the monument, it should release whatever is holding us back."

Riya nodded, her mind reeling. She lifted the journal, and the symbols on it began to match the symbols on the monument. Slowly, pieces of a jigsaw fall into place, the symbols locked perfectly into position. But when she placed the final symbol into position, the air around them crackled with energy.

The monument's light burst into blinding brightness, and Riya stumbled back, shading her eyes.

And then, abruptly, everything halted.

The silence was horrid. The power that held them captive was lost, and the only thing left was the unwholesome glow of the monument. They looked about, bewildered, but no Keeper was visible. The shadow had withdrawn into the distance, with nothing but the silver light remaining.

"What's happening?" Neha gasped, looking.

"I don't know," Riya whispered. "But I think. I think we did it."

The monument was different. The symbols had let loose something inside its stone, revealing a hidden door. Carved into the foundation of the building, the door was open, ominous and dark, beckoning them into the darkness.

"This is it," Aarav said. "The final step."

Riya took a deep breath, her heart pounding. She had no idea what was behind the door, but they had no other choice. The curse wasn't complete yet.

"Let's go," Riya said, her voice firm with determination. "We have to finish this."

Hand in hand, they stepped forward into the darkness of the open door.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

The Final Revelation

The squeak of the door's thick wooden frame protesting their passage echoed through the stillness as it creaked open. The air inside was stale, filled with the smells of dust, damp stone, and something older—older, even, than stone. Riya froze in the doorway, her chest pounding, but the others were already following, enticed by an unstoppable need to know what was beyond.

"We must do this," Aarav whispered, his tone resolute, though his eyes were open in uncertainty.

"Whatever it is," Neha replied, her tone mixed with fear and determination, "we can't turn back now."

Riya took a deep breath and crossed over the doorway. The moment she did, a shivering wave of cold air swept across her skin, and she involuntarily shivered. The air hummed with energy, as if the building walls themselves were alive, holding their breath, anticipating something.

The space behind the door was enormous, with high ceilings barely visible in the dim lighting. They were draped with worn tapestries, their colors faded with age, and stone columns rose like titans in the gloom. The pedestal that sat in the center of the room

was gigantic, and underneath it lay a gleaming symbol that was as much like the ones they had been following all this while.

"This is it," Riya panted, advancing on the pedestal.

The journal she held seemed to pulse in her hands, as if it knew the power of the place. The air vibrated with the power of the curse they'd been trying to shatter. The soft glow of the pedestal lit an eerie radiance on the stone ground as the group gathered, at a loss for what to do next.

What do we do with it?" Ray had questioned, looking at the glowing symbol.

"I think we need to place the journal here," Riya said, the realization hitting her. "This is where everything leads to. The journal is the key."

When she stepped closer, the air that enveloped her vibrated, and the ground that they were standing on trembled faintly. She trembled with her hands as she placed the journal on the pedestal. When the book touched the stone, the symbol on the pedestal shone brighter, its light spreading outward in a blinding burst.

Riya stepped back, shielding her eyes from the intense light. The atmosphere was electric, filled with the energy of something ancient and powerful. She caught a low growling noise, and for a brief instant, she could have sworn she glimpsed something—someone—at the far end of the room.

But it disappeared in an instant.

Once the light at last receded, the room fell into an unearthly silence. The pedestal had stopped radiating, and the journal lay open on the stone pedestal, its pages gently gleaming. The text inside had been changed. The mysterious symbols now spelled out a familiar pattern. It was a map.

A map of the town.

"This... this is it," Riya gasped. "This is how it ends."

The journal revealed the final locations—the sites where the final pieces of the curse had been hidden. No more symbols, no more secrets. Only a path to the truth.

Ray stared at the map, his face white. "We have to go to these places... don't we?"

"We have no choice," Riya said, her voice weighed down with determination. "If we don't stop it now, it will never end."

Aarav nodded, frowning. "Let's finish this."

They were just a step away from the door when a voice abruptly boomed up—low, menacing, and yet somehow recognized.

"Well done."

They were frozen in their tracks.

It was the Keeper.

Her figure materialized from the shadows, her form shifting like a spirit, her eyes glowing with unnatural light. She moved towards them, her strides slow, calculated, and almost not of this world.

"Think you've won?" she asked, her voice a cold whisper that made Riya shiver.

"You were going to lose anyway," the Keeper continued, her lips twisting into a smile that wasn't exactly genuine. "This was never a decision you had to make. The curse was eternal. You are nothing but pawns in an infinitely larger game."

Why?" Riya wailed, her voice tight with anger and fear. "Why are you doing this? What do you want with us?"

The Keeper's smile widened, the radiance of her eyes blazing still more intensely. "I want nothing with you. I want to see you fail. I want to see the spark of hope doused, one at a time. The ones who were lost are gone—eternally lost. You'll never get them back."

Riya experienced a flash of defiance. "We're not surrendering. We'll put a stop to it, no matter what."

The Keeper laughed through the room. "You're gutsy, little girl. But dumb."

The Keeper's hand flashed up, and to the amazement of Riya, the room did darken. The walls pressed inward, the air becoming thick and indigestible.

But just as Riya was about to lose hope, the journal in front of her began to glow with an increased force. The glow lit up the room, and for an instant, she was able to feel the power of something wonderful, something ancient, stirring within herself.

"Riya," Aarav persisted, his voice firm. "Use it."

Riya raised the journal high, the light intensifying, and as she did, the symbols on the journal pages began to move again. The ground shook, and the room echoed with a deep, thundering sound, as though the very fabric of the earth was being torn apart.

The Keeper let out a shriek, her body distorting and blurring as the light of the journal engulfed her completely.

"You... can't..." she gasped, her voice fading away as her body broke apart into nothing.

And then, in an instant, she was gone.

The beam of light from the journal vanished, the room standing still and silent once more.

Riya stood frozen, staring at where the Keeper had been, her heart racing. The curse was broken. But at what cost?

As the light in the room began to wane, Riya felt a change. The energy surrounding her had shifted, and she could feel the weight of the world easing, ever so slightly. The lost ones... they were returning.

But there was not yet time to celebrate.

The real journey was only beginning.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

The Return

The light had hardly dissipated when Riya began to feel the first shift—flashing to begin with, like a tenuous tremor on the earth under her. The air had grown lighter, freer, as if a weight had been dropped. And, for the very first time since she could recall, the paralyzing dark within the monument had begun to ebb back, leaving naught but a residual echo of the Keeper's sinister words.

But the danger wasn't yet past. Riya gripped the journal tightly in her hand as she looked around, waiting for any sign of movement. She couldn't shake the feeling that there was still something that they hadn't quite understood, something beyond the Keeper's disappearance.

"Did we actually do it?" Neha ventured, her voice slicing into the tense silence. She was trembling, no longer from fear, but from sheer awareness of what they had just done.

Riya did not answer right away. She was attempting to get her head around all of it—the defeat of the Keeper, the flood of memories now coming back, the strange new silence in the room. Slowly, she faced the others. "I think... I think we have."

Aarav nodded but was still skeptical. "But what of the forgotten? The ones who disappeared?"

Riya gazed down again at the journal. The light was subdued now, the symbols on its pages no longer gleaming but substantial, as though they had learned their place in the world at last. Trembling fingers began to turn through the pages, Riya hoping to discover something—anything—to reassure her that what they'd done had indeed broken the curse. The journal concluded on the final page, upon which a drawing of the town monument had been done, with symbols now etched into the base.

And then—something odd happened.

The town beyond shifted.

It wasn't loud or dramatic; it was a soft buzzing in the edges of her perception, something elusive but true. Riya widened her eyes as she saw it—the town was reconstructing itself, piece by piece. Roads where the lost individuals once walked were appearing, like memories reinstating themselves. Buildings that had once seemed empty or forgotten burst into being, like time itself rewinding filling in the spaces that previously lay.

"Riya," Neha's voice was full of wonder as she moved forward, her hand extended towards the door. "Look outside."

Riya turned around, and the sight that met her was nothing short of miraculous. People—faces she recognized, people who had vanished years ago—were walking down the road, going on as usual as though all

of this hadn't happened. Families reunited, friends hugged and embraced each other, and the world, once lost in the grip of an impenetrable curse, was returning to its peaceful tempo.

Ray smiled, the tension easing off his shoulders as he enjoyed the moment. "It's over," he spoke heavily, relief infusing the words.

Riya stayed there for a very long time, sipping it all in—the people's homecoming, the gentle ring of laughter and life returning to the air, and the quiet of her friends by her side. As if the veil had been lifted, she was given the world that they had fought so desperately to protect. But she knew, in her heart, that this wasn't going to last. They had won, but the road had taken its toll on them.

The monument, the journal, the Keeper—all of these had led them to this final moment. The curse had been broken, but the recollection of what had happened would never be an entirety.

"Is it really gone?" Aarav asked quietly, his voice full of wonder.

Riya glanced around at the others, faces that were etched with relief and hope, and for the first time since ever this ordeal had begun, she allowed herself to hope that it was. "Yes," she whispered. "It's over."

But there was one final thing she needed to do.

Riya walked slowly to the pedestal in the middle of the monument, where the journal had earlier emitted its supernatural power. It was now just a book, its pages still and intact. She placed the journal on the pedestal

for the last time, and for a moment, it seemed to pulse with a gentle glow, as if in appreciation of the fulfillment of its purpose.

“I’m ready to move forward,” Riya whispered, her voice steady as she took a step back.

The air within the room began to hum with power, and as the light receded from the pedestal, Riya understood that the final grip of the curse had faded away. The lost ones, being released, would go on to live their lives, free from the grip of darkness and time. The town would heal, as would she and her friends.

Aarav, Neha, and Ray all stood around her, and they shared one final, knowing glance. They’d done it. All of them.

And as they emerged from the monument, the town lay before them, they knew that no matter where life led them, they would never forget what they’d endured.

The last battle had been won. The curse was broken.

But that friendship, their bond, was the only thing that could never be ripped from them.

The End