

ECHOES

EVERY CITY HAS ITS SECRETS

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BlueRoseONE^{.com}
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To my friends and family, who kept faith in me when I had lost mine.

To the teachers, guides, and mentors who inspired questioning and provoked me to seek more. Thank you for teaching me that every question has value, and every failure brings us closer to greatness.

And to each reader who is willing to follow the whispers, into darkness and mystery: thank you for believing in the journey, when the end is not yet clear.

Preface

Every city has its secrets, some play songs, while others hum the echoes of what has been buried.

It's more than just a story about a missing girl or a detective haunted by his past.

It's about the things we chase when we are not sure. Sometimes for closure. Sometimes to hide from our past, thinking that the mystery's solution will somehow fix what's broken inside of us.

It's about how, even after the noise fades, some echoes don't. When I started to write Echoes, I did not design any twists. The story found its own path.

Every time I thought I knew where it was going, it would take some turn. Almost as if the story was writing itself through me.

Yet the deeper I went, the more I realized this wasn't a tale of good and evil. It's about choices, consequences and the price of knowing *too much*.

To the readers holding this book, this is not simply a mystery to solve.

It's a world to feel. A question to ask yourself: When the shadows call your name... will you answer?

Welcome to the hunt. Welcome to Echoes.

— Ayaan Agarwal

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The First Echo

The night sky over Ravenwood was covered with circling crows.

Beneath them stood a decaying building swallowed by vines and rot. The old orphanage, abandoned long before most people even remembered it existed.

A figure staggered out of the forest. His eyes darted wildly behind him as if he was running from someone.

He spotted the orphanage right outside the forest. He froze for a moment and began sprinting towards it desperately.

He forced himself inside and hid behind a wall.

Flashlights flickered through the trees outside.

The police. Two officers stepped out of the woods, scanning the area cautiously.

Tim held his breath as one officer entered the orphanage. His footsteps echoed closer... and closer...

A buzz shattered the silence. The officer's walkie-talkie.

"I don't think he came here," came the voice. "Let's get back and check the woods."

The officers left. Their footsteps echoed into the night.

Tim exhaled shakily.

He looked around the dusty hall.

“What even is this place?”

Attracted by a strange hum, Tim limped down a narrow staircase into the basement.

The air grew colder as he descended. He stood still when he reached, his eyes widening in shock.

The ground began to glow.

Lines started to arrange as veins of a blue light, forming a large circular symbol. A serpent curling itself around an eye.

The glow intensified until Tim had to shield his face.

A shadow burst from the center and slammed into him. Tim flew backward, collapsing as the darkness swallowed him.

Everything faded to black.

Five Years Later – March 12, 1991

The sun shined across the middle school playground where children’s laughter filled the air.

Harry Cook, eleven and full of reckless energy, chased his friends in an intense game of tag.

“I’m coming!” he shouted dramatically.

Emma Smith, gentle, soft-spoken and always smiling smiled as she ran from him.

“Looks like someone’s hungry for blood!” she teased.

Chloe Adams ran beside them, tossing her hair with her usual overconfidence. "Hurry up, Harry! You still can't beat me!"

Harry finally lunged and caught Emma's arm. "Caught you!"

Emma laughed breathlessly. "How do you run so fast?"

"Which means I win. Emma, you owe me a pastry." Boasted Chloe flicking her hair.

"Fine," Emma sighed. "You both can have one."

They collapsed onto the grass, giggling.

"Okay kids, inside! Time to learn something fun." Mrs. Grace, their class teacher shouted.

Chloe rolled her eyes. "Oh my god. Yes. I was dying to study. It's soooooo fun."

Harry teased her. "Relax, teacher's pet."

"Hey!" Chloe laughed as she ran inside with Harry chasing her.

Emma hurried after them.

Later that afternoon, the three friends grabbed their bicycles behind the school. They planned to meet at Chloe's house in the evening.

Emma suddenly gasped. "I forgot my notebook in the classroom."

Harry groaned. "Seriously?"

"You two go. I'll see you in the evening."

"My place. Don't forget!" Chloe reminded as Harry and her cycled away.

Emma returned alone to the quiet, empty classroom. Her notebook lay on her desk.

"There you are."

A shadow darted across the wall behind her. Fast. Wrong.

Emma spun around.

Nothing.

"Who's there...?" she whispered. A terrified look on her face.

She rushed into the hallway, footsteps echoing wildly. She opened the front door and...

A metal gate slammed down covering the exit.

Out of nowhere.

The lights dimmed. A growl echoed.

Then a shape materialized in the darkness.

A tall figure... floating black particles. A man, but *not entirely*.

Emma's heart rate pumped up.

"Go away," she whispered, voice cracking. "Please..."

The figure smirked. "Don't worry, kiddo." His voice changed. "We're going to do beautiful things together."

He raised his hand as his body began to shake. He snapped his fingers and...

The world snapped black.

Emma was gone.

Her notebook fluttered to the floor.

Evening at Chloe's House

Harry arrived at Chloe's place, stepping past the mailbox marked *THE ADAMS*.

Harry noticed George instantly. Older, cooler... Emma's brother, sitting there doing his homework with Chloe's sister, Olivia Adams.

"Is Emma here?" Harry asked.

"Not yet," Chloe replied casually. "Relax."

But as time passed — and the three kids played, teased, and waited — something felt wrong.

Finally, Olivia snapped at George, "Call your parents. Ask if Emma's home."

George shrugged it off.

Moments later, panic set in.

They all raced to the Smith residence.

The house was empty.

"EMMA?" George shouted.

Nothing.

The kids searched every room, every corner. Harry checked the garden. Chloe and Olivia checked upstairs.

When they regrouped, no one had found her.

George's breathing became rapid. "Shit... shit... shit."

"You left her alone," Olivia scolded. "You left your eleven-year-old sister alone."

They rushed to the police station.

Chief Sam Cooper listened quietly as Harry explained what happened.

Amy Smith, Emma's mother, arrived mid-conversation and broke down.

"Please," she begged Sam. "Find her."

Sam nodded. "We'll start right away."

Within an hour, the town knew.

Volunteers gathered.

Officers organized search routes.

Flashlights swept through the dense woods behind the school.

The search continued all night.

By dawn, people were exhausted, broken.

Sam finally ordered the search party to stop.

George screamed, "No! She's out there!"

But no one had any strength left.

2 Weeks Later

The Smith residence was drowning in silence and dread.

Harry, Chloe and Olivia sat together, waiting for news, too scared to speak.

John Smith, Emma's father, rushed home.

Sam Cooper arrived moments later, removing his hat.

"I'm sorry," he said softly. "We've done whatever we could. The search party has been disbanded."

Amy broke down as George hugged her tight.

John's grief turned into anger.

"You searched everywhere? All of it?"

"Every path we could cover," Sam replied.

"And found nothing?"

"...Nothing."

"Then bring him." John said coldly as if referring to the last resort.

Sam froze.

"No," he said immediately.

John stepped forward. "You know who I'm talking about. Bring him back"

"He isn't on duty anymore."

"I don't care. He's the only one who solved cases none of you could."

The room went silent.

Sam finally exhaled.

“...Alright. I’ll talk to him.”

Sam left the Smith residence, walked to his car, and dialed a number he had hoped never to call again.

In a dim, filthy house across town, a phone buzzed on a messy table.

The man sitting in the shadows didn’t move.

The phone buzzed again.

And again.

But Alex didn’t answer.

Not yet.

The Call That Could Not Be Ignored

The rain poured hard on the pavement of Elm Street. Inside a house, a single desk lamp cast a dim light, barely brightening the room.

Scattered files of cold cases and old photographs scattered across the table.

Five years. Five long years of silence. Five years of being erased from the world that once needed him.

Alex stared at a blank page in his notebook. He didn't lack words but felt that the world had stopped asking anything from him.

The city had moved on. Agencies had closed their files, colleagues had retired or left, and the ghosts of old cases had faded into memories.

Still, the phone on the table buzzed with an urgency.

It was Sam.

"Alex," came Sam's familiar voice, "I never thought I'd be calling you again. But this one... I need you."

Alex sat back on his chair. Sam, the chief of his old agency, rarely sounded desperate. "I thought I was done. You made sure of that." Alex said, hiding a sense of sarcasm.

Publicly he was gone, but Sam knew when politics failed, Alex was the last resort.

"I did. But some cases don't die," Sam replied, his voice was steady but tense. "This isn't just another missing person. It's Emma Smith, the mayor's daughter. Reported missing since 12 March"

She had vanished two weeks ago, leaving behind only uncertainty and panic.

Alex's grip tightened around the phone. "Two weeks... and they've called it a runaway?"

Sam exhaled sharply. "They've closed the case. Local police, agencies... even my own team has dismissed it, but, I know better. If there is one person in this entire world who can get through the blindness of this case, it's you".

"You want me to just... pick up where everyone else left off?" Alex asked quietly.

Sam hesitated. "Not just pick up. Finish it. Her parents won't accept it. Emma didn't run away. Her parents have been clear. If no one else can find her, they want you. Only you."

Alex sat quiet letting the silence stretch between them for a long moment.

He wanted to say no. After whatever he had to go through, taking up another serious case was like digging up his own grave.

Then he spoke, low and deliberate. "Send me everything. Files, photos, timelines."

His willingness to make everything right won over his doubts.

The line fell silent for a heartbeat, then Sam's voice returned, a faint smile detectable even through the phone. "I knew I could count on you, Alex."

beeeee—. Sam hung up knowing he could count on Alex's responsible shoulders.

Five years had passed since he last walked the streets as a detective. But tonight, he would step back into a world that had moved on, a world that had forgotten him.

Alex closed his notebook, feeling a strong sense of determination for the first time in years. Emma Smith's face looked back at him from the file, smiling and unaware.

Even after all those years, it was destiny itself which had not forgotten Alex's number.

The House of Silence

Alex wasted no time in getting to work.

Alex quickly grabbed his detective kit. A notebook, a pen and left for the Smith Residence without thinking further.

The rain was still pouring hard, the drive to the residence was a blur.

By the time he reached, the rain had reduced to drizzle.

He walked up the path to the house and knocked on the door, the voice of the knock echoing in the silent neighborhood.

After a moment, the door opened. Standing inside was a woman somewhere in her mid-50s.

Her eyes were swollen with sleepless nights and endless crying.

Mrs. Smith.

“Mr. Alex Park?” she asked. Her tone was fragile.

Alex released a small reassuring smile. A gesture he had not practiced in years. She stepped aside signaling Alex to enter inside.

He entered the living room. Every object was placed perfectly. Yet, the air almost felt suffocating.

Grief had entered the walls of the beautiful Smith residence and Alex was there to make things right again.

On the sofa, sat a large, broad shouldered man, Mr. Smith.

"Two weeks, and all they've given us is excuses. They wrote her off as a runaway. My Emma? A runaway?

They don't know her. They don't know a damn thing." Mr. Smith spoke as his face fumed with anger.

Alex brought out the notepad and pen out of his pocket. They felt strangely unfamiliar in his hands, as if he had dug them out of a deep grave.

"I understand your frustration, sir." Alex finally said reassuring Emma's parents. "I am here to help. Tell me everything you know. From the beginning."

Mrs. Smith clasped her hands in her lap, twisting her fingers nervously. Her voice trembled as she began. "It was a Thursday. Neither of us were home."

She swallowed hard, tears threatened to spill. "When she came back from school...she was gone."

Alex's pen scratched across the paper. "No signs of deliberate entry?"

Mr. Smith's stood up from the sofa. "The window was open. But it's always open a crack, for air. No mud. No broken glass. Nothing."

Alex nodded slowly, listening carefully to each and every detail. "Did she have enemies? Arguments?"

Mrs. Smith flinched, as if the thought of Emma having enemies was an alien concept. "Emma wasn't the kind of girl who made enemies. She was... gentle. Too gentle for this world. Her friends adored her. Every single one of them."

"Did she have some sort of a strange past or any event that might have happened recently?" Alex questioned, his eyes meeting those of Mrs. Smith.

"She was adopted, but we never made her feel that way. The orphanage was located out of town. It got shut down due to some management issues they say."

Alex rose to his feet, "Can you show me her room?"

Upstairs, the air grew more suffocating. The door opened to a tidy bedroom surrounded with books and photographs.

Alex went straight to the window. "Did she ever try escaping through the window?"

"Why would she? She had a door." Mr. Smith uttered.

Alex looked around. He noticed a small, framed photo on her bedside table, tucked behind a lamp.

It was Emma with another girl, both laughing, their arms linked. A familiar face. He recognized the girl from the police file, listed as Emma's best friend, Chloe.

He held up the frame, "Who's this?"

For the first time, Mrs. Smith's eyes softened. "Chloe. Since kindergarten, she has been best friends. They couldn't be separated.

"Has Chloe heard from anyone?"

"Yes", Mr. Smith interrupted. He spoke in a flat tone. "The police took action. She claimed that she hadn't seen Emma since that day at school. Claimed Emma was alright."

Alex studied the photo one more time before setting it down carefully. "I'll need to speak to Chloe again myself. And I'll need access to Emma's phone and laptop."

The change came instantly. Mr. Smith's jaw tightened and his face became stern. They have already been searched by the police. Nothing was present.

Alex's tone sharpened as he spoke, "With respect, your daughter would be home if there was nothing." I'm not law enforcement. I don't search for things that are already there. I search for what isn't.

A long quiet stretch filled the room. Finally, Mr. Smith let out a sigh. "I'm sorry. That won't be possible."

Alex closed his notepad, his face showing no emotion. "Very well. That'll be it for now. I'll do everything I can to dig deeper into this case."

When he stepped outside, the drizzle had stopped.

Alex stepped out into the fog, hearing murmurs behind him.

As he moved, he noticed something on the hood of his car that hadn't been there before.

A small, folded note held down by a stone. He opened it with shaking fingers. Just three words stared back at him: 'Welcome back old friend.'

Shadows in the Frame

Ignoring the message, Alex drove to Chloe's home.

He knocked on her door, the air now fresh and lively, too different from the town's situation.

The door opened almost immediately, as if Chloe was there waiting for Alex to come.

Her blonde hair tied back with a loose strand falling to her face.

"So, you're the new detective?" she questioned, stepping aside to allow Alex inside. Her voice was steady but her eyes betrayed a tremor.

The living room was painted yellow. Dotted patterns on the sofa. The furniture was placed neatly. Too neat to be natural.

He sat opposite to Chloe taking out his notebook and pen. "As you know, I am looking into Emma's case. I understand you were her best friend."

Chloe folded her hands in her lap. "Yeah. Since forever."

Alex nodded, keeping his tone neutral. "When was the last time you saw her?"

"At school. Thursday. Lunch." Chloe's words were clipped, rehearsed almost. "She seemed... normal."

"Normal how?" Alex spoke almost instantly.

Chloe looked away as if trying to avoid eye contact. "Talking about homework, weekend plans. Just... Emma being Emma."

Alex studied her. She seemed to be hiding something. "Did she mention anything unusual? New friends, strange plans?"

Chloe hesitated, then shook her head. "No. Nothing. She was excited about her history project, that's all."

Alex tapped his pen against the notebook. "Chloe, if Emma was planning something... anything... she'd tell you. Wouldn't she?"

Her lips parted, then shut again. When she spoke, her voice was softer. "I don't know. She kept things to herself sometimes."

"Like what?"

A small shrug, too casual to be real. "She got really into photography lately. Old buildings, weird places. She remarked that they had character. The abandoned mill, the orphanage at the edge of town... creepy stuff."

Alex's hand stilled mid-note. "The orphanage?"

Chloe finally met his eyes. For the first time, he saw fear there. "Yeah. And the mill down by the river. She'd go alone."

"Did she ever take you?"

"No." The word came quickly.

Alex's pen scratched against the paper. "Did she have her camera with her when she disappeared?"

Chloe shook her head. "Her good one was still in her room. She usually just used her phone for those trips."

Alex sat back, closing the notebook. "Thank you, Chloe."

She nodded. Chloe wasn't telling him everything. Her silences stretched too long. She was hiding something. Either for Emma, or for herself.

When he was leaving, Chloe handed out an old diary stating it belonged to Emma.

Her expression suggested she wanted to help, but something was holding her back.

Later that night, back in his dim apartment, Alex plugged Emma's phone into his laptop which he had pocketed quietly at the Smith residence.

The glow of the screen lit his face as lines of code rolled past; the security system failed under his practiced hands.

Messages. Social media. Photos. All ordinary. Homework discussions, teenage chatter, selfies with friends.

He scanned through her browser history. Fashion sites, school research, music blogs. Normal.

"Why am I even doing this?" A voice from within questioned, flashbacks of his past never leaving him alone.

Then he found it.

A hidden folder, buried deep in her photo gallery, named: **Project X**.

Alex clicked. The images opened one after another, and his stomach tightened.

Emma had been inside the mill. Inside the orphanage. Crumbling walls. Rusted machinery. Shattered windows.

In several frames, faint in the background, there was... something. A blur. A figure. Always half-hidden, always at the edge of the frame. A shadow that seemed to move from shot to shot.

He zoomed in, adjusted the contrast, and sharpened the pixels. It was still too blurry, but deliberate.

Someone had been there. Watching her.

Alex opened her contacts. An unfamiliar number appeared, marked only with a single letter: **K**. Just the number, sitting there like a silent question.

He opened the recordings app next. One file stood out, timestamped the night she vanished.

He pressed play.

The audio crackled. A cracking voice whispered. *"Emma..."* Then silence. A deep voice followed, *"...at the old orph – "*

Beeeeeeep-

Alex sat frozen, staring at the screen. His reflection in the dark monitor stared back at him.

Emma hadn't run away.

She had walked straight into the shadows. And someone had been waiting for her.

Friend of Foe?

Alex's apartment was dim. The only light came from the desk lamp. Its yellow glow lighting over scattered case files, coffee stains, and a dustbin filled with pencil shavings.

The clock on the wall blinked 1:47 a.m.

He rubbed his eyes, staring at a photo. Emma Smith. Eleven years old. Vanished.

He had been on this case for a week now. After five long years of silence.

Now he was back. Not because he wanted redemption. But because he couldn't stand the ghosts anymore.

Alex sat quietly, listening to the rain tap the window.

There was a soft knock on the door. Few people ever came here.

When he opened it, a boy stood outside. No more than ten.

"Sorry, mister. My football rolled into your balcony," the boy whispered, shivering slightly.

Alex nodded. He fetched the ball and handed it back. "Be careful next time. It's late."

The boy grinned. "You're the detective, right? Mom says you used to be on TV."

Alex froze for a heartbeat. *Used to be.*

The boy tilted his head. "Are you solving something again?"

Alex smiled faintly. "Trying to."

When the boy left, Alex stood at the doorway a little longer than he should have.

The boy's innocent laughter echoed down the hall. It felt like something from another life.

He remembered the night. The storm, the accusations, the betrayals, everything.

Sam calling him "unfit for duty."

The silence from his colleagues.

That was the last time he wore the badge.

He sat back, closed his eyes, and let the flashbacks take over.

5 Years Ago

Detective Alex Park stepped into the room, eyes tired enough to show the years of hard-work he refused to talk about.

Even the thought of doing something wrong felt illegal in itself under his watch.

Besides him, stood his rival yet a very close friend, Tim Hale. Not a mere colleague, but an individual who complemented Alex's brilliance.

Tim's compassion for strays and wounded animals was well known. A habit that often made its way into local headlines.

They argued at times over methods, leads and way to dealing with cases. But beneath it all, was a bond of mutual respect and coffee fueled nights.

The case that was supposed to change their careers forever: a shadow mafia group responsible for over fifty audacious bank robberies.

Tim and Alex spent days and nights studying strategies, mapping escape routes, identifying their theft patterns and what not.

"There's something we're not seeing, Tim. It's right in front of us, but we're blind to it." Alex muttered on one rainy night, lying over the bunch of scattered files on the table.

Tim rubbed his exhausted eyes "I feel it too. Get some rest. Tomorrow, six sharp. Hem Lake. We'll put the pieces together."

Hem Lake was the quietest place in the entire town. Tim believed silence helped him focus.

They worked tirelessly, sometimes barely even getting any sleep. Alex's mind lived in patterns while Tim loved to jump directly in the chaos.

Together they were unstoppable.

A month later, the mafia group was finally cornered. Their days of hard work had paid off.

“Wohoooo Tim! Another case solved.” Alex screamed happily.

“Yeah man.” Tim replied. His tone was a bit misplaced. Somewhat disappointed.

Alex did not notice. He was too happy celebrating.

Everything seemed to go smoothly until one day.

A few rival agencies believed Alex’s brilliance was a threat, a threat to their own name.

Perhaps ambition, or perhaps utter jealousy of the fame he had earned too quickly.

When the mafia leader was finally cornered, a narrative was created: Alex, they claimed, had been aiding the criminals for three years.

Every mislead, every escape was suddenly, in the court of public opinion, his fault.

News reporters stormed outside the agency. Sam, Alex’s boss had to come out to give answers. Or rather wash off his agency’s name.

“He is unfit for duty.” Sam stated out boldly.

The matter had to be investigated. Court proceedings were called for. Alex tried everything, but at one point, even the court felt biased against him.

The world, the public had made him enemy number 1.

“You’re no hero, Alex. You’re a fraud. We all know it.”

“I used to admire him... now he’s just a stain on this city.”

Alex could do nothing but stare at the floor, thoughts of disbelief and embarrassment storming in his mind.

He knew the truth – he had done nothing wrong. He wanted to scream, he wanted to fight, but the pressure had piled up on his mind.

All he saw on the internet was social media posts and newsletters calling him a traitor.

"Hero? Don't make me laugh. He's nothing but a fraud."

At the end, nothing mattered. Alex handed his resignation.

And when he finally felt it was over, the court gave away the final blow. Alex Park – sentenced to 2 years in prison.

"For what?" Alex screamed at the top of his lungs. The people who once saw him as their protector had turned their backs on him. And for the first time in his life, he felt hopeless, he felt *powerless*.

As he was being dragged – hands chained, he saw another man in the neighboring court room. *Tim*. His best friend, dragged into the court fighting himself to prove his innocence.

"Why him? What rubbish is going on in the town? Alex shouted at a news reporter.

He could do nothing but stare at the floor, thoughts of disbelief and embarrassment stormed in his mind.

He was dragged away by police officers. He walked away leaving his badge behind. His name was already a stain.

Two Years in The Darkness

The first night in prison felt like dying with open eyes.

They didn't hand him a uniform, or a meal, or even the dignity of a spoken instruction.

They pushed detective Alex Park through the rusted gate of Ravenwood prison like a piece of trash.

His badge. Gone.

His name. Mocked.

His reputation. Ruined by people who once used his work to shine their own medals.

The guards didn't even look at him as they locked the gate behind his back.

One of them smirked. "Welcome home, traitor."

The words echoed through Alex's head all night.

The place was darker than what he remembered from training visits years ago.

Prison cells lined both sides of the hallway.

Some faces watched him with interest; others with hatred; others with amusement.

Almost all of them knew his name without knowing the truth.

A man grabbed the bars of his cell as Alex passed.

"Park," he hissed, breath rancid. "Should've thought twice before helping the mafia, huh?"

Another voice laughed, "The hero himself! Where's your cape, detective?"

The humiliation was expected.

The silence inside him wasn't.

He had imagined many times how he'd react. Anger. Rage. A defense. A scream.

Instead, he felt... *nothing*.

Like a statue being dragged on floor.

A dead man moving.

His cell was small. A metal bed frame, no mattress, a bucket in the corner, and a window so narrow that even a child's hand couldn't pass through.

The guard pushed him inside.

"No fighting. No arguing. Stay out of trouble. Not that it matters."

The door slammed.

The lock clicked.

And the world went silent.

Only then did the tears come.

Tears of disbelief swam down a man's face who had solved thirty-six cases, rescued three kidnapped children alive, survived two shootouts, and devoted his entire existence to justice... was thrown away by the very system he gave his life to.

He stared at his hands. The same ones that had collected evidence at crime scenes, written reports that sent monsters to jail.

The prison swallowed the night.

By the end of week two, Alex learned the language of prison.

Silence was safer than honesty.

Stillness was safer than confrontation.

Eye contact was an invitation to war.

Other prisoners whispered about him everywhere he went.

"That's the cop."

"Park, the mafia dog."

One evening, while returning from the cafeteria, three men cornered him in the hallway.

One of them cracked his knuckles. "You put my brother away."

Alex didn't flinch. "He kidnapped a child."

The punch came fast.

It crashed into Alex's jaw, sending him stumbling into the concrete wall. The next hit came across his ribs. Then his stomach. Then another to his face.

He curled, protecting his head.

Someone laughed.
Someone whispered, "Should've killed him when we had the chance."

The guards didn't intervene. They didn't care.

When the inmates finally grew bored and walked away, Alex slid down the wall, blood dripping from his mouth.

He didn't cry.

He didn't speak.

He just whispered to himself,

"I didn't do it. I didn't do it. I didn't—"

He spent the night awake, tasting blood with every swallow.

Somewhere, someone screamed.

Somewhere else, someone laughed.

Somehow, the first year passed. Alex had survived a year in that hell.

He had not received a single visitor.

Not Sam.

Not friends.

Not family. Neither did he have any left.

Not even the journalists who once loved interviewing him.

But one day, a guard handed out a folded paper inside his cell.

"From the outside," he said while yawning.

Alex's heartbeat increased as he opened the letter.

"He wasn't there when I needed him." Alex whispered under his breath.

He almost threw the photo away.

But something in him stopped.

Not forgiveness.

Not hope.

Just a simple understanding. *Every person who turns their back on you was once someone you trusted, someone you loved.*

As he stepped out of the prison gates, the sky looked huge.

Alex had come back from the dead.

The Serpent's Whisper

Alex snapped out of his memories. He did not have time to waste.

He knew the Orphanage had the answers to many of his questions.

Wasting no time, he drove to the outskirts of the town.

The Orphanage was at the edge of the woods.

Alex stepped out of his car.

A faint metallic gate marked the entrance of the place, the kind that abandoned places with hidden secrets have.

He pushed the gate which screamed in protest, the sound echoing in the silence.

He began his search, flashlights in his hand. Every piece of gravel made more noise than it generally should as he walked.

The beam of his flashlight cut past the dimness inside.

Something in the distance caught his eye. A glow.

He hid behind a pillar watching closely.

Two men sat around a campfire, their faces glowing from the flame. One wore a beanie, the other had a long scar stretching across his neck.

Their postures weren't casual. They seemed to be protecting something.

Alex picked up a glass bottle from a nearby table and threw it across the room. The sound of shattered glass echoed loud.

"Did you hear that?" One of them stood up picking up a torch.

"Yeah. Let's go check." The other followed.

As the two made their way towards the noise. Alex came out of his hiding, sneaking slowly behind the empty chairs.

A carton sat tucked against the wall. He opened it slowly only to find just a...*locket*?

It was delicate, covered with dust. The letter 'E' inscribed on it. *Emma*.

He opened it. Inside was a photograph. Emma standing beside a boy. The boy's face scratched out deliberately and violently.

He pocketed the locket, turning to search for more clues. Then, his boots brushed past a loose board on the floor.

Creak.

Both men turned around "Hey. Who's there?"

Alex froze. One of them aimed the flashlight at him. Before they could spot him, the floor beneath his feet gave away.

He crashed through a tunnel into darkness. Dust exploded around him.

He lay still, breathing slowly.

It was colder down there. His flashlight flickered, revealing a narrow room with a low ceiling.

Then he saw it.

A stain on the floor, dark and dry. *Blood.*

Alex knelt beside it, touching the edge of the mark with his gloved finger. "This is not a runaway," he muttered. "This is something else entirely."

He let out a small smile which hid a sense of uneasiness. "And Detective Alex," he said quietly, "is back to drama."

A tunnel stretched out at the far end of the basement, disappearing into the dark. He followed it, each step echoing softly.

After what felt like an eternity, the passage ended at a rusted iron gate. It was locked from the inside.

Alex examined it. There was no keyhole. It was a puzzle.

He brushed the dust away and read the engraving aloud:

"I slither unseen, I strike without sound,

I bind without chains, yet kings bow down.

Who am I?"

Alex smirked. "A serpent."

The lock clicked and the gate opened.

Before he could step through, a voice came through an old radio speaker on the wall, low and chillingly calm.

"Welcome, detective. Not many make it this far."

Alex froze, his eyes shifting towards the sound.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. A notification.

A single message: We've been expecting you, Alex.

Then another ping.

"Turn around."

He spun instantly, but saw nothing. Only darkness.

Silence.

Alex's flashlight fell, rolling across the floor. His breathing quickened, but his eyes were steady.

"Got you," muttered the empty air.

Alex stepped out of the Orphanage into the woods.

In the distance, he could outline of the old mill against the fog.

Whatever Emma had uncovered, it had started here.

And it wasn't over.

The Serpent's Mark

The next set of answers to Alex's questions was to be found in the Old Mill, a five minute walk from the Orphanage.

Alex found a loose board at the back and slipped through, careful not to disturb the silence.

Every step he took echoed down the corridors.

His torch flashed across the far wall. A shelf stood there, half-collapsed. But these books weren't randomly placed.

Their spines, arranged carefully, formed a rough image of a snake coiling upward.

Alex crouched, studying it. The alignment was too deliberate to be accidental.

On the table beside the shelf, the entire alphabet had been carved deep into the wood. Two letters were circled in thick lines. E and J.

Alex murmured under his breath, "E must stand for Emma... J might be the boy in the locket."

That scratched face from the photograph returned to his mind.

He looked across the room again. Something metallic shined. Moving closer, he found a small silver ring on

the table, its surface was rusted but the design still clear.

A serpent coiled around itself.

"Too old to be hers," Alex muttered. "Too deliberate to be left behind."

He pocketed it, a weight that wasn't heavy, but felt *significant*.

As he turned to leave, his flashlight passed over something on the floor by the entrance. An envelope, placed deliberately in the open.

He picked it up carefully. Inside was a single slip of paper:

"WE ARE ALWAYS WATCHING."

The letters felt dry beneath his thumb. Dark red. Not ink.

His heartbeat steadied instead of quickening. He reached into his pocket, tore a page from his notebook, and wrote:

"Nothing slips past me. Not tonight."

He placed it back on the same table, his eyes scanning the surroundings one last time.

As Alex made his way away from the scene, a figure emerged around the area; masked, dressed in black. He moved soundlessly, his boots making no sound against the wooden floor.

The figure stopped by the table. His gloved fingers picked up Alex's note.

He stared at it for a moment and then slowly crushed the paper in his fist.

The serpent symbol glowed on the edge of his mask before he vanished back into the dark.

Back at the police station, Alex dropped the locket and the ring onto Sam's desk.

Sam leaned forward, and after a long silent stretch, he finally asked "Emma's?"

"The E matches," Alex replied, sliding the locket open. "But the boy in the picture. His face was scratched out. We need to know who he is."

Sam nodded. "And this ring?"

"Not hers. The serpent carving. It's a mark. A sign of whoever took her."

Sam reached for his phone. "Get a team to the old mill. I want every inch of that place dusted for prints. And run this photo through the facial database."

Alex hesitated, then added, "There's more. On Emma's phone, I found a number. Just labeled 'K.' No messages, no calls. Just... there."

Sam scribbled it down quickly, his tone sharp. "We'll trace it. Whoever K is, they're not random."

Alex nodded and turned to leave. As he stepped outside, the night greeted him with fog thick enough to blur the streetlights.

The ring in his pocket felt like a reminder that the serpent wasn't done with him yet.

Somewhere, hidden behind the quiet streets and sleeping houses, the eyes that had written that message were still *watching*.

Emma's Diary

As he got back home, Alex finally opens to explore the diary given to him by Chloe all that time ago. The ink is slightly smudged, as if written in haste. Some pages are torn, others marked by faint water stains.

Emma's diary a few days before she went missing spoke of fear, anxiety, suspense and the horror still undergoing.

March 1

Emma's Diary:

I keep seeing the same symbol everywhere. Benches, walls, my notebooks. At first, I thought I was imagining it.

Jason used to talk about it when we were little, "The Eye of the Serpent," he said. Last night, I dreamed of the orphanage again. The same whisper: "The Eye sees all."

Alex flipped the page slowly.

"The Eye sees all..." he repeated under his breath.

The serpent symbol again. It's the same as the one at the mill. The same as the ring.

A soft sigh. "This wasn't superstition."

March 2

Emma's Diary:

I went back to the orphanage. I shouldn't have.

In the basement, I found old carvings. Circles, lines, and that serpent symbol again.

Someone's been here recently.

Alex runs his fingers across the page.

"Someone's been here recently.

He whispers, "She was tracking someone... or something was tracking her."

March 3

Emma's Diary:

A letter came today. No sender. Just one sentence.

"You were chosen."

And beneath it, drawn in red ink, the serpent's mark.

I threw it away, but I still feel its weight on me.

He exhales sharply, the paper trembling in his hands.

"Chosen... for what?" he trembles within.

"Jason chose her. But for what reason?"

Alex underlines the word *chosen* three times.

March 5

Emma's Diary:

Chloe says I've been distant. Maybe she's right. I can't sleep.

Every night I see Jason standing by Hem Lake. He whispers my name.

When I wake up, there are marks on my wrists. I swear I didn't make them.

Alex clenches his jaw, turning the page slowly.

"She's hallucinating... or she's being watched," he says quietly.

He types a quick note to Sam: "Check Hem Lake – pattern of serpent –related graffiti or markings."

March 8

Emma's Diary:

Jason came to see me last night.

He looked terrified. He said, "They've awakened the Eye."

He gave me something. A silver ring, shaped like a serpent coiled in on itself. He told me to wear it. He said it would protect me.

When I looked down at my hand later, it was gone.

Alex grips the diary tighter. His pulse quickens.

"The ring," he whispers.

March 10

Emma's Diary:

I can't escape the whispers anymore. Even in daylight.

A man stood outside the house last night. A brown coat, wide hat. He didn't move, didn't blink.

If anyone finds this, the serpent is real.

It's not a story.

The Eye never closes.

The last words hit Alex like a punch.

He closes the diary slowly. "Not a story," he mutters. "Then what are you?"

He opens the page again. The ink there is different. Darker. He brings it closer under the light.

The serpent symbol appears again, drawn shakily in the corner.

But this time, beneath it, two faint letters:

H.L.

He pushes back from the desk, eyes fixed on the symbol, voice low and steady:

"Emma knew something. She saw it coming."

March 12

Emma's Diary

It's like they are playing with me now. This was just the start of the day. Another letter – the same symbol. The same nightmare. The dreams feel deliberate at this point.

I just can't take it anymore. Each and every letter has this illustration of the orphanage. It feels like it all draws back to that place.

Jason sent me a voice mail. He asked me to meet him there. Probably today, I'll get the answer to all this.

"The day she disappeared". Alex felt a cold breeze through his body. "That voice recording – Jason. Whoever he is; pulled Emma in this.

This cult does not feel human anymore. There's something deeper, darker about this."

He glances toward the window, where moonlight glowed faintly.

"Whatever this serpent is... it's not done watching."

The Journal of Shadows

The next morning, Alex's phone buzzed.

Chief Sam's name flashed on the screen.

"The blood sample tested positive for human blood," Sam spoke. "And the DNA matches Emma's. She was definitely at the mill... and hurt."

A silence filled the room. "What about the boy in the locket?"

"We identified him," Sam continued. "Jason Miller. A former ward of the old orphanage. The place shut down about ten years ago. He's got a history. Petty theft, trespassing."

Alex exhaled sharply, connecting the dots. "And the number labeled 'K' on Emma's phone?"

"Untraceable," Sam replied.

The call ended, leaving Alex uneasy. Jason Miller. An orphan with a past that circled right back to the very place Emma was photographed. Coincidence?

Not really.

Just then, a sound broke the silence.

Ding.

The doorbell.

Alex stepped outside. A small parcel sat on his doorstep. Inside was an old journal. Its leather cover was decaying and its pages were yellowed.

The name on the first page froze him.

Jason Miller.

Alex flipped through the pages. The handwriting was uneven. Written by a boy too young to carry such thoughts.

The entries spoke of loneliness, of lost friends and forgotten faces.

Then the tone shifted. Jason wrote about a secret society.

The Serpent's Eye.

Alex sat back as his eyes narrowed.

Someone was trying to lead him somewhere. But who sent the journal now? And why?

Before he could explore further, his phone lit up again. This time with a flood of notifications. Dozens. Then hundreds.

Group chats, jokes, spam... chaos, most of them being curious classmates of Emma. But one message caught his eye.

A great friend of Emma. **Harry.**

"Hey detective, I heard you're handling Em's case. She was a close friend. I want to help if I can."

"Was?" asked Alex surprised by the wording.

"People say she's gone. I don't believe that. Em's a fighter. She's still out there." Harry clarified.

Alex shifted the tone. "You know any Jason Miller?"

"Jason? Never heard of him." Harry answered bluntly.

"Did Emma take any therapy or counseling sessions recently?"

"Yeah, she saw Mrs. Anderson. The school counselor. Chloe convinced her to go. Said it'd help with whatever was on her mind. They never told me what it was." Harry responded.

"Thanks, Harry. I'll be in touch."

Alex immediately searched Emma's phone for Mrs. Anderson's contact. When he called, the woman's tone almost defensive.

"Mr. Alex," she said curtly, "I cannot disclose anything about my sessions with Emma. It's a matter of privacy."

"This isn't about privacy," Alex argued. "It's about her safety. She's missing."

"Then perhaps... you shouldn't dig too deep. Some truths aren't meant to be found."

The line went dead.

Alex froze, her words echoing in his head. *Was that a warning... or a threat?*

He turned back to Jason's journal. One entry stood out. Dated a week before the orphanage shut down.

"They're closing us down. They'll never find it now. But I won't forget. I'll come back. I'll find it. Old Man Hemlock will look after. The Serpent's Eye will see again."

The message seemed like a question in itself. Jason had promised to return.

And somehow, he had kept that promise.

For the first time in years, Alex felt the chill wasn't from the night. It was from the truth hiding in plain sight.

The Chamber Beneath

The Serpent's Eye was more than a symbol; it was a clue.

He called Sam right away.

"Jason Miller," Alex spoke urgently. "He wasn't alone. He was obsessed with the orphanage, a caretaker named Old Man Hemlock, and something they called The Serpent's Eye. A ritual. A treasure."

Sam's voice cracked with disbelief. "A ritual? Alex, this isn't a ghost story."

"I'm serious, Sam."

There was a pause. "Old Man Hemlock..." Sam muttered. "Yeah, I remember him. He hung around the orphanage till about 2 years ago. Talked about ghosts, snakes, curses. People called him crazy."

Alex frowned. "Maybe he wasn't."

Sam sighed. "Could this be connected to the number labeled 'K'?"

"It's possible," Alex replied quietly. "Whatever Emma found or whatever Jason showed her led to the mill. She was there."

Before Sam could respond, Alex's phone buzzed again. George.

Alex hesitated, then answered.

"Detective," George uttered in a shaky voice. "I couldn't sit still. She's my sister. I had to do something."

Alex's eyes widened. "What do you mean? Where are you?"

"I'm at the old mill," George replied. "I'm here right now."

"What?!" Alex snapped, pacing quickly. "That place isn't safe."

"Relax," George interrupted, trying to sound brave. "I'm not a kid. I can handle myself. Just tell me what to look for."

The kid's recklessness reminded Alex of himself at seventeen. Curious, stubborn, and foolishly brave.

"Fine," Alex exhaled. "If you're already there, make yourself useful. Look for something like a hidden room, loose panels, false walls or anything strange. But whatever happens, don't make a sound."

There was a moment of silence. Then George whispered, "Got it."

Minutes passed. Then —

A muffled voice came through the line. "Detective... I think I found something."

Alex's pulse quickened. "What is it?"

"It's behind a bookshelf," George whispered, his voice barely audible. "There's... a line in the wall. Like a doorframe."

Alex gripped the phone tighter. "Try pushing it. Slowly."

A screech of old wood followed by a slow thud.

"I got it open," George whispered. "There's a tunnel. Going down."

"Don't move yet," Alex ordered, but it was too late. The line filled with the sound of footsteps, descending deeper.

The next few seconds felt like an eternity.

"Describe what you see," Alex muttered under his breath, keeping his voice low and firm.

"It's... a chamber," George breathed. "Circular. Stone walls. Symbols on the floor. Like a serpent around an eye."

Alex froze. The Serpent's Eye.

Then George whispered, terrified, "Alex... someone's here."

"What?"

"I heard something. Behind the altar."

"Hide. Now."

George ducked behind a table, holding his phone close. Shadows spread across the stone walls.

Footsteps echoed slowly and deliberately.

Then, from the darkness, a tall figure stepped into view. His face was hidden under a hood, and he held a long, curved dagger, its blade shining in the light.

The figure's voice broke the silence.

"You shouldn't have come here," he hissed. "This is our sacred ground."

George tightened his grip on the phone.

The figure stepped closer, dragging the blade across the floor, tracing the serpent's curve. "Shit," George mouthed silently.

Abrupt voices muffled as Alex sat at the other end – trembling.

"George?" Alex shouted into the phone.

"Georgeeeeeeee?!"

The Weight of Silence

The next morning, Alex's eyes scanned the newsletter lying on his desk.

"Emma's brother, George Smith, has been reported missing. Is it coincidence or part of a bigger mystery?"

His pulse quickened. The city had a way of hiding horrors in plain sight.

He threw his drenched jacket onto the chair and collapsed onto the couch. The faint hum of the birds outside was the only sound breaking the stillness of his apartment.

George was gone. Emma's phone, the leads, Chloe's half-truths. All of it stormed in his head like a math problem refusing to solve.

Every time he closed his eyes, the memories rushed. Flashes from another case, years ago.

He'd promised himself he'd never let that happen again.

And yet, here he was. One step behind.

Again.

He grabbed his car keys. Sitting here wouldn't help. He needed to see George's parents. Guilt was eating him up inside, alive.

The Smith's house was dimly lit. When Mrs. Smith opened the door, she didn't look surprised. Just tired.

"Detective," she greeted softly. Her voice carried no anger, no accusation. Just resignation.

"I came to give you an update," Alex spoke, forcing the words out.

They sat in the small living room that smelled faintly of lavender. A photo of George as a kid sat on a nearby table. A cricket bat in hand and eyes full of innocence.

Mr. Smith, sitting silently beside his wife, finally looked up. "He's a good boy. Always said he wanted to do something that mattered."

Alex nodded.

He didn't know what to say. The silence echoed between them.

The guilt he came to set aside, had gotten into his head.

When he left, the night was cold again. The streetlights cast long shadows across the road. Alex stood by his car, staring at the reflection of his face.

A man carrying ghosts.

Back home, he poured himself a glass of water. The clock read 3:17 a.m. He opened his case journal and started writing.

Case Log: Day 17

George Smith - missing.

Chloe still unresponsive.

Found evidence pointing toward ritualistic patterns —
Serpent's Eye.

He paused, staring at the words *ritualistic patterns*.
They reminded him of something from the diary.

"Immortality. Wealth. Sacrifice."

He looked up, heart skipping a beat. For a moment, he
thought he saw a shadow outside. He blinked, and it
was gone.

"Focus, Alex," he muttered, closing the journal.

Still, he couldn't shake the feeling that *something* or
someone was *watching*.

By morning, the sunlight cut through the window. He
hadn't slept.

He grabbed his coat, glanced once more at the board
filled with photos, and whispered to himself,

"Alright, Emma. Let's finish what we started."

The Silence Between Echoes

The case board on his wall looked like a crime scene of its own. Red threads, pinned photos, notes half-torn in frustration.

Emma. Jason. George. Chloe.

Every name felt like part of a riddle he wasn't meant to solve.

He sat back in his chair, hands covering the exhaustion in his eyes.

George's name had just been added beneath Emma's, *in red*.

"Missing."

He closed his eyes, trying to rest himself.

And then came a voice note on his phone.

"Detective Alex. We warned you."

The voice was familiar, inhuman, yet calm.

Alex exhaled.

He knew the number wouldn't trace. But that wasn't the point. They wanted him to know they were watching.

He drove out to the orphanage again that night. The metal gate stood open. He snuck in silently.

He ran his flashlight along the walls and *paused*.

There, in the far corner, someone had painted a new symbol. The serpent's mark. Freshly done. Still wet with paint.

Someone had been here. Recently.

Beneath it, written in hasty strokes:

"The ritual cannot be undone."

Alex's breath caught. He took a step back and something *crunched* beneath his boot.

A **bracelet**.

Worn, broken. A small charm attached. A crescent moon.

He remembered seeing it in one of Emma's old photos.

That was all the confirmation he needed. She had been here. Alive.

Maybe even recently.

Alex crouched near the wall again. Something caught his eye. A brick... slightly loose.

He pressed it.

A compartment clicked open with a snap.

Inside lay an **old photograph**. Five children standing before the orphanage, hands joined in a circle.

Jason was there.

Next to him stood a younger Emma.

And behind them, looming like a shadow, *Old Man Hemlock*. His face was covered but Alex just knew it was him.

The back of the photo had a single message scribbled in fading ink:

"The Eye chooses its bearer."

Alex felt the ground shift beneath the weight of that phrase.

Something had chosen Emma, maybe even Jason, maybe even long before it ever heard their names.

He returned home close to midnight.

The city outside had gone quiet.

He placed the photo, the bracelet, and the journal on his desk.

And there, in the corner of the page he hadn't noticed before, was another mark. The serpent again, drawn faintly in pencil beside the words:

"The next meeting by the lake."

He froze.

The lake.

The same one near the abandoned orphanage.

He didn't even stop to think.

This wasn't just a lead anymore. It was a warning written in history.

As he stepped into the storm again, the city lights blurred through the rainfall.

In the distance, thunder cracked like a gunshot.

The Tree House

Alex remembered Chloe. Her hesitation, the flicker in her eyes. Something she hadn't told him. Something she was still *hiding*.

Alex pulled out his phone and typed:

"Hey Chloe, just need your help with a few more questions."

Minutes passed. No reply.

"Chloe?" he tried again.

A notification tone interrupted him:

"Lovely. Now a fraud is using my daughter to get his job back. Don't message her again."

Blocked.

Alex sat still, processing what was just said.

Something didn't add up. He went back to Emma's phone, digging through the hidden data folders. Among the contacts, he found a number saved as *Chloe* 2.

He typed quickly:

"Hey Chloe?"

An anxious reply came almost immediately.

"Yeah, detective. My mom didn't know about you... she misunderstood. I don't have much time. Please make it quick."

Alex leaned closer. "Just tell me. Did you ever hang out in a specific place after school hours? Anywhere secret?"

Chloe hesitated. "Not really... except a tree house we sometimes went to. It's been a while though."

"Where is this tree house?"

"It's on the other side of the Hem Lake... near an abandoned orphanage, or whatever it's called."

"And Jason Miller? Old Man Hemlock?"

There was a minute of silence, as if Chloe was stunned with that question.

"I know Jason. He was an old friend of Emma. They spent a lot of time together at the orphanage as kids. Don't know much else."

"Did they practice... rituals? Cultural or secret ones?"

Chloe's tone shifted. "Ritual? What are you talking about detective? Ahh... I got to go. Good Luck."

Chloe was hiding something. *Again*. But why? Was she a part of this?

By late afternoon, he reached the tree house. From the outside, it appeared abandoned, like a forgotten crown in the branches.

As Alex entered, he noticed something off. The wood was solid and the structure almost... *maintained*.

"How is this place still in good condition?" he muttered. "No dust, no cobwebs... *strange*."

A small cupboard caught his eye. He opened it and found a photograph tucked inside.

It was a man, older, familiar yet unfamiliar. His eyes held a sense of calmness, a kind of authority that Alex couldn't place. Emma stood beside him, smiling.

Alex frowned. *Why is there a photo of an old man with Emma?*

He shut the thought aside, focusing on the search.

A shelf against the far wall drew his attention. Similar to the one at the old mill. *Deliberate*.

Rows of books lined it. One in particular stood out: *The Eye of the Snake*.

It didn't end there. Alex noticed an under chamber hidden on the floor. He pulled upon the gate and what he found left his eyes wide.

Loads and loads of cash. Thousands of dollars. *Hidden*. But who would leave it here?

His eyes fixed back at the shelf.

He opened one of the books. The pages crackled like dry bones. The words slid across him like ice:

"The ritual of awakening. The true power of the Serpent. The night of the full moon. It will grant us

everything. Immortality, wealth, dominion. But it requires... a sacrifice. *The chosen girl.*"

Alex's chest tightened. His confidence that Emma was still alive shook. She wasn't just missing anymore. A countdown had begun.

He checked the date.

The full moon was only four days away.

The Watch that Ticked Twice

The floorboards racketed under Alex's boots as he scanned the tree house once more.

Something caught his eye. A metallic circular object placed on a table.

A watch.

Not Emma's. Not Chloe's. A man's watch. Old, scratched, but still ticking faintly.

"What is this watch doing in here?" Alex muttered, holding firmly it in his hand. The initials *T.H.* were engraved on the back.

"It might belong to that old man in the photo."

The ticking echoed in the small room. Steady yet haunting.

He slipped it into his pocket and looked at his phone. 2:48 a.m.

He'd been at this for days and nights. His body screamed for rest, but his mind wouldn't let him stop, it wouldn't want him to stop.

He finally exhaled, rubbing his eyes. "You need to sleep, Alex. Three big days ahead."

The next morning sunlight spilled weakly through the curtains. His mind was still on the watch and the photo.

He picked up his phone and dialed the number he'd called too many times already.

"Hey, man. I know it's your policy not to share student information and all, but please, there's a deadline to this case now."

A tired sigh replied through the speaker. "Not you again, detective. I already told you, I can't help."

"You've got to trust me. This isn't some obsession. It's a direct threat to Emma's life!"

"Yeah, right. I know people like you. You can't manipulate me with this. Don't call me again."

Beeeeep-

Alex stared at the phone. "I have to get Emma's files. If it means doing it the wrong way... so be it."

He arrived at Emma's school just past sunset. The corridors were silent.

He scrolled through Emma's phone, finding a school map in the gallery. *Room 204.*

Alex peeked through the small glass window.

Mrs. Anderson was still inside, talking on the phone, her back turned to the door.

"Ahh, shit," Alex whispered.

He scanned the corridor for something. Anything to create a distraction. A cleaning cart stood nearby.

He gave it a push, sending it rolling down the hall until it crashed into a locker with a loud bang.

Mrs. Anderson jumped, muttered something, and rushed out of the office.

Alex moved. Fast.

He slipped in and headed straight for the filing cabinet. The drawers screeched as he opened them. His fingers brushed across the folders.

L, M, N... E.

Emma Smith.

Got it.

He grabbed the file, heart hammering. Just then, he heard footsteps returning. Without thinking, he jumped for the window, pried it open, and jumped.

It wasn't smooth, but he landed, rolled, and got up with the file still in hand.

He didn't stop running until he reached his car.

At home, Alex placed the file on his desk. He hesitated for a second. A strange feeling washing over him, as if once he opened this, there was no going back.

He flipped it open.

In bold, underlined, and circled lines. **"Unusual Behavior. Mentions of Symbols. Snake-like imagery. Association with Jason Miller. Possible Cult Activity."**

Next to the notes were Emma's own scribbles. Strange alphabets and sketches of the serpent symbol.

Alex leaned back, exhaling sharply. "She knew. She knew it all. That confirms it. She must have declined and Jason...might have forced her in this."

He looked at the watch again. *T.H.*

Those letters had been haunting him since last night.

He sat down on his chair, eyes closed. He kept on thinking. Out of frustration he finally opened his eyes in anger.

Suddenly, his vision went to an old photo frame on his table; Him and Tim Hale; old colleagues, friends once upon a time.

Tim's wrist...bore the *same exact watch*.

His hand trembled as he compared them. The picture and the watch flashing in his mind, over and over.

"Tim..." he whispered.

His voice cracked. "Tim Hale."

A moment of disbelief. Then realization.

Old Man Hemlock.

The ticking of the watch grew louder, unnatural and mechanical, echoing through the room like a countdown.

Alex's breath quickened. He took a step back, but the sound didn't stop. It was inside his head now, pulsing with every heartbeat.

Just as he was processing what he uncovered, Alex mind replayed it all. Alex and Tim were accused of helping the mafia group.

If Tim is the Old Man Hemlock. That means the *cash* ...

It was Tim helping the mafia group. Alex was just framed along the way.

Just as he began to realize it all, his phone rung with the sound of a notification.

A voice message.

"You should've left it alone."

The Lake below

Alex had just discovered two of the most mind boggling facts of the case. Both at the tree house.

He had to be sure he did not miss anything. So off went detective Alex Park for one final search of the secret hideout.

As Alex made his way walking past the Hem Lake leading to the tree house, his foot slipped on the bank.

He tried to grab a nearby root, but it was of no use. He rolled forward – straight into the icy cool water of the lake.

He kicked violently. Bubbles came out as he made efforts to breathe the surface.

He broke through the water's surface.

He swam back to the bank, clothes soaked and teeth stuttering.

Suddenly, his mind replayed the incident. He realized he had seen a small stone carved mouth – like a tunnel. The mouth seeming to be like that of a...*serpent*.

He looked back, staring at the entrance. "Hem Lake or Hemlock?"

A mere coincidence or a *conspiracy*?

Alex sank to his knees, still cold from the incident. But the cold was too small of a problem to freeze his determination.

He felt heavy, as if the tunnel was echoing his name. He grabbed a diving suit equipped with oxygen container.

Below the surface, the world transformed.

Alex swam closer, running his gloved fingers along the carvings. Each scale was deliberate, precise, a symbol he'd seen before. The Serpent's Eye. His pulse quickened. This wasn't natural. This was a deliberate marker.

The stone entrance sloped downward into a dark tunnel. He made his way in, but the light from his torch barely penetrated the darkness.

He considered retreating, but curiosity, the same instinct that had led him through abandoned mill, and orphanage chamber, won.

Alex took a deep breath, and kicked into the tunnel.

The passage was tight, forcing him to swim horizontally, the water pressed against his body.

The visibility neared zero. Something tapped against his boot. A fallen branch? Or deliberately placed wood to *warn intruders*?

The tunnel widened slightly, revealing carvings on the stone. Water-stained markings resembling letters. Some twisted, almost serpentine in shape.

Alex ran his gloved hand along one of the carvings, tracing it. The symbol matched the serpent he had seen in Emma's photos.

A sudden current pushed against him, stronger than before. A whisper of sound. A bubbling, almost human-like sigh made him pause.

This is no ordinary lake, he thought. Someone or something is maintaining this place... or has for decades.

He made his way forward, crawling through the narrow underwater passages.

He discovered yet another small passage that led upward. Bubbles escaped from his lips as he pushed against the stone, reaching another submerged chamber.

Faint carvings covered the walls: serpents, ritualistic symbols, and dates. Some recent, some decades old. His mind raced: *This is a site of obsession. Perhaps even madness.*

A faint whisper struck Alex's ear. Alex froze, listening to the faint sound of movement, or was it the echo of his own breathing?

Alex's flashlight caught on another object: a small, worn journal, sealed in a waterproof pouch. He grabbed it, flipping through the pages briefly.

The entries were cryptic, referencing rituals, sacrifices, and the "awakening of the serpent." Dates matched the current lunar cycle — the full moon in *two nights*.

A realization settled over him. *Emma isn't just missing. She's a target.*

He pocketed the journal, scanning the chamber one last time. The carvings, the submerged tunnels, the journal. Alex kept on discovering fact after fact and now his mind was boiling with thoughts.

He didn't yet know, but the ritual, the Serpent's Eye, and the connection to Emma were no longer unconnected to him.

Slowly, methodically, he retraced his path, swimming back through the passages.

He emerged into the open lake, limbs trembling from the cold.

He rested himself onto the muddy bank, shivering uncontrollably, dripping water onto the stones. Beneath that calm exterior of the lake, secrets waited, silent and deadly.

Alex sat on the edge, flashlight illuminating nothing but mist and dark water. "This isn't over. Not by a long shot," he whispered, his eyes traced the surface of the dark water, the hidden mouths of stone tunnels.

He shivered, not from the cold, but from the certainty that the full moon was coming, and with it, the next step of a ritual he barely understood.

The Day Before the Ritual

Next evening, with no other options left, he contacts Chloe for one final time.

"Hey, sorry to come up again. I have one last question for you."

"No problem, detective. You can come up any time...I guess."

"Yeah, so apart from the tree house you both spent time at, was there any other place you both might have hanged out at?"

"Not really, let me recall. Yeah, we did go to that library at the outskirts of the town. Not many people go there now. It was mostly just us."

"Outskirts? You mean, near the old orphanage?"

"Yeah, that place...it felt quite *creepy* at times. But Emma, brave as she is, pulled me there with her every time."

"Well, nice to hear someone using 'is' rather than 'was' for Emma. Anyways, thank you for your time."

Rain lashed against the cracked windshield as Alex drove down the abandoned highway. The signboard ahead barely hung to its post, **"Old Town Library – 2 Miles"**.

The words from Chloe replayed in his mind like a broken record.

“We did go to that library at the outskirts of the town. Not many people go there now... It was mostly just us.”

He tightened his grip on the wheel.

“Outskirts... old orphanage... why does everything point back there?” he muttered.

The clock ticks: 9:04 PM.

The ritual was supposed to happen **tomorrow midnight**. One day and a few hours left to solve this or lose Emma forever.

Alex parked his car by the side of the muddy road. The forest around the library was darker than usual, the wind whispering through the dead trees.

He got out, flashlight in hand, coat flapping against the wind. His eyes scanned the distance. The outline of a building appeared faintly.

The Old Library.

Then, the sound. *Crunch*. Leaves, behind him.

He turned. Nothing.

Crunch.

This time, closer.

Alex’s breath caught. His pulse raced.

“Who’s there?” he called out, flashlight roaming across the shadows.

No response.

Then, in a split second, two men lunged from the darkness.

He barely had time to react before a *metal rod slammed* into his back. Pain exploded across his body as he fell to the ground, rolling into the wet soil.

He looked up, vision blurring. Two men, faces covered by hoods, stood above him.

Both had **serpent tattoos** coiling up their arms.

"Who sent you?" Alex groaned.

They didn't reply but only exchanged a silent nod.

The first one kicked him hard in the ribs, the second pulled out a dagger. But instead of finishing him, one leaned close and whispered through his mask:

"The serpent sees you now."

Another hit. Darkness.

Alex woke up some time later, face pressed against cold gravel. The watch on his read 11:38 PM.

His flashlight was broken. His coat, torn.

The attackers were gone.

He spat out dirt, groaning as he sat up. His ribs ached, blood seeping from his lip.

"Alive... They left me alive... Why?"

Flashbacks of five years ago crawled back yet again "Why Alex, why? What's gotten into you? Maybe you were never meant to be the great detective you dreamt of being as a teenager."

He continued, his limp carried him forward, toward the looming shadow of the **library**.

The Girl Who Lied to Herself

While Alex was doing everything he could to save Emma, the Serpent was already rolling a dice to get him to square zero.

Night had a different meaning in Chloe Adams' house.

The house was asleep.

But Chloe sat on the floor of her room, her knees pulled to her chest. She stared at her trembling hands.

On her desk lay her phone. The screen was glowing with the last message she received:

"Tomorrow midnight. Bring him to the circle."
— *H.L.*

Hemlock.

Her nightmare.

She wiped away the tears on her face with the back of her hand.

At merely twelve, she had already done things she could never undo.

Things she wished she could forget.

The worst lie she ever told wasn't to the police.

It wasn't to Alex.

It wasn't even to her mother.

The worst lie she told was to Emma.

Two weeks before Emma disappeared.

They had been sitting near the lake. Hem Lake. The place Chloe once believed was nothing more than a peaceful retreat.

Emma was skipping stones. Laughing innocent.

But Chloe knew the truth even back then. She knew the symbol carved beneath the water, knew the history of the Serpent's Eye, knew that the ritual's chosen child had to be someone pure.

Someone kind.

Someone brave.

Someone like Emma.

Emma threw another pebble. "Chloe, will you ever tell me what's been bothering you?"

Chloe forced a smile.

"No," she lied softly. "It's nothing."

Three months before the disappearance, Chloe had been summoned to the abandoned orphanage by a note slipped under her school locker.

Meet me. Alone. — J.

Jason.

Back then, he wasn't a threat. He was a trembling, paranoid teenage boy with nightmares of Hemlock's return. He told her about the symbol. The rituals. The chosen.

He told her she had been selected as the next "Vice".

The one who would lure the chosen vessel into the circle.

She had made a mistake. She understood all of this as a game, until she was the pawn being used for the game.

The next day, she found a snake's skull in her school bag.

A warning.

She pressed her hands to her eyes and cried until dawn.

Tonight, her reflection in her mirror stared at her with disgust.

"You're a monster," it whispered.

Chloe shook her head. "I didn't choose this."

"You're going to help them kill Emma."

"No." Tears rose. "No, I won't. I can stop it. I can. I can save her."

Her reflection seemed to talk back.

"You really think Alex can stop them? You think you can? You're twelve. Hemlock will snap you in half."

"I'll try," Chloe whispered through a cracking voice. "I have to try."

"You can't save anyone. You're weak. You're scared."

"No, I'm not."

"You are."

Chloe punched her fist against the mirror as the glass shattered.

"I'M NOT!"

She covered her mouth quickly trying to avoid her mother from waking up.

She lowered her voice.

"I'm going to help Emma escape. During the ritual. When the circle opens."

The broken glass still seemed to warn her.

"And then what? They'll kill you."

"I don't care."

The reflection laughed bitterly.

"You do."

Chloe wiped her cheeks. "I care about Emma more."

She stared at a bracelet Emma had gifted to her and whispered, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. I'm going to fix this. I don't care what Hemlock said. I don't care what Jason wants. I'll save you. I swear."

Her voice trembled in the empty room.

"But I have to bring Alex first. That's the deal. That's the only way he'll let Emma live long enough for me to help her escape."

Her reflection softened.

"And what if Alex dies?"

Chloe's lip trembled.

"He won't," she whispered.

She didn't fully believe that.

The Library

"Hello?" Alex's voice echoed inside the hollow hall.

No response.

Dust floated in thick layers, illuminated by slivers of moonlight slicing through broken glass. Rows of books stood like tombstones of forgotten knowledge.

And then he saw it. A single **book placed on the first table**, clean, untouched by dust.

Its cover bore the familiar **serpent emblem**. The same one from Emma's file.

He hesitated, then flipped it open.

"Detective, if you are reading this, you've already come far.

You must remember how people treated you after that case.

You must either be too stupid or too gentle to still take up this one.

Oh! And don't worry, there's a black van waiting for you outside.

You can trust us with getting you home quicker... and safely."

Alex froze, eyes darting to the window.

A **black van** stood outside.

He took a slow breath.

“Alright, then. Let’s see where this ride goes.”

He stepped outside, rain dripping off his hair, and opened the van door. Inside, sitting calmly in the back seat, was **Chloe**.

Alex’s throat dried. “What are you doing here?”

She smiled. That same bright, familiar smile, but her eyes were wrong. Empty.

“Oh, me? I’m here to serve our master... *The Old Man Hemlock*.”

Alex’s pulse thundered. “Who is this man? What have you done with Emma?”

Chloe chuckled. “Alex, Alex, Alex... you ask too much.”

Her voice grew sharper.

“I was the vice head of the student council at the Old Orphanage. Jason Miller, your beloved villain, was just a pawn. The Old Man Hemlock is our **leader**, our **messiah**, our **lord** who will free us from misery. WE WILL BE STRONG, WE WILL BE RICH, AND WE WILL BE POWERFUL. THE WORLD WILL BOW TO US!”

Her laughter echoed like madness inside the confined space.

Alex clenched his fists, ready to lunge forward — but the driver spoke first.

A calm, chilling voice.

“Hello... old friend.”

The driver turned slightly. The mask glinted in the van's dim light.

Alex's heart stopped.

"Tim... Hale?"

The van doors slammed shut. Tires screeched.
Darkness.

The alarm clock blinked: **11:11 p.m.**

Alex shot up from his motel bed, gasping for air, drenched in sweat.

For a moment, he thought it was a dream. A nightmare.

Then he looked at his wrist. And *froze*.

A faint **red mark** circled his skin. Shaped like a serpent swallowing its tail.

"No... no, this can't be real..."

He stumbled toward the sink, splashing water on his face. The image of Chloe, Tim, and that van replayed over and over.

He pressed a hand to the mirror, trying to catch his breath.

"Did they drug me? Was it a dream... or a warning?"

He noticed something else. A small piece of paper sat neatly on his table.

It hadn't been there when he woke up.

"TOMORROW MIDNIGHT — THE RITUAL BEGINS."

Alex's jaw clenched.

"Alright then, Hemlock... You want me to come? I'll come."

He looked at his map. **Hem Lake, Old Orphanage, Library, Old Mill** all connected in a circular pattern.

Right in the center of it — **Emma's house**.

He realized the horrifying truth:

The entire town was built in the shape of the **Serpent's Eye**.

He backed away from the map, whispering,

"This was never about Emma. She's just the key..."

The phone buzzed. A new message. **Unknown number**.

"SEE YOU TOMORROW, DETECTIVE. DON'T BE LATE."

The mark on his wrist burned.

Outside, thunder cracked over the hills.

Alex loaded his revolver, packed his flashlight, and whispered:

"If the serpent wants to see me, it better be ready."

The clock struck **11:59 PM**.

He looked at the mirror one last time.

For the first time, he wasn't just a detective anymore.

He was **the last man standing between the ritual and the world beyond**.

The Night of The Serpent

Alex laid over his desk, face lit by the dim glow of the table lamp.

Emma's **locket** hung from his fingers.

The **floor** was chaos. Files scattered. Photos torn. Strings connecting faces and locations.

He hadn't slept in **two days**.

His eyes flicked to Jason's journal.

He opened it again. The same words, the same curse staring back.

"When the circle breathes, silence it.

When the eye opens, blind it.

When the heart beats, stop it."

At first, he thought it as poetic metaphoric. But now?

His voice cracked the silence.

"It's literal. Step by step. How to stop the ritual."

A low voice slithered through his mind.

Not from the room. From *inside* it. A whisper under his skin.

"You can't save her, Alex... you failed once... you'll fail again..."

His pulse quickened.

"Not again."

The lamp flickered. The whisper stopped.

And in the reflection of the dark window, for half a second, a **serpent's emblem** *vanished*.

Midnight.

The **Old Orphanage** loomed ahead, Alex had made his way to the horror, risking his own life for that of Emma.

The gates creaked open with a groan that echoed like a cry.

Inside, the air thick with **incense, rot, and fear**.

Rows of candles lined the hallway. Walls scribbled with blood.

And at the far end was carved a circle into the floor.

Alex moved silently, every step syncing with some faint chanting.

"Serpent of the Circle... Eye that sees all... awaken the dawn beyond death..."

He crouched behind a carton, eyes narrowing at the figures ahead —

Jason, hooded, arms raised.

Chloe, standing beside him, motionless.

And in the center; **Emma**. Unconscious.

"Chosen vessel... she will awaken the Eye..."

Alex's hand tightened around his knife as thunder roared outside.

He exhaled.

"One wrong move... and she's gone."

He stepped into the circle.

The chanting stopped.

The world froze.

Jason turned, his voice calm. Too calm.

"Detective. Welcome."

Then the circle **glowed blue**.

Chaos erupted.

Screams tore through the hall. Alex covered his ears and collapsed to the floor, the voices felt like a dark energy attacking him. Slowly, the voices vanished. Alex stabilized himself.

Dozens of men surrounded him, striking him from all directions. Alex ducked and dodged.

But there were too many.

One blade slashed across his leg. Pain shot through him like lightning. He fell.

The chants restarted. Louder now. *Faster*.

He looked up through blurred vision and saw Chloe.

Expressionless. Watching.

"Chloe... please... don't—"

He collapsed. The world dimmed.

"The Eye awakens."

Darkness.

The voices of his past came rushing back to his head.

"Hero? Don't make me laugh. He's nothing but a fraud."

The Fight for Life

Alex's eye snapped open. "Not tonight." Those two simple words fueling a fire, a fire of determination in his head.

Alex teared apart a piece of cloth laying nearby and wrapped it around his injured leg. He struggled his way back to his feet, limping and hurting.

"Leave her alone." Alex shouted at the top of his lungs.

Jason laughed a wicked cackle like Alex had cracked a joke. "Detective, you think you're in charge?"

"All this just for wealth?" Alex muttered, questioning the very existence of the cult.

"I am a mere soldier in the war, Alex. Wealth is nothing compared to what we want." Jason replied, uneasiness in his tone.

"And what did you do to George?"

"Oh, that dumb boy? He thought he could sneak up on me? I think you are good enough to figure it out yourself."

"Bring it on." Alex muttered.

Jason lunged forward as Alex dodged, seized him by the neck, and slammed him against the wall.

After a brutal struggle, Alex forced him down, snapping shackles around his wrists.

Alex tied Jason's hands behind a pillar forcing his struggles to an end.

"Detective," he voiced softly, voice rich and calm. "You think you made it?"

As the cult scatters, shadows stretch across the room.

A tall figure emerges, masked, voice sharp as a blade.

"He always makes it, kiddo."

Alex's heart stopped. "Tim?"

Tim smirked.

"You still don't get it, do you? Truth is the real currency, Alex. Not gold. Not faith. Truth. The Eye lets those who hold it, *reshape it*."

"You call this truth? You're murdering children."

Tim's eyes flashed.

"Oh these children? My dear friend, they are just pawns. They seriously think I am doing this for them. The truth is – I am doing this for us Alex."

He circled Alex slowly, calmly.

"I didn't ruin you, Alex. The system did. The papers, the people. They made you a villain, they made us a villain. With the power I will behold after this ritual, I will be stronger, smarter – POWERFUL. I will finish everyone who put a stain on our name."

"SHUT UP! YOU ARE THE REASON I SUFFERED."
Alex fumed.

Hemlock's voice rose. "Begin the final verse."

The circle flared, the chamber shook and the air *hummed*.

"I am sorry Alex. I can't go back from here. So, either you join me or die trying."

Alex did not reply. A silent shake of the head was all he gave back.

"Fine." Tim exhaled.

Tim's men rushed forward with chains and daggers.

Alex is brought down to his knees.

Tim picked up the dagger, raising it high.

"I loved you like a brother, Alex. But I can't let you ruin it all."

"Goodbye, Alex."

All hope felt lost. Alex just knew his attempts had gone in vain.

Crack!

A wooden beam smashed across Tim's face.

Chloe.

Her hands trembled. "I... I can't do this anymore."

Emma gasped awake.

The circle's glow flickered, then faded out.

The chamber walls cracked as **sirens wailed above**.

Sam's men burst in, guns drawn.

Jason shouted from behind. "You are playing with fire, detective."

The entire room flooded with smoke.

Alex turned back.

The torches went out and darkness swallowed the chamber whole.

Smoke curled from broken beams. Crows circled above.

As the smoke faded, Alex turned.

Tim was gone. Only his blood, remained behind.

Echoes

A while later, everyone evacuated the place.

Emma and Chloe sat by an ambulance, wrapped in a blanket. *Silent.*

Harry raced towards his friends. He hugged both of them tight. "I missed you soooo much Em."

Emma didn't speak. She just embraced Harry as the three of them shared a wholesome moment.

Alex limped toward them, his coat bloodstained and his eyes hollow.

She looked up.

"I saw things down there. I don't know what was real anymore."

He paused.

"You survived. That's what's real."

His sight drifted to the faint **burn mark** on the ground.

"What if the shadows weren't following me, but waiting for me to return." Alex thought, processing what was going on.

A week later.

Media headlines screamed:

"Mayor's Daughter Rescued by Fallen Detective."

A ceremony was conducted to award Alex for his bravery. The Mayor shook his hand, pinning a medal to his chest.

"Why is there no mention of the Serpent's Eye in the news?" Alex was surprised to see no one know about the case.

"The people can't know about this, Alex. I advise you to stay silent too. And please get my boy back too. Please get my George." The mayor's tone shifted from cold to emotional at the mention of George.

Harry, Chloe and Emma stood behind him, watching silently.

The town; the people who called him a fraud, the people who left him when he needed, his ex-colleagues – gathered to watch the man who criminals still fear.

Alex smiled faintly for the cameras. But his eyes. *Empty.*

"Detective Alex, I'll admit, I was wrong about you. Turns out, some stories don't end in disgrace... they just take longer to prove their worth."

"Didn't think I'd see the day you'd wear that badge again, Alex. You made us all eat our words."

The town was happy – the mayor's daughter had been saved. But Alex – still empty. Guilt laid heavy on his shoulders. *George.*

But, somewhere within Alex's instincts betrayed his feelings. Deep down he knew George couldn't have been dead. Not if Jason was right.

Chloe got Alex to a side. She had a truth to reveal.

"The serpent's eye is far more than a cult, detective... it's beyond human understanding... I led it here. I am sorry."

"What are you even saying Chloe?" Alex questioned.

"You think the ritual failed...the truth is, it was successful... the day Emma vanished."

"Chloe, relax. It's over now" Alex replied trying to calm her down.

"Detective, I know better. *I led it here.* I had to protect Emma's life. That is why I had to play the double agent. But...this thing, it isn't done." Chloe spoke as sweat swam down her face.

"Chloe, we will talk about this later. I have to go see Emma." Alex went away. But, the roots of a threat of danger were planted in his head.

The hospital stood in the eastern end of the town.

Alex made his way inside and paused at the entry of Ward 7. Through the glass, he saw Emma sitting upright. She held a cup of tea in her hands.

The machine beside mapped her heartbeat.

He knocked once and entered inside.

Her eyes shifted towards the door as if she knew Alex would be there.

"Detective." She said softly, her voice was calm. Too calm.

"Just came in to have a check on you." Alex spoke as he stepped inside.

"Well. I am alive." Emma whispered.

"So, do you remember anything?" Alex questioned. His eyes fixed at Emma's, waiting for a response.

Emma smiled. "They say I was found in that orphanage. They tell me you pulled me out."

"You don't believe them?"

"I believe them. They *think* that is what happened."

Alex stared at her for a moment. The monitor showed a steady heartbeat but her body betrayed it.

"You're safe now Emma." Alex muttered trying to study her.

"Safe." She repeated.

Alex released out a fake laugh. "You should rest now. Time will help you settle."

Emma turned her face towards the window and kept on staring at it. "Time does not settle. It circles."

Alex rubbed his eyes. "I'll check on you tomorrow." He hoped that her distant responses were just an illusion of his mind.

Emma nodded, still staring at the window. "It's always cold here." She whispered under her breath.

Alex left the room. The voice of the monitor beeping echoes through his ears.

He pushed open the exit gate and stepped out into the rain.

He told himself it was over. But the echo of that single beep sound followed him all the way to his car.

*"In the city that never forgot, silence had
simply learned to wait."*

THE END

OR MAYBE NOT?

A Message from the Author

When I had the first thought of this story, it was never meant to be a book. It was merely a way to calm the chaos in my mind. That urge to do something, to prove myself.

I did not write this for praise or fame, I wrote it to understand what means to fall, to lose and rise again.

And if, while reading this book, you felt like “Oh – this has happened to me”, then we’ve already made a connection beyond words.

Because, the truth is that everyone single one us has their own version of Alex Park – being doubted, feeling lost. But, we learn to rise only when we fall. Don’t we?

This book might have been a mystery to many, but to me personally? It was just a way to let my beloved readers know;

Why fear what life might throw your way?

Why fear what life might make you say?

If nothing happens, it’s still okay.

You’ll walk out wiser at the end of the day.