THE VANISHING BELL

EVERY BELL HAS A STORY.
THIS ONE HAS A SECRET.

SUVASHREE SARKAR

MYSTERY | FRIENDSHIP | COURAGE | DISCOVERY

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Chapter 1:

The New Girl

The first day after the summer vacation was always the noisiest day of the year at Greenwood High School.

The long corridor outside Class XI-B buzzed with excitement. Students crowded around notice boards, comparing timetables and discussing unfinished holiday assignments. Some were excited to meet their friends again, while others were already complaining about the upcoming examinations.

Aryan Sen sat quietly at his desk near the window.

While most students were busy talking, he was reading a mystery novel. "Seriously, Aryan?" a voice said.

He looked up to find his best friend, Ananya Roy, standing beside his desk. "School has just started, and you're already reading?"

Aryan smiled. "It's better than listening to everyone argue about homework." Ananya rolled her eyes and sat down.

"You know, one day you're going to solve a real mystery instead of reading about them." Aryan laughed.

"Only in books."

Outside the classroom window, dark clouds gathered across the sky.

The weather forecast had predicted rain, but the morning had begun bright and sunny. Now the sunlight was disappearing behind thick grey clouds.

The school bell rang.

Students hurried to their seats.

A few moments later, Mrs. Sharma, the class teacher, entered the room carrying a file. The class immediately fell silent.

"Good morning, everyone."

"Good morning, ma'am," the students replied. Mrs. Sharma smiled.

"Before we begin, I would like to introduce a new student." The classroom door opened.

A girl stepped inside.

Instantly, every student turned to look.

She wore the Greenwood High uniform neatly and carried a school bag over one shoulder. There was nothing unusual about her appearance, yet she somehow stood out.

Perhaps it was the confidence in her eyes.

Or perhaps it was the calm way she looked around the room, as though she was observing everyone. "This is Riya Kapoor," Mrs. Sharma announced. "She recently transferred here from Delhi."

"Hello, everyone," Riya said politely. Several boys immediately sat up straighter. A few girls exchanged curious glances.

Ananya leaned toward Aryan and whispered,

"I guarantee half the class already has a crush on her." Aryan ignored the comment.

Mrs. Sharma looked around the room. "There is one empty seat."

Unfortunately for Aryan, the empty seat happened to be beside him. "Riya, you may sit there."

Riya walked across the classroom and took the seat next to Aryan. For a moment neither spoke.

Then she smiled. "Hi."

"Hi."

"You're Aryan, right?" He looked surprised. "How do you know?"

"The teacher mentioned your name while showing me around." "Oh."

An awkward silence followed. Riya seemed amused.

"You don't talk much, do you?" "Not really."

"That's okay. Someone has to balance the rest of the class." Aryan couldn't help smiling.

For the first time that morning, he felt slightly less uncomfortable. The first few periods passed normally.

Mathematics.

Physics.

English.

The usual routine.

During lunch break, students gathered in groups across the school grounds.

The large campus included a football field, basketball court, library, science block, and an old abandoned wing that had been closed for years.

Nobody was allowed there.

Naturally, countless ghost stories existed about the place.

Ananya, Aryan, and Riya sat together beneath a large banyan tree. "So why did you transfer?" Ananya asked.

"My father's job," Riya replied.

"Do you like mysteries?" Aryan asked suddenly. Both girls looked at him.

Ananya burst out laughing.

"You've known her for three hours, and that's your question?" Aryan shrugged.

Riya smiled. "Actually, I do."

His eyes brightened. "Really?"

"I read mystery novels all the time." "Who's your favorite detective?"

The conversation continued for nearly the entire lunch break.

For the first time in years, Aryan felt as though he had met someone who understood his interests. As the day progressed, the weather became worse.

Rain clouds covered the sky.

Strong winds rattled classroom windows.

By the final period, distant thunder echoed across the city. Students eagerly watched the clock.

Nobody wanted to stay late on the first day. Finally, the last bell rang.

The school exploded into motion. Students rushed toward the exits. Teachers gathered their books.

The parking area quickly filled with vehicles. Aryan packed his bag and headed home.

As he passed the old abandoned wing, he noticed something strange. A light flashed briefly inside one of the dark windows.

He stopped.

The building was supposed to be empty. Perhaps it was a reflection.

Perhaps someone had accidentally left a light on. Yet something felt wrong.

The flash appeared again. Then disappeared. "Aryan!"

He turned.

Ananya was waving from the school gate. "What are you doing?"

"Nothing."

He looked back toward the abandoned building. The window was dark once more.

Maybe he had imagined it.

That evening, heavy rain began falling across the city. Aryan sat at his desk attempting to organize his notes. His phone buzzed.

A message from Ananya.

Welcome back to another year of suffering. Aryan laughed.

Before he could reply, another notification appeared. This one came from an unknown number.

The message contained only four words. LOOK BEHIND THE SCHOOL.

Aryan frowned.

No name.

No explanation.

Just the message.

He assumed it was a prank.

After all, students often created anonymous groups and sent random messages. Still, something about it felt unsettling.

He typed a reply.

Who is this?

No answer came.

Minutes passed.

Then the number went offline. Outside, thunder shook the windows. Rain poured endlessly onto the streets. Aryan tried focusing on homework.

Yet he kept thinking about the message. Look behind the school.

Why?

What was there?

And who had sent it?

The next morning, Greenwood High awoke to shocking news.

A security guard reported seeing someone near the abandoned wing late at night. Someone who definitely wasn't supposed to be there.

More disturbing was what he claimed to have found. A school ID card lying in the mud.

The card belonged to a student.

A student who had not yet arrived at school. A student named Rahul Sinha.

Nobody realized it yet.

But this small discovery would become the beginning of a mystery that would change Greenwood High forever.

And before the year ended, several students would disappear. Some would return.

Others would not.

End of Chapter 1

Coming in Chapter 2: The Last Bell

(The disappearance of Rahul Sinha and the first major clue.)

Chapter 2:

The Last Bell

The news spread through Greenwood High faster than a viral social media post.

By the time Aryan reached school the next morning, groups of students had already gathered around the main gate, whispering excitedly.

"What happened?"

"I heard a student is missing."

"No, no. He's probably just absent."

"My cousin said the police came last night." Rumors were flying in every direction.

Aryan spotted Ananya near the notice board. She looked unusually serious.

"Have you heard?" she asked as soon as he approached. "Heard what?"

"Rahul Sinha never went home yesterday." Aryan frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean exactly that. He left school, but he never reached home." Before Aryan could respond, Riya arrived.

"What happened?" Ananya quickly explained.

For the first time since joining Greenwood High, Riya seemed genuinely unsettled. "Has anyone contacted him?" she asked.

"His phone is switched off," Ananya replied.

The bell rang before they could continue the conversation. Reluctantly, students headed toward their classrooms.

Yet nobody was thinking about lessons. Everyone was thinking about Rahul.

Rahul Sinha was one of the most popular students in Class XI. He wasn't a topper.

He wasn't a troublemaker.

He was simply one of those people everybody liked.

He played football, made jokes during lunch breaks, and somehow managed to be friends with almost everyone.

The idea of Rahul disappearing seemed impossible.

As the first period began, even the teachers appeared distracted. His empty desk sat quietly in the corner of the classroom.

Several students kept glancing at it.

Mrs. Sharma attempted to continue the lesson, but it was obvious that her mind was elsewhere. Finally, after twenty minutes, one student raised his hand.

"Ma'am, is Rahul okay?"

The classroom immediately fell silent. Mrs. Sharma hesitated.

Then she answered carefully.

"The school administration is aware of the situation. The police have been informed." That was all she said.

But it was enough.

A nervous murmur spread through the room. Police.

This wasn't an ordinary absence. Something serious had happened.

During lunch break, the entire school seemed obsessed with the mystery. Every table in the cafeteria buzzed with theories.

"He probably ran away."

"No chance. Rahul loves football too much." "Maybe he got into trouble."

"What kind of trouble?" "No idea."

Aryan listened quietly.

Unlike most students, he wasn't interested in wild guesses. He preferred facts.

And so far, there were very few facts.

One fact stood out above all others. Rahul had vanished.

Without explanation.

Without warning.

Without leaving any message behind.

That afternoon, rain clouds gathered once again.

As students prepared for their final class, Aryan noticed something unusual. Riya was staring out the window.

"What are you looking at?" he asked. She pointed toward the abandoned wing.

For a brief moment, Aryan thought he saw movement near one of the windows. A shadow.

It appeared and disappeared so quickly that he couldn't be certain. "Did you see that?" Riya whispered.

"Maybe."

"Someone was there."

Before they could investigate further, the teacher entered the classroom. The lesson began.

But neither of them could concentrate.

When the final bell rang, students poured out of the building.

Aryan was about to leave when he noticed several police officers near the principal's office. This immediately attracted attention.

Dozens of students slowed down to watch.

The principal stepped outside and spoke quietly with the officers. His expression was grim.

Very grim.

A feeling of unease settled in Aryan's stomach. Something was wrong.

Very wrong.

As he walked toward the gate, he noticed a familiar figure sitting alone on a bench. It was Kabir Mehta, the school captain.

Normally confident and cheerful, Kabir looked tense. Almost worried.

His eyes followed the police officers as they crossed the courtyard. Then, for a split second, he noticed Aryan watching him.

Their eyes met.

Kabir immediately looked away. The reaction felt strange.

Almost guilty.

Aryan made a mental note of it. That evening, heavy rain returned.

The streets outside were nearly empty. Around eight o'clock, Aryan's phone buzzed. A message from Ananya.

The police searched near the rear gate today.

Aryan quickly replied.

Did they find anything?

Several moments passed.

Then another message arrived. A footprint.

Aryan stared at the screen. Just one?

Yes. Only one.

That detail bothered him.

A lot.

Why would there be only one footprint? Rain should have washed away everything. Yet somehow a single print remained.

It didn't make sense.

Unable to stop thinking about it, Aryan opened his laptop and searched recent news reports. Most articles repeated the same information.

A seventeen-year-old student was missing. Police were investigating.

No suspects had been identified. No evidence had been released. No leads had been found.

It was frustrating.

Then something caught his attention.

One article mentioned that Rahul's school bag had never been recovered. Neither had his bicycle.

It was as though he had simply vanished.

The next morning, Greenwood High felt different. Quieter.

Students spoke in hushed voices. Even the teachers seemed tense.

As Aryan entered Class XI-B, his eyes automatically moved toward Rahul's desk. Still empty.

Still waiting.

Still unanswered.

A strange chill ran through him.

For the first time, the disappearance felt real. Not like a rumor.

Not like gossip.

Real.

Someone they knew was gone. And nobody knew why.

The first lesson had barely begun when something unexpected happened. The classroom door opened.

A police officer stepped inside. Instantly, every student sat up straight.

The officer spoke briefly with Mrs. Sharma before addressing the class.

"We would like anyone who saw Rahul Sinha after school on Thursday to come forward." Nobody spoke.

The officer nodded.

Then he added something that made the room fall completely silent. "We have reason to believe Rahul did not leave voluntarily."

A shocked gasp escaped several students. Not voluntary?

That meant only one thing.

Rahul hadn't simply disappeared. Something had happened to him. Something serious.

Something dangerous.

That night, as rain tapped softly against his bedroom window, Aryan couldn't sleep. He kept thinking about Rahul.

About the abandoned wing. About the single footprint.

About the anonymous message he had received. Look behind the school.

Suddenly, he sat upright.

The rear gate.

The footprint had been found near the rear gate. Was that what the message meant?

His heart began to race.

He grabbed his phone and opened the message again. The unknown number had disappeared.

No profile picture.

No name.

Nothing.

Yet the timing felt too perfect to be a coincidence. Someone had wanted him to notice something.

The question was—Who?

And why?

As lightning flashed outside, another message appeared on his screen. Unknown Number.

Just three words.

You're being watched.

Aryan froze.

For several seconds, he couldn't move.

Then, slowly, he looked toward his bedroom window.

Outside, across the rain-soaked street, stood a dark figure beneath a streetlamp. Watching his house.

And the moment Aryan noticed it—

The figure turned and vanished into the darkness.

End of Chapter 2

Coming in Chapter 3: The Empty Desk The mysterious watcher returns.

Aryan begins investigating on his own.

A strange object is found near the rear gate. Riya reveals she knows more than she's saying. Another threatening message arrives.

Chapter 3:

The Empty Desk

Aryan barely slept that night

The image of the figure standing beneath the streetlamp replayed in his mind again and again. Had someone really been watching his house?

Or had his imagination been running wild after everything that had happened?

At around two in the morning, he finally forced himself to look outside once more. The street was empty.

Only rainwater glistened beneath the yellow streetlights. No figure.

No movement.

Nothing.

Yet the uneasy feeling remained. The anonymous messages.

The disappearance of Rahul. The mysterious watcher.

None of it felt like a coincidence.

The next morning, Greenwood High School seemed strangely quiet. Even the usual chatter in the corridors had faded.

Students still talked about Rahul, but now there was something different in their voices. Fear.

Nobody wanted to admit it, but everyone was beginning to wonder the same thing. Could it happen again?

Could someone else disappear?

Aryan entered Class XI-B and immediately noticed Rahul's desk. Empty.

The chair remained pushed neatly beneath it. His notebooks were gone.

His football keychain no longer hung from the side. It looked as though he had never existed.

For a moment, Aryan found himself staring at the desk. Then he noticed someone else staring too.

Riya.

She quickly looked away when she realized he was watching. The first period dragged on painfully.

No one paid attention to the lesson. Even Mrs. Sharma seemed distracted.

Halfway through class, the principal made an announcement over the school's intercom system.

"Students are advised not to spread rumors regarding recent events. The police investigation is ongoing. Please cooperate with school authorities."

As soon as the announcement ended, whispers erupted across the room. Ananya leaned toward Aryan.

"That sounds bad."

"It is bad," Aryan replied quietly. She nodded.

"Do you think Rahul was kidnapped?" Aryan hesitated.

Until yesterday, he would have dismissed the idea. Now he wasn't so sure.

During lunch break, Aryan decided to visit the rear gate.

The area had been sealed off temporarily, but the police tape had already been removed. Most students avoided the place.

The gate stood at the far end of the campus near the abandoned wing. Tall trees surrounded it.

The area always felt isolated.

As Aryan approached, he noticed Riya standing nearby. "You came too?" he asked.

Riya looked slightly embarrassed. "I was curious."

Aryan smiled. "So was I."

Together they examined the area. At first, they found nothing unusual. Just wet soil and fallen leaves.

Then Aryan spotted something near a bush.

A small metallic object partially buried in the mud. He bent down and picked it up.

It was a silver button.

The school emblem was engraved on it. Riya frowned.

"That looks like it came from a school blazer." Aryan turned it over.

The back was scratched.

Almost as if it had been torn off during a struggle. His stomach tightened.

"What if this belonged to Rahul?" Riya didn't answer.

Because both of them were thinking the same thing.

As they headed back toward the main building, they noticed someone watching them. Kabir Mehta.

The school captain.

He stood near the basketball court, talking to a group of students.

Yet the moment Aryan held up the button, Kabir's expression changed.

Only for a second.

But Aryan saw it.

Surprise.

Or perhaps concern.

Then Kabir smiled and continued his conversation as if nothing had happened. "Did you notice that?" Aryan asked.

"Notice what?" "Kabir."

Riya glanced over her shoulder. "What about him?"

"He looked nervous." Riya shrugged.

"Maybe you're imagining things." Maybe.

But Aryan wasn't convinced.

That afternoon, heavy clouds darkened the sky once again. The weather seemed determined to remain gloomy.

As classes ended, Aryan headed toward his locker.

When he opened it, a folded piece of paper fell onto the floor. His heart skipped a beat.

Slowly, he picked it up.

The note contained only three words. STOP ASKING QUESTIONS.

Aryan stared at the message. His hands trembled slightly.

Someone had placed it inside his locker. Someone who knew he was investigating. Someone who had access to the school.

He immediately looked around.

The corridor was crowded with students. Any one of them could have done it.

Any one of them could be responsible. "What's that?"

Aryan quickly turned.

Ananya was standing behind him. He showed her the note.

Her face paled.

"This isn't funny anymore." "I know."

"We should tell a teacher." Aryan folded the paper.

"And say what? Someone put a note in my locker?" Ananya crossed her arms.

"You received anonymous messages, saw a stranger outside your house, and now this." When she said it aloud, the situation sounded even worse.

Aryan knew she was right. Yet something stopped him. Instinct.

The feeling that if he told the wrong person, whoever was behind this would simply become more careful.

That evening, as students left the campus, rain began falling once again. Aryan hurried toward the gate.

Suddenly, someone called his name. "Wait."

He turned.

It was Riya.

She looked unusually serious. "Can we talk?"

"Sure."

For several moments she seemed uncertain. Then she finally spoke.

"There's something I haven't told you." Aryan waited.

Riya glanced around to make sure nobody was listening.

"When I first arrived at Greenwood, I thought it was just another school." "Okay..."

"But after Rahul disappeared, I started noticing things." "What things?"

She lowered her voice. "People watching me." Aryan froze.

"What?"

"I've seen the same man three times." His heart began beating faster.

"The same man?" Riya nodded.

"Near the school gate. Near my house. And once outside the library." "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"I wasn't sure."

Aryan thought about the figure outside his own house. Could it be the same person?

The possibility sent a chill down his spine.

That night, Aryan sat at his desk trying to study. His chemistry textbook lay open before him.

The upcoming exams were only weeks away.

Normally he would have been focused entirely on his studies. But now every page seemed meaningless.

His phone buzzed.

A new message.

Unknown Number.

His stomach dropped.

Slowly, he opened it.

This time there was no text. Only a photograph.

The image showed Greenwood High School. Specifically, the abandoned wing.

Someone had taken the picture very recently.

The building appeared dark except for one illuminated window on the third floor. Room 307.

Aryan zoomed in.

A shadow stood behind the glass. Watching.

At the bottom of the image was a single sentence. HE'S STILL THERE.

Aryan's blood ran cold.

Who was still there?

Rahul?

The mysterious watcher?

Or someone else entirely?

Outside, thunder shook the night sky.

And for the first time, Aryan realized something terrifying. Rahul's disappearance might only be the beginning.

End of Chapter 3

Chapter 4: The Strange Message

Aryan and Riya secretly investigate Room 307. A teacher behaves suspiciously.

Another student receives a threat.

The abandoned wing reveals its first dark secret. Someone is hiding inside the school after dark.

Chapter 4:

The Strange Message

The photograph haunted Aryan all night.

Every time he closed his eyes, he saw the shadow standing in the window of Room 307. Watching.

Waiting.

The message beneath the picture repeated itself endlessly in his mind. HE'S STILL THERE.

Who was there?

And how had the sender known exactly where to look?

By the time morning arrived, Aryan had made up his mind. He needed answers.

The school grounds were unusually crowded when he arrived. Students stood in groups discussing the latest rumors.

Rahul's disappearance dominated every conversation.

Some students believed he had been kidnapped. Others claimed he had run away.

A few even insisted that the abandoned wing was haunted. Nobody seemed interested in the truth.

They preferred stories.

Aryan preferred facts.

And facts were becoming increasingly difficult to find.

As he entered the classroom, he immediately noticed Riya sitting at her desk. She looked tired.

Dark circles had appeared beneath her eyes. "You didn't sleep either?" Aryan asked.

She looked surprised. "How did you know?" He held up his phone.

The photograph filled the screen. Riya's expression instantly changed. "You got one too?"

Aryan blinked. "What do you mean?"

Without a word, she unlocked her phone and showed him another message. It had arrived shortly after midnight.

The photograph was different. But the location was the same. Room 307.

Beneath it were four words. DON'T OPEN THE DOOR.

For several seconds neither spoke. The realization settled over them.

Someone was sending both of them messages. Someone who knew they were investigating. The first few classes passed slowly.

Neither Aryan nor Riya paid much attention. Instead, they exchanged notes and theories. By lunch break they had reached a decision.

They were going to visit the abandoned wing after school. Together.

The old wing stood at the far end of the campus. Most students avoided it.

The building had been closed years ago after structural damage was discovered. At least, that was the official explanation.

Students had invented dozens of alternative stories. Some claimed a teacher had disappeared there.

Others insisted strange sounds could be heard at night. The rumors grew more exaggerated every year.

Yet after Rahul vanished, the stories no longer felt harmless.

At lunch, Ananya joined them beneath the banyan tree.

The moment she saw their faces, she knew something was wrong. "What happened?"

Aryan showed her the messages.

Ananya nearly dropped her water bottle. "This is insane."

"I know."

"You have to tell someone." "We can't," Riya said.

"Why not?"

"Because whoever is sending these messages obviously doesn't want us involved." Ananya stared at her.

"That's exactly why you should tell someone." For a moment, nobody spoke.

Then Aryan leaned forward. "We're going to Room 307." Ananya looked horrified. "No."

"Yes."

"No."

"Ananya—" "Absolutely not."

Despite her protests, she eventually agreed to come with them. Mostly because she knew they would go anyway.

And she didn't want them doing something reckless alone. The final bell rang at four o'clock.

Most students hurried toward the exits.

Within minutes, the campus became nearly empty. The three friends waited until the corridors cleared. Then they headed toward the abandoned wing.

The farther they walked, the quieter everything became. Soon even the sounds of the main building faded away.

The old structure stood before them like a forgotten relic. Its windows were covered in dust.

Paint peeled from the walls. Cracks ran across the concrete. The place looked abandoned.

Yet Aryan couldn't shake the feeling that someone was watching them. The entrance door creaked loudly as they pushed it open.

The sound echoed through the empty hallways. Dust floated through the air.

Rows of old classrooms stretched into darkness. "This place is creepy," Ananya whispered.

"Very helpful observation," Aryan replied. She glared at him.

Riya smiled despite the tension.

For a brief moment, things felt normal. Then they heard a noise.

A distant metallic clang.

Everyone froze.

The sound had come from upstairs. Room 307.

The staircase groaned beneath their feet as they climbed. Each step seemed impossibly loud.

By the time they reached the third floor, nobody was speaking. The corridor stretched ahead like a tunnel.

Classroom doors lined both sides. Most were locked.

Some hung partially open.

At the very end stood Room 307. The door was closed.

Silence surrounded it.

Aryan slowly approached.

His pulse hammered in his ears.

The anonymous messages flashed through his mind. DON'T OPEN THE DOOR.

He reached for the handle. Then stopped.

"What if someone's inside?" Ananya whispered. "Then we'll finally get answers."

Taking a deep breath, Aryan pushed the door. It didn't move.

Locked.

He tried again.

Nothing.

Riya examined the lock. "It's been sealed."

Sure enough, an old metal chain secured the door. The chain appeared rusty.

Untouched for years.

Yet something felt wrong.

Very wrong.

Suddenly, a loud bang echoed from inside the classroom. All three jumped.

The sound came again.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

Someone—or something—was inside. Ananya grabbed Aryan's arm.

"We're leaving." Nobody argued.

They turned and hurried back down the corridor.

But before reaching the stairs, Aryan glanced behind him.

For the briefest moment, he thought he saw movement through the dusty classroom window. A figure standing inside Room 307.

Watching them.

They didn't stop until they reached the main building. All three were breathing heavily.

"What was that?" Ananya asked. "I don't know."

"Someone was definitely in there," Riya said. Aryan nodded.

The sounds had been real. Of that much he was certain.

As they prepared to leave school, something unexpected happened. A teacher approached them.

Mrs. Dutta.

The vice-principal.

She rarely interacted with students unless necessary. Today she looked unusually tense.

"Where have you three been?"

The question caught them off guard.

"We were just walking around campus," Aryan answered. Mrs. Dutta's eyes narrowed.

"For future reference, students are not permitted near the abandoned wing." Her tone felt sharper than necessary.

Almost nervous. "Understood?" she asked. "Yes, ma'am."

Without another word, she walked away.

Yet something about the encounter bothered Aryan. How had she known where they had been?

That evening, Greenwood High exploded with new rumors.

A student from Class XI-C claimed to have received a threatening message. The message contained only one sentence.

YOU'RE ASKING TOO MANY QUESTIONS.

The mystery was spreading.

They weren't the only targets anymore. Someone was watching multiple students. And that meant the danger was growing.

Late that night, Aryan sat at his desk reviewing everything that had happened. The messages.

The photograph.

The sounds from Room 307.

Mrs. Dutta's strange behavior. None of it made sense.

Then his phone vibrated.

Another message.

Unknown Number.

His hands trembled as he opened it. This time there was no photograph. No warning.

Only five words.

CHECK RAHUL'S EMPTY DESK.

Aryan stared at the screen. A chill ran down his spine.

Tomorrow morning, he would.

And something told him that whatever he found there would change everything. End of Chapter 4

Chapter 5: Footprints in the Rain

Aryan discovers a hidden clue in Rahul's desk. A mysterious notebook goes missing.

Riya shares part of a secret from her past. New evidence appears near the rear gate.

The investigation takes its first dangerous turn.

Chapter 5:

Footprints in the Rain

Aryan arrived at Greenwood High earlier than usual the next morning.

The anonymous message from the previous night had kept him awake for hours. CHECK RAHUL'S EMPTY DESK.

Those words echoed in his mind as he walked through the nearly empty corridors. The school day had not yet begun. Only a handful of students had arrived.

Perfect.

If there was something hidden in Rahul's desk, Aryan wanted to find it before anyone else. As he entered Class XI-B, he was relieved to see that the room was empty.

Sunlight filtered through the windows, casting long shadows across the floor. Rahul's desk sat in the back corner of the classroom.

Waiting.

Aryan approached it slowly. He felt ridiculous.

After all, it was just a desk.

Yet his heartbeat quickened as he crouched beside it. The drawer appeared empty.

Books were gone.

Notebooks were gone.

Everything had been cleared out after Rahul disappeared. At first glance, there was nothing unusual.

Then Aryan noticed something taped beneath the drawer. A folded piece of paper.

His pulse jumped.

Carefully, he peeled it off and unfolded it. Inside was a rough sketch of the school grounds. Nothing more.

Or so it seemed.

He examined it closely.

Then he noticed a small red circle marked near the rear gate. Beside it were three handwritten words.

HE SAW SOMETHING.

Aryan stared at the note.

Who had seen something?

Rahul?

And if so, what?

Before he could think further, footsteps echoed from the hallway.

He quickly slipped the paper into his pocket and sat down just as students began arriving. By lunchtime, Aryan had shown the map to both Riya and Ananya.

The three sat beneath the banyan tree once again. Riya studied the sketch carefully.

"This was definitely hidden on purpose." "Agreed," Aryan said.

"But why leave it in his desk?" Ananya leaned forward.

"Maybe Rahul knew something was going to happen." The possibility made all three uncomfortable.

If Rahul had anticipated danger, then his disappearance wasn't random. Someone had targeted him.

The sky darkened throughout the afternoon.

By the final period, rain hammered against the classroom windows. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

Several students cheered when the teacher announced an early dismissal due to the storm. Within minutes, umbrellas filled the courtyard.

Aryan glanced toward Riya. "Rear gate?"

She nodded.

Ananya sighed dramatically.

"One day this is going to get us expelled." Yet she followed anyway.

The rain intensified as they crossed the campus. Water streamed along the pathways.

Most students had already left. The rear gate area was deserted.

Tall trees swayed violently in the wind.

The three friends stood beneath a small shelter while examining Rahul's map. "The red circle is somewhere around here," Aryan said.

They began searching.

At first they found nothing. Only mud.

Leaves.

Rainwater.

Then Riya stopped. "Wait."

She pointed toward the ground.

A series of footprints stretched across the muddy earth. Fresh footprints.

Much fresher than they should have been. Aryan crouched down.

The prints led toward the trees behind the fence. Then suddenly disappeared.

Not faded.

Not washed away. Simply stopped.

As though the person who made them had vanished into thin air. Ananya shivered.

"That's not creepy at all."

A flash of lightning illuminated the area.

For a brief moment, Aryan noticed something hidden near one of the tree roots. He hurried over.

Half-buried beneath wet leaves lay a small black notebook. Its cover was soaked from the rain.

There was no name written on it. No identifying marks.

Only a faint scratch across the front. Aryan opened it.

Most pages were blank.

But several contained notes. Lists of dates.

Times.

Locations around the school.

And repeatedly, one room number appeared. 307

Riya's face paled. "That's impossible." "What?"

She pointed at a page.

A date had been written beside Room 307.

The date was from three days before Rahul disappeared. The notebook also contained something else.

A name.

Written repeatedly across multiple pages.

A. Kapoor

Riya froze.

For several seconds, she simply stared. "A. Kapoor?" Ananya asked.

"Does it mean anything?"

Riya didn't answer immediately. Instead, she closed the notebook. Too quickly.

Too suddenly. Aryan noticed. "Riya?"

She looked away. "It's nothing." Clearly, it wasn't.

As rain continued pouring from the sky, they took shelter beneath a nearby shed. For a while nobody spoke.

Then Riya finally broke the silence.

"There was someone in my family who attended Greenwood High." Aryan looked surprised.

"You never mentioned that." She nodded slowly.

"My older brother."

The words hung in the air. "He studied here years ago." "What happened to him?" Riya hesitated.

Her expression darkened. "He disappeared." Silence followed.

Even the rain seemed quieter. Aryan stared at her.

"What?"

"Ten years ago." Ananya's eyes widened. "Are you serious?"

Riya nodded.

"The police never found him."

Suddenly the name in the notebook made sense.

A. Kapoor.

Aryan felt a chill run through him. Could it stand for Arjun Kapoor? Riya's brother?

And if so, why was his name connected to Room 307? The storm grew worse.

The friends decided to return home.

But as they left the rear gate area, Aryan noticed something strange.

A man stood across the road. Watching them.

He wore a dark raincoat.

His face was hidden beneath a hood.

The moment Aryan looked directly at him, the man turned away. Then disappeared into the rain.

"Did you see that?" Aryan asked. Riya nodded immediately.

"So it wasn't just me." Ananya looked confused.

"What are you talking about?"

By the time she turned around, the stranger was gone. That evening, Aryan spread the notebook across his desk. He carefully examined every page.

Most entries appeared meaningless. Random dates.

Random times.

Then he noticed something. Several pages had been torn out. Deliberately removed.

Whoever owned the notebook hadn't wanted someone reading those sections. That meant the missing pages were probably important.

Very important.

His phone suddenly vibrated. A message from Riya.

Did you notice the last page? Confused, Aryan flipped to the back.

There, written faintly in pencil, were four words. Words he hadn't noticed before.

THEY NEVER LEFT.

Aryan stared at the sentence. His stomach tightened.

Who never left?

Rahul?

Arjun Kapoor?

Or someone else entirely?

Before he could think further, another notification appeared. Unknown Number.

The now-familiar sender.

The message contained only one sentence. You should not have found the notebook. Aryan's heart pounded.

Someone knew exactly what they had discovered. Someone had been watching them at the rear gate.

And whoever it was clearly didn't want them digging deeper.

Outside, thunder shook the night sky.

Far away, hidden somewhere within Greenwood High, another secret was waiting to be uncovered. And the closer they came to the truth, the more dangerous the game was becoming.

End of Chapter 5

Chapter 6: The Locked Classroom Strange noises come from Room 307. The notebook disappears.

A hidden symbol is discovered inside the school. Mrs. Dutta becomes increasingly suspicious.

Aryan and Riya find evidence that someone is secretly living inside the abandoned wing.

Chapter 6:
The Locked Classroom

The storm continued throughout the night. Aryan lay awake in bed, staring at the ceiling.

The anonymous message kept replaying in his mind. You should not have found the notebook.

It wasn't just a threat.

It was proof.

Whoever was sending the messages knew exactly what he, Riya, and Ananya were doing. The thought was terrifying.

Someone was watching them. Closely.

And that meant every clue they discovered brought them one step closer to danger. The next morning, Greenwood High was unusually quiet.

The rain had finally stopped, but the dark clouds still hung over the city.

Students walked through the corridors discussing homework, football matches, and upcoming exams. Yet beneath those ordinary conversations was something else.

Fear.

Rahul had been missing for nearly two weeks. No one had any answers.

And every day that passed made the situation worse. Aryan entered Class XI-B and immediately opened his bag. His heart nearly stopped.

The notebook was gone.

For a moment he simply stared. Then he checked again.

And again.

Nothing.

The black notebook they had discovered near the rear gate had vanished. Someone had taken it.

"No..." he whispered.

"What happened?" Ananya asked as she sat down. "The notebook."

"What about it?" "It's gone."

Her face instantly changed. "What do you mean gone?" "It was in my bag."

Aryan searched every compartment. Nothing.

Riya arrived moments later.

When she heard the news, she looked just as shocked. "You didn't leave it at home?"

"No."

"Could someone have stolen it?" Aryan nodded grimly.

"That's exactly what I think."

The three exchanged nervous glances. Someone had entered his bag.

Inside the school.

Without being noticed.

The morning lessons passed slowly. Aryan couldn't focus.

His eyes constantly drifted toward the classroom door. Every student suddenly seemed suspicious.

Every teacher seemed suspicious. Anyone could have taken the notebook. Anyone could be involved.

During the lunch break, the three friends met in the library. The old building was one of the quietest places on campus. Rows of books stretched endlessly between wooden shelves. Students rarely visited except before exams.

Which made it perfect for private conversations.

"We need to figure out who had access to your bag," Riya said. Aryan sighed.

"That could be half the school." Ananya frowned.

"Maybe whoever stole the notebook wasn't after us." "What do you mean?"

"Maybe they were after the notebook itself." For several seconds, nobody spoke.

Because the possibility made perfect sense. The notebook contained information.

Someone wanted that information hidden.

Before they could continue, something unexpected happened. The library lights flickered.

Once.

Twice.

Then returned to normal.

Several students glanced around nervously.

The librarian looked annoyed. "Probably the weather," she muttered. Yet Aryan noticed something else.

A folded piece of paper had appeared on the table. None of them had placed it there.

Slowly, he opened it.

Inside was a symbol.

A circle crossed by three diagonal lines. Nothing else.

No message.

No explanation.

Just the strange symbol.

"Have you seen this before?" Aryan asked. Riya immediately froze.

The reaction lasted less than a second. But Aryan noticed.

"You know what it is?"

Riya shook her head too quickly. "No."

Yet her expression suggested otherwise.

That afternoon, a strange rumor spread through Greenwood High.

Several students claimed they had heard noises coming from Room 307 again. Knocking.

Scratching.

Footsteps.

Most dismissed it as another ghost story. But Aryan, Riya, and Ananya knew better. They had heard sounds themselves.

Someone—or something—was definitely inside that room. After classes ended, the three decided to investigate.

Again.

This time they were more careful.

The corridors of the abandoned wing felt even darker than before. Dust coated every surface.

Broken windows allowed cold air to drift through the building. Everything was silent.

Too silent.

They climbed the stairs toward the third floor. Room 307 waited at the end of the corridor.

Locked.

Motionless.

The same as before.

Then the sound came.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

The noise echoed from inside the classroom. Ananya jumped.

"Tell me you heard that." "We heard it," Aryan replied. The knocking continued.

Slow. Rhythmic.

Almost deliberate.

Bang.

Bang.

Bang.

As though someone wanted them to know they were there. Aryan approached the door.

This time he examined it more carefully.

The rusty chain still hung across the entrance. But something had changed.

The dust around the handle had been disturbed. Recently.

Very recently.

Someone had touched the door. "Look."

Riya pointed toward the floor.

A muddy footprint marked the corridor. Fresh mud.

Fresh enough that it hadn't completely dried. The footprint led away from Room 307.

Toward the far end of the hallway.

Toward a section of the building that should have been empty. The three followed the trail.

Their footsteps echoed softly. The corridor narrowed.

Eventually it ended near a storage room. The door stood slightly open.

Just enough to reveal darkness inside. Aryan slowly pushed it open.

The room smelled musty.

Old desks and chairs were stacked against the walls. At first glance, nothing seemed unusual.

Then Riya spotted something. A sleeping bag.

Everyone froze.

A sleeping bag.

Inside the abandoned wing.

Next to it stood several empty water bottles.

A flashlight.

Food wrappers.

Someone had been living there. Not years ago.

Recently. Very recently.

"That's impossible," Ananya whispered. Aryan shook his head.

"No."

His voice was quiet. "It's not."

The evidence was right in front of them.

Someone was secretly staying inside the abandoned building. Someone close enough to Room 307 to hear everything.

Suddenly, a floorboard creaked somewhere behind them. All three spun around.

The room was empty.

Yet the sound had been real.

Another creak echoed from the hallway. Then another.

Footsteps.

Slow footsteps.

Approaching.

"Run," Riya whispered.

Nobody argued.

The three rushed from the storage room and sprinted down the corridor. The footsteps followed.

Not running.

Walking.

As if whoever was chasing them knew they couldn't escape. The sound echoed behind them all the way to the staircase. Only when they reached the main building did it finally stop. Breathing heavily, they gathered near the football field.

None of them spoke for nearly a minute. Finally, Ananya broke the silence. "Someone lives there."

"Yes."

"And they're connected to Room 307." "Probably."

"And we're definitely going to die if we keep doing this." For the first time all day, Aryan laughed.

Even Riya smiled.

Briefly.

As the sun began setting, Aryan prepared to leave school.

But before reaching the gate, he noticed Mrs. Dutta standing outside the administrative office.

She was speaking with another teacher.

The moment she saw him, the conversation stopped. Both adults fell silent.

Watching.

Waiting.

Aryan felt a chill.

Then Mrs. Dutta smiled.

A perfectly normal smile.

Yet something about it felt wrong. Very wrong.

That night, Aryan received another message. Unknown Number.

His hands trembled slightly as he opened it. The message contained a single photograph. The sleeping bag.

The exact sleeping bag they had found in the storage room. The picture had clearly been taken after they left.

At the bottom was a sentence. NOW YOU KNOW HE'S REAL.

Aryan stared at the screen. His pulse raced.

The anonymous sender wasn't merely watching them. They were following every step.

And whoever was hiding inside the abandoned wing wanted to be found. The question was—

Why?

End of Chapter 6

Chapter 7: Mid-Term Pressure In the next chapter:

Mid-term exams begin.

Academic pressure creates new conflicts.

Vihaan's obsession with ranking first becomes suspicious. A hidden message appears in an exam paper.

Aryan discovers that someone inside the school is helping the mysterious figure in Room 307.

Chapter 7:

Mid-Term Pressure

The following Monday began with a feeling of tension hanging over Greenwood High. For most students, the reason was obvious.

Mid-term examinations.

The dreaded words seemed capable of transforming even the calmest student into a nervous wreck. Corridors that normally echoed with laughter were filled with frantic last-minute revision.

Mathematics formulas.

Chemistry equations.

History dates.

Everyone seemed to be carrying textbooks.

Everyone except Aryan.

He had barely studied over the weekend.

Every time he opened a book, his thoughts drifted back to the abandoned wing, the hidden sleeping bag, and the mysterious messages.

Exams suddenly felt far less important than discovering what had happened to Rahul. Unfortunately, the school disagreed.

"Stop staring into space and revise," Ananya said, dropping a thick mathematics notebook onto his desk. Aryan sighed.

"I know the formulas." "Then revise them again."

"That's not how revision works." Ananya rolled her eyes.

"That's exactly how revision works." Nearby, Riya laughed quietly.

For a moment, things felt normal. Almost.

Then Aryan noticed someone watching them. Vihaan Malhotra.

The school's top-ranked student.

He stood near the classroom door holding a stack of notes. As usual, he looked perfectly prepared.

Perfect uniform.

Perfect grades.

Perfect confidence.

Yet something about him seemed different lately.

Whenever the conversation shifted toward Rahul's disappearance, Vihaan became uncomfortable. And Aryan had started noticing.

The first exam was Mathematics.

Students entered the hall carrying transparent pouches filled with pens, rulers, and calculators. The atmosphere felt like a battlefield before a major battle.

Teachers paced between rows. Answer sheets were distributed. Question papers followed.

The room fell silent.

Only the scratching of pens remained.

For the first twenty minutes, Aryan managed to focus. The questions weren't difficult.

In fact, they were easier than expected. He completed several pages quickly.

Then something strange happened.

As he turned to the final page, a small piece of paper slipped from inside the question booklet. His heart skipped a beat.

Carefully, he unfolded it beneath the desk. The note contained only four words.

THEY ARE WATCHING YOU.

Aryan froze.

The handwriting wasn't familiar. The message wasn't signed.

Yet one thing was certain.

Someone had placed it there deliberately. Inside an official examination paper.

His pulse hammered in his ears. Who could have done that?

Students weren't allowed near the papers before the exam. Only teachers and administrative staff had access.

The realization sent a chill through him.

The person behind the messages might be inside the school administration. When the exam ended, Aryan immediately showed the note to Riya and Ananya. Both were horrified.

"Inside the exam paper?" Ananya whispered. "Yes."

"That's impossible." "Apparently not."

Riya examined the handwriting carefully. Then her expression changed.

"What?"

She hesitated.

"It looks familiar." Aryan leaned forward. "From where?"

"I don't know."

The answer sounded genuine.

Yet something told him she wasn't remembering everything. Over the next few days, examinations continued.

Physics.

Chemistry.

English.

Each morning students arrived looking increasingly exhausted. Some survived on coffee.

Others survived on panic.

A few survived on both.

Yet despite the academic pressure, the mystery refused to fade into the background. If anything, it seemed to be getting worse.

On Wednesday afternoon, another rumor spread through the school.

A student claimed someone had entered the examination hall before dawn. Security guards denied it.

Teachers dismissed it.

Most students ignored it.

Aryan didn't.

Because he had seen something himself.

As he arrived early that morning, he noticed a light glowing inside the administrative office. The light disappeared the moment he looked directly at it.

At the time, he hadn't thought much about it. Now he wasn't so sure.

That evening, rain began falling once again.

The weather seemed determined to mirror the mood of the school. Dark.

Unsettling.

Unpredictable.

Aryan sat in the library trying to revise chemistry when he noticed Vihaan at a nearby table. The topper appeared unusually agitated.

He kept checking his phone. Looking toward the door.

Checking his phone again.

Finally, Vihaan stood up and hurried away. Something felt wrong.

Very wrong.

Curiosity won.

Aryan quietly followed.

Vihaan moved through several corridors before entering a rarely used staircase near the old science block.

Aryan stayed far enough behind to avoid detection.

The staircase led toward a storage area that students almost never visited. Vihaan stopped near a window and looked around.

Then he did something unexpected.

He placed an envelope on the windowsill.

Moments later, another hand appeared from outside the building. A gloved hand.

The envelope vanished.

Aryan's eyes widened.

Someone outside the school had just collected a secret message. Before he could get closer, Vihaan turned around.

Aryan ducked behind a wall. His heart pounded.

Footsteps approached.

Then faded away.

When he finally looked again, Vihaan was gone. So was the mysterious recipient.

Only the empty windowsill remained.

That night, Aryan told Riya and Ananya everything. The three met through a video call.

"Maybe Vihaan is helping whoever is sending the messages," Ananya suggested. "Or maybe he's being blackmailed," Riya replied.

Aryan considered both possibilities.

At this point, nothing seemed impossible.

Just before ending the call, Riya suddenly remembered something. "The handwriting."

Aryan looked up. "What about it?"

"The note from your exam paper." "Yes?"

"I've seen it before." The room fell silent. "Where?" Aryan asked.

Riya's face had gone pale. "In an old letter."

"What letter?"

She swallowed hard.

"A letter my brother received before he disappeared." Neither Aryan nor Ananya spoke.

The significance hit them instantly. If the handwriting matched...

Then whoever had contacted Arjun Kapoor ten years ago might still be operating today. After the call ended, Aryan sat alone in his room.

Outside, thunder rolled across the city.

The investigation had just become far bigger than a missing student.

The same person—or group—might have been active for an entire decade. Perhaps longer.

Then his phone vibrated.

Another message.

Unknown Number.

This time it contained no threat. No photograph.

Only a simple sentence.

Ask Vihaan what happened in Room 307. Aryan stared at the screen.

Vihaan knew something.

The question was whether he was involved... Or terrified.

End of Chapter 7

Chapter 8: Secret Between Friends Aryan confronts Vihaan.

Riya reveals more about her brother's disappearance. Ananya uncovers a shocking secret about Mrs. Dutta. A hidden file goes missing.

Someone breaks into the library at night.

Chapter 8:

Secret Between Friends

Thursday morning arrived with a strange mixture of exhaustion and anticipation. Mid-term examinations were finally nearing their end.

Most students were relieved. Aryan wasn't.

The anonymous message from the previous night had completely occupied his thoughts. Ask Vihaan what happened in Room 307.

It wasn't a suggestion.

It felt like an instruction.

As though someone wanted him to uncover the truth. The question was why.

Whoever kept sending the messages clearly knew more than they were revealing. Sometimes they seemed to help.

Other times they threatened him. It made no sense.

And that frightened him more than anything else.

When Aryan arrived at school, he immediately began searching for Vihaan. The topper was easy to spot.

He was sitting alone near the basketball court, reviewing notes before the day's examination. As usual, everything about him seemed perfectly controlled.

Perfect posture.

Perfect handwriting.

Perfect confidence.

Yet Aryan couldn't forget what he had witnessed near the old science block. The envelope.

The mysterious gloved hand. The secret exchange.

Something was definitely wrong. Aryan walked over.

"Can we talk?" Vihaan looked up.

His expression immediately became cautious. "About what?"

"Room 307."

The reaction was instant. Vihaan's face lost all color. Only for a second.

But Aryan saw it.

And that was enough.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Vihaan said quickly. Aryan sat beside him.

"Really?"

"Really."

"Then why did you look terrified when I mentioned it?" Vihaan closed his notebook.

"You're imagining things."

Before Aryan could respond, the school bell rang. Students began heading toward their classrooms.

Vihaan stood.

The conversation was clearly over.

Yet as he walked away, he quietly whispered something. So quietly that Aryan almost missed it.

"Stop investigating."

Then he disappeared into the crowd.

For the rest of the morning, Aryan couldn't concentrate. The words echoed in his mind.

Stop investigating.

The exact same warning appeared repeatedly in anonymous messages. Was Vihaan connected to them?

Or was he simply afraid?

After lunch, Riya asked Aryan to meet her behind the library. The area was usually deserted.

Tall trees surrounded a small garden filled with old stone benches. When Aryan arrived, Riya was already waiting.

She looked nervous.

More nervous than he had ever seen her. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Riya took a deep breath.

"There are things I haven't told you." Aryan sat down.

"Okay."

For several moments she remained silent. Then she finally spoke.

"My brother wasn't just a student here." Aryan frowned.

"What do you mean?"

"He was investigating something before he disappeared." The statement stunned him.

"What?" Riya nodded.

"My parents didn't tell me everything at first. I only learned the truth a few years ago." "What was he investigating?"

Riya looked away.

"No one knows exactly." "Then how do you know?" "Because of his diary." Aryan leaned forward. "You found his diary?" "Part of it."

Her voice trembled slightly.

"Several pages were missing. Most of the important parts had been torn out." A chill ran through Aryan.

The notebook they had found near the rear gate also contained torn pages.

The similarity couldn't be a coincidence. "What did the remaining pages say?" Riya hesitated.

Then she answered.

"He believed there was a secret group operating inside Greenwood High." The wind seemed to stop.

Everything suddenly felt still. "A secret group?"

"Yes." "Students?"

"I don't know." "Teachers?"

"I don't know." "What did they do?"

Riya's expression darkened. "That's the problem."

She looked directly at him.

"The pages that explained everything were missing." Neither spoke for several seconds.

Finally Aryan asked the question that had been bothering him for days. "Why did you transfer here?"

Riya smiled sadly.

"To find out what happened to my brother."

For the first time, Aryan realized how much she had been carrying alone. The mystery wasn't just an investigation for her.

It was personal.

Very personal.

That afternoon, another surprise awaited them. Ananya arrived looking unusually excited.

"I found something."

Aryan and Riya immediately paid attention. "What?"

Ananya lowered her voice. "Mrs. Dutta."

Both exchanged glances.

The vice-principal again.

"What about her?" Aryan asked. "I think she's hiding something."

Ananya explained that she had been helping a teacher organize old files earlier that day. While searching through a cabinet, she accidentally discovered a folder labeled: STUDENT INCIDENT REPORTS

The folder contained documents dating back more than ten years. Including reports connected to Arjun Kapoor.

Aryan's eyes widened. "What did they say?"

"Not much. Most pages were missing." "Of course they were."

"But there was one strange thing." "What?"

Ananya reached into her bag and pulled out a small piece of paper. It contained a symbol.

A circle crossed by three diagonal lines.

The exact same symbol they had discovered in the library. Riya's face went pale.

Again.

This time Aryan definitely noticed. "Riya."

She looked up.

"You know what that symbol means." For several moments she said nothing. Then she slowly nodded.

"I've seen it before." "Where?"

"My brother's diary."

The words sent chills through all three of them. The symbol connected everything.

Arjun.

The missing notebook.

The secret group.

Room 307.

Somehow, they were all related.

That evening, the three decided to return to the library after school. Not officially.

They simply wanted another look at the old records. Unfortunately, when they arrived, the librarian had already left. The building was locked.

The lights were off. Everything appeared normal.

Until Aryan noticed the broken window. The glass had been shattered.

Recently.

Tiny fragments still covered the ground. Someone had broken into the library.

They hurried inside.

Rows of books stood undisturbed. Tables remained in place.

Nothing appeared stolen.

At least not immediately.

Then Ananya noticed the open archive cabinet. The one containing old student records.

Several folders had been pulled out. Papers littered the floor.

Someone had searched through everything. Desperately.

As though looking for a specific document. Aryan's heart sank.

The folder mentioning Arjun Kapoor was gone. Completely gone.

Whoever broke into the library had taken it.

And they had done so only hours after Ananya discovered it. The timing was impossible to ignore.

Someone was monitoring them. Closely.

Every clue they found vanished almost immediately afterward. Every lead disappeared before they could fully understand it. It was as though an invisible hand kept staying one step ahead.

As darkness settled outside, the three stood silently among the scattered papers. Then Aryan noticed something lying beneath a bookshelf.

A small folded note.

Carefully, he picked it up.

His pulse quickened.

The handwriting was familiar. Very familiar.

It matched the anonymous messages. Slowly, he unfolded it.

Inside were only five words.

YOU ARE RUNNING OUT OF TIME.

A cold silence filled the room.

Because for the first time, the message felt less like a threat... And more like a warning.

As they left the library, none of them noticed the figure standing across the street. Watching.

Waiting.

And smiling.

End of Chapter 8

Chapter 9: The Missing Diary In the next chapter:

A former teacher reveals a shocking secret about Arjun Kapoor. The mystery of the symbol begins to unravel.

Vihaan finally reveals part of the truth. Someone breaks into Aryan's house.

A hidden diary resurfaces after ten years.

Chapter 9:

The Missing Diary

The message stayed in Aryan's mind all night.

YOU ARE RUNNING OUT OF TIME.

For once, it didn't sound threatening. It sounded desperate.

Almost as if whoever sent it wanted him to solve the mystery before it was too late. But why?

And why hide behind anonymous messages instead of simply telling him the truth? The questions chased him through a restless night.

The next morning, Greenwood High was buzzing with excitement. The final mid-term examination was over.

Students who had spent weeks buried under textbooks were suddenly free again. Laughter returned to the corridors.

Groups gathered to discuss answers and predict results. For most students, life was returning to normal.

For Aryan, it felt as though the real nightmare was only beginning.

As he entered the classroom, he immediately noticed something unusual. Vihaan was waiting for him.

Not studying. Not revising. Waiting.

The topper rarely looked nervous. Today he looked terrified.

"Meet me after school," Vihaan whispered. Aryan blinked.

"What?" "After school." "Why?"

Vihaan glanced around the classroom. Then lowered his voice further.

"Because if I tell you here, someone will hear."

Before Aryan could ask another question, Vihaan walked away. The rest of the day passed painfully slowly.

Every hour felt longer than the last.

Even Ananya and Riya noticed his distraction.

When he explained what had happened, both reacted exactly as expected. "That's suspicious," Ananya said.

"Very suspicious," Riya agreed.

"Maybe he's finally ready to tell us the truth." Or maybe it was a trap.

Aryan couldn't decide which possibility frightened him more. After school, the four met near the football field.

The sky was grey once again. Dark clouds drifted overhead.

The weather seemed determined to remain gloomy. Vihaan arrived several minutes later.

He looked over his shoulder repeatedly before speaking.

As though afraid someone might be following him. "You were right," he said quietly.

"About what?" Aryan asked. "Room 307."

The three friends exchanged glances. Finally.

An answer.

"What happened there?" Riya asked. Vihaan swallowed.

Then he said something that made all three freeze. "I saw someone enter the room."

"When?" Aryan asked.

"Three weeks before Rahul disappeared." The air seemed to leave Aryan's lungs.

Three weeks.

Before everything began. "Who was it?"

"I don't know." "You saw them." "It was dark." "Was it a student?" "I think so."

"You think?"

Vihaan nodded slowly. "They were carrying boxes." "What kind of boxes?"

"I don't know."

"But they kept bringing things into Room 307." For several moments, nobody spoke.

Then Vihaan added something else. Something even stranger.

"And they weren't alone." Aryan stared at him. "What do you mean?" "There was an adult." "Who?"

Vihaan looked down.

"I couldn't see their face." The answer was frustrating.

Yet Aryan could tell he wasn't lying. Not this time.

Before leaving, Vihaan handed Aryan a folded piece of paper. "I found this near Room 307."

"What is it?" "I don't know."

"It's all I have."

Then he turned and walked away. Fast.

As though he wanted to get as far from the conversation as possible. Back at home that evening, Aryan carefully unfolded the paper.

Inside was a rough drawing. A symbol.

The same symbol they had already encountered multiple times. A circle crossed by three diagonal lines.

But this time there was something else. Tiny writing beneath it.

Three words.

The Third Circle.

"The Third Circle?" Ananya repeated over a video call. "What does that even mean?"

Nobody knew.

But the phrase sounded important. Very important.

Later that night, another breakthrough arrived. Riya called unexpectedly.

"I found someone." "What?"

"A retired teacher." Aryan sat upright. "What teacher?"

"He taught here when my brother attended Greenwood." "Can we talk to him?"

"He agreed to meet us tomorrow."

For the first time in days, hope flickered.

Perhaps someone from the past finally had answers.

The next afternoon, the three friends visited the retired teacher's house. Mr. Chatterjee was nearly seventy years old.

His small home was filled with books. Photographs lined the walls.

Many showed former students from Greenwood High.

Including one photograph that immediately caught Riya's attention. Her brother.

Arjun Kapoor.

Smiling.

Alive.

Standing beside a group of classmates. For several moments, Riya simply stared. Then Mr. Chatterjee spoke softly.

"He was a brave boy." The room fell silent.

"You knew him?" Aryan asked. The old teacher nodded.

"Very well."

"What happened to him?" A shadow crossed his face.

"He started asking questions."

The exact same phrase appeared repeatedly in the anonymous messages. Aryan felt a chill.

"Questions about what?" Mr. Chatterjee hesitated. Then he answered.

"A group."

The three friends exchanged glances. Again.

The group. "What group?"

"They called themselves the Third Circle." The words hit like a thunderbolt.

Aryan immediately thought about the symbol. The note.

The drawing from Vihaan.

Everything connected.

Mr. Chatterjee continued. "It began as a student club." "That's all?"

"No."

His expression darkened.

"It became something much more dangerous."

Before he could explain further, his phone suddenly rang. The old teacher answered.

Listened.

Then his face went pale.

Very pale.

"What happened?" Riya asked.

Mr. Chatterjee lowered the phone slowly. His hands were shaking.

"Someone broke into my house last week." The room went silent.

"I didn't think it mattered." "What was stolen?" Aryan asked.

The old teacher looked directly at him. "A diary."

Riya's eyes widened. "My brother's diary?" Mr. Chatterjee nodded.

For several seconds, nobody spoke. The missing diary.

The one containing answers. The one with torn pages.

The one connected to Arjun Kapoor. Gone.

Then Mr. Chatterjee said something unexpected. "At least, that's what I thought."

Slowly, he opened a drawer beside his chair. And removed an old leather-bound notebook. The diary.

Riya gasped.

"I thought it was stolen." "So did they."

A faint smile crossed the old teacher's face. "I hid the real one."

The room became completely silent. Because after ten years...

Arjun Kapoor's diary had finally resurfaced. And somewhere inside its pages lay the truth.

That night, Aryan couldn't stop thinking about the diary. Tomorrow they would finally begin reading it.

Tomorrow they might finally learn what Arjun discovered.

Tomorrow they might finally understand why people were disappearing. But before going to bed, Aryan noticed something strange.

His bedroom window was open. Just slightly.

He was certain he had closed it earlier. Certain.

A cold feeling settled in his stomach. Slowly, he looked around the room. Nothing appeared disturbed.

Until he noticed the desk.

A piece of paper sat neatly in the center.

A piece of paper that definitely hadn't been there before. With trembling hands, he picked it up.

The message contained only four words. I KNOW ABOUT THE DIARY.

Aryan's blood ran cold. Someone had entered his house. And they wanted him to know it.

End of Chapter 9

Chapter 10: Rank One

The diary reveals Arjun's first discoveries.

The truth about the Third Circle begins to emerge.

Vihaan's obsession with rankings becomes dangerous. Someone attempts to steal the diary.

A shocking betrayal changes everything.

Chapter 10:

Rank One

Aryan didn't sleep at all.

The note left on his desk haunted him. I KNOW ABOUT THE DIARY.

Someone had entered his house. Not stolen anything.

Not damaged anything.

Just left a message.

It felt deliberate.

Personal.

As though the person wanted him frightened. Wanted him to know they could reach him anywhere. Even at home.

The next morning, Aryan arrived at school looking exhausted. Riya immediately noticed.

"You didn't sleep." "No."

"Because of the note?" Aryan nodded.

Ananya looked horrified. "This is getting out of control." For once, nobody disagreed.

The three friends met during lunch to discuss their next move. The diary was too important to ignore.

Yet reading it openly felt dangerous.

If someone was willing to break into houses and steal files, they would certainly come after the diary. "We should tell the police," Ananya suggested.

Riya shook her head. "And say what?"

"That someone left a note?" "No."

Riya lowered her voice.

"Whoever is behind this has been hiding for ten years." The statement silenced everyone.

Because she was right.

Ten years.

That meant planning.

Patience.

Resources.

This wasn't some prank by bored students.

After school, they returned to Mr. Chatterjee's house.

The retired teacher was waiting for them. The diary sat on the table.

Its leather cover was cracked with age. Several pages were yellowed.

Others appeared damaged. Yet it remained intact.

A record of secrets hidden for a decade. Riya hesitated before opening it.

For a moment, she simply rested her hand on the cover. This was her brother's handwriting.

Her brother's thoughts.

The last trace he had left behind. Finally, she opened the first page. The diary began normally.

Descriptions of classes.

Teachers.

Football matches.

Exams.

Ordinary school life.

But as the entries progressed, the tone changed. Arjun became suspicious.

Concerned.

Obsessed.

One entry caught Aryan's attention immediately.

"I think someone is using Room 307 after school hours. The administration claims it is sealed, but lights appear there almost every night."

The three exchanged glances.

Even ten years ago, Room 307 had been important. Another entry read:

"I saw the symbol again today. The circle with three lines. Students pretend not to notice it, but they do. Everyone does."

The symbol.

The Third Circle.

The mystery continued growing.

Then they reached an entry dated one week before Arjun disappeared. The handwriting became hurried.

Messy.

As though he had written it in a hurry. "The rankings aren't what they seem." Ananya frowned.

"What does that mean?" Nobody knew.

But the next sentence was even stranger. "Every year they choose one."

Silence filled the room. "Choose one?" Aryan repeated.

"Choose one for what?" Riya asked. The diary offered no explanation.

Several pages afterward had been torn out. Missing.

Gone.

The answers had once existed. Someone had removed them. Just then, Mr. Chatterjee spoke. "There was another student." The friends looked up. "Another student?"

He nodded.

"One who became obsessed with rankings." Immediately, Aryan thought of Vihaan.

"The Third Circle recruited students through competition." Mr. Chatterjee's expression darkened.

"They targeted ambitious students." "Why?" Riya asked.

"Because ambitious people are easier to manipulate." The answer sent chills through the room.

That evening, Greenwood High released the mid-term rankings. Students crowded around the notice board.

Excited.

Nervous.

Curious.

As expected, Vihaan ranked first. Again.

Aryan ranked second.

Again.

The difference was only two marks. Most students congratulated Vihaan. Yet something seemed wrong.

Instead of celebrating, he looked anxious. Almost frightened.

His eyes repeatedly scanned the crowd. As though searching for someone.

Or expecting someone. Aryan decided to follow him. Not closely.

Just enough to observe.

After several minutes, Vihaan slipped away from the main building. He headed toward the old science block.

The same place where Aryan had previously witnessed the envelope exchange. This time, Vihaan wasn't alone.

A figure waited near the staircase.

Hidden partially in shadow. Aryan moved closer.

Close enough to hear fragments of conversation. "You promised"

Vihaan's voice sounded angry. "We're watching."

The stranger's voice was calm. Too calm.

"I got first place." "Not enough."

Aryan's pulse quickened.

What did that mean?

Not enough?

Suddenly, the stranger handed Vihaan an envelope. The exact same type Aryan had seen before.

Then the figure disappeared down the corridor. Vihaan remained frozen.

Staring at the envelope.

Looking terrified.

That night, Aryan told Riya and Ananya everything.

The more they discussed it, the more convinced they became that Vihaan was connected to the Third Circle somehow.

Whether willingly or not remained unclear. Around midnight, Aryan received a phone call. Unknown number.

His heart raced.

Slowly, he answered.

For several seconds, nobody spoke. Then a voice whispered:

"Protect the diary." The line went dead.

Aryan immediately called Riya. No answer.

He called again.

Still nothing.

Panic surged through him.

He grabbed his jacket and rushed outside. Rain had begun falling once more.

The streets were nearly empty.

When he finally reached Mr. Chatterjee's house, flashing police lights illuminated the road. His stomach dropped.

The front door stood open.

Several officers moved in and out of the building. Neighbors gathered nearby.

Whispering nervously.

Aryan pushed through the crowd. "What happened?"

One officer stopped him. "Who are you?"

"A friend."

The officer hesitated. Then answered. "Someone broke in." Aryan's heart pounded. "The diary?"

The officer looked surprised.

"How did you know about a diary?" Aryan felt cold.

Very cold.

Then he spotted Riya.

Standing beside an ambulance. Safe.

Shaken.

But safe.

"What happened?" he asked. Riya looked pale.

"They came for the diary." "Did they get it?"

For several terrifying seconds, she didn't answer. Then she slowly opened her bag.

Inside lay the leather-bound notebook. Still there.

Still safe.

Relief washed over Aryan. Until Riya spoke again. "They didn't get the diary." "Then what did they take?" Riya's eyes filled with fear. "They took Mr. Chatterjee." The world seemed to stop. The retired teacher.

The man who knew the truth.

The man who had protected the diary for ten years. Gone.

Kidnapped.

Just like Rahul.

And as police officers searched the property, one of them discovered a message written on the living room wall.

A message painted in black.

THE THIRD CIRCLE HAS RETURNED.

End of Chapter 10

In Chapter 11: The Hidden Corridor, the diary reveals a secret passage beneath the school, and the friends discover that Room 307 is connected to a hidden underground network no one knew existed.

Chapter 11:

The Hidden Corridor

The words painted on Mr. Chatterjee's living room wall refused to leave Aryan's mind. THE THIRD CIRCLE HAS RETURNED.

Even now, two days later, he could still picture the black letters. Sharp.

Uneven.

Threatening.

The message had not been written to scare the police. It had been written for them.

For Aryan.

For Riya.

For Ananya.

A warning.

Or perhaps a challenge.

Greenwood High seemed unusually normal that Monday morning. Students chatted about exam results.

Teachers handed back answer sheets.

The football team argued about an upcoming tournament. Life continued as though nothing had happened.

As though a retired teacher hadn't been kidnapped. As though a student hadn't vanished.

As though an unknown group wasn't operating somewhere in the shadows. Aryan almost envied the students who knew nothing.

Ignorance seemed peaceful.

He entered the classroom and immediately noticed Riya sitting silently near the window. She looked exhausted.

Since Mr. Chatterjee's kidnapping, she had barely spoken. Aryan sat beside her.

"Any news?"

She shook her head. "No."

"The police?" "Nothing."

The answer wasn't surprising. But it still hurt.

Mr. Chatterjee had disappeared without a trace. Just like Rahul.

Just like Arjun.

Ananya arrived moments later carrying a notebook. "Look what I found."

She dropped it onto the desk.

It was Arjun's diary.

The same diary they had nearly lost.

"Why did you bring it to school?" Aryan asked. "Because I found something."

Immediately, both Aryan and Riya leaned closer. Ananya opened the diary near the middle.

A page they had previously ignored. At first glance, it appeared blank.

Completely empty.

"I thought so too," Ananya said. "Then what?"

"I spilled water on it accidentally." Aryan raised an eyebrow.

"That's your explanation?" "Be grateful."

She pointed toward the page. Faint markings had appeared. Hidden writing.

Almost invisible. Riya's eyes widened. "It's a map."

She was right.

A rough sketch stretched across the page. Not of the town.

Not of the school grounds.

Something beneath them.

The map showed tunnels.

Corridors.

Rooms.

Passages.

All located under Greenwood High. For several seconds nobody spoke. Then Aryan whispered,

"This can't be real."

But deep down, he already knew it was.

Near the bottom of the page, Arjun had written a short note. The handwriting appeared hurried.

Almost desperate.

"The corridor begins behind Room 307. If anything happens to me, this is where the answers are." The words sent chills through all three of them.

Behind Room 307.

The same room connected to everything.

The same room that seemed impossible to access. The same room where lights appeared at night.

For the remainder of the school day, Aryan barely paid attention to anything else.

His thoughts kept returning to the hidden map. The underground corridors.

The possibility that someone had been using them for years. Maybe even decades.

By the final bell, the decision had already been made. They were going back.

The sky had begun darkening when the three friends reached the abandoned wing. A cold wind swept through the empty courtyard.

The building seemed even more intimidating than usual.

Perhaps because this time they knew something was hidden inside.

The entrance door creaked loudly as they stepped into the abandoned hallway. Dust covered the floor.

Broken ceiling panels hung overhead. Everything looked forgotten.

Yet Aryan couldn't shake the feeling that someone had been there recently. They climbed the stairs carefully.

Every sound echoed through the building. Every shadow seemed alive.

Room 307 waited at the end of the corridor. Silent.

Motionless.

Locked.

"Same as always," Ananya whispered. Aryan examined the door.

The rusty chain remained in place. The lock appeared untouched.

Yet according to Arjun's diary, the entrance to the hidden corridor was somewhere nearby. "Search everything," Riya said.

For nearly twenty minutes they examined every inch of the hallway. Walls.

Windows.

Floorboards.

Storage closets.

Nothing.

Frustration began creeping in. Maybe the map was incomplete.

Maybe the corridor no longer existed. Maybe—

"Wait."

Riya's voice echoed through the corridor. The others rushed over.

She was kneeling beside a damaged section of wall behind Room 307. Most students would never have noticed it.

A narrow crack ran vertically through the plaster. "Look closely."

Aryan crouched beside her.

Hidden within the crack was the familiar symbol. The circle crossed by three diagonal lines.

The Third Circle.

Someone had carved it there. Years ago.

"Push it," Riya whispered. "What?"

"The symbol." Aryan hesitated.

Then pressed against the carved section. Nothing happened.

For a moment.

Then a faint click echoed from somewhere inside the wall. All three froze.

Slowly. Very slowly.

Part of the wall shifted.

Dust fell from the ceiling.

A narrow opening appeared. Behind it lay darkness.

Nobody spoke.

The hidden corridor was real.

The passage smelled damp and stale. Like air trapped underground for years. Aryan switched on his phone flashlight.

The beam illuminated rough concrete walls. Old pipes.

And a staircase leading downward. "This is insane," Ananya whispered. Yet nobody suggested turning back. Step by step, they descended.

The temperature dropped noticeably.

Soon the sounds of the school vanished completely. Only silence remained.

The staircase ended in a long tunnel. The corridor stretched into darkness. Farther than their lights could reach. Dust coated the floor.

But something immediately caught Aryan's attention. Footprints.

Fresh footprints.

Not one set.

Several.

Someone had used the tunnel recently.

Very recently.

The realization sent a chill through the group. This wasn't an abandoned passage.

It was active.

As they followed the footprints deeper underground, strange markings began appearing on the walls. Symbols.

Numbers.

Arrows.

Most had faded with age.

But some looked recent.

"Someone's guiding people through here," Aryan said.

Before anyone could reply, a sound echoed through the tunnel. A metallic clang.

Everyone froze.

The sound came again.

Closer this time.

Clang. Clang. Clang.

Someone else was down there.

The footsteps began moments later. Slow.

Steady. Approaching.

The three friends switched off their flashlights instantly. Darkness swallowed the corridor.

Aryan's heart hammered in his chest. He could hear Ananya breathing.

He could hear Riya's trembling exhale. And somewhere ahead—

Someone was walking toward them. The footsteps grew louder.

Closer. Closer. Closer.

Then a flashlight beam appeared around the corner. A figure emerged from the darkness.

Tall.

Wearing a black hood.

The stranger stopped.

For a terrifying second, nobody moved. Then the hooded figure spoke.

A single sentence.

"You're not supposed to be here."

End of Chapter 11

Chapter 12: The Anonymous Letter Coming next:

The identity of the hooded stranger is partially revealed. A chase through the underground tunnels.

A hidden room filled with old student records. Riya discovers a clue connected to Arjun.

The friends receive a letter that changes everything.

Chapter 12:

The Anonymous Letter

The voice echoed through the underground tunnel. "You're not supposed to be here."

Aryan's pulse pounded in his ears.

The hooded figure stood only a few meters away, holding a flashlight.

The beam cut through the darkness, illuminating the damp walls of the hidden corridor. Nobody moved.

Nobody spoke.

For one terrifying second, it felt as though time itself had stopped. Then the stranger took a step forward.

And instinct took over. "Run!" Ananya shouted.

The three friends turned and sprinted down the tunnel. Footsteps exploded behind them.

The hooded figure was chasing them. Fast.

Much faster than Aryan expected.

The narrow passage echoed with the sounds of running shoes slamming against concrete. Dust rose into the air.

The darkness seemed endless. "Left!" Riya yelled.

A side corridor suddenly appeared.

The three darted into it without hesitation.

Behind them, the stranger's flashlight beam swept across the wall. For a brief moment, Aryan thought they had escaped.

Then the footsteps changed direction. The figure had followed them.

"This way!" Aryan shouted. The corridor twisted sharply. Old pipes lined the ceiling.

Water dripped from somewhere overhead. Everything looked identical.

Like a maze built beneath the school.

As they ran, something unexpected appeared ahead. A metal door.

Old.

Rust-covered.

Half hidden behind a cluster of pipes. Without thinking, Aryan grabbed the handle. To his surprise, it opened.

"Inside!"

The three friends rushed through.

Aryan slammed the door shut behind them.

For several seconds, they stood in complete darkness. Breathing heavily.

Listening.

Waiting.

Footsteps approached.

Then stopped.

Silence.

The hooded figure was outside. Very close.

Nobody dared move.

Not even a little.

Minutes passed.

Or perhaps seconds.

It was impossible to tell. Finally, the footsteps retreated. Slowly.

Gradually.

Until they disappeared completely.

Only then did Aryan switch on his flashlight.

The room around them emerged from the darkness. And all three froze.

The chamber was enormous.

Larger than any classroom in Greenwood High. Old filing cabinets lined the walls.

Dust-covered shelves stretched into the distance. Stacks of cardboard boxes filled every corner. "What is this place?" Ananya whispered.

Aryan walked toward the nearest shelf. His flashlight illuminated faded labels. Student Records.

Attendance Reports.

Disciplinary Files.

Examination Results. His eyes widened. "This is an archive."

An underground archive. Hidden beneath the school.

Rows upon rows of documents filled the room. Some appeared decades old.

Others looked surprisingly recent. Riya approached a cabinet marked:

1989–2006

Another cabinet stood beside it. 2007–2016

And another.

2017–Present

The realization hit them immediately.

Someone had been storing school records underground. Secretly.

For years.

"Why hide all this?" Ananya asked. Nobody had an answer.

Then Riya suddenly stopped. "Wait."

Her flashlight had landed on a familiar name. Kapoor.

A file drawer stood slightly open. Inside were dozens of folders.

One of them bore a label.

Arjun Kapoor

Riya's hands trembled.

For a moment she simply stared. Unable to move.

Then she slowly removed the file.

The folder was thicker than expected. Filled with papers.

Photographs.

Reports.

Notes.

Aryan immediately noticed something strange.

The official school records described Arjun as an excellent student. High grades.

Good attendance.

No disciplinary issues.

Yet someone had written additional notes in red ink. The handwriting looked hurried.

Almost angry.

One sentence stood out.

"Subject continues investigating restricted areas." Another note read:

"Potential security risk." A chill ran through Aryan. Security risk?

Arjun had been a student.

Why describe him that way?

Then Riya discovered a photograph. Her breath caught.

It showed her brother standing near Room 307.

The image had clearly been taken without his knowledge. Someone had been watching him.

Years before he disappeared. "That's impossible," she whispered. But the evidence was right there.

The Third Circle hadn't simply monitored students. They had surveilled them.

Tracked them.

Recorded them.

Just then, Aryan noticed another folder. A newer folder.

One that shouldn't have been there. The label read:

Rahul Sinha

Silence filled the room. Rahul's file was much thinner. Only a few pages.

Yet one document immediately caught Aryan's attention. A report dated three weeks before Rahul disappeared.

The final sentence read:

"Subject observed near Tunnel Access Point B." Aryan looked up.

"Rahul knew about the tunnels." The realization felt enormous.

Maybe Rahul hadn't simply been kidnapped. Maybe he had discovered something.

Something dangerous.

Suddenly, a noise echoed through the archive room. A metallic click.

Everyone froze.

Then another.

Click.

Click.

Click.

The sound came from the far side of the room. Aryan swung his flashlight toward it.

A shadow moved between the shelves. Someone else was there.

The hooded figure?

Or someone entirely different?

The shadow vanished before he could tell.

"Let's go," Ananya whispered urgently. Nobody argued.

As they hurried toward the exit, Riya noticed something sticking out from beneath Arjun's file. An envelope.

Yellowed with age.

Sealed.

Her name was written on the front. RIYA KAPOOR

The handwriting belonged to her brother. For several seconds, she couldn't breathe. Arjun had written a letter.

To her.

Ten years ago.

A letter nobody was supposed to find. With trembling hands, she opened it. Inside was a single page.

The message was short.

Very short.

But it changed everything.

If you're reading this, I was right. The Third Circle is real.

Trust nobody inside Greenwood High. Especially not the person everyone trusts most. They are watching everything.

Find the room beneath the room. That's where the truth is hidden.

— Arjun

The room beneath the room. Aryan read the sentence twice. Then three times.

"What does that mean?" Nobody knew.

But one thing was certain.

Arjun had discovered something before he disappeared. Something so dangerous that he left a warning for the future. And now that warning had finally reached its destination.

As the three friends emerged from the underground archive and hurried back toward the surface, none of them noticed a security camera hidden in the tunnel ceiling.

A tiny red light blinked once. Then again.

Somewhere far away, a monitor flickered to life. And someone smiled.

Because the game had just become much more interesting.

End of Chapter 12

Chapter 13: The Science Lab Incident

Coming next:

A dangerous accident in the chemistry laboratory. Evidence that someone is sabotaging students.

The mysterious "room beneath the room" is investigated. Vihaan receives a threatening message.

A shocking clue points toward a trusted teacher.

Chapter 13:

The Science Lab Incident

The letter from Arjun Kapoor changed everything.

For the rest of the week, Aryan couldn't think about anything else. Trust nobody inside Greenwood High.

Especially not the person everyone trusts most. The warning replayed constantly in his mind.

Who was the person everyone trusted? The principal?

A teacher?

A student leader?

The possibilities seemed endless.

Yet one sentence bothered him more than any other. Find the room beneath the room.

What did that even mean?

The phrase sounded like a riddle.

And somewhere inside Greenwood High, the answer was waiting. Friday morning arrived bright and sunny for the first time in weeks. The rain had finally stopped.

Students filled the corridors with renewed energy. The football field was busy.

The basketball court echoed with laughter.

For the first time since Rahul disappeared, Greenwood High almost felt normal. Almost.

Aryan met Riya and Ananya before class. All three carried copies of Arjun's letter. They had spent hours trying to decode it. Without success.

"I think the room beneath the room is another tunnel," Ananya suggested. "Maybe," Aryan replied.

"But Arjun specifically called it a room." Riya nodded.

"Which means it's probably something hidden."

Before they could continue, a loud voice interrupted them. "Results are out!"

Instantly, students rushed toward the notice board. The final mid-term rankings had been posted.

As expected, Vihaan Malhotra remained first. Aryan remained second.

The difference between them was only one mark. Most students congratulated Vihaan.

Yet Aryan noticed something strange. The topper wasn't smiling.

He wasn't celebrating.

If anything, he looked nervous. Almost frightened.

When their eyes met, Vihaan quickly looked away. The reaction didn't feel normal.

It felt like fear.

The first few classes passed uneventfully. Then came Chemistry practicals.

The science laboratories occupied an entire wing of the school. Long tables filled the room.

Glassware gleamed beneath bright lights.

Students moved between stations preparing experiments. Aryan normally enjoyed practical classes.

Today he felt distracted.

His thoughts remained focused on Arjun's letter. "Focus," Ananya whispered.

"You nearly poured the wrong solution." Aryan sighed.

She wasn't wrong.

Across the room, Vihaan worked alone. As usual.

The topper rarely interacted with other students. Then something happened.

A sharp crack echoed through the laboratory. Everyone looked up.

One of the beakers on Vihaan's table exploded. Glass shattered across the room.

Students screamed. Several jumped backward.

A teacher rushed forward immediately. "Everyone move away!"

The laboratory descended into chaos. Fortunately, nobody was seriously injured. A few minor cuts.

Nothing more.

Yet something felt wrong.

Very wrong.

The experiment Vihaan was conducting shouldn't have exploded. Not like that.

Once the situation calmed, the chemistry teacher examined the equipment. For several minutes she said nothing.

Then her expression changed. "This valve was damaged." Silence filled the room.

"Damaged?" another teacher asked. The chemistry teacher nodded. "Deliberately."

The word echoed through the laboratory. Deliberately.

Someone had tampered with the equipment. Someone had caused the accident.

Aryan immediately glanced toward Vihaan. The topper looked pale.

Almost shaken.

For the first time, Aryan wondered if Vihaan was actually a victim rather than a suspect. After the class ended, Vihaan left quickly.

Too quickly. Aryan followed.

The topper headed toward the old science block. Again.

The same place where secret meetings had occurred. The same place where envelopes changed hands.

This time, however, Vihaan wasn't alone.

A folded piece of paper waited on the windowsill. He picked it up.

Read it.

And immediately looked terrified.

Before Aryan could get closer, Vihaan crumpled the note and hurried away. The paper landed in a nearby trash bin.

Aryan waited until the corridor emptied. Then retrieved it.

His heart pounded as he unfolded the note. Three words appeared in black ink.

YOU FAILED AGAIN.

Aryan stared at the message. Failed?

Vihaan had ranked first. How could that be failure?

Unless the rankings weren't what mattered.

Unless someone expected something else from him. Something connected to the Third Circle.

That evening, the three friends met inside the library. The room was nearly empty.

Only a handful of students remained. Aryan showed them the note.

Riya immediately frowned.

"That's not from a teacher." "How do you know?"

"The wording."

She pointed at the sentence. "It's a threat."

And she was right.

The note wasn't criticism.

It was pressure.

The same kind of pressure that seemed to surround Vihaan constantly. The same pressure Arjun had written about.

Suddenly, Ananya snapped her fingers. "The room beneath the room."

Aryan looked up. "What?"

"I think I know where it is."

For several seconds nobody spoke.

Then she opened a blueprint of Greenwood High she had borrowed from the library archives. The school map spread across the table.

Most of it looked ordinary. Classrooms.

Offices.

Sports facilities.

Then Ananya pointed toward Room 307. "Look."

Aryan leaned closer.

His eyes widened.

According to the blueprint, Room 307 shouldn't exist. At least not entirely.

Part of the room extended over an unused storage area beneath the third floor. A hidden space.

A room below Room 307. The room beneath the room.

Arjun's clue suddenly made sense.

Before anyone could celebrate, a shadow fell across the table. The three friends looked up.

Mrs. Dutta stood before them. The vice-principal smiled politely.

Yet something about her eyes felt cold. Very cold.

"What are you three studying?" she asked. For a moment nobody answered.

Because the blueprint lay open directly in front of them. And Mrs. Dutta was staring at it.

Then her gaze settled on the words: Room 307

The smile disappeared.

Only for a second.

But Aryan noticed.

And that single moment confirmed something important. Mrs. Dutta knew exactly what Room 307 was.

The question was—

How much else did she know?

That night, as Aryan prepared for bed, his phone vibrated. Another message.

Unknown Number.

His stomach tightened.

Slowly, he opened it.

A photograph appeared.

The image showed a locked metal door underground. At the bottom of the picture was a sentence.

THE ROOM BENEATH THE ROOM IS OPEN.

Aryan's pulse quickened.

Because someone had just invited them deeper into the mystery. And something told him there would be no turning back.

End of Chapter 13

Chapter 14: First Crush Coming next:

Aryan and Riya grow closer.

The hidden room beneath Room 307 is explored.

A major clue about Rahul's disappearance is discovered. Ananya struggles with her feelings.

The mystery takes a deeply personal turn.

Chapter 14:

First Crush

Aryan stared at the message on his phone long after midnight. THE ROOM BENEATH THE ROOM IS OPEN.

The anonymous sender had never been this direct before. Usually, the messages were vague warnings or cryptic clues. This felt different.

Almost like an invitation.

Or a trap.

The problem was that it could easily be both.

The next morning, Greenwood High buzzed with its usual energy. Students crowded the corridors.

Teachers rushed between classrooms. The school appeared completely normal.

Yet beneath that normality lay secret tunnels, hidden archives, mysterious symbols, and a shadowy organization called the Third Circle.

Sometimes Aryan wondered how everyone else could walk through the hallways without noticing. He spotted Riya near the library steps.

She was reading something on her phone. When she noticed him approaching, she smiled. A genuine smile.

Not the nervous smile she often wore these days. A real one.

For reasons Aryan couldn't explain, his heartbeat sped up slightly. "Morning," she said.

"Morning."

"You look tired."

"You say that every day." "Because you always look tired." Aryan laughed.

For the first time in weeks, the tension between them seemed to ease.

As they walked toward class together, Ananya watched from across the corridor. A strange feeling settled in her chest.

She hated it.

Not because she disliked Riya. She actually liked her.

But every day, Aryan and Riya seemed to grow closer.

And every day, Ananya felt herself becoming more invisible. She quickly pushed the thought away.

There were bigger problems to worry about. Much bigger.

Classes dragged on endlessly. Aryan barely paid attention.

His thoughts remained fixed on the hidden room beneath Room 307. At lunch, the three friends gathered beneath the banyan tree.

The same place where they had first become friends.

The same place that now served as their unofficial headquarters. "We're going tonight," Aryan said.

Ananya groaned immediately. "Of course we are."

Riya smiled.

"You sound surprised." "I'm not surprised."

Ananya sighed dramatically.

"I'm just tired of nearly dying every week." Despite the joke, everyone understood the risk.

Every time they followed a clue, things became more dangerous. Yet stopping no longer felt possible.

Not after everything they had discovered.

That evening, they returned to the abandoned wing. The corridors were empty.

Silent.

Dark.

The hidden entrance behind Room 307 opened just as before. Dust drifted through the air as the wall shifted aside.

Beyond it lay the familiar staircase descending into darkness. This time they moved carefully.

Slowly. Methodically.

The underground tunnels seemed even colder than before. Every sound echoed endlessly.

Every shadow appeared threatening.

Eventually they reached the section shown on the blueprint. The area beneath Room 307.

There, hidden behind a rust-covered metal panel, stood a narrow door. Exactly like the one in the anonymous photograph.

Nobody spoke.

Aryan stepped forward.

The handle felt cold beneath his hand. Then he pushed.

The door opened.

A stale gust of air rushed outward.

The room beyond had clearly remained sealed for years. Flashlights illuminated the darkness.

And all three froze.

The room wasn't empty. Photographs covered the walls. Hundreds of them.

Students.

Teachers.

Hallways.

Classrooms.

Some photographs appeared recent. Others looked decades old.

Every image had one thing in common. Someone had been watching.

Watching everyone.

"What is this place?" Ananya whispered. No one answered.

Because the answer was terrifyingly obvious. This was a surveillance room.

A hidden room used to monitor people. For years.

Aryan moved deeper inside.

Several desks stood against the far wall. Dust-covered equipment sat abandoned. Old computers.

Recording devices.

Stacks of files.

Then Riya suddenly stopped. "Aryan."

Her voice trembled.

He turned.

She was staring at one particular photograph.

The image showed a teenage boy standing near the school gate. Smiling.

Alive.

Arjun Kapoor.

For several moments, Riya couldn't speak. This wasn't a newspaper picture.

Or a family photograph. Someone had secretly taken it.

Someone had watched her brother before he disappeared. Tears filled her eyes.

Aryan quietly stood beside her. Neither spoke.

Neither needed to.

For the first time, the mystery felt painfully personal. Eventually, Riya wiped her eyes and continued searching. They needed answers.

Among the files, Aryan discovered a folder labeled:

R. Sinha Rahul.

His hands shook slightly as he opened it. Inside were attendance records.

Photographs.

Notes.

And one report.

A report dated two days before Rahul disappeared. Aryan read it aloud.

Subject discovered unauthorized access point. Surveillance compromised.

Immediate action recommended. Silence filled the room.

Rahul had discovered something.

Something important enough that someone considered him a threat. The realization made Aryan's stomach turn.

Perhaps Rahul hadn't been chosen randomly. Perhaps he had simply gotten too close to the truth. Just like Arjun.

Just like Mr. Chatterjee.

And maybe...

Just like them.

Suddenly, a loud noise echoed through the room. Everyone jumped.

A metallic crash.

Somewhere nearby.

Then another.

Closer.

Someone was in the tunnels. Again.

The three exchanged nervous glances. "We should leave," Ananya whispered. Nobody disagreed.

As they hurried toward the exit, Aryan noticed something lying beneath one of the desks. A small notebook.

Newer than everything else in the room. Much newer.

He picked it up.

The cover contained a name. Kabir Mehta

Aryan froze.

Kabir.

The school captain.

What was his notebook doing inside a secret underground surveillance room?

Before anyone could investigate further, footsteps echoed through the corridor outside. Heavy footsteps.

Approaching rapidly.

The three friends switched off their flashlights. Darkness swallowed the room.

And somewhere beyond the door, someone stopped. Listening.

Waiting.

The mystery had just become even more complicated. And for the first time, Aryan realized something else.

The closer he grew to Riya, the more dangerous everything became. Because if anything happened to her...

He wasn't sure he could handle it. End of Chapter 14

Chapter 15: Jealous Hearts Coming next:

Ananya struggles with her growing feelings for Aryan. Kabir's notebook reveals shocking secrets.

A mysterious stranger follows Riya home.

The identity of the hooded figure begins to emerge.

A betrayal inside the friend group changes everything.

Chapter 15:

Jealous Hearts

The footsteps outside the hidden surveillance room stopped. For several seconds, nobody moved.

Nobody even breathed.

Aryan stood frozen in the darkness, clutching Kabir's notebook. Beside him, Riya remained perfectly still.

Ananya's hand gripped the edge of a desk so tightly that her knuckles had turned white. Outside, silence filled the tunnel.

The kind of silence that felt unnatural. Dangerous.

Then came a sound.

A slow creak.

The door handle moved.

Just slightly.

Aryan's heart nearly stopped. Someone was trying to enter. The handle turned again.

More aggressively this time.

Without thinking, Aryan switched off his phone completely. The room plunged into absolute darkness.

Nobody spoke.

The handle rattled once more. Then stopped.

Several long seconds passed.

Finally, footsteps echoed down the corridor. Growing fainter.

Then disappearing entirely.

Only after nearly a minute did Aryan dare switch his flashlight back on. "They're gone," he whispered.

For now.

The three wasted no time.

They hurried through the tunnels and climbed back toward the abandoned wing. Only when they reached the surface did anyone speak.

"We need to read that notebook," Riya said.

Aryan looked down at the small black book in his hands. Kabir Mehta's notebook.

Found inside a secret underground surveillance room. The discovery raised far more questions than answers. That evening, the three friends met at Aryan's house.

His parents were visiting relatives and wouldn't return until late.

The empty living room became the perfect place for an emergency meeting. Rain tapped softly against the windows.

The atmosphere felt tense. Almost nervous.

Carefully, Aryan opened the notebook. Most pages contained ordinary notes.

Class schedules.

Assignment reminders.

Football practice timings.

Nothing unusual.

Then they reached the middle section. And everything changed.

The pages became increasingly strange. Lists of dates.

Names.

Room numbers.

Repeated over and over.

One name appeared more frequently than any other. Mrs. Dutta

The vice-principal.

Ananya frowned.

"Why would Kabir keep notes about her?" Aryan turned another page.

A sentence had been written across the top. She's hiding something.

Silence filled the room.

Another page.

Followed her after school. Entered abandoned wing. Another.

Meeting unknown individuals. Another.

Connected to Room 307. Riya looked up.

"Kabir's investigating her." Aryan nodded slowly.

Just like them.

Which meant one important thing.

Kabir wasn't necessarily part of the Third Circle. He might be trying to expose it.

The realization completely changed the situation.

Perhaps they had been suspicious of the wrong person all along. Meanwhile, across town, another problem was beginning.

Riya was walking home alone after leaving Aryan's house. The streets were mostly empty.

Streetlights reflected off rain-soaked pavement. The night felt calm.

Peaceful.

Until she noticed the footsteps. Behind her.

Slow.

Steady.

At first she ignored them.

Someone else was probably walking home. Then she turned a corner.

The footsteps followed.

Her pulse quickened.

She crossed the street.

The footsteps crossed too.

Now she was certain.

Someone was following her.

Without looking back, she increased her pace. The footsteps increased as well.

Fear began tightening around her chest. She quickly pulled out her phone.

Before she could call anyone, a voice spoke behind her. "Riya."

She froze.

The voice wasn't threatening. It sounded familiar.

Slowly, she turned around.

A young man stood beneath a streetlamp. Perhaps twenty years old.

Maybe a little older.

Dark hair.

Dark jacket.

Tired eyes.

Most importantly—

He wasn't wearing a hood.

For several seconds, neither spoke.

Then the stranger handed her a folded envelope. "Read it when you're alone."

"What?" "Trust me."

Before she could ask another question, he walked away. Disappearing into the darkness.

The entire encounter lasted less than thirty seconds. Yet it left Riya deeply unsettled.

Later that night, she opened the envelope. Inside was a photograph.

A photograph of Greenwood High. Taken ten years earlier.

At first glance, it seemed ordinary.

Students standing outside the main building. Teachers smiling.

Nothing unusual.

Then she noticed someone in the background. Arjun.

Her brother.

And standing beside him—

The same young man who had given her the envelope. Riya's breath caught.

How was that possible?

The stranger clearly knew Arjun. But why reveal himself now?

Why wait ten years?

And who exactly was he?

Across town, Ananya sat alone in her room. Unable to sleep.

Her thoughts weren't focused on the Third Circle. Or Room 307.

Or hidden tunnels.

They were focused on Aryan.

For weeks she had tried ignoring her feelings. Pretending they didn't exist.

Pretending she wasn't jealous every time Aryan and Riya laughed together. Yet pretending was becoming increasingly difficult.

The truth was obvious.

She liked him.

A lot.

And every day she watched him growing closer to someone else. The realization hurt more than she wanted to admit.

Just then, her phone buzzed. A new message.

Unknown Number.

Her heart skipped a beat.

Slowly, she opened it.

The message contained a single photograph.

A photograph of Aryan and Riya standing together outside the library. Taken secretly.

At the bottom appeared a sentence. HE DOESN'T TRUST YOU ANYMORE.

Ananya stared at the screen.

For several moments, she simply sat there. Then another message arrived.

WE CAN HELP YOU.

The sender remained anonymous. But the intention was clear.

Someone was trying to manipulate her. Trying to create division.

Trying to break apart the group.

And somewhere in the shadows, the Third Circle was watching. Smiling.

Because sometimes the easiest way to destroy an investigation wasn't through violence. Sometimes all it took was doubt.

End of Chapter 15

Chapter 16: The Midnight Search Coming next:

The mysterious stranger reveals a shocking connection to Arjun. Ananya faces a difficult choice.

Kabir finally joins the investigation.

The friends return to the tunnels at midnight.

A hidden prison cell is discovered beneath Greenwood High.

Chapter 16:

The Midnight Search

Ananya stared at the anonymous message for nearly ten minutes. HE DOESN'T TRUST YOU ANYMORE.

WE CAN HELP YOU.

The words felt like poison.

She knew she should ignore them. Delete them.

Forget they ever existed.

Yet a small part of her couldn't stop thinking about them.

Because the message attacked a fear she had been trying to hide from herself. The fear that she was being left behind.

Over the past few weeks, everything had changed.

The investigation had brought Aryan and Riya closer together. They shared clues.

Secrets.

Late-night phone calls.

Plans.

Meanwhile, Ananya often felt like she was running to keep up. She hated feeling that way.

And she hated the fact that someone out there knew it. Slowly, she locked her phone.

No.

She wasn't going to fall for it.

Whoever had sent the message wanted exactly that. Division.

Distrust.

Arguments.

She wasn't going to help them.

The next morning, Greenwood High felt strangely peaceful. The sky was clear.

Sunlight streamed across the campus.

Students discussed sports, assignments, and exam results.

It was almost enough to make someone forget about missing students and secret tunnels. Almost.

At lunch, Aryan and Riya arrived carrying serious expressions. Ananya immediately knew something had happened.

"What is it?"

Riya exchanged a glance with Aryan.

Then she pulled out the photograph from the mysterious stranger. Ananya studied it carefully.

Arjun stood near the school entrance.

Beside him was the young man from the previous night. "Who is he?" Ananya asked.

"We don't know," Riya replied.

"But he definitely knew my brother."

Before they could continue, another voice interrupted. "I know who he is."

All three spun around.

Kabir Mehta stood behind them. For a moment, nobody spoke.

The school captain looked uncomfortable. Nervous, even.

"What do you mean?" Aryan asked. Kabir sat down.

Then lowered his voice. "His name is Sameer." Riya froze.

"You know him?" Kabir nodded.

"Not personally. But my father mentioned him."

Kabir's father had worked as a police officer years earlier.

The same officer who had investigated Arjun Kapoor's disappearance. "Sameer was Arjun's best friend."

The words hit Riya like a thunderbolt. "He's alive?"

"As far as I know." "Then why disappear?" Kabir hesitated.

"Because after Arjun vanished, someone tried to make him disappear too." Silence followed.

The mystery was growing larger with every answer.

For the first time, Kabir seemed genuinely determined to help. And for the first time, Aryan began trusting him.

That evening, the group made a decision. They were going back underground.

This time at midnight.

Because according to Arjun's diary, certain areas of the tunnel system became active only after dark.

If answers existed, they might finally find them.

At 11:45 PM, the four friends met behind the abandoned wing. The school grounds looked completely different at night.

The empty buildings seemed larger. The shadows seemed darker.

The silence felt endless.

No teachers.

No students.

No security guards in sight. Only darkness.

Using flashlights, they entered the hidden passage behind Room 307. The familiar staircase descended into the earth.

Step by step, they moved deeper underground. The air felt colder than before.

Much colder.

Soon they reached the underground archive room. The place where they had discovered Arjun's letter. This time, however, they didn't stop.

According to the map hidden in the diary, another tunnel extended beyond the archive. A section they had never explored.

The passage narrowed as they advanced. The walls became rougher.

Older.

It almost felt as though they were entering a different part of the underground network. Then Aryan noticed something strange.

The floor had changed. Scratches marked the concrete. Deep scratches.

"What caused those?" Ananya whispered. Nobody knew.

Yet the marks looked recent.

As though something heavy had been dragged through the tunnel. The realization made everyone uneasy.

They continued forward.

The tunnel eventually ended at a large metal door.

Unlike everything else underground, the door looked modern. Very modern.

Someone maintained it.

Someone used it.

Aryan carefully pushed against it. To his surprise, it opened.

A wave of cold air rushed outward. The room beyond was dark.

And enormous.

For several seconds, their flashlights revealed only empty space.

Then Riya gasped. "What is that?"

Aryan followed her flashlight beam. And immediately froze.

Metal bars.

A locked cell.

Then another.

And another.

Rows of prison-like cells stretched across the room. A hidden detention area beneath Greenwood High. No one spoke.

The discovery was too shocking.

Why would a school need prison cells? Who built them?

Who used them?

Aryan slowly approached the nearest cell. The door stood open.

Dust covered the floor.

Yet something caught his attention. Words scratched into the wall.

Old words.

Written years earlier.

His flashlight illuminated the message. And his heart nearly stopped.

HELP ME.

Below it appeared another sentence. THEY TOOK ARJUN.

Riya stared at the wall.

Unable to move.

Unable to breathe.

Someone had written those words after Arjun disappeared. Someone who had been imprisoned there.

Someone who knew the truth.

Suddenly, a metallic sound echoed through the room. Clang.

Everyone froze.

The noise came from deeper within the underground prison. Then another.

Clang.

Clang.

As though a chain was moving. Or a door.

Slowly opening.

Aryan raised his flashlight.

Far across the room, a shadow moved.

Not a trick of the light.

Not imagination.

A real person.

Standing between the cells. Watching them.

And then—

The figure began walking toward them. End of Chapter 16

Chapter 17: Vanished Again Coming next:

The mysterious figure is revealed.

A hidden prisoner shares shocking information. The friends learn what happened to Arjun.

Another Greenwood High student disappears.

Panic spreads through the school as the Third Circle makes its next move.

Chapter 17:

Vanished Again

The figure moved slowly through the darkness. Step.

Step.

Step.

The sound echoed across the underground prison. Aryan tightened his grip on the flashlight.

Beside him, Riya stood frozen.

Kabir and Ananya exchanged nervous glances. Nobody spoke.

Nobody dared.

The shadow continued approaching.

The beam from Aryan's flashlight finally reached the figure's face. And all four friends stopped breathing.

It wasn't a stranger.

It was Sameer.

The young man from the photograph.

The one standing beside Arjun ten years earlier. The one who had secretly approached Riya.

For several seconds, nobody moved. Then Sameer sighed.

A tired, exhausted sigh. "You shouldn't be here." Aryan almost laughed.

It was becoming a very common sentence.

"We could say the same thing about you," Kabir replied. To everyone's surprise, Sameer smiled slightly.

"Fair enough."

The tension eased a little.

Not much.

Just enough to talk. Riya stepped forward. Her voice trembled. "You knew my brother."

Sameer's smile disappeared immediately. "Yes."

"What happened to him?" The question hung in the air. Heavy.

Painful.

For several moments, Sameer didn't answer. Then he lowered his head.

"He found something."

Aryan exchanged a glance with Kabir. Again.

Always the same answer. Arjun had found something. "What?" Riya asked.

"The truth." Silence.

Sameer looked toward the prison cells. His eyes seemed distant.

As though remembering things he wished he could forget. "The Third Circle wasn't just a secret club."

Aryan's pulse quickened. "It controlled people." "How?" Ananya asked. "Fear."

Sameer pointed toward the cells.

"Those who discovered too much disappeared." The room suddenly felt colder.

"Students?" Aryan asked. "Students."

"Teachers?" "Sometimes."

"What about Arjun?" Sameer hesitated.

Then answered. "He got too close."

Riya closed her eyes.

For years she had searched for answers.

And every answer seemed to hurt more than the last. "Is he alive?"

The question barely escaped her lips.

Sameer looked away. "I don't know."

The words shattered whatever hope remained. For a long moment, nobody spoke.

Then a distant sound echoed through the prison. A phone ringing.

Everyone froze.

The sound came from Sameer's pocket. Slowly, he answered.

Listened.

Then his face went pale.

Very pale.

"What happened?" Aryan asked. Sameer lowered the phone. "Another student is missing." The room fell silent.

"What?"

"A girl."

"Who?"

Sameer swallowed. "Neha Sharma."

Panic surged through Aryan. Neha.

A quiet student from Class XI-C.

She wasn't part of their investigation. At least, as far as they knew.

So why take her?

The answer came immediately.

Because the Third Circle wanted everyone afraid. Not just investigators.

Everyone.

The next morning, Greenwood High exploded with rumors. Police vehicles lined the entrance.

News reporters gathered outside.

Teachers struggled to control frightened students. The atmosphere felt completely different now.

Rahul's disappearance had shocked the school. Neha's disappearance terrified it.

Two students gone.

No answers.

No suspects.

No explanations.

Parents arrived throughout the day. Some demanded security.

Others demanded the school close temporarily.

The principal assured everyone the situation remained under control. Nobody believed him.

Not anymore.

During lunch, the four friends met in secret. "We need to figure out why Neha was taken."

Aryan's voice sounded more determined than ever. Sameer sat with them now.

Though not officially.

He couldn't risk being seen too often.

"Maybe she discovered something," Kabir suggested. "Or maybe they chose her randomly," Ananya replied. Sameer shook his head.

"They don't do anything randomly."

The certainty in his voice silenced everyone. Then Riya suddenly remembered something. "Wait."

"What?" Aryan asked.

"I saw Neha in the library last week." "So?"

"She was reading old newspaper articles." Aryan felt a chill.

"What kind of articles?" Riya thought carefully. "Missing students." Silence.

The answer was obvious.

Neha had started asking questions. Just like Rahul.

Just like Arjun.

Just like them.

The pattern was becoming impossible to ignore.

That afternoon, another shocking discovery emerged. Police recovered CCTV footage.

A blurry video recorded near the abandoned wing. The image quality was terrible.

Yet one detail stood out.

A silver wristwatch.

The exact same type worn by Kabir.

Within hours, rumors spread across the school. Kabir became a suspect.

Students whispered whenever he walked past. Teachers looked at him differently.

Even some of his friends avoided him.

The situation quickly spiraled out of control.

By the end of the day, police requested an interview.

Kabir tried acting calm.

Failed.

"Someone's setting me up." Aryan believed him.

But proving it would be difficult. Because the evidence looked convincing. Too convincing.

Almost as if someone had planned it.

That evening, as the group met once again beneath the banyan tree, Sameer handed Aryan a folded piece of paper.

"What is this?" "A list."

Aryan unfolded it. His eyes widened. Names.

Dozens of names. Students.

Teachers.

Former staff members.

Many were familiar.

Then he noticed something terrifying. Three names had been highlighted.

Rahul Sinha.

Neha Sharma.

Arjun Kapoor.

Below them appeared another name. A name highlighted in red.

Aryan Sen.

For several seconds, he couldn't breathe.

Because someone had placed him on the same list. And if the pattern continued…

He might be next.

Far away, hidden somewhere within Greenwood High, a computer monitor flickered to life. A surveillance camera displayed Aryan's image.

Someone watched silently.

Then typed three words into a document. PHASE TWO BEGINS.

End of Chapter 17

Chapter 18: CCTV Footage Coming next:

Kabir becomes the prime suspect.

Aryan discovers who put his name on the list.

The surveillance network beneath Greenwood expands. A shocking secret about Neha is uncovered.

Someone inside the friend group receives a dangerous offer.

Chapter 18:

CCTV Footage

Aryan couldn't stop staring at his name. The paper trembled slightly in his hands. Rahul Sinha.

Neha Sharma. Arjun Kapoor. And now—Aryan Sen.

The names seemed to burn into the page. For a long moment, nobody spoke.

The evening air felt unusually cold beneath the banyan tree. Even the sounds of students leaving campus seemed distant. "Where did you get this?" Aryan finally asked.

Sameer looked around carefully before answering. "I took it."

"Took it from where?" Sameer hesitated.

Then spoke quietly.

"From the surveillance room." Silence.

The hidden room beneath Greenwood High. The room covered with photographs.

The room where someone monitored students. "I wasn't supposed to see it," Sameer continued.

"But after I found your name, I knew I had to warn you." Riya looked alarmed.

"What does the list mean?" Sameer lowered his voice.

"It means they're interested in you." Nobody liked the sound of that.

At all.

The next morning, Greenwood High looked more like a police station than a school. Officers moved through the hallways.

Parents waited outside administrative offices. Students whispered constantly.

Neha's disappearance had changed everything. Fear was no longer hiding beneath the surface. Now it was everywhere.

As Aryan entered the classroom, he immediately noticed people staring. Not at him.

At Kabir.

The school captain sat alone.

Normally, students crowded around him. Today, nobody sat nearby.

The CCTV footage had spread throughout the school. Everyone knew.

Everyone was talking about it.

A blurry figure near the abandoned wing. A silver wristwatch.

A student disappearing shortly afterward.

It wasn't enough evidence to prove anything. Yet rumors didn't care about proof.

They cared about suspicion.

And Kabir had become the perfect suspect. During first period, two police officers arrived. The classroom fell silent immediately.

"We need to speak with Kabir Mehta." Every eye in the room turned toward him. Kabir stood slowly.

For the briefest moment, Aryan saw something in his expression. Not guilt.

Fear.

The officers escorted him out. And the whispers began instantly. "He did it."

"I always thought he was suspicious." "I heard he was seen near Room 307." Aryan clenched his jaw.

People loved simple answers.

Unfortunately, mysteries rarely offered them. After school, the group gathered in the library. Minus Kabir.

The police interview was still ongoing.

"This is exactly what the Third Circle wants," Sameer said. "What?"

"Distraction."

Riya nodded slowly.

"If everyone's focused on Kabir, nobody's looking elsewhere." The idea made sense.

Too much sense.

Then Ananya remembered something. "The CCTV footage."

Everyone looked at her. "What about it?"

"It only showed the watch." Aryan frowned.

"So?"

"So lots of people own silver watches." The room became quiet.

She was right.

The footage never showed a face. Only an accessory.

Someone could easily copy that. Someone could deliberately frame Kabir. The possibility changed everything.

Suddenly, Sameer's phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen.

And immediately stood up. "What happened?" Aryan asked. Sameer looked troubled. "Someone sent me a location." "Who?"

"I don't know." "Should we trust it?" "No."

"But we're going anyway."

By sunset, the five had reached an abandoned maintenance building behind the school's sports complex. The structure appeared unused.

Forgotten.

Broken windows lined one side. Vines crawled across the walls.

Yet according to the message, something important was hidden inside. The door opened with a loud creak.

Dust filled the air.

At first glance, the building looked empty. Then Aryan noticed something unusual. A staircase.

Leading downward.

Another hidden staircase.

Another underground section. Greenwood High seemed built on secrets. The group descended cautiously.

The stairs ended inside a small room.

Unlike the tunnels, this place looked modern. Computers lined the walls.

Monitors glowed softly.

And on every screen appeared CCTV footage. Dozens of camera feeds.

Classrooms.

Corridors.

The library.

The cafeteria.

Even the banyan tree where they usually met.

Someone had been watching nearly every part of the school.

For years.

"This is insane," Ananya whispered. Aryan approached one of the monitors. Several folders appeared on the desktop. Names.

Student names.

Rahul.

Neha.

Arjun.

Then another.

Aryan.

His stomach tightened.

Before he could open the folder, Riya suddenly gasped. Everyone turned.

She was staring at another screen. The monitor displayed a photograph. Neha Sharma.

Not from this year.

From six months ago.

The date appeared clearly in the corner.

"Why were they watching her back then?" Aryan asked. Nobody knew.

But it meant something important. Neha hadn't been selected recently. She had been monitored for months. Perhaps longer.

Then Sameer discovered something even stranger. A file marked:

RECRUITMENT CANDIDATES

Silence filled the room.

Slowly, he opened it.

Inside appeared a list of names. Students.

Most were high achievers.

Top-ranked.

Competitive.

Ambitious.

Vihaan's name appeared near the top. So did Aryan's.

And then—Everyone froze.

Another name appeared on the list. Someone they trusted completely. Ananya Roy.

"What?" she whispered.

Her face turned pale. "Why am I on there?" Nobody had an answer.

Before anyone could investigate further, a new notification appeared on the monitor. A message.

Sent seconds earlier.

The text contained only one sentence. YOU SHOULDN'T HAVE COME HERE.

The room fell silent.

Because the message meant only one thing.

Whoever operated the surveillance system knew they were inside. Right now.

At that exact moment, somewhere above them, a door slammed shut. Then came the sound of footsteps.

Multiple footsteps.

Approaching rapidly.

The Third Circle was coming.

And this time, they weren't hiding. End of Chapter 18

Chapter 19: Exam Hall Panic Coming next:

The group becomes trapped underground.

Ananya learns why her name is on the recruitment list. Vihaan finally reveals the truth about the Third Circle. A coded message appears during a school exam.

The Third Circle delivers a direct threat to Aryan.

Chapter 19:

Exam Hall Panic

The footsteps above them grew louder. Fast.

Purposeful.

Getting closer with every second.

The group stood frozen inside the hidden surveillance room. Computer monitors flickered around them.

Security camera feeds displayed dozens of locations across Greenwood High. The entire school seemed to be watching them.

"We need to leave," Sameer said. Nobody argued.

The problem was that there appeared to be only one exit. The staircase.

The same staircase now occupied by whoever was approaching. Aryan's mind raced.

"There has to be another way."

The surveillance room was too important. Too secret.

No organization would create a place like this with only one entrance. Quickly, the group searched the room.

The footsteps continued getting closer. Then Ananya noticed something. "Here!"

A section of the wall looked different. Slightly newer.

Slightly cleaner.

Together they pushed against it. A hidden panel swung open.

Behind it lay a narrow tunnel. Without hesitation, they entered.

Moments later, voices echoed from the surveillance room behind them. The Third Circle had arrived.

The tunnel twisted beneath the school.

Unlike the older corridors, this one felt recently constructed. Electric cables ran along the walls.

Emergency lights glowed faintly overhead. Whoever built it expected regular use.

Eventually, the passage emerged near the old science block.

The group climbed through a maintenance hatch and stumbled into the cool night air. For several moments nobody spoke.

Then Ananya asked the question everyone was thinking. "Why was my name on that list?"

Silence followed.

Because nobody knew.

Or at least nobody wanted to guess. Finally, Sameer spoke.

"The Third Circle doesn't recruit random people." Everyone looked at him.

"They choose students with influence." "Influence?" Aryan asked.

"Leaders. High achievers. People who can affect others." The explanation made sense.

Vihaan.

Aryan.

Ananya.

All of them fit the pattern.

"But why me?" Ananya asked quietly. Sameer hesitated.

Then answered honestly. "Because people trust you."

The words caught her off guard.

For a moment, she didn't know what to say.

The next morning, Greenwood High attempted to return to normal.

Attempted.

It failed.

Students remained nervous. Teachers remained tense.

Police officers still patrolled parts of the campus. The atmosphere felt fragile.

Like something waiting to break.

That afternoon, students gathered for a surprise aptitude assessment. Officially, it wasn't an exam.

Just a school evaluation.

Unofficially, nobody wanted to be there. Rows of desks filled the auditorium.

Question papers were distributed. Students groaned.

Aryan sat near the center.

Riya beside him.

Ananya two rows behind.

The test began.

For the first twenty minutes, everything seemed normal. Then a scream shattered the silence.

Everyone looked up.

A student near the back had dropped his paper. His face was pale.

Terrified.

A teacher hurried over. "What happened?"

The student pointed at the question sheet. Unable to speak.

The teacher picked it up.

Then froze.

Because someone had written a message across the page. In thick black ink.

NUMBER THREE WILL DISAPPEAR TONIGHT.

The auditorium erupted. Students stood up.

Teachers shouted for calm. Whispers spread instantly. Number Three?

What did it mean?

Who was Number Three?

The exam ended immediately.

School administrators rushed to contain the situation. Unfortunately, it was too late.

Within an hour, every student knew about the message.

And everyone was trying to guess who Number Three might be.

That evening, the group met secretly inside the library. The atmosphere was grim.

"This wasn't random," Aryan said. "No," Riya agreed.

"It was a warning." Or a threat.

The Third Circle had stopped hiding. Now they were communicating openly. Just then, someone entered the library. Kabir.

The school captain looked exhausted.

The police interview had clearly taken a toll on him. Yet there was something else.

Determination.

"I know what's happening."

The statement instantly captured everyone's attention. "What?" Aryan asked.

Kabir sat down.

Then pulled out a folder.

"My father kept records from the original investigation." Silence.

The original investigation.

Arjun's case.

Kabir opened the folder.

Inside were photographs.

Reports.

Witness statements.

One document stood out immediately. A list.

The same type of list they had seen in the surveillance room. Recruitment candidates.

Names.

Ranks.

Performance records.

Students were being evaluated. Judged.

Selected.

"For what?" Riya asked. Kabir looked uncomfortable. Then answered.

"The Third Circle recruits members through competition." Nobody spoke.

Because suddenly everything made sense. The rankings.

The pressure.

The obsession with achievement.

Students weren't merely competing for grades. Some were being watched.

Chosen.

Tested.

The entire system had been manipulated. Then Kabir revealed something even worse. "The candidates receive offers."

"What kind of offers?" "Power."

The room became very quiet. Influence.

Connections.

Opportunities.

Exactly the sort of thing ambitious students might find difficult to resist. Then Kabir looked directly at Aryan.

"There was another document." Aryan felt his stomach tighten. "What document?"

Kabir slid a folded page across the table. At the top appeared a familiar name.

Aryan Sen.

His pulse quickened.

Below the name was a note. A recent note.

Written only days earlier.

Aryan unfolded it slowly.

The message contained a single sentence. FINAL EVALUATION IN PROGRESS.

For several seconds, he simply stared. Then a realization hit him.

The Third Circle wasn't planning to stop him. Not yet.

They were studying him.

Testing him.

Watching every decision.

Every move.

And somewhere, hidden within Greenwood High, someone was deciding whether he would become a member...

Or a victim.

Far away, inside a locked room beneath the school, a computer screen displayed several student profiles. One file blinked red.

ARYAN SEN.

A cursor moved.

Then a new status appeared beside his name.

PHASE THREE AUTHORIZED.

End of Chapter 19

Chapter 20: The Abandoned Warehouse Coming next:

The meaning of "Phase Three" is revealed.

Aryan and Riya follow a clue to an abandoned warehouse. The identity of a senior Third Circle member is uncovered. A shocking betrayal threatens the entire group.

The mystery enters its most dangerous stage yet.

Chapter 20:

The Abandoned Warehouse

Aryan couldn't stop thinking about the words.
PHASE THREE AUTHORIZED.

The phrase sounded official. Planned.

Deliberate.

As though someone had spent months preparing for this exact moment. The problem was that he had no idea what Phase Three actually meant. And that uncertainty frightened him more than any threat.

The next morning, Greenwood High felt unusually tense.

The message found during the aptitude test had spread far beyond the school. Parents were angry.

Students were frightened. Teachers looked exhausted.

Even the principal seemed stressed.

Yet despite the chaos, classes continued. Assignments continued.

Exams continued.

Life moved forward.

As though nothing was wrong.

During lunch, Aryan met Riya beneath the banyan tree. The place that had once felt safe now felt exposed.

After discovering the surveillance network, he couldn't shake the feeling that someone was always watching.

"Did you get anything?" Riya asked. Aryan nodded.

His phone buzzed.

Another anonymous message.

This time it contained only a location. No explanation.

No warning.

No threat.

Just an address.

"What is it?" Riya asked. Aryan showed her the screen.

Her expression immediately changed. "That's outside town."

He nodded.

"An abandoned industrial area."

The message had arrived less than ten minutes earlier. Which meant whoever sent it expected them to act quickly. "Trap?" Riya asked.

"Probably." "Going anyway?"

Aryan smiled slightly.

"You already know the answer."

For the first time all day, Riya laughed. "Fair point."

That evening, they told Ananya and Kabir about the message. Neither was happy.

"This is exactly how people disappear," Ananya said. "Usually, yes," Kabir agreed.

"But if we ignore every lead, we'll never find Rahul." The argument lasted nearly twenty minutes.

In the end, they all went.

Together.

The abandoned warehouse stood on the outskirts of town.

A massive structure surrounded by rusting fences and overgrown weeds. Broken windows lined the upper floors.

The roof sagged in several places. It looked completely deserted.

Which immediately made everyone suspicious.

Because places connected to the Third Circle always looked deserted. Until they weren't.

The group slipped through a broken gate and approached the building. The evening sky was turning orange.

Long shadows stretched across the cracked pavement. Inside, the warehouse felt enormous.

Rows of support pillars disappeared into darkness. Old machinery sat abandoned.

Dust covered everything.

At first glance, the place seemed empty. Then Sameer stopped.

"Wait." Everyone froze. "What?"

He pointed toward the floor. Footprints.

Fresh footprints.

Someone had been there recently.

Very recently.

The group followed the trail deeper into the building. Eventually, they reached a section hidden behind stacked crates. And there they found something shocking.

Photographs.

Hundreds of them.

Pinned to walls.

Spread across tables.

Stored inside folders.

Every photograph showed Greenwood High. Students.

Teachers.

Classrooms.

Hallways.

Years of surveillance.

Years of observation.

The warehouse wasn't abandoned. It was an archive.

A hidden operations center. Aryan moved toward one wall.

His flashlight illuminated a series of photographs connected by red strings. The arrangement resembled an investigation board.

Only the subjects weren't criminals. They were students.

Rahul.

Neha.

Vihaan.

Kabir.

Ananya.

Riya.

Aryan.

All connected.

All monitored.

The realization sent chills through everyone. Then Riya gasped.

No one had ever heard fear like that in her voice before. Aryan turned.

And froze.

A newspaper clipping hung in the center of the wall. The headline read:

GREENWOOD STUDENT DISAPPEARS

Beneath it appeared a familiar photograph. Arjun Kapoor.

Yet something about the clipping looked wrong. Very wrong.

Someone had written across it in red ink. One word.

LIAR

Silence filled the warehouse.

"What does that mean?" Ananya whispered. Nobody knew.

Then Sameer noticed something else. A file cabinet.

Locked.

Unlike everything else in the room. Which made it instantly interesting. Kabir searched nearby.

Eventually he found a key taped beneath a table. The lock clicked open.

Inside waited dozens of folders. Personnel files.

The Third Circle's internal records. Aryan opened the first one.

His heart nearly stopped. Each folder contained a name. A photograph.

A role.

These weren't victims.

These were members.

Actual members of the Third Circle.

For several minutes, the group searched through them. Most names meant nothing.

Then Aryan found one that did. His blood ran cold.

The photograph showed a person he recognized immediately. Someone trusted.

Respected.

Powerful.

Mrs. Dutta.

The vice-principal.

Riya stared at the folder. "No way."

But the evidence was undeniable. The file listed years of activity.

Secret meetings.

Surveillance operations.

Recruitment assignments.

Mrs. Dutta wasn't merely connected to the Third Circle. She was part of it.

A senior member.

Suddenly, a loud crash echoed through the warehouse. Everyone spun around.

The front entrance slammed shut. Then another.

And another.

Every exit.

Locked.

The group exchanged alarmed glances. Someone had trapped them inside.

Slowly, footsteps echoed through the building. Multiple footsteps.

Approaching from different directions. They weren't alone anymore.

Then a voice rang out from the darkness. Calm.

Confident. Familiar. "Congratulations." The group froze.

The voice continued.

"You've finally found what you were looking for." Aryan's pulse raced.

Because he recognized the voice. Everyone did.

It belonged to someone from Greenwood High. Someone they saw almost every day.

Someone they trusted.

But before the figure could step into the light—Ananya noticed something.

A folded note sticking out from one of the files. Her eyes widened.

Because the note contained a single sentence. ONE OF YOU IS ALREADY WORKING FOR US.

The room fell silent.

Nobody spoke.

Nobody moved.

Because suddenly a terrifying possibility emerged.

The betrayal they had feared all along might already have happened.

And one of the people standing in that warehouse might not be who they seemed.

End of Chapter 20

End of Part 2 (Chapters 11–20) Major Revelations So Far:

The hidden tunnels beneath Greenwood High are real. Sameer was Arjun Kapoor's best friend.

The Third Circle recruits and monitors students.

Rahul and Neha discovered something before disappearing. Mrs. Dutta is a senior member of the organization.

Aryan is undergoing a mysterious "Phase Three."

The abandoned warehouse contains years of surveillance records. A traitor may already exist inside the group.

Part 3 Begins (Chapters 21–30)

The story now becomes much darker and more dangerous: The identity of the warehouse voice is revealed.

The traitor mystery unfolds. Aryan and Riya grow closer.

A murder shocks Greenwood High.

The Third Circle's true purpose begins to emerge. The mastermind starts making mistakes.

Chapter 21: Trapped in Darkness is where the biggest twists begin.

Chapter 21:

Trapped in Darkness

The warehouse fell completely silent.

Dust floated through the beams of flashlight light.

The words on the note seemed to echo inside everyone's head. ONE OF YOU IS ALREADY WORKING FOR US.

Aryan slowly looked around. Riya.

Ananya.

Kabir.

Sameer.

His closest allies.

The people he trusted most.

Yet for the first time, a tiny seed of doubt entered his mind. That was exactly what the Third Circle wanted.

Doubt.

Fear.

Suspicion.

The footsteps continued approaching. Slow.

Confident.

Unhurried.

Whoever was coming wasn't afraid. They knew every exit was locked.

They knew the group was trapped. Finally, a figure stepped into the light. Everyone froze.

"Mr. Bose?"

The old caretaker smiled weakly. For several seconds nobody spoke.

Mr. Bose had worked at Greenwood High for decades.

Students knew him as the quiet caretaker who fixed broken desks and unlocked classrooms. Most barely noticed him.

Yet according to the newspaper reports, he had retired two years earlier. "What are you doing here?" Kabir demanded.

The old man sighed.

"I was wondering the same thing about all of you." Aryan narrowed his eyes.

"You know about the Third Circle." It wasn't a question.

Mr. Bose nodded slowly. "More than I wish I did."

The atmosphere shifted immediately. This wasn't an enemy.

At least, not yet.

The old caretaker approached one of the tables. His face looked tired.

Older than Aryan remembered.

As though he had spent years carrying a burden he could never share. "I tried leaving all this behind," he said quietly.

"What happened?" Riya asked. Mr. Bose looked at her.

For a moment, sadness appeared in his eyes. "Your brother happened."

Silence filled the warehouse. "My brother?" Riya whispered. The old man nodded.

"Arjun was the first student who got closer than anyone else." Aryan felt his pulse quicken.

"He discovered the surveillance network?" "Partly."

"The tunnels?" "Partly."

"The Third Circle?" "Partly."

The answer frustrated everyone.

Then Mr. Bose said something unexpected. "None of those things are the real secret." The room became completely still.

Because if tunnels, kidnappings, surveillance, and secret recruitment weren't the real secret... What was?

Before anyone could ask, a loud metallic bang echoed from somewhere deeper inside the warehouse. Mr. Bose's expression changed instantly.

"How did they find this place?"

The question made Aryan's stomach tighten. "They?"

The old caretaker looked toward the darkness. Then he whispered:

"We have to leave. Now."

Suddenly, alarms began sounding throughout the building. A harsh electronic siren.

Red emergency lights flickered on.

The warehouse transformed into a nightmare of flashing shadows. "What is happening?" Ananya shouted.

"They're here." "Who?"

Mr. Bose didn't answer.

Instead, he ran.

The others followed.

There wasn't time for questions anymore.

The group sprinted through rows of abandoned machinery. The sirens echoed endlessly.

Red light flashed across concrete walls. Then Aryan noticed something.

The old caretaker wasn't heading toward an exit. He was heading downward.

Toward a staircase hidden behind stacked crates. The stairs descended beneath the warehouse.

Another underground level.

Of course there was another underground level. At this point, nobody was surprised anymore.

The staircase ended at a narrow corridor. The air smelled damp.

Ancient.

Forgotten.

Mr. Bose finally stopped beside a heavy steel door. Then he entered a code.

The lock clicked open.

Everyone stared.

"You knew about this?" Kabir asked.

"I built part of it."

The answer stunned them.

Before anyone could react, the old man pushed the door open. The room beyond looked unlike anything they had seen before. Not a surveillance room.

Not a prison.

Not an archive.

A command center.

Maps covered the walls.

Old computers lined several desks.

Stacks of files filled metal cabinets.

And pinned to one enormous board was a timeline. A timeline stretching back more than twenty years. Greenwood High.

The Third Circle. Disappearances. Recruitments.

Suspensions.

Transfers.

Everything.

"This is impossible," Aryan whispered. The board contained hundreds of names. Some had photographs attached.

Others had reports.

Then Aryan noticed something terrifying.

Several photographs had red X marks drawn across them. Students.

Teachers.

Staff members.

"What do the Xs mean?" Mr. Bose hesitated.

Then answered quietly.

"They stopped asking questions." Nobody liked that answer.

At all.

Then Riya spotted something.

A photograph near the center of the board. Her breath caught.

Arjun.

Yet unlike the others, his photograph didn't have a red X. Instead, a question mark appeared beside his name. "What does that mean?"

The old caretaker looked directly at her.

And for the first time, genuine hope appeared in his eyes. "It means nobody ever found him."

The room fell silent.

Nobody found him.

Not dead.

Not alive.

Missing.

Still missing.

The realization hit Riya like a thunderbolt. For ten years, everyone assumed the worst.

Yet according to the Third Circle's own records, Arjun's fate remained unknown. Which meant one thing.

He might still be alive.

Suddenly, a gunshot echoed somewhere above them. Everyone jumped.

Another followed.

Then shouting.

People were searching the warehouse. Getting closer.

Much closer.

Mr. Bose hurried toward a cabinet. Inside lay dozens of folders.

He pulled out one marked:

PHASE THREE

Aryan's heart skipped a beat. The phrase again.

The same phrase that appeared beside his name. "What is it?"

The old caretaker stared at him. His expression was grim.

"Phase Three is the final recruitment stage." Silence.

"What recruitment stage?" Mr. Bose swallowed.

"The stage where they decide whether you join the Third Circle..." He paused.

"...or disappear."

The words landed like a punch to the chest. Suddenly, everything made sense.

The surveillance.

The tests.

The rankings.

The psychological pressure.

Aryan hadn't simply been investigated. He had been evaluated.

For months.

Maybe years.

And somewhere, someone was preparing to make a decision about his future. Before anyone could react, the lights suddenly went out.

Darkness swallowed the room. Absolute darkness.

For several seconds, nobody moved.

Then a familiar voice echoed from somewhere behind them. A calm voice.

A confident voice.

A voice they recognized immediately. "Mr. Bose talks too much."

Aryan's blood ran cold. Because he knew that voice. Everyone did.

And whoever had just entered the room wasn't supposed to know they were there. End of Chapter 21

Chapter 22: False Suspect Coming next:

The identity of the mysterious voice is revealed. Kabir becomes the prime target of the Third Circle.

Mr. Bose exposes a shocking secret about the principal. Riya receives proof that Arjun may still be alive.

Someone inside Greenwood High finally betrays the group.

Chapter 22:

False Suspect

Darkness swallowed the underground command center. For several seconds, nobody moved.

Nobody breathed.

The only sound came from the distant sirens echoing somewhere above. Then the voice spoke again.

Calm.

Confident.

Dangerously familiar.

"Mr. Bose really should learn when to stay quiet." Aryan's pulse hammered in his ears.

He knew that voice.

So did everyone else.

A flashlight suddenly flickered on.

The beam illuminated a figure standing near the doorway. Vice Principal Mrs. Dutta.

The room froze.

For a moment, nobody spoke. Then Ananya whispered,

"I knew it."

Mrs. Dutta smiled.

Not the warm smile students saw during school assemblies. Not the polite smile she wore in hallways.

This smile felt different.

Colder.

Sharper.

"You've all been very busy lately."

The vice-principal stepped farther into the room. Two other figures stood behind her.

Both wore black jackets. Neither spoke. "Following tunnels."

"Breaking into restricted areas." "Stealing documents."

She sounded almost impressed.

"Most students wouldn't have made it this far." Riya clenched her fists.

"Where's my brother?"

The question echoed through the room. Mrs. Dutta's expression changed slightly. Only slightly.

"You sound just like him." The answer wasn't enough. Not even close.

"Where is he?"

For several seconds, Mrs. Dutta remained silent. Then she shrugged.

"I honestly don't know." Nobody believed her.

Yet something in her voice sounded genuine. Which made the answer even more disturbing.

Because if Mrs. Dutta didn't know where Arjun was...

Then perhaps someone even higher in the organization did. Suddenly, Mr. Bose stepped forward.

"Enough."

The old caretaker looked angrier than Aryan had ever seen him. "You've destroyed lives."

Mrs. Dutta's expression hardened. "No."

She pointed toward the files surrounding them. "We identified potential."

The room became very quiet. "Potential?" Kabir repeated. "Leadership."

"Intelligence." "Influence."

Mrs. Dutta spoke as though she genuinely believed what she was saying. "We gave students opportunities."

"You kidnapped people," Riya snapped.

The vice-principal didn't answer immediately. Finally she said:

"Not everything is as simple as it looks." Aryan hated answers like that.

Because they usually meant the truth was worse.

Before anyone could continue, Mr. Bose suddenly reached into a cabinet. He removed a thick folder.

Then threw it across the room.

The folder landed at Aryan's feet.

Across the cover appeared a familiar name. Rajan Malhotra

The principal.

Silence filled the command center. Aryan slowly opened the folder.

His eyes widened.

Meeting records.

Financial records.

Internal communications.

All connected to Greenwood High. All connected to the Third Circle.

The principal's name appeared repeatedly. Again.

And again.

And again.

The evidence was impossible to ignore.

Principal Malhotra wasn't merely aware of the organization. He had worked with it.

For years.

"This can't be real," Ananya whispered. But everyone knew it was.

The principal was involved.

The most trusted person in the school.

Arjun's warning suddenly made perfect sense.

Trust nobody inside Greenwood High. Especially not the person everyone trusts most. He hadn't been talking about Mrs. Dutta.

He had been talking about the principal. The realization hit like lightning.

Suddenly, one of the black-jacketed figures moved. Too quickly.

He lunged toward the folder. Kabir reacted instantly.

The school captain intercepted him. Both crashed into a desk.

Papers flew everywhere.

Chaos erupted.

Mrs. Dutta shouted something. The second figure rushed forward. Aryan grabbed the folder.

Riya pulled Ananya toward the exit. Mr. Bose knocked over a filing cabinet.

The entire room exploded into confusion. Then the lights came back on.

Bright.

Blinding.

For a split second, everyone froze.

And that was when Aryan saw something shocking. The man fighting Kabir wasn't a stranger.

He was one of Greenwood's security guards. Someone students saw every day.

Another trusted face.

Another hidden member of the Third Circle.

The realization made Aryan wonder how many others existed. How many teachers?

How many staff members? How many students?

Before he could think further, Kabir shoved the guard backward. "Run!"

Nobody needed convincing.

The group sprinted from the command center. Back into the tunnels.

Footsteps echoed behind them. Shouts followed.

The chase had begun.

For nearly ten minutes, they raced through underground corridors. Turning corners.

Crossing passageways.

Avoiding dead ends.

Finally, they emerged through an abandoned maintenance tunnel near the football field. The cool night air hit them immediately.

For several moments, everyone simply stood there breathing heavily. Then Sameer noticed something.

A folded envelope sticking out of Aryan's jacket pocket. "What is that?"

Aryan frowned.

He hadn't placed anything there. Slowly, he removed it.

The envelope contained a photograph. Nothing else.

Just a photograph.

Riya gasped the moment she saw it. Arjun.

The image showed Arjun standing beside a road sign. Older.

Much older than he appeared in the school photographs. At least twenty years old.

Which was impossible.

Because Arjun disappeared at seventeen.

The photograph had clearly been taken years later.

Proof.

Actual proof.

Arjun had survived his disappearance. At least for some time.

Riya's hands trembled.

Tears filled her eyes.

For the first time in ten years, she had evidence that her brother might still be alive. Then Aryan noticed something written on the back.

A message.

Three simple words.

FIND THE STATION.

Everyone exchanged glances. "What station?" Ananya asked. Nobody knew.

Yet one thing was certain.

The photograph wasn't random. It was a clue.

Another breadcrumb leading deeper into the mystery.

And somewhere out there, someone wanted them to follow it.

Meanwhile, back at Greenwood High, a meeting was taking place inside the principal's office. Principal Rajan Malhotra sat alone at his desk.

The room was dark except for a single lamp. Across from him stood a shadowy figure.

Neither spoke for several seconds. Then the principal finally asked:

"How much do they know?" The figure smiled.

"Too much."

The principal's face darkened. Then he gave an order.

A simple order. "Move to Phase Four." The shadow nodded.

And somewhere within Greenwood High, another plan quietly began.

End of Chapter 22

Chapter 23: The Secret Club Coming next:

The mystery of "the station" begins.

The true origin of the Third Circle is revealed.

Aryan discovers who has been sending the anonymous messages. Phase Four begins.

Someone close to the group vanishes without warning.

Chapter 23:

The Secret Club

The photograph changed everything.

For years, Arjun Kapoor had been treated like a ghost. A tragedy.

A missing person whose story ended with a police report and unanswered questions. Now, for the first time, there was proof that his story had continued.

The photograph was real.

Recent enough to show him older. Alive.

Or at least alive at some point after his disappearance. Riya stared at the image for nearly an hour.

They had gathered in Aryan's room after escaping the tunnels. Nobody felt like going home.

Not after everything that had happened. "I know it's him."

Her voice was quiet.

Certain.

"It's definitely Arjun." Nobody argued.

The resemblance was obvious.

The question wasn't whether the photograph was genuine. The question was who had sent it.

And why.

Aryan flipped the photograph over again. FIND THE STATION.

The words seemed almost frustratingly simple. "What station?" Ananya asked.

"There are dozens of stations in the city." "Maybe not train stations," Kabir suggested. "Then what?"

Nobody knew.

The mystery seemed impossible. Until Sameer suddenly froze. "I've heard that phrase before." Everyone turned toward him. "What phrase?"

"Find the station." The room fell silent.

Sameer's expression had changed.

As though an old memory had suddenly resurfaced. "Arjun used to say it."

Riya leaned forward immediately. "When?"

"Near the end." The words hit hard. Near the end.

Near the time Arjun disappeared.

"He thought something important was hidden there." "What?"

"I don't know."

Sameer looked genuinely frustrated. "He never told me."

But it was enough.

The clue belonged to Arjun. Which meant it mattered.

The following afternoon, the group met inside Greenwood High's old library archive. The police presence around campus had decreased slightly.

Administrators were trying desperately to convince everyone that the situation was under control. Nobody believed them.

Students remained nervous. Parents remained angry.

Rumors spread faster than ever.

And somewhere behind all of it, the Third Circle continued operating. This time, however, the group had a new objective.

The station.

Hours passed.

Maps covered tables.

Old newspapers littered the floor. Historical records piled around them. Then Ananya found something. "Guys."

Everyone looked up.

She held an old yearbook.

Not just old.

Ancient.

Nearly twenty-five years old.

The cover featured Greenwood High's crest. Inside, a page had been marked.

The heading read:

THE THIRD CIRCLE ACADEMIC SOCIETY

Silence filled the archive room. The Third Circle.

Not hidden.

Not secret.

Not underground.

Official.

At least originally.

The page contained a group photograph. Twenty students.

Three teachers.

A school principal.

Everyone smiling.

Everyone proud.

Nothing looked suspicious.

Yet beneath the photograph appeared a description.

Founded to identify exceptional students and develop leadership potential. Aryan frowned.

That sounded harmless.

Almost admirable.

"What happened?" Riya asked. Nobody knew.

Until Sameer noticed another article.

A newspaper clipping folded inside the yearbook. The headline read:

CONTROVERSIAL STUDENT PROGRAM SHUT DOWN

The date matched.

The same year.

The article described complaints. Pressure.

Manipulation.

Psychological testing.

Parents protested.

The program officially ended.

Or at least that's what everyone believed. The reality was much darker.

It hadn't ended.

It had gone underground.

Literally.

The secret tunnels.

The surveillance network.

The recruitment system.

All of it grew from that original student society. The Secret Club.

The first version of the Third Circle. For a long moment, nobody spoke. Then Aryan realized something.

The organization wasn't created by criminals. It was created by educators.

People who genuinely believed they were helping students. At first.

Somewhere along the way, everything changed. The idea became an obsession.

The obsession became control.

And control became something far more dangerous. Just then, Kabir's phone buzzed.

He glanced at the screen.

Immediately went pale.

"What happened?" Kabir didn't answer.

Instead, he handed the phone to Aryan.

The message came from an unknown number. Attached was a photograph.

Aryan's stomach tightened.

The image showed the group leaving the warehouse the previous night. Someone had photographed them.

Again.

At the bottom appeared a sentence. PHASE FOUR HAS STARTED.

Silence.

Nobody liked those words.

At all.

Then another notification appeared. This time on Aryan's phone.

Unknown Number.

The familiar sender.

The anonymous helper.

The person who kept leaving clues. Aryan opened the message immediately.

For the first time ever, it wasn't a photograph. It wasn't a warning.

It wasn't a puzzle.

It was a name.

Just a name.

NIKHIL ROY.

Everyone stared.

"Who's that?" Ananya asked. Aryan frowned.

He had never heard the name before. Neither had Kabir.

Neither had Riya.

Then Sameer suddenly stood up. His chair nearly fell backward. "No way."

The reaction startled everyone. "You know him?"

Sameer nodded slowly.

"Nikhil Roy was Arjun's source." The room became completely silent. Source?

"What does that mean?"

"It means he fed Arjun information." The mystery deepened instantly.

"Who was he?" Sameer swallowed.

"A member of the Third Circle." A former insider.

Someone who helped Arjun investigate. Someone who apparently knew the truth. Then Sameer added something else.

Something far worse. "He disappeared too." The room fell silent. Another missing person. Another victim.

Another thread connected to the same mystery.

Before anyone could process the revelation, a loud crash echoed from somewhere outside the archive room.

Everyone jumped.

Footsteps followed.

Running footsteps.

Fast.

Panicked.

Then the library door burst open. A student stumbled inside.

Breathing heavily. Terrified.

Aryan recognized him immediately. It was Vihaan.

The school's top-ranked student. His face was pale.

His hands were shaking.

And for the first time since the story began, Vihaan looked genuinely frightened. "They took him."

Nobody understood. "Took who?"

Vihaan looked directly at Aryan.

Then delivered the words that made the entire room go silent. "They took Sameer."

Everyone turned.

The chair beside them stood empty. At some point during the chaos...

Sameer had vanished. End of Chapter 23

Chapter 24: The Night Call Coming next:

Sameer's disappearance shocks the group.

Vihaan finally reveals his connection to the Third Circle.

Aryan receives a late-night phone call from a kidnapped student. The mystery of Nikhil Roy deepens.

The identity of the anonymous messenger is finally uncovered.

Chapter 24:

The Night Call

For several seconds, nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

Everyone simply stared at the empty chair. Sameer's chair.

The chair that had been occupied only moments earlier. Now it sat alone.

Silent.

Abandoned.

"What do you mean they took him?" Aryan demanded. Vihaan looked exhausted.

As though he had been running for a long time. "I saw it."

The room became completely still. "Saw what?" Kabir asked.

"Two men."

Vihaan struggled to catch his breath. "They grabbed him outside the library." "Why didn't you stop them?"

The question escaped before Aryan could think. Immediately, guilt flashed across Vihaan's face. "There were two of them."

His voice cracked slightly. "I couldn't."

Nobody replied.

Because deep down, everyone knew the truth.

The Third Circle wasn't a group teenagers could fight head-on. Not yet.

Not without help.

The problem was that help kept disappearing. Arjun.

Mr. Chatterjee.

Rahul.

Neha.

Now Sameer.

Every person who knew too much eventually vanished. The pattern was becoming impossible to ignore.

That evening, the group gathered at Aryan's house. Rain hammered against the windows.

Thunder rolled across the sky.

The weather felt perfectly suited to the mood.

Nobody felt like talking. Finally, Kabir broke the silence.

"There's something I haven't told you." Everyone looked up.

The school captain appeared unusually nervous.

Aryan immediately knew whatever came next was important. "What is it?"

Kabir took a deep breath.

"My father wasn't just involved in Arjun's case." Silence.

"What do you mean?" Kabir looked down.

"He was recruited by the Third Circle." The words landed like a bomb. "What?"

Kabir nodded slowly. "Years ago."

Suddenly, everything about his father's investigation seemed different. "He refused them."

Kabir's voice remained quiet.

"And after that, strange things started happening." Career problems.

Missing evidence.

Anonymous threats.

The Third Circle had influence beyond the school. Far beyond it.

For the first time, Aryan realized how powerful the organization truly was. Then Kabir said something even more surprising.

"They approached me too." The room froze.

"You?"

Kabir nodded. "Last year."

"Why didn't you tell us?"

"Because I thought I could handle it." The answer sounded painfully honest.

For months, Kabir had been fighting his own battle. Alone.

The realization changed how Aryan saw him. Maybe Kabir wasn't a suspect.

Maybe he had been a target all along.

Around midnight, everyone finally returned home. Aryan collapsed onto his bed.

Exhausted.

Frustrated.

Confused.

His phone buzzed.

At first, he ignored it. Then it buzzed again. Unknown Number.

His heart immediately began racing. Slowly, he answered.

Silence.

For several seconds, nobody spoke. Then a weak voice whispered:

"Aryan?"

The voice sounded familiar. Very familiar.

His eyes widened. "Rahul?"

A faint laugh came through the phone. "Good."

The voice sounded exhausted. "You figured it out."

Aryan sat upright instantly. "Where are you?"

No answer.

Only static.

Then Rahul spoke again. "They're listening."

The words sent chills down Aryan's spine. "They watch everything."

"Are you okay?" Another faint laugh.

"As okay as someone trapped underground can be." Underground.

Aryan grabbed a notebook immediately. Every word mattered.

"Where are you?" "I don't know."

"What do you mean?" "I never see daylight."

The answer felt horrifying.

For a moment, Aryan couldn't speak. Then Rahul continued.

"There are others." Aryan froze.

Others.

"What others?" "Students."

His pulse quickened. "How many?"

"I don't know." The line crackled.

Then Rahul whispered something that changed everything. "Neha's here."

Silence.

Neha was alive.

Alive.

Aryan struggled to process it.

For weeks everyone assumed the worst. Yet she was alive.

Somewhere underground.

Held captive.

The call suddenly distorted.

Voices echoed faintly in the background. Rahul became hurried.

"Listen carefully." "I'm listening." "The station."

Aryan's heart skipped a beat. Again.

The station. "What about it?" "It's real." "Where is it?"

Static interrupted the answer. The connection weakened.

Then Rahul shouted:

"Nikhil knows—" The line went dead.

Aryan stared at the phone. Breathing heavily.

Nikhil.

The same name from the anonymous message. The missing insider.

The former member of the Third Circle. Suddenly, the puzzle pieces began aligning. Nikhil Roy knew something about the station. Rahul knew Nikhil knew.

And someone clearly didn't want that information reaching them. Before Aryan could think further, another message arrived.

Unknown Number.

The anonymous sender.

The person who had guided them for months.

This time, the message contained no clues. No photographs.

No riddles.

Only a single sentence.

I AM NIKHIL ROY.

Aryan's blood ran cold.

For months, the mysterious messenger had been helping them. For months, they had wondered who it was.

Now they finally had an answer. Nikhil Roy.

Arjun's former source.

A man who disappeared years ago.

A man who was apparently still alive.

Then another message arrived immediately afterward. A location.

And beneath it, five simple words. COME ALONE IF YOU WANT ANSWERS.

Aryan stared at the screen. The storm outside intensified.

Lightning flashed across the sky.

For the first time since the mystery began, he was closer than ever to finding the truth.

And for the first time, he had a terrible feeling that the truth might be far worse than anything he imagined.

End of Chapter 24

Chapter 25: The Body in the Forest Coming next:

Aryan secretly meets Nikhil Roy.

The station mystery is finally explained.

A shocking discovery is made in the forest.

The first confirmed murder changes the investigation forever. The Third Circle begins hunting Aryan directly.

Chapter 25:

The Body in the Forest

Aryan stared at the message for nearly an hour. I AM NIKHIL ROY.

COME ALONE IF YOU WANT ANSWERS.

The words glowed on his screen in the darkness of his room. Outside, rain hammered against the windows.

Thunder rolled across the night sky. Every instinct told him it was a trap.

Every lesson from every mystery novel he'd ever read screamed the same warning. Don't go alone.

Yet another voice inside him whispered something different.

If Nikhil really was Arjun's source, he might hold the answers they had spent months searching for. Answers about Rahul.

Neha.

The Third Circle.

Maybe even Arjun himself.

By morning, Aryan had made his decision. He was going.

Alone.

At least officially.

Of course, keeping that decision secret from Riya proved impossible. She noticed something was wrong almost immediately.

"You're hiding something."

Aryan looked up from his notebook. "No, I'm not."

Riya raised an eyebrow. "That was a terrible lie." Ananya nodded.

"A truly terrible lie." Kabir agreed.

"Possibly the worst lie in human history." Aryan sighed.

Five minutes later, everyone knew about the message. Exactly as expected.

"You're not going alone," Riya said immediately. "Nikhil specifically said—"

"I don't care."

The answer ended the argument before it began. In the end, they compromised.

Aryan would meet Nikhil. The others would stay nearby. Out of sight.

It wasn't exactly following instructions.

But it was better than walking into danger completely alone. That evening, Aryan followed the location from the message. The meeting place lay beyond the edge of town.

Near an old railway line abandoned decades earlier. The area felt forgotten.

Tall grass covered the tracks.

Trees crowded the surrounding landscape. Rusting signs leaned sideways.

And at the center of it all stood a small station building. Aryan's pulse quickened.

The station.

Not a code.

Not a metaphor.

An actual railway station. Suddenly, Arjun's clue made sense.

Find the station.

He had meant this place all along.

The abandoned building looked deserted. Windows were broken.

Paint peeled from the walls.

Nature slowly reclaimed everything. Then a voice spoke from the shadows. "You came."

Aryan turned sharply.

A man stepped into the fading evening light. Perhaps thirty years old.

Maybe older.

Dark hair.

Tired eyes.

A scar above one eyebrow. Nikhil Roy.

At least, Aryan assumed so.

For several seconds, neither spoke. Then Nikhil smiled slightly.

"You look exactly like Arjun described." Aryan froze.

"You knew him." The smile vanished.

"Better than anyone."

For the next hour, Nikhil explained everything he could. Years ago, he had been recruited into the Third Circle.

At first, it seemed harmless. Leadership programs.

Special opportunities.

Academic competitions.

Then things changed.

The organization became obsessed with control. Students weren't encouraged anymore.

They were manipulated.

Tested.

Observed.

Those who refused cooperation faced consequences. Nikhil eventually tried exposing them.

That's when he met Arjun. Together, they investigated.

Together, they discovered the tunnels. The surveillance network.

The hidden archives.

And together, they got too close. "What happened?" Aryan asked.

Nikhil looked away.

"The night Arjun disappeared, we came here." He pointed toward the station building.

"This was our meeting place." Aryan's heartbeat quickened. "Why?"

"Because beneath the station is another entrance." Another entrance.

Of course there was.

Every important location seemed connected underground somehow. Then Nikhil said something unexpected.

"We found proof." Aryan leaned forward. "Proof of what?"

"The mastermind." Silence.

The mastermind.

Not a member.

Not a recruiter.

The person at the top.

For a moment, Aryan couldn't breathe. "You know who it is?"

Nikhil nodded slowly.

Then his expression changed. Fear.

Genuine fear.

"We have to leave." "What?"

"They found us." Aryan spun around.

At first, he saw nothing.

Then movement appeared among the trees. Several figures.

Black jackets.

Approaching rapidly.

The Third Circle.

Nikhil grabbed Aryan's arm. "Run."

They sprinted toward the forest. Branches whipped against their faces. Leaves crunched beneath their feet.

The pursuers followed.

Closer.

Closer.

Closer.

Then something happened. Nikhil suddenly stopped. "What is it?"

The older man stared ahead. His face had gone pale.

Very pale.

Slowly, Aryan followed his gaze. And immediately wished he hadn't. A body lay among the trees.

Motionless.

Half hidden beneath fallen leaves. For several seconds, neither moved. Neither spoke.

Then Aryan stepped closer. His stomach turned.

The victim was an older man.

A man he recognized immediately. Mr. Bose.

The retired caretaker.

The man who had helped them. The man who knew the truth.

Gone.

A wave of shock hit Aryan.

For weeks, disappearances had dominated the mystery. Now, for the first time, there was no doubt.

Someone had been killed.

The investigation had become something far darker. Something far more dangerous.

Nikhil looked devastated. "He was trying to help." Aryan couldn't answer.

He couldn't stop staring. Then he noticed something. A note.

Pinned to a nearby tree.

The paper fluttered gently in the wind. Slowly, he removed it.

The message contained only six words. THIS IS WHAT HAPPENS TO TRAITORS.

Silence filled the forest.

The warning wasn't meant for Mr. Bose. It was meant for everyone else.

Especially Aryan.

Especially Nikhil.

The Third Circle wasn't hiding anymore.

They wanted people afraid. And it was working.

Then Nikhil whispered something that made Aryan's blood run cold. "They've never killed before."

Aryan looked at him. "What?"

Nikhil stared at the note.

Fear filled his eyes.

"Whoever is running the Third Circle now..." He swallowed hard.

"...isn't the same person who ran it ten years ago." The implication hit immediately.

Something had changed. Someone new had taken control. Someone more ruthless.

Someone willing to cross lines the original organization never crossed. And somewhere in the darkness, that person was watching.

Waiting.

Planning.

Because the game had just entered a new phase. And the next move belonged to the mastermind. End of Chapter 25

Chapter 26: Secrets of the Past Coming next:

Nikhil reveals the truth about Arjun's disappearance. The history of the Third Circle is uncovered.

Aryan discovers a shocking family connection. The identity of the original founder is revealed.

A clue hidden for twenty years changes everything.

Chapter 26:

Secrets of the Past

The forest felt unnaturally quiet. Too quiet.

The discovery of Mr. Bose's body had changed everything.

For months, the mystery had revolved around disappearances. Missing students.

Missing teachers.

Missing clues.

Now there was something undeniable. A death.

A real victim.

A line had been crossed. Police arrived within an hour. The area was sealed.

Officers searched the forest with flashlights.

Questions flew in every direction.

Yet Aryan noticed something strange. Nobody seemed surprised.

Not shocked.

Not confused.

Almost as if certain people had expected this to happen. The realization bothered him throughout the night.

The next morning, Greenwood High erupted with rumors. Officially, very little information was released.

Unofficially, everyone knew. Students whispered in hallways. Parents called the school constantly.

Teachers looked more nervous than ever.

And for the first time, Aryan noticed something else. Fear.

Not ordinary fear.

The fear of people realizing they might be trapped inside something much bigger than they imagined. After school, the group met Nikhil at the abandoned railway station.

The old building seemed different now. More important.

More dangerous.

Because according to Nikhil, this was where everything began. The station wasn't merely a meeting place.

It was history.

For nearly twenty years, members of the Third Circle had used it. Students.

Teachers.

Recruiters.

Leaders.

Generations of secrets hidden beneath forgotten tracks. Nikhil led them through the abandoned building.

Past broken benches.

Past rusting ticket counters.

Past walls covered with fading graffiti. Eventually, they reached a locked storage room. Nikhil removed a key from his pocket.

The lock clicked open.

Inside stood dozens of dusty boxes. Files.

Documents.

Photographs.

Years of records.

"This is what's left." Aryan frowned. "Left of what?"

"The original archive."

The answer immediately captured everyone's attention. The original archive.

Not the one beneath Greenwood High. An older one.

A hidden collection dating back before Arjun. Before Nikhil.

Before anyone currently involved. Slowly, Nikhil opened one of the boxes.

Inside lay newspapers nearly twenty years old. Yearbooks.

Reports.

Photographs.

Then he removed a leather folder. Across the cover appeared a name. The Third Circle Foundation Program Silence filled the room.

The beginning.

The origin.

Finally.

Nikhil opened the file.

The first pages described the program's creation. Twenty-two years earlier.

A leadership initiative.

An educational experiment.

A project designed to identify exceptional students and help them succeed. Nothing sinister.

Nothing criminal.

At least initially.

Then Aryan noticed a signature. At the bottom of the page.

The founder.

The creator.

The person responsible for everything that followed. For several seconds, he simply stared.

Because he recognized the name. Professor Dev Roy.

Ananya gasped. "Roy?"

Nikhil nodded slowly. "My father."

Silence.

Nobody had expected that. Not even remotely.

The founder of the Third Circle was Nikhil's father.

The revelation hit like a thunderbolt. "You never told us."

Nikhil looked away.

"Would you have trusted me if I had?" Nobody answered.

Because he had a point.

For a moment, everyone sat in silence. Then Nikhil continued.

"My father wasn't evil."

The statement surprised Aryan.

"He genuinely wanted to help students." Scholarships.

Mentorship programs.

Career opportunities.

The original Third Circle had focused on success. Not control.

But after several years, new leaders took over. The organization changed.

Gradually. Then rapidly.

Power replaced purpose. Control replaced mentorship. Fear replaced opportunity.

And eventually, the Third Circle became something entirely different. Something dangerous.

Something capable of destroying lives. Then Nikhil uncovered another file.

This one looked older.

Much older.

A photograph slipped onto the table. Aryan picked it up.

The image showed a group of students standing beside Professor Roy. Most faces meant nothing.

Then Aryan froze.

One face looked familiar.

Very familiar.

"That's impossible." Everyone turned toward him. "What?"

Aryan pointed.

The young man in the photograph resembled someone they knew. Not exactly.

But enough.

The same eyes.

The same smile.

The same facial structure. Principal Rajan Malhotra. Twenty years younger.

Silence filled the room.

The principal had been involved since the beginning. Not recruited later.

Not added afterward.

From the beginning.

The realization changed everything. Then Kabir discovered something else.

A sealed envelope hidden inside the folder.

Across the front appeared a handwritten message. To whoever finds this.

The handwriting belonged to Professor Roy. Slowly, Nikhil opened it.

Inside lay a single letter.

The paper had yellowed with age. Yet the words remained clear.

For several minutes, nobody spoke as Nikhil read. Then he stopped.

His face had gone pale. "What is it?"

Nikhil looked up. "My father knew." "Knew what?"

"He knew someone was planning to take over the organization." The room became completely silent.

Years before everything happened... Years before students disappeared... Years before Arjun investigated...

The founder had already seen the danger coming. Then Nikhil read the final sentence aloud.

The sentence that changed everything.

If anything happens to me, never trust Rajan. Silence.

Absolute silence.

Because the letter had been written twenty years earlier. Twenty years.

Professor Roy had specifically named Rajan Malhotra. The current principal.

The man Arjun warned them about.

The man whose name appeared throughout the records. The man connected to everything.

Suddenly, another realization struck Aryan. A terrible realization.

"Nikhil."

"What?"

"Your surname is Roy." "Yes."

"Professor Roy was your father." "Yes."

Aryan's pulse quickened.

"Then why did the anonymous messages start helping us now?" Nikhil looked confused.

"What do you mean?" Aryan stared at him.

"Because someone wanted us to find all this." Someone had guided them for months.

Someone who knew where clues were hidden. Someone who seemed one step ahead.

Then a frightening possibility emerged.

What if there was another person helping them? Someone they still hadn't identified.

Someone inside the Third Circle.

Before anyone could discuss it further, a sound echoed through the station. Footsteps.

Slow. Deliberate. Approaching. Everyone froze.

The station should have been empty. Only the group knew about this meeting. Yet someone was coming.

And as the footsteps grew closer, a familiar voice echoed through the hallway. A voice filled with calm confidence.

"Looking for answers?" Aryan's blood ran cold.

Because he recognized the voice immediately.

And the person who had just arrived wasn't supposed to know about the station. End of Chapter 26

Chapter 27: The Double Agent Coming next:

The mysterious visitor is revealed.

The identity of the secret helper inside the Third Circle emerges. Aryan discovers who betrayed Arjun.

Riya receives a message that may finally lead to her brother. The group learns the true purpose of Phase Four.

Chapter 27:

The Double Agent

The footsteps stopped outside the storage room.

Silence followed.

Heavy.

Uncomfortable.

Dangerous.

Nobody moved.

Nobody spoke.

The abandoned railway station suddenly felt much smaller. Much more vulnerable.

Then the figure stepped into the doorway. And every person in the room froze.

Vihaan Malhotra.

The school's top-ranked student stood beneath the dim light. His uniform was gone.

His expression was serious. Tired.

Older somehow.

For several seconds, nobody spoke. Then Kabir stood up.

"How did you find us?"

Vihaan didn't answer immediately. Instead, he looked around the room. At the files.

The photographs.

The old documents spread across the table. Finally, he sighed.

"Because I've been following the same clues." The answer sounded simple.

Too simple.

Nobody believed it.

Especially Aryan.

For months, Vihaan had appeared at exactly the wrong places. The abandoned wing.

The old science block.

Room 307.

The tunnels.

Always nearby.

Always involved.

The coincidence was impossible. "Tell us the truth."

Aryan's voice was calm.

Firm.

For a moment, Vihaan looked away. Then he nodded.

"Fine."

The room became completely silent.

Because everyone sensed what was coming next. A confession.

Not necessarily guilt.

But the truth.

At last.

"I was recruited two years ago." The words landed heavily.

Nobody reacted.

Not immediately.

Perhaps because deep down, everyone already suspected it.

"The Third Circle approached me after I ranked first in Class Nine." Vihaan laughed bitterly.

"At first, it felt amazing." Special attention.

Exclusive meetings.

Academic opportunities.

Mentorship.

Everything ambitious students dream about. Then the expectations began.

Pressure.

Competition.

Control.

And eventually, fear.

The story sounded familiar. Too familiar.

Exactly what Nikhil described. Exactly what Arjun uncovered. The cycle repeating itself.

"So you're a member?"

Riya's question cut through the silence. Vihaan hesitated.

Then answered. "Officially."

The room froze.

Ananya stared at him.

Kabir clenched his fists.

Aryan felt his stomach tighten. Officially.

Not former.

Not recruited.

Current.

Then Vihaan continued. "But not willingly anymore." The tension eased slightly.

Only slightly.

"Why stay?"

"Because leaving isn't easy." His voice sounded exhausted.

"The Third Circle doesn't like losing people." Nobody doubted that.

Mr. Bose had died.

Sameer disappeared.

Students vanished.

Leaving clearly carried consequences. Then Vihaan said something unexpected. "The anonymous messages."

Aryan's pulse quickened.

What about them?

Vihaan looked directly at him.

"You've been wondering who sent them." The room fell silent.

For months, that question remained unanswered. Photographs.

Warnings.

Clues.

Directions.

Someone had guided them. Someone hidden.

Someone inside the organization. Vihaan slowly nodded.

"I know who it is." Nobody breathed. "Who?"

The answer came quietly. Almost sadly.

"Sameer."

Silence exploded through the room. "What?"

Riya stood so quickly her chair nearly fell backward. "That's impossible."

Vihaan shook his head. "No."

Then he explained.

After Arjun disappeared, Sameer spent years hiding. Investigating.

Watching.

Waiting.

Eventually, he infiltrated parts of the Third Circle again. Not as a member.

As a spy.

A double agent.

The realization changed everything. The warnings.

The clues.

The photographs.

All of it.

Sameer had been protecting them from the shadows. Trying to guide them without exposing himself.

Until he was finally discovered. Until he disappeared.

Riya sat down slowly.

For the first time, she truly understood why Sameer seemed to know so much. Because he had spent years gathering information.

Years risking his life.

Then Vihaan revealed something even worse. "Someone betrayed Arjun."

The room became still.

Very still.

Because this question had haunted them from the beginning. Who betrayed him?

Who gave away his investigation?

Who told the Third Circle what he discovered? Vihaan looked down.

Then spoke quietly. "It wasn't a teacher."

"It wasn't a staff member." "It was a student."

The answer shocked everyone. "A student?"

Vihaan nodded.

"The student who worked closest with Arjun." Riya's heart pounded.

For a terrifying moment, she feared the answer. Then Vihaan said a name.

"Nikhil."

The room froze. Nobody moved. Nobody spoke.

Even Nikhil looked stunned. "What?"

Vihaan's expression was serious. "Not intentionally."

The tension eased slightly.

Years ago, Nikhil had been captured by members of the Third Circle. Interrogated.

Manipulated.

Eventually, information slipped out. Locations.

Meetings.

Plans.

Enough information for the organization to track Arjun. The guilt in Nikhil's eyes said everything.

Perhaps he had spent years blaming himself. Perhaps he never stopped.

Then a phone vibrated.

Everyone jumped.

Riya stared at her screen.

Unknown Number.

Her hands trembled.

Slowly, she opened the message. A photograph appeared.

The room went silent.

Arjun.

Again.

But this time, the image was different. Much different.

The photograph looked recent. Very recent.

Not years old. Not historical. Recent.

The timestamp in the corner showed a date from only three days earlier. Three days.

Riya's breath caught.

At the bottom appeared a message. HE'S WAITING.

Below it was a location.

A location far outside the city. Near the mountains.

For several seconds, nobody spoke.

Because the implication was impossible to ignore. Arjun might actually be alive.

Right now.

Somewhere beyond the city. Then Vihaan broke the silence. "Don't go."

Everyone looked at him. "What?"

His expression darkened. "That's Phase Four."

The words sent chills through the room. Phase Four.

The next stage.

The phase the principal ordered. "What does it mean?" Aryan asked. Vihaan swallowed.

Then answered.

"It's a trap designed to separate targets from their support systems." The room fell silent.

The location.

The photograph.

The hope.

All of it might be bait.

A carefully designed lure.

And if Vihaan was right...

The Third Circle wanted them to follow it. Wanted them isolated.

Wanted them vulnerable.

Then another realization struck Aryan. A terrifying one.

If Phase Four had begun...

Then someone inside the organization already knew exactly what they would do next. And somewhere, hidden behind the scenes, the mastermind was waiting.

Smiling.

Because the final stage of the game had finally begun.

End of Chapter 27

Chapter 28: The Mountain Road Coming next:

Riya refuses to ignore the clue.

The group travels to the mountain location. A hidden facility is discovered.

The mastermind finally contacts Aryan directly. A shocking truth about Arjun is revealed.

Chapter 28:

The Mountain Road

Nobody slept that night.

The photograph remained on the table between them. Arjun Kapoor.

Alive.

Or at least appearing to be alive.

The timestamp showed a date from only three days earlier. Three days.

After ten years of uncertainty. After ten years of searching. After ten years of grief.

Riya stared at the image endlessly. Every detail mattered.

Every shadow. Every reflection. Every possibility.

Finally, around two in the morning, Aryan spoke. "It could be fake."

The words hurt.

He knew they would.

But someone needed to say them. Riya looked away.

"I know."

Her voice sounded small.

Tired.

"But what if it isn't?" Silence followed.

Because nobody had an answer. What if it wasn't?

The next morning, the debate continued. Vihaan remained firmly against going. "It's exactly what they want."

His frustration was obvious. "The timing is too perfect." "The photograph appears." "The location appears." "Phase Four begins."

He spread his hands.

"How much more obvious can the trap be?" Unfortunately, he made a very good point. Yet none of it mattered.

Because Riya had already made her decision. "I'm going."

The words were quiet.

Calm.

Certain.

No one could stop her.

Not after everything she had endured. Not after everything she had lost.

And so, despite every warning, the group left the city that afternoon. The location led toward a remote mountain region several hours away. The journey felt strangely peaceful.

Green hills rolled past the car windows. Clouds drifted across distant peaks.

Narrow roads twisted through forests. For a while, the mystery seemed far away.

Then the road began climbing. Higher.

Higher.

Higher.

Eventually, civilization disappeared. No houses.

No shops.

No people.

Only forest.

And mountains.

The location pointed toward a section of road abandoned years earlier after a landslide. The pavement was cracked.

Vegetation covered much of the route. Nature slowly reclaimed everything. "This feels like a horror movie." Ananya's comment earned a weak laugh. Because she wasn't wrong.

As evening approached, they reached the destination. The coordinates ended near a cliff overlooking a valley. At first glance, nothing appeared unusual.

Just rocks.

Trees.

Wind.

Then Kabir noticed something. "Tire tracks."

Everyone turned.

Fresh tracks crossed the dirt. Someone had driven there recently. Very recently.

The discovery immediately changed everything. They followed the tracks into the forest.

The path narrowed.

Twisted.

Disappeared beneath overhanging branches. Then suddenly—

The trees opened.

And the group stopped.

A facility stood hidden among the mountains. Not large.

Not military. Not industrial.

But definitely active.

Fences surrounded several buildings. Security cameras covered the entrances. Lights glowed behind windows.

"This can't be real."

Aryan barely recognized his own voice. The facility looked modern.

Maintained.

Occupied.

Someone had invested enormous resources into keeping it hidden. Then Nikhil whispered:

"I've never seen this place before." The statement terrified everyone.

If even Nikhil didn't know about it...

Then this location represented something new. Something important.

Something hidden even from longtime members. The group moved closer.

Carefully. Quietly.

Eventually, they reached a ridge overlooking the facility. From there, they could observe without being seen.

And what they observed made their blood run cold. Students.

Several teenagers walked between buildings. Not prisoners.

Not exactly.

They appeared normal.

Talking.

Studying.

Working.

Yet something felt wrong.

Very wrong.

Because none of them ever approached the fences. None looked toward the mountains.

None appeared interested in leaving.

It was as though they lived in a different world. A controlled world.

Then Aryan's phone vibrated. Everyone jumped.

Unknown Number.

Again.

Slowly, he opened the message.

His stomach tightened immediately. The sender wasn't anonymous this time. The message contained a name.

Rajan Malhotra The principal.

For the first time ever, the mastermind had contacted him directly.

The text appeared beneath the name. You've done very well, Aryan.

Much better than expected.

The casual tone made the message even more disturbing. As though this were merely a conversation.

As though none of the danger mattered. Another message arrived.

You remind me of someone. Aryan's pulse quickened.

A third message appeared. You remind me of Arjun.

Silence.

Nobody spoke.

The mastermind was watching. Right now.

Then another message arrived. That's why I selected you.

Selected.

The word echoed in Aryan's mind. Not targeted.

Not investigated.

Selected.

Like an experiment.

Like a candidate.

Like a replacement.

Then came the final message. Come inside alone.

It's time you learned the truth.

For several seconds, Aryan simply stared. Then Riya pointed toward one of the buildings. "Aryan."

Her voice trembled. Everyone followed her gaze.

A figure stood behind a second-floor window. Watching the valley.

Watching the mountains.

Watching them.

The distance made details difficult to see. Yet one thing was unmistakable.

The person looked exactly like Arjun Kapoor. Not a photograph.

Not a recording.

A real person.

Standing inside the facility. Alive.

The group froze.

Because after ten years...

After every clue...

After every disappearance... After every lie...

They were finally looking at the person who started it all.

And somewhere inside that hidden facility waited the answer to the greatest mystery of all. What really happened to Arjun Kapoor?

End of Chapter 28

Chapter 29: The Boy in the Window Coming next:

The truth about the figure in the facility is revealed. Aryan enters the compound alone.

Rajan Malhotra finally explains the Third Circle. Riya learns what happened ten years ago.

A devastating betrayal breaks the group apart. THE VANISHING BELL

Chapter 29:

The Boy in the Window

For several long seconds, nobody moved.

The figure remained at the second-floor window. Motionless.

Watching.

The fading sunlight reflected from the glass, making details difficult to see. Yet Riya knew.

Deep down, she knew. "It's him."

Her voice barely rose above a whisper. "Riya..." Aryan began.

"No."

She shook her head. "It's him."

Ten years of searching. Ten years of questions. Ten years of grief.

All focused on a single figure standing behind a window. Then the figure moved.

Slowly.

And disappeared from sight. The moment shattered.

Suddenly everyone began talking at once. "We need a plan."

"We need proof."

"We need to call the police." "We need to—"

"No."

Aryan's voice cut through the chaos. Everyone looked at him.

His phone still displayed the messages from Rajan Malhotra. Come inside alone.

The invitation.

Or trap.

Depending on how one viewed it. "I'm going."

Immediate protests followed. "No."

"Absolutely not." "That's insane."

Even Vihaan looked horrified. Yet Aryan already knew.

If there was any chance of finding the truth, he had to go. After several minutes of argument, a compromise emerged. Aryan would enter alone.

The others would remain nearby. Watching.

Waiting.

Ready to intervene if necessary. None of them liked the plan.

But nobody had a better one.

As darkness settled across the mountains, Aryan approached the facility. Surprisingly, nobody stopped him.

The gate stood open.

Waiting.

Almost inviting.

The realization felt unsettling. Because it meant they expected him.

Someone watched through security cameras as he crossed the grounds. Someone knew exactly where he was.

Eventually, he reached the main building. The front door opened before he touched it. A silent welcome.

The lobby inside looked more like a university than a prison. Bookshelves lined the walls.

Academic awards filled glass cases. Photographs showed successful graduates. Everything appeared respectable.

Normal.

Which somehow made it worse.

A voice echoed from the far side of the room. "Impressive, isn't it?"

Aryan turned.

Principal Rajan Malhotra stood near a staircase.

For the first time, the two faced each other without masks. Without pretenses.

Without lies.

The mastermind.

Or at least the man everyone believed was the mastermind. The principal smiled.

Not warmly. Not cruelly. Almost sadly.

"I've been looking forward to this conversation." Aryan didn't respond.

Instead, he asked the question that had haunted him for months. "Where's Rahul?"

The principal sighed. "Alive."

The answer came instantly. Without hesitation.

"And Neha?" "Alive."

Relief surged through Aryan. Yet it lasted only a moment.

Because another question followed. "Why?"

The principal looked around the facility. Then gestured toward the books.

The classrooms.

The buildings beyond the windows. "This."

Aryan frowned. "What?"

"The Third Circle."

For nearly an hour, Rajan explained. At least his version of the story.

The original Third Circle identified exceptional students. Students with leadership potential.

Intelligence.

Influence.

The goal was simple.

Create future leaders.

Provide opportunities unavailable elsewhere. Develop talent.

At first, the vision sounded reasonable. Almost admirable.

Then Aryan remembered the tunnels.

The surveillance.

The disappearances.

"And the kidnappings?"

The principal's expression darkened. "Protection."

The answer made Aryan angry. "Protection?"

"Some students discovered things before they were ready." The explanation sounded absurd.

Dangerously absurd.

Yet Rajan seemed to believe it completely. Then Aryan realized something.

The principal didn't view himself as a villain. He viewed himself as a visionary.

Someone willing to make difficult choices. The most dangerous kind of person.

Then footsteps echoed from upstairs. Aryan's pulse quickened.

A figure appeared at the top of the staircase. The same figure from the window.

The same figure Riya had seen. Slowly, the young man descended. Step by step.

The resemblance was undeniable. Arjun Kapoor.

Older.

Thinner.

More serious.

But unquestionably Arjun.

For a moment, Aryan couldn't breathe. After ten years.

He was standing right there. Alive.

The mystery's central figure.

The boy everyone believed had vanished forever. Arjun stopped several feet away.

Neither spoke.

Then Arjun smiled faintly.

"You've caused quite a lot of trouble." The casual remark felt surreal.

Aryan stared at him. "Riya's looking for you."

Something changed in Arjun's expression. Pain.

Regret.

Guilt.

All at once. "I know."

The answer was quiet.

Heartbreaking.

"Then why didn't you come back?" Silence followed.

A long silence. Finally, Arjun spoke. "Because I couldn't."

The answer made no sense.

Yet before Aryan could ask more, another voice interrupted. A voice coming from behind him.

"He's lying."

Aryan spun around.

Shock exploded across the room. Standing in the doorway was Nikhil. But he wasn't alone.

Several security doors behind him stood open. And beside him were Rahul and Neha.

Alive.

Exhausted.

But alive.

The entire room froze.

No one had expected this.

Not Rajan.

Not Arjun.

Not Aryan.

Then Nikhil pointed directly at Arjun.

And delivered the sentence that shattered everything. "Tell him who betrayed us."

Silence.

Absolute silence.

Because suddenly, the mystery wasn't about who disappeared. It wasn't about the tunnels.

The surveillance.

Or even the Third Circle.

It was about betrayal.

And judging by the look on Arjun's face... The truth was about to destroy everything. End of Chapter 29

Chapter 30: The Confession Coming next:

Arjun finally reveals what happened ten years ago. The true traitor is exposed.

Rajan Malhotra loses control.

The final mastermind is revealed.

Aryan must choose between justice and revenge.

Chapter 30:

The Confession

The room fell into complete silence. Nobody moved.

Nobody spoke.

The tension felt almost unbearable. Nikhil stood beside Rahul and Neha. Arjun stood near the staircase.

Principal Rajan Malhotra remained motionless. And Aryan found himself at the center of it all. Ten years of secrets.

Ten years of lies.

Ten years of unanswered questions. Everything had led to this moment. "Tell him."

Nikhil's voice echoed through the room. Arjun looked away.

For the first time since Aryan met him, he seemed uncertain. Vulnerable.

"Tell him the truth."

The words hit harder this time.

Rahul and Neha exchanged nervous glances. Even Rajan Malhotra appeared uncomfortable. Aryan's pulse hammered in his chest.

"What truth?"

Nobody answered immediately. Finally, Arjun sighed.

A long.

Exhausted.

Painful sigh.

Then he spoke.

"The night I disappeared..."

The room became completely silent. "...I betrayed Nikhil."

The confession landed like a thunderbolt. Nobody moved.

Nobody even breathed.

For a moment, Aryan wondered if he had heard correctly. Arjun.

The hero.

The victim.

The missing student everyone spent months searching for.

Arjun was the traitor?

Nikhil closed his eyes.

As though hearing the words still hurt after all these years. "What happened?" Aryan asked quietly.

Arjun stared at the floor. "The Third Circle caught us." He swallowed hard.

"We had proof."

The same proof Nikhil mentioned at the railway station. The proof identifying the mastermind.

"They gave me a choice." Silence.

A terrible silence. "What choice?"

Arjun's voice trembled slightly. "Give them Nikhil."

The room froze.

"Or watch my family suffer." Riya stared at her brother.

Unable to speak.

Arjun looked at her.

For the first time.

And the guilt in his eyes was overwhelming. "They knew everything."

His voice cracked. "Where you lived." "Where Mom worked." "Where Dad traveled." The threat had been real. Terrifyingly real.

"So I told them." Nobody spoke.

Because what could anyone say? The betrayal wasn't driven by greed. Or ambition.

Or jealousy.

It came from fear.

Raw.

Human.

Fear.

Nikhil finally broke the silence.

"You gave them our meeting location." Arjun nodded.

"Yes."

"You gave them the evidence."

Another nod. "Yes."

"You gave them me."

This time, Arjun couldn't look up. "Yes."

The room seemed to shrink around them. Years of guilt.

Years of anger.

Years of unanswered questions. Finally spoken aloud.

Then Rahul stepped forward. "But that's not the whole story." Everyone looked at him.

"What do you mean?"

Rahul glanced toward Rajan Malhotra. Then toward Arjun.

"They never planned to let either of them go." The realization hit instantly.

The choice had been fake.

A lie.

Even if Arjun remained silent... Even if he betrayed Nikhil...

The Third Circle would have acted anyway. Arjun closed his eyes.

"I figured that out too late."

Then came the question that mattered most. "What happened after that?"

Aryan's voice sounded almost afraid.

Because he wasn't sure he wanted the answer. Arjun looked directly at him.

Then finally revealed the truth. "I escaped."

The room froze. "What?"

"I wasn't kidnapped." Silence.

Absolute silence.

For ten years everyone believed Arjun disappeared. Taken.

Captured.

Hidden.

The truth was far more complicated. He had run.

After realizing what he had done. After understanding the consequences.

After seeing Nikhil captured. He ran.

And he never stopped.

Until Rajan found him again. Years later.

At his lowest point.

Offering protection.

Purpose.

Forgiveness.

The Third Circle welcomed him back. Not as a prisoner.

As a member.

Riya looked devastated.

Not because her brother was alive. Because he had chosen to stay away. For ten years.

Then something unexpected happened. Principal Rajan Malhotra laughed.

A quiet laugh.

Then another.

The sound echoed through the room. Everyone turned toward him.

The principal shook his head slowly. "Still telling half the story."

Arjun stiffened.

The atmosphere changed instantly.

Because for the first time, Rajan seemed nervous. Almost desperate.

"What are you talking about?" The principal smiled.

A cold smile.

"Tell them who actually created all this." Silence.

Arjun looked genuinely shocked.

Then a new voice echoed through the facility. From somewhere above.

A voice nobody expected. "Perhaps I should." Every head turned.

A figure stood on the balcony overlooking the lobby. Older.

Elegant.

Confident.

And completely unfamiliar.

At least to everyone except Nikhil.

Because the moment he saw the woman, all color vanished from his face. "No."

His voice sounded terrified. "No, that's impossible." The woman smiled.

"Hello, Nikhil." The room froze.

Because Nikhil had just reacted the way people reacted to ghosts. And perhaps, in a way, he had seen one.

Slowly, the woman descended the stairs. Her eyes never left him.

Then she spoke the words that shattered everything they thought they knew. "My name is Dr. Meera Roy."

Silence.

Roy.

The surname hit instantly. The founder's surname.

Nikhil's surname.

Professor Dev Roy's surname. Nikhil stared at her.

"You died."

The woman smiled sadly. "No."

She stopped beside Rajan. "I disappeared."

The room fell silent.

Because suddenly the mystery became much larger than Greenwood High. Much older.

Much deeper.

Dr. Meera Roy.

Professor Roy's daughter.

Nikhil's older sister.

A woman everyone believed dead for nearly twenty years. And judging by the expressions around the room...

The real mastermind had finally stepped out of the shadows.

End of Chapter 30

Part 4 Begins (Chapters 31–40) The Final Arc:

Dr. Meera Roy's shocking history is revealed.

The true purpose of the Third Circle comes to light. Aryan and Riya's relationship faces its biggest challenge. Greenwood High erupts into chaos.

The mystery of the disappearances is solved. The final confrontation begins.

Chapter 31: The Woman Who Never Died Coming next:

Meera Roy explains her connection to the Third Circle. Nikhil confronts his sister after twenty years.

Aryan learns the real reason he was selected.

A shocking murder confession changes the investigation. The final countdown begins.

Chapter 31:

The Woman Who Never Died Nobody spoke.

Nobody moved.

Nobody even seemed capable of breathing.

The appearance of Dr. Meera Roy had shattered everything. Every theory.

Every assumption.

Every certainty.

For months, the investigation revolved around Principal Rajan Malhotra. The manipulative leader.

The mastermind.

The man pulling strings from behind the scenes. Now it appeared he wasn't at the top at all.

He worked for someone.

And that someone had just walked into the room. Dr. Meera Roy.

A woman believed dead for almost twenty years. Nikhil stared at her.

His face had gone completely pale. "No."

His voice sounded hollow. "This isn't possible."

Meera looked at him quietly. Almost sadly.

"You've grown up."

The sentence only made things worse. Twenty years.

Twenty years of grief.

Twenty years of believing his sister was dead.

And she stood before him as though nothing had happened. "You let us bury an empty coffin."

The accusation echoed through the facility. Meera closed her eyes briefly.

"I know."

"You let Dad die believing you'd been murdered." Silence.

The pain in Nikhil's voice was impossible to ignore. For the first time, Meera looked genuinely affected.

But only for a moment.

Then her expression hardened. "You deserve answers." Everyone did.

And finally, after years of secrets, answers began coming.

Twenty-two years earlier, Professor Dev Roy created the original Third Circle. A leadership initiative.

An educational experiment.

A program designed to help gifted students. Meera had been among the first participants. Brilliant.

Driven.

Ambitious.

She loved the project.

Believed in it.

Eventually, she became obsessed with it. While her father saw mentorship...

She saw potential.

Potential to reshape society. Potential to create better leaders. Potential to change the future.

The problem was simple.

Meera stopped seeing students as people. She began seeing them as possibilities.

Projects.

Experiments.

Numbers.

The room fell silent.

Because suddenly everything made sense. The surveillance.

The evaluations.

The recruitment phases.

All of it reflected a single philosophy. People measured.

Ranked. Studied. Selected.

Like subjects in an experiment.

Then Aryan asked the question nobody else wanted to ask. "Why?"

Meera looked directly at him.

For the first time, a smile appeared. Not cruel.

Not warm.

Interested.

"You really don't know?" Aryan frowned.

"Know what?"

The woman studied him for several seconds. Then answered.

"Why I selected you." The room grew quiet. Very quiet.

Because everyone remembered. Phase Three.

Phase Four.

The evaluations.

The recruitment process. Aryan had never been random. He had been chosen.

Carefully. Deliberately.

"Because you're intelligent?" Ananya guessed.

"No."

"Because he's influential?" Kabir suggested.

"No."

"Because he reminds you of Arjun?" Riya asked.

Meera smiled slightly. "Closer."

Then she looked directly at Aryan. "You ask questions."

Silence. "What?"

"Most students accept what they're told." Teachers.

Parents.

Rules.

Systems.

Aryan challenged them.

Investigated.

Observed.

Refused easy answers.

The same qualities once possessed by Arjun. The same qualities once possessed by Nikhil. The same qualities Meera admired.

And feared.

"You weren't testing me."

Aryan's voice sounded distant. "You were recruiting me." Meera nodded.

For the first time, she didn't deny anything. Then Rahul stepped forward.

"What about us?"

The room turned toward him.

"What about the students who disappeared?"

The question had haunted everyone from the beginning. Rahul.

Neha.

Others.

Victims.

Or so everyone believed.

Meera sighed.

Then answered.

"None of them were kidnapped." Shock exploded through the room. "What?"

Rahul stared at her. Neha looked horrified. "That's a lie."

Meera shook her head. "Not entirely."

The explanation that followed changed everything. The students had been isolated.

Manipulated.

Pressured.

But not physically imprisoned. Many stayed voluntarily.

Because they believed the promises. Because they wanted opportunities.

Because they thought they were joining something important. The realization felt disturbing.

The Third Circle wasn't merely an organization. It was a cult of ambition.

Built around success.

Prestige.

Influence.

Then Nikhil asked the question nobody expected. "What about Mr. Bose?"

Silence.

The room instantly became tense. Because one thing remained undeniable. Someone had died.

Someone had been murdered.

For the first time all evening, Meera looked genuinely uncomfortable. Then she spoke.

"I didn't order that." Nobody moved.

Nobody spoke.

Because suddenly something felt wrong. Very wrong.

The mastermind was denying the murder. Not deflecting.

Not lying.

Denying.

Rajan Malhotra's expression changed. Only slightly.

But Aryan noticed.

A flicker of fear.

Then realization hit him.

Hard.

Meera built the system. Meera ran the organization.

But someone else crossed the line. Someone else escalated everything.

Someone else turned manipulation into violence. Aryan slowly turned toward Rajan.

The principal looked back.

And for the first time since they met, he appeared nervous. Very nervous.

The room fell silent.

Because everyone had just reached the same conclusion. The real mastermind might not be Meera after all.

And somewhere beneath Greenwood High, beneath the tunnels, beneath the secrets... An even darker truth waited.

One that could destroy everything.

Then a loud alarm suddenly echoed through the facility. Red emergency lights began flashing.

A computer monitor flickered to life. Across the screen appeared a message. COUNTDOWN INITIATED

02:59:59

Three hours.

Nobody knew what the countdown meant. But one thing was certain.

The final stage had begun.

End of Chapter 31

Chapter 32: Three Hours Coming next:

The meaning of the countdown is revealed. Rajan Malhotra's secret actions come to light. Aryan and Riya finally confess their feelings. The Third Circle begins collapsing from within. The race to stop a catastrophe begins.

Chapter 32:

Three Hours

The red numbers glowed on the monitor. 02:59:59

Then—02:59:58

02:59:57

The countdown was real.

Every second felt like a hammer striking the room. Nobody spoke for several moments.

Everyone simply stared. Watching the numbers decrease. Watching time disappear.

"What is that?"

Aryan finally broke the silence. No one answered immediately.

Then something surprising happened. Meera Roy looked genuinely confused. Very confused.

"I didn't start it."

The statement sent a chill through the room.

Because if the woman running the Third Circle didn't know about the countdown… Then somebody else did.

Slowly.

Every head turned toward Principal Rajan Malhotra. The principal remained silent.

Too silent.

For the first time since his mask had begun slipping, he looked cornered.

"Ninety minutes ago," Nikhil said quietly, "I would have believed anything you told me." Rajan didn't respond.

"Now?"

Nikhil took a step forward.

"Now I think you've been lying to everyone." The tension became unbearable.

Finally, Rajan smiled.

A small smile.

A dangerous smile.

"You finally figured it out."

Silence exploded through the room.

"What did you do?" Meera demanded. Rajan laughed softly.

For years he had hidden behind professionalism. Respectability.

Authority.

Now all of it disappeared.

"The Third Circle was always too small." Nobody liked the sound of that.

At all.

"Too cautious."

He looked toward Meera. "Too sentimental."

The insult clearly stung.

Then Rajan turned toward the monitor. "The future belongs to people willing to act."

"What does the countdown do?" Aryan demanded. The principal's smile widened.

"Exactly what the Third Circle should have done years ago." That wasn't an answer.

And everyone knew it.

Then Rahul suddenly moved toward one of the computers. His fingers flew across the keyboard.

Lines of data appeared.

System files.

Internal documents.

Network maps.

Then his face went pale. "What is it?"

Rahul looked up.

Horrified.

"The school." Silence.

"What about it?"

"The countdown is connected to Greenwood High." A wave of dread swept through the room.

Because whatever was happening...

It wasn't isolated to the mountain facility. It involved the school.

The place where everything began.

Meanwhile, outside the building, night settled across the mountains. Cold winds swept through the valley.

Clouds covered the moon.

The atmosphere felt like the calm before a storm. Inside, Rahul continued searching.

Eventually, he opened a hidden file.

And the truth finally emerged.

Rajan had spent years building a second organization inside the Third Circle. A secret faction.

Loyal only to him.

Not Meera.

Not the original mission.

Just him.

The surveillance. The kidnappings. The intimidation.

The murder of Mr. Bose. None of it came from Meera. It came from Rajan.

The room became completely silent. Because suddenly everything made sense. The escalation.

The violence.

The fear.

Someone had corrupted the Third Circle from within. And that someone stood right in front of them.

Then another voice spoke.

Riya.

Quietly. "Why?"

The question echoed through the room. Not anger.

Not accusation.

Just confusion.

Why?

Rajan looked at her.

Then laughed sadly.

"Because talent is wasted." The answer shocked everyone.

"Every year brilliant students disappear into ordinary lives." The principal's eyes burned with conviction.

"Potential wasted." "Dreams abandoned." "Greatness forgotten."

His obsession had consumed him completely. He genuinely believed he was saving people. Which made him even more dangerous.

Then the countdown changed. 01:47:13

Time was vanishing rapidly. "We need to stop it."

Aryan's voice cut through the room. Nobody disagreed.

The problem was simple.

Nobody knew how.

For the next thirty minutes, chaos erupted. Computers.

Files.

Maps.

Documents.

Everyone searched desperately. Then Ananya found something. A maintenance blueprint.

Hidden inside Rajan's records. Her eyes widened immediately. "Aryan."

"What?"

She pointed toward the blueprint. A section beneath Greenwood High. Deeper than the tunnels.

Deeper than the prison cells. Deeper than the archives.

A facility nobody had ever discovered. A final chamber.

The true heart of the Third Circle. And according to the blueprint...

That was where the countdown originated. Silence followed.

Because the answer was obvious. They had to return.

One last time.

Back to Greenwood High.

Back to where everything started.

While the others prepared, Aryan stepped outside briefly. He needed air.

Needed a moment to think.

The mountains stretched into darkness. The wind felt cold.

Then he heard footsteps behind him. Riya.

For a moment, neither spoke. The silence felt comfortable. Familiar.

Different from the tension inside. Finally, Riya smiled faintly.

"We're probably making terrible decisions."

Aryan laughed.

"That's been true for months."

For the first time in days, both smiled. Then the smile faded.

Because they both knew something. The final confrontation was coming.

And there was no guarantee everyone would survive it. The thought hung between them.

Unspoken.

Until Riya finally broke the silence. "If something happens..."

Aryan immediately shook his head. "Don't."

But she continued.

"If something happens, I need you to know something." His heart skipped.

For a moment, the mystery disappeared. The countdown disappeared.

The danger disappeared.

Only the two of them remained. Riya took a deep breath.

Then said the words she had been holding back for months. "I love you."

The world seemed to stop.

Aryan stared at her.

Speechless.

Then he smiled.

A real smile.

The kind he hadn't worn in a very long time. "Good."

Riya frowned. "Good?"

Aryan laughed.

"Because I was planning to tell you the same thing."

For the first time since the mystery began, hope returned. Just a little.

Just enough.

Then the alarm sounded again from inside the facility. Pulling them back to reality.

The countdown continued. Time continued running out.

And somewhere beneath Greenwood High, the final secret waited. 01:29:44

The race had begun.

End of Chapter 32

Chapter 33: The Final Chamber Coming next:

The group returns to Greenwood High.

The deepest secret beneath the school is discovered. Rajan's final plan is revealed.

A shocking death changes everything. The final confrontation begins.

Chapter 33:

The Final Chamber

The journey back to Greenwood High felt endless. Every minute mattered.

Every second of the countdown mattered.

Yet the road seemed determined to stretch forever. Rain had begun falling again.

The windshield wipers moved constantly.

The storm outside mirrored the chaos inside the vehicle. Nobody spoke much.

There wasn't time.

There wasn't energy.

The revelation about Rajan Malhotra had changed everything. For months, they chased shadows.

Followed clues.

Questioned friends.

Suspected teachers.

Now they finally knew.

The real danger wasn't the original Third Circle. It was what Rajan had turned it into.

A weapon.

The countdown clock remained visible on one of Rahul's devices. 01:12:27

And falling.

The numbers felt merciless.

By the time they reached Greenwood High, darkness covered the campus. The school looked eerily normal.

Silent buildings.

Empty corridors.

Dark classrooms.

Anyone looking from outside would see nothing unusual. Yet beneath the school lay tunnels.

Archives.

Prison cells.

Secrets.

And now—

A final chamber.

The deepest secret of all.

The group entered through the abandoned wing. The place where their investigation had truly begun. Room 307 waited at the end of the corridor.

Exactly as before.

Dust.

Darkness.

Silence.

Yet this time, everything felt different. Because now they knew what existed below.

Using the blueprint Ananya discovered, they located another hidden mechanism behind the surveillance room.

One nobody had noticed before.

A metal panel concealed beneath layers of concrete. Kabir pressed against it.

Nothing happened.

Nikhil tried.

Still nothing.

Then Rahul noticed a strange symbol.

The circle crossed by three diagonal lines. The symbol of the Third Circle.

The symbol that started everything. Carefully, he pressed the center.

A loud click echoed through the tunnel. Then the wall slowly shifted.

Dust exploded into the air. Behind it appeared a staircase.

Descending deeper than any passage they had ever seen. No one spoke.

Because everyone understood. This was it.

The final chamber.

Step by step, they descended. The air became colder.

The silence became heavier. The staircase seemed endless. Then finally—

It ended.

And everyone froze.

The chamber was enormous.

Far larger than anything beneath Greenwood High should have been. Rows of servers lined the walls.

Computer systems hummed softly. Monitors displayed surveillance footage. Records.

Profiles.

Data.

Thousands of student profiles. Not just Greenwood students.

Students from schools across the country. The realization hit like lightning.

The Third Circle was never just Greenwood High. It was bigger.

Much bigger.

For years, Rajan had been expanding. Building a network.

Gathering information.

Creating influence.

The chamber was the heart of it all. The control center.

The brain of the operation.

Then Aryan noticed something else.

A massive screen at the center of the room. The countdown.

00:48:16

Still running.

Still falling.

"What happens when it reaches zero?" Ananya whispered. Nobody answered.

Then Rajan's voice echoed through hidden speakers. Calm.

Confident. Exactly as always. "Welcome."

The group spun around.

The principal appeared on the giant screen. Not live.

A recorded message.

One prepared long ago.

"If you're watching this, you've reached the final chamber." The image smiled.

"Which means you've proven yourselves." Aryan hated that smile.

Then the recording continued.

"The countdown marks the activation of the Evaluation Network." Silence.

"What does that mean?" Kabir asked. Rahul already knew.

His face had gone pale.

Very pale.

"It's releasing the data."

Everyone looked at him. "What data?"

Rahul pointed toward the servers. Years of surveillance.

Psychological evaluations.

Private information.

Student profiles.

Everything.

Every secret.

Every weakness.

Every fear.

The entire system would become public. Lives would be destroyed.

Thousands of them.

The realization stunned everyone. This wasn't a bomb.

It wasn't physical destruction. It was something different.

Something arguably worse. The destruction of trust.

The destruction of privacy.

The destruction of countless futures.

Then another voice echoed through the chamber. Not Rajan.

A real voice.

A voice coming from behind them. Everyone turned.

Rajan Malhotra stood in the doorway. The real one.

For the first time, he looked completely unmasked. No polite principal.

No respected educator.

No trusted leader.

Just a man obsessed with control. "It's beautiful, isn't it?"

The room fell silent.

Because the final confrontation had arrived. Then something unexpected happened.

Arjun stepped forward.

Not Aryan.

Not Nikhil.

Arjun.

For years he carried guilt. For years he carried regret.

For years he carried the weight of his mistakes.

Now he stood directly in front of Rajan. "You destroyed everything."

The words echoed through the chamber. Rajan smiled sadly.

"No."

He shook his head. "I perfected it." Silence.

Then Arjun did something nobody expected. He revealed a small flash drive.

The room froze.

"What is that?" Aryan asked. Arjun smiled faintly.

"The proof." The same proof.

The proof he and Nikhil discovered ten years earlier. The evidence everyone thought was lost forever.

For a brief moment, hope surged through the room. Then a loud crack echoed through the chamber.

A gunshot.

Everyone froze.

The flash drive slipped from Arjun's hand. His eyes widened.

Then he collapsed.

Riya screamed.

The sound echoed through the underground chamber. And suddenly, everything changed.

Because the final battle was no longer about secrets. It was about survival.

And the countdown continued. 00:41:02

Time was running out.

End of Chapter 33

Chapter 34: Forty-One Minutes Coming next:

The aftermath of the gunshot.

The identity of the shooter is revealed. Riya faces her greatest loss.

Aryan uncovers the contents of the flash drive. The final countdown accelerates toward zero.

Chapter 34:

Forty-One Minutes

The gunshot echoed through the final chamber. Then came silence.

A terrible silence.

The kind that seemed to swallow every sound. Every thought.

Every breath.

Arjun hit the floor.

The flash drive skidded across the concrete. Spinning.

Sliding.

Stopping near one of the server racks. For a moment, nobody moved.

Nobody seemed capable of understanding what had happened. Then Riya screamed.

"ARJUN!"

The sound shattered the silence. She rushed forward.

Dropping to her knees beside her brother. Aryan followed immediately.

The others stood frozen.

Shock.

Fear.

Disbelief.

Everything happened too fast. Riya grabbed Arjun's hand. "Stay with me."

Her voice trembled. "Please."

For years she dreamed of finding him. For years she imagined this moment. Not like this.

Never like this.

Arjun's eyes fluttered open briefly. He looked at her.

Really looked at her.

For the first time in ten years. A faint smile appeared.

"I'm sorry."

The words broke her heart. "Don't."

Tears streamed down her face. "Don't say that."

Then another voice cut through the chaos. "Nobody move."

Everyone turned.

The shooter stood near the doorway. And the sight stunned them.

It wasn't Rajan.

It wasn't Meera.

It wasn't a mysterious stranger. It was Mrs. Dutta.

The vice-principal.

The woman who had been involved from the beginning. Her hands trembled slightly.

The gun looked wrong in them. Unnatural.

Almost as though she couldn't believe she was holding it either. The room fell silent again.

"Mrs. Dutta..."

Ananya's voice barely emerged. The vice-principal closed her eyes. "I warned him."

Nobody understood. "I warned all of you."

Tears appeared in her eyes. The sight felt almost surreal.

Because villains weren't supposed to cry. Yet she looked devastated.

Broken.

Then Rajan laughed.

A quiet laugh.

A pleased laugh.

As though everything was unfolding exactly as planned. The sound immediately drew Aryan's attention.

Something clicked.

Something felt wrong.

Very wrong.

Then he realized it.

Mrs. Dutta wasn't aiming at them anymore. She was aiming at Rajan.

The room froze.

For the first time, genuine fear appeared in the principal's eyes. "Put that down."

His voice sounded different now. Less confident.

Less controlled.

Mrs. Dutta shook her head. "No."

The single word echoed through the chamber. Then she revealed the truth.

For years she had worked with the Third Circle. Not because she believed in it.

Because she was trapped.

Threatened.

Manipulated.

Every attempt to leave resulted in consequences. Career threats.

Blackmail.

Fear.

Exactly what happened to so many others. Rajan had controlled everyone.

Including his own allies.

Then Mrs. Dutta whispered something that stunned the room. "He killed Mr. Bose."

Silence.

Absolute silence.

The accusation hung in the air.

Because now someone had finally said it aloud. The murder.

The line that could never be uncrossed. Rajan smiled.

A cold smile.

And in that moment, everyone knew. The accusation was true.

Then chaos erupted.

One of Rajan's loyal security officers lunged forward. Mrs. Dutta reacted instantly.

The gun fired again.

The bullet struck a metal server cabinet. Sparks exploded.

Alarms immediately blared throughout the chamber. Emergency lights flashed red.

Computer screens flickered wildly. The countdown accelerated.

00:39:44

Then—00:39:43

00:39:42

Suddenly, the numbers skipped. 00:34:00

Everyone froze.

"What happened?" Rahul shouted.

He rushed toward the central computer. His fingers flew across the keyboard.

Then his face turned pale. "It's unstable."

The server damage had triggered something. The release process was speeding up.

Instead of forty minutes...

They now had less than thirty-five. Panic spread through the chamber.

Meanwhile, Aryan crawled toward the flash drive. The tiny device still lay where Arjun dropped it.

The proof.

The evidence hidden for ten years. Carefully, he picked it up.

Then hurried toward one of the computers. The screen flickered as he inserted it.

For a moment, nothing happened. Then dozens of files appeared.

Documents.

Photographs.

Financial records.

Videos.

Evidence.

Enough evidence to destroy the entire organization. Enough evidence to expose everyone involved.

Enough evidence to end the Third Circle forever. Then Aryan discovered one final folder.

A folder labeled:

FOUNDER'S LETTER

Confused, he opened it.

A video appeared.

Professor Dev Roy. The original founder. Alive in the recording. Older.

Tired.

Concerned.

The room fell silent as the video played.

If you are watching this, something has gone terribly wrong.

The Third Circle was never meant to become a system of control. It was meant to help students discover their potential.

If anyone is using it to manipulate, threaten, or exploit others... End it.

Silence followed.

Then came the final sentence.

The sentence that changed everything.

No ambition is worth losing your humanity. The recording ended.

Nobody spoke.

Because the founder himself had rejected what the organization became. Then Aryan looked toward Riya.

His heart sank.

She still sat beside Arjun.

Holding his hand.

Crying quietly.

Arjun's eyes remained closed.

For several terrifying seconds, nobody knew whether he was conscious. Whether he could hear them.

Whether he would survive. Then suddenly—

His fingers moved.

Just slightly.

Riya gasped.

Hope returned.

Tiny.

Fragile.

But real.

At that exact moment, another alarm sounded. A different alarm.

Louder.

More urgent.

Rahul looked up from the computer. And his expression terrified everyone.

"The countdown isn't the biggest problem anymore." Silence.

"What do you mean?"

Rahul pointed toward the monitor.

A new warning flashed across the screen. SERVER CORE FAILURE

FACILITY LOCKDOWN IN 29 MINUTES

The exits were about to seal.

And if they didn't stop the system in time... Everyone underground would be trapped. Forever.

End of Chapter 34

Chapter 35: Locked In Coming next

The group races against the lockdown. Rajan's final secrets are exposed.

Arjun reveals one last truth.

A shocking sacrifice saves lives.

The final confrontation enters its last stage.

Chapter 35:

Locked In

The warning flashed relentlessly across every monitor. SERVER CORE FAILURE

FACILITY LOCKDOWN IN 29:00

Then—28:59

28:58

28:57

The room erupted into motion. Everyone was suddenly talking at once. Searching.

Running.

Thinking.

For months, they had chased answers. Now answers no longer mattered.

Survival did.

"We need to shut everything down!" Kabir shouted.

"I'm trying!"

Rahul replied from the central computer. Lines of code flashed across the screen.

System files.

Security protocols.

Network controls.

The deeper he searched, the worse his expression became. Finally he looked up.

"This place was designed to survive attacks." Nobody liked that sentence.

At all.

"What does that mean?" Aryan asked.

"It means if one system fails..." Rahul swallowed.

"...another takes over."

The realization hit immediately.

Destroying the servers wouldn't stop the release. The network would continue.

Like a living thing.

Like a machine designed never to die.

Meanwhile, near the doorway, Rajan Malhotra remained strangely calm. Too calm.

Almost relaxed.

As though none of this worried him. That alone worried Aryan.

Then Arjun suddenly spoke. His voice was weak.

But clear.

"The backup room."

Everyone turned.

Riya immediately leaned closer. "What?"

Arjun winced from the pain. Yet forced himself to continue. "The real control system..."

He coughed. "...isn't here." Silence.

The room froze. "What?"

Aryan whispered.

Arjun looked toward the far wall. "There was always a backup."

Of course there was.

After everything they'd learned, it made perfect sense. The Third Circle planned for everything.

Including failure. "Where?"

Kabir asked.

Arjun raised a trembling hand.

Toward the deepest section of the chamber.

A section hidden behind rows of server racks. A section nobody had explored yet.

Without hesitation, Aryan, Kabir, and Rahul ran toward it. The path wound through endless equipment.

Blinking lights.

Metal cabinets.

Cooling systems.

Then they found it.

A massive steel door.

Unlike everything else underground. Modern.

Reinforced.

Protected.

At its center appeared a biometric scanner. "Great."

Kabir sighed.

"How do we open that?"

A slow clap echoed behind them. Everyone turned.

Rajan.

The principal approached calmly. His smile had returned.

"You've come very far."

The words felt almost insulting now. "No more games."

Aryan snapped. Rajan laughed. "I agree."

Then he did something unexpected.

He placed his thumb against the scanner. The lock immediately flashed green.

A heavy metallic sound echoed. The door slowly opened.

Everyone stared.

Even Aryan looked confused. "Why would you help us?"

For the first time, Rajan seemed tired. Genuinely tired.

Because despite everything... He wasn't smiling anymore. "You still don't understand." His voice sounded distant.

"I never wanted the system destroyed." Silence.

"But I don't want it inherited by people who don't deserve it either." The statement made little sense.

Until Aryan realized something. Rajan didn't view this as defeat. He viewed it as succession.

He was still evaluating them. Still judging.

Still trapped inside his obsession. The realization felt tragic.

Then they entered the room. And froze.

The backup chamber was enormous.

At its center stood a single server tower. Unlike the others.

Larger.

Older.

Connected to hundreds of cables. The true heart of the system.

The core.

A monitor displayed a message. MASTER ARCHIVE ACTIVE

Below it:

COUNTDOWN TO RELEASE 00:21:43

The clock was falling faster than ever. Then Aryan noticed something shocking.

The archive contained profiles dating back twenty-two years. Every student.

Every recruit.

Every evaluation.

Thousands of lives reduced to files.

Then another folder caught his attention. A folder named:

ARYAN SEN

His stomach tightened.

Slowly, he opened it.

The room fell silent.

Inside were hundreds of records. School reports.

Personality assessments.

Behavior analyses.

Photographs.

Even childhood photographs.

The realization made him feel sick. They had been watching him for years. Long before he discovered them.

Long before the mystery began. Then he found a note.

Written by Rajan.

The note read:

Candidate demonstrates exceptional curiosity. Comparable to Arjun Kapoor.

Potential leadership score: 9.8/10. Aryan immediately closed the file. He couldn't bear reading more.

Then suddenly—

A voice echoed from the chamber entrance. Riya.

Panicked. "Aryan!"

Everyone spun around.

Her face was pale.

Terrified.

"What happened?" Riya struggled to speak. Then finally whispered: "Arjun remembers." Silence.

"What?"

"He remembers everything." The room froze.

Ten years.

Ten years of missing memories. Hidden truths.

Lost details.

And suddenly—

Arjun remembered.

Everything.

Aryan and the others rushed back. Arjun looked exhausted.

Weak.

Barely conscious.

Yet his eyes were focused.

Clear.

For the first time.

"I know who killed Mr. Bose."

The room became completely still. Even Rajan looked surprised.

Because whatever Arjun was about to say... Nobody expected it.

Then Arjun looked directly at Meera Roy. And spoke four words.

Four words that shattered the room. "You gave the order."

Silence.

Absolute silence.

Meera stared at him.

The color drained from her face.

And for the first time since her arrival...

The woman who seemed to control everything looked afraid. Very afraid.

End of Chapter 35

Chapter 36: The Last Truth Coming next:

Meera's role in the murder is revealed.

The final secrets of the Third Circle emerge. Aryan faces an impossible decision.

Rajan's empire collapses.

The countdown approaches zero.

Chapter 36:

The Last Truth

The accusation hung in the air like thunder before a storm. Nobody moved.

Nobody spoke.

The countdown continued flashing across nearby monitors. 00:18:22

00:18:21

00:18:20

Yet suddenly, the countdown seemed less important. Because every person in the room was staring at Meera Roy. "You gave the order."

Arjun's voice remained weak.

But the words struck with incredible force. Meera stared back at him.

Expressionless.

Silent.

For several seconds, nobody breathed. Then Nikhil stepped forward.

"Is it true?"

His voice sounded broken.

Not angry.

Not accusing.

Heartbroken.

The question hurt because he wanted the answer to be no. Wanted desperately for it to be no.

Meera looked at her younger brother.

The same boy she abandoned twenty years earlier.

The same boy who spent decades believing she was dead. And finally—

For the first time—She looked ashamed. Not defeated.

Not frightened.

Ashamed.

The room immediately understood. The answer was yes.

Silence spread through the chamber. Then Meera spoke.

"It wasn't supposed to happen." Nobody liked that answer.

Because it sounded too familiar. Too close to an excuse.

Mr. Bose was dead.

There was no "supposed to." No justification.

No explanation that could change reality. Still, Meera continued.

"After he helped you escape..." Her voice trembled slightly.

"I ordered my people to stop him." Nikhil closed his eyes.

Not stop him permanently. Not kill him.

Just stop him.

At least, that was what she claimed. Then Arjun spoke again.

"No."

Everyone looked at him. Arjun's gaze never left Meera.

"You knew exactly what would happen." The room became silent once more.

Because deep down, everyone understood.

If you send dangerous people after someone... You accept responsibility for what follows.

Whether you admit it or not. Finally, Meera lowered her head. And whispered:

"Yes." One word.

One terrible word.

The confession shattered whatever sympathy remained. Nikhil stepped backward.

As though physically struck.

For years he searched for answers.

For years he wondered what happened to his sister. Now he knew.

And somehow the truth hurt more than the mystery. Meanwhile, Rajan Malhotra watched everything quietly. Almost thoughtfully.

Then something unexpected happened. He laughed.

Not loudly.

Not dramatically. Just quietly.

The sound immediately drew everyone's attention. "You still don't understand."

His voice echoed through the chamber. Nobody wanted to hear another speech. Yet Rajan continued anyway.

"You're all arguing about the wrong thing." The principal looked toward the servers.

Toward the archive.

Toward the system.

"The Third Circle was never about control."

Aryan frowned.

"Then what was it about?" Rajan smiled sadly. "Fear."

Silence.

The answer surprised everyone. Then Rajan explained.

For years he watched brilliant students fail. Not academically.

Emotionally. Socially.

Personally.

Students terrified of failure. Terrified of disappointing parents. Terrified of losing opportunities.

Fear controlled them long before the Third Circle ever existed. The organization simply exploited it.

Encouraged it.

Amplified it.

The realization felt disturbingly accurate.

Because every student in the room understood that pressure. Exams.

Ranks.

Expectations.

The fear of not being enough.

Then Rajan looked directly at Aryan. "You were different."

Aryan hated hearing that.

Because it sounded exactly like every evaluation note he'd found. Every recruitment document.

Every manipulative compliment. "I don't care."

The response came immediately.

For the first time, Rajan smiled genuinely. And somehow that was worse.

"That's why you succeeded." Silence.

Then Rahul interrupted.

"Can someone focus on the countdown?" Everyone turned.

The timer now displayed:

00:11:36

The clock was disappearing rapidly.

The reminder snapped everyone back to reality. Because arguments wouldn't save anyone.

The system still needed stopping. Fast.

Rahul rushed toward the master server. His fingers flew across the keyboard.

Files opened.

Commands executed.

Security systems bypassed. Then his expression changed. "What?"

Aryan asked.

Rahul looked up.

Half shocked.

Half relieved.

"There is a shutdown protocol." Hope surged through the room. Finally.

A solution.

Then Rahul finished reading.

And the hope vanished immediately. Because there was a catch.

Of course there was. "What catch?" Kabir asked.

Rahul swallowed.

"The shutdown requires manual activation." Nobody understood.

"So activate it." Rahul shook his head.

"It's inside the core chamber." The deepest part of the system. Behind reinforced security doors. Behind automatic locks.

Inside an area that would seal permanently during shutdown. The realization spread instantly.

Whoever activated the shutdown... Would be trapped.

Forever.

Silence filled the room. The countdown continued. 00:09:02

Nobody spoke.

Because everyone had reached the same conclusion. The system could be stopped.

But somebody would have to stay behind.

And suddenly the mystery wasn't about evidence.

Or secrets.

Or conspiracies.

It was about sacrifice.

Then a voice broke the silence. Calm.

Certain. "I'll do it."

Everyone turned.

Arjun slowly pushed himself upright. Riya immediately shook her head. "No."

But Arjun's expression never changed.

For the first time in years, he seemed at peace. Because after ten years of running...

After ten years of guilt...

After ten years of regret...

He had finally found something worth facing. The truth.

And now he intended to finish what he started.

End of Chapter 36

Chapter 37: One Choice Coming next:

Arjun insists on staying behind. Riya refuses to leave him.

Aryan discovers a hidden alternative. The countdown reaches its final minutes. The fate of the Third Circle is decided.

Chapter 37:

One Choice

The room erupted immediately. "No."

Riya's voice echoed through the chamber. Louder than anyone expected.

More emotional than she intended. She stepped in front of Arjun.

Almost protectively. "No."

She repeated.

"You're not doing this." Arjun smiled sadly.

The same smile he used whenever he already knew the argument was over. For a moment, Riya hated that smile.

Because it reminded her of childhood. When he teased her.

Protected her.

Made decisions for her.

Then disappeared.

For ten years.

And now he wanted to leave again. She wasn't going to let that happen. "I'm serious."

Tears filled her eyes.

"You don't get to come back after ten years and leave again." Silence spread through the room.

Because nobody knew what to say. Not Aryan.

Not Kabir.

Not Rahul.

Not even Arjun.

The words hurt because they were true. Then Arjun looked away.

For the first time since they found him, he seemed completely vulnerable. "I'm tired, Riya."

His voice sounded smaller than before. Not physically tired.

Emotionally. Mentally.

The exhaustion of carrying guilt for a decade.

The exhaustion of living with mistakes that never stopped following him. "I don't want to keep running."

Riya shook her head immediately. "Then don't."

The answer came without hesitation. "Stay."

Silence.

For several seconds, neither spoke. Then the countdown interrupted. 00:07:14

Time continued moving. Whether they were ready or not.

Meanwhile, Aryan stood near the master server. Thinking.

Watching.

Searching.

Something felt wrong.

Not morally wrong.

Logically wrong.

The Third Circle planned everything. Every detail.

Every contingency.

Why would such a system require a permanent sacrifice? The design made no sense.

Unless—

Suddenly, he froze.

"What if we're looking at this incorrectly?" Everyone turned toward him.

"What?" Kabir asked.

Aryan hurried back to the terminal. He reopened the shutdown files.

Read every line again.

Every instruction.

Every warning.

Then his eyes widened. "There."

Rahul moved beside him.

For several seconds, both stared at the screen. Then Rahul smiled.

A real smile.

The first one anyone had seen in hours. "You genius."

Everyone looked confused. "What?"

Ananya asked.

Aryan turned toward the group.

"The shutdown doesn't trap someone forever." Silence.

"What?"

Riya whispered.

Aryan pointed toward the screen.

"The system automatically locks for sixty minutes." Not forever.

One hour.

The misunderstanding hit everyone at once. The instructions had been misread.

The person inside would be trapped. But only temporarily.

Hope exploded through the chamber. Then Rahul's smile vanished.

Because there was still a problem. A major problem.

"The core chamber is flooding with coolant." The room froze.

"What?"

Rahul pointed toward a warning indicator.

CORE TEMPERATURE CRITICAL EMERGENCY COOLANT RELEASE IN 05:00

The meaning became obvious immediately.

The shutdown chamber would fill with freezing coolant. Anyone inside could be seriously injured.

Or worse.

Silence returned.

Hope disappeared almost as quickly as it arrived. Then Rajan laughed softly.

"Now you understand." Nobody responded.

Because everyone finally saw the truth.

The system wasn't designed to kill someone.

It was designed to ensure only someone truly committed would activate it. A final test.

A final evaluation.

Even now.

Even at the end.

The Third Circle remained obsessed with proving worth. Then another surprise came.

Nikhil stepped forward. "I'll do it."

Everyone looked at him. "No."

Arjun answered immediately. "Yes."

The two men stared at each other. Former friends.

Former enemies.

Connected by ten years of guilt and mistakes. Nikhil shook his head.

"You already sacrificed enough."

The statement hit harder than anyone expected. Because despite everything...

Despite the betrayal...

Despite the anger...

Nikhil had forgiven him.

Maybe not completely.

Maybe not yet.

But enough.

Then Meera spoke. "No."

The room turned toward her.

For the first time since her confession, she stepped forward willingly. "I started this."

Silence.

"I should finish it."

Nobody trusted the statement immediately. Yet her expression seemed sincere.

For perhaps the first time in decades. Then Rajan suddenly became alarmed. Genuinely alarmed.

"No."

The response came too quickly. Too emotionally.

And everyone noticed. Because for the first time...

The calm principal disappeared.

The composed mastermind vanished. Only fear remained.

"What are you afraid of?" Aryan asked quietly. Rajan didn't answer.

Then Aryan realized something. The system wasn't just data.

The system contained evidence. Proof.

Records.

Everything.

If the archive vanished...

So would Rajan's power.

The realization hit everyone simultaneously. This was never about the countdown.

This was never about the facility. This was never about the servers. Rajan was terrified of losing control. Then the countdown displayed:

00:03:11

The final minutes.

The final decision.

Suddenly, an emergency map appeared on Rahul's screen. And Aryan noticed something extraordinary.

A maintenance shaft.

A hidden access tunnel.

Tiny.

Dangerous.

But connected directly to the core chamber. An alternative route.

A route nobody planned for.

And a route that might allow someone to activate the shutdown… Without getting trapped inside.

For the first time all night… Victory seemed possible.

But only if they moved immediately. 00:02:48

The final race had begun.

End of Chapter 37

Chapter 38: The Run Coming next:

Aryan races through the maintenance shaft. Rajan makes a desperate final move.

The shutdown sequence begins. The Third Circle starts collapsing.

A shocking betrayal changes the outcome of the finale.

Chapter 38:

The Run 00:02:48

The numbers flashed relentlessly. Every second felt louder than the last. Every second mattered.

The maintenance shaft was barely visible on the blueprint.

A narrow emergency passage hidden behind decades of modifications. Forgotten.

Ignored.

Exactly the kind of place that might save them. Aryan looked at Rahul.

"Will it work?"

Rahul stared at the map.

Calculating.

Thinking.

Praying.

Finally, he nodded. "It should." "Should?"

"That's the best answer I have." Nobody liked it.

But nobody had time for anything better. 00:02:31

The countdown continued. Then Rajan moved.

Fast.

Much faster than anyone expected. He lunged toward the central console. Toward the server controls.

Toward the archive.

Years of obsession suddenly exploded into desperation.

"No!"

Kabir intercepted him.

Both crashed into a row of equipment. Metal rattled.

Screens flickered.

The struggle became chaotic immediately.

For years Rajan controlled everything through intelligence. Manipulation.

Strategy.

Now he fought like a man losing everything. Because he was.

Meanwhile, Aryan located the maintenance hatch.

A narrow opening hidden behind cooling equipment. Small.

Dark.

Claustrophobic.

Perfect.

Riya grabbed his arm.

For a moment, neither spoke. Neither needed to.

Because both understood the risk. The countdown.

The coolant.

The collapsing system.

Everything depended on what happened next. Finally, Riya smiled.

A nervous smile. "Don't be a hero." Aryan laughed softly. "I'll try."

Then he climbed inside.

The hatch closed behind him. Darkness swallowed everything.

The tunnel was barely large enough to crawl through. Metal walls pressed in from all sides.

Pipes crossed overhead.

The air felt hot.

Stale.

Every movement required effort. And the countdown kept running. 00:02:01

Back in the chamber, chaos intensified. Kabir and Rajan continued struggling. Ananya helped Rahul secure the servers. Nikhil watched the monitors.

Meera stood frozen.

Watching her life's work collapse around her. For the first time, she looked old.

Not powerful.

Not brilliant.

Just tired.

Then she whispered something. So quietly only Nikhil heard it. "I'm sorry."

The words stunned him.

Because in twenty years...

He had never imagined hearing them.

Yet before he could respond, alarms intensified. Red lights flashed violently.

Emergency warnings filled every monitor. CORE OVERLOAD

90 SECONDS REMAINING

The situation was getting worse. Much worse.

Inside the maintenance shaft, Aryan crawled faster. The tunnel twisted unexpectedly.

Then split.

Two directions. His heart sank. Of course.

Nothing could ever be simple. Quickly, he examined both paths. One descended.

One continued straight.

No labels.

No signs.

Only a choice.

And very little time.

Then he remembered something. Arjun's diary.

One of the earliest clues.

A note written years ago.

The answers are always deeper.

The memory flashed through his mind.

Without hesitation, Aryan chose the lower path. And prayed he was right.

00:01:17

Back in the chamber, Rajan finally broke free. The principal stumbled toward the console.

Desperate.

Terrified.

Not of prison.

Not of exposure.

Of irrelevance.

His entire identity depended on control. And he was losing it.

Then someone stepped directly into his path. Arjun.

Weak.

Injured.

But standing.

For several seconds, the two simply stared at each other. Student and mentor.

Victim and manipulator.

Ten years of history.

Ten years of consequences. Finally, Rajan spoke.

"You could have been extraordinary." Arjun smiled sadly.

"I already am."

The answer stunned everyone. Because for the first time...

Arjun wasn't carrying guilt. He wasn't running.

He wasn't hiding.

He had finally forgiven himself.

And Rajan couldn't understand that.

Because Rajan measured worth through achievement. Arjun measured it through choices.

The difference changed everything. Then Arjun stepped aside.

Not because he surrendered.

Because he knew something Rajan didn't. Aryan was already close.

Very close.

Inside the shaft, a faint blue light appeared ahead. The core chamber.

Finally.

Aryan pushed forward.

Ignoring exhaustion.

Ignoring fear.

Ignoring everything except the clock. Then he emerged into a circular room. The heart of the system.

The true center of the Third Circle.

A single console stood in the middle. One button.

Protected beneath a transparent cover. Above it flashed:

MASTER SHUTDOWN

Below it:

CONFIRMATION REQUIRED

Aryan ran toward it.

Then stopped.

Because a voice echoed through the chamber. A familiar voice.

"Good choice." Aryan froze.

A monitor flickered to life. Rajan appeared on the screen. Not live.

A prerecorded message.

Created years ago.

"If you've reached this point, then you've already won." Aryan stared.

Confused.

The message continued.

"Because the final test was never intelligence." Silence.

"Never ambition."

The countdown kept falling. 00:00:41

"The final test was whether you would choose people over power." Aryan frowned.

The words sounded completely different from everything Rajan ever believed. Then realization struck.

The recording wasn't made by Rajan. It was made by Professor Dev Roy.

The founder.

The original creator.

His final safeguard.

His final lesson.

Then the monitor displayed one final sentence. Leadership is not control.

Leadership is responsibility. The countdown reached: 00:00:20

Aryan opened the protective cover. Placed his hand on the button.

And pressed it.

For one terrifying second... Nothing happened.

Then every light in the chamber changed. Green.

The shutdown sequence had begun. But somewhere behind him...

A hidden door suddenly opened. And someone stepped into the room. Someone nobody expected.

Someone whose betrayal would change everything.

End of Chapter 38

Chapter 39: The Betrayal Coming next:

The identity of the final traitor is revealed. Aryan faces one last confrontation.

The Third Circle collapses forever. Rajan's fate is decided.

The story races toward its emotional finale.

Chapter 39:

The Betrayal

The hidden door slid open with a metallic hiss. Aryan spun around.

The shutdown sequence had started.

Green lights flashed throughout the core chamber. Monitors displayed the same message repeatedly: MASTER SHUTDOWN IN PROGRESS

For one brief moment, relief flooded through him. They had done it.

The Third Circle was ending.

Then he saw the figure standing in the doorway. And the relief vanished instantly.

"Ananya?"

His voice echoed through the chamber. She stood perfectly still.

Not frightened.

Not surprised.

Almost calm.

The sight immediately felt wrong.

Because everyone else should have been in the main chamber. Yet somehow Ananya had found a completely different route. A route nobody else knew about.

The realization struck like lightning. Aryan's stomach tightened.

"No."

Ananya lowered her eyes.

For several seconds, neither spoke. Then she whispered:

"I'm sorry."

The words shattered him.

Not because they explained anything. Because they confirmed everything. The note in the warehouse.

ONE OF YOU IS ALREADY WORKING FOR US.

The warning from months ago. The suspicion everyone dismissed. It had been true all along.

And the person was standing right in front of him. "Since when?"

Aryan's voice sounded distant. Almost unrecognizable.

Ananya closed her eyes. "A year."

Silence.

A year.

Long before Rahul disappeared. Long before Room 307.

Long before the mystery truly began.

The betrayal ran deeper than anyone imagined. Then Ananya surprised him.

She started crying.

Not dramatically.

Quietly.

As though she had been holding it inside for months. "They approached me after my scholarship interview." The explanation came in fragments.

Her family struggled financially.

The scholarship represented everything. University.

Opportunity. A future.

Then the Third Circle appeared. Offering help.

Connections.

Support.

At first, the requests seemed harmless. Observe students.

Attend meetings.

Share information.

Nothing dangerous.

Nothing obviously wrong.

Then the requests became demands.

And by the time she understood what was happening... She was trapped.

The story sounded painfully familiar. Exactly like Mrs. Dutta.

Exactly like Vihaan.

Exactly like countless others.

The Third Circle didn't recruit people. It trapped them.

Then Aryan asked the question that truly mattered. "Did you know about Rahul?"

Ananya shook her head immediately. "No."

"Neha?" Another shake. "No."

"Mr. Bose?"

Tears filled her eyes. "No."

The answer felt genuine.

Terribly genuine.

Because suddenly Aryan realized something. Ananya wasn't the mastermind.

She wasn't even a major player. She was another victim.

A victim who made terrible choices. But still a victim.

Then she held out a small device. A data key.

"What is that?" "The real archive." Aryan froze. "What?"

Ananya nodded.

"Rajan never trusted the servers." Of course he didn't.

He trusted control.

And control required backups.

The data key contained everything. The true records.

The hidden evidence.

The names of every member. Every operation.

Every crime.

Everything.

"This was my job." Her voice trembled. "Protect it." Silence.

Then she handed it to him. Freely.

Without hesitation.

The gesture said everything.

Her choice had finally been made. Then alarms suddenly intensified. Every monitor flashed red.

SHUTDOWN COMPLETE IN 03:00

The system was collapsing. Fast.

Very fast.

Back in the main chamber, chaos erupted. Servers powered down.

Screens went dark.

Years of surveillance disappeared. Years of control vanished.

The Third Circle was dying. And Rajan Malhotra knew it.

For the first time, the principal looked defeated. Not angry.

Not frightened.

Defeated.

Because the thing he spent decades building was disappearing. One system at a time.

One file at a time.

Then Meera stepped forward.

For years they had worked together. Built together.

Manipulated together.

Now she looked at him with disappointment. Nothing more.

Nothing less.

"You forgot the point."

The statement echoed through the chamber. Rajan laughed bitterly.

"No."

He looked around.

At the students.

At the tunnels. At the servers. "You did."

The argument might have continued. But suddenly every screen went black. The silence felt enormous.

The Third Circle was gone. Not weakened.

Not damaged.

Gone.

For several seconds, nobody moved. Then emergency lights flickered on.

And a distant sound echoed through the tunnels. Sirens.

Police sirens.

Lots of them.

The evidence Rahul had uploaded earlier finally reached authorities. The investigation was over.

The truth was out.

And help was coming.

Then Aryan returned from the core chamber. Holding the data key.

Holding the final piece of evidence. The room immediately understood. It was finished.

Really finished.

Rajan looked at the key. Then at Aryan.

For a moment, nobody spoke. Finally, the principal smiled sadly. "You know what the worst part is?" Aryan didn't answer.

Rajan looked around the room. At every student.

Every person he tried to control. Then he whispered:

"You would have been better than me." Silence followed.

Then police officers appeared at the far end of the tunnel. Flashlights illuminated the darkness.

Voices echoed.

The nightmare was finally ending. Yet one chapter remained.

The hardest chapter.

The one that came after the mystery. The one that came after the truth.

The chapter about consequences.

End of Chapter 39

Chapter 40: The Vanishing Bell The final chapter:

The aftermath of the Third Circle. Arjun and Riya's future.

Aryan and Ananya's reconciliation. Aryan and Riya's relationship.

The fate of Rajan, Meera, and the school. The meaning of "The Vanishing Bell." The emotional ending of the novel.

Chapter 40:

The Vanishing Bell Three months later.

The rain had finally stopped.

Sunlight bathed Greenwood High in warm golden light.

Students crossed the campus carrying books, laughing with friends, complaining about assignments, and worrying about exams.

To an outsider, everything looked normal. Ordinary.

Peaceful.

But Greenwood High would never truly be the same. Too many secrets had been uncovered.

Too many lives had been changed.

Too many truths had emerged from beneath the school. The tunnels had been sealed.

The underground facilities had been dismantled. The surveillance systems had been destroyed.

The Third Circle officially ceased to exist. Newspapers covered the story for weeks. Television channels debated it endlessly. Investigators examined thousands of documents. The scandal spread far beyond Greenwood High. Schools across the country reviewed policies.

Parents demanded transparency. Students began asking difficult questions.

Questions they should have been asking all along. Meanwhile, Rajan Malhotra faced trial.

The evidence from the data key proved devastating. Years of manipulation.

Coercion.

Blackmail.

Illegal surveillance.

Everything finally came to light.

For the first time in decades, Rajan couldn't control the story. He couldn't rewrite it.

He couldn't manipulate it.

He could only face it. Meera Roy also stood trial.

Her role in creating and maintaining the organization couldn't be ignored. Yet her cooperation helped authorities uncover the full truth.

The woman who once believed she could engineer perfect leaders finally understood the cost of treating people like experiments.

Nikhil visited her only once.

Nobody knew exactly what they discussed. But afterward, he seemed lighter.

Not happy. Not healed.

But finally moving forward.

Some wounds never disappear completely. Yet they stop controlling your life.

And sometimes, that's enough.

Back at Greenwood High, a new principal arrived. A woman determined to rebuild trust.

Not through secret programs. Not through surveillance.

Through honesty.

The way schools were supposed to work. For the first time in years, students felt free. Not evaluated.

Not monitored.

Not ranked by hidden systems. Simply students.

And perhaps that was the greatest victory of all. One afternoon, Aryan sat beneath the banyan tree. The same tree where countless plans had begun.

The same tree where friendships had been tested. The same tree where mysteries had unfolded.

A notebook rested on his lap. Inside were pages of notes.

Clues.

Maps.

Photographs.

The entire investigation.

Months of work.

Months that changed his life forever. Then footsteps approached.

Riya.

Aryan smiled immediately. Some things had changed. Some things hadn't.

She sat beside him.

Comfortably. Naturally.

Neither felt the need to fill every silence anymore.

That was one of the strange gifts of surviving something extraordinary together. Words became less necessary.

For a while, they simply watched students crossing the campus. Then Riya spoke.

"Arjun starts university next month." Aryan smiled.

Arjun's recovery had been slow.

The injury from the shooting required months of treatment. Yet he survived.

And more importantly—He finally stopped running. The guilt remained.

The mistakes remained.

But now he faced them honestly.

For the first time in ten years, he and Riya felt like siblings again. Not strangers connected by tragedy.

Family.

Then Aryan thought about everyone else. Kabir.

Who had become one of his closest friends. Vihaan.

Who spent months helping investigators expose the remaining parts of the network. Rahul and Neha.

Who slowly returned to normal life.

Or as normal as possible after everything they'd experienced. Even Ananya.

Especially Ananya.

The truth about her involvement with the Third Circle had been painful. Very painful.

Yet Aryan eventually understood something important. People make mistakes.

Sometimes terrible ones.

The question isn't whether mistakes happen. The question is what people do afterward.

Ananya chose the truth.

When it mattered most.

And that choice deserved recognition.

The friendship would never be exactly the same. But it survived.

Which was more than many people expected. Then Riya noticed the notebook.

"Still working on the case?"

Aryan laughed. "Not exactly."

He turned the notebook toward her. The first page contained a title.

THE VANISHING BELL

Riya stared. Then laughed. "Seriously?" Aryan grinned. "Seriously."

The idea felt right somehow. Not because he wanted fame.

Not because he wanted recognition. But because stories matter.

Truth matters.

And some stories deserve toss be remembered. Then Riya noticed something else.

A blank final page. "What goes there?"

Aryan looked toward the school building. Toward Greenwood High.

Toward the clock tower.

And the old bell.

The bell that once rang across campus every day.

The bell students stopped hearing after years of construction and neglect. The bell that became almost mythical.

Almost forgotten.

Then he finally answered. "The ending."

Riya smiled.

"So what's the ending?" Aryan thought for a moment. Then looked at her.

"The bell never really vanished." She frowned.

"What does that mean?"

Aryan glanced toward the campus one last time. "The truth was always there."

Hidden.

Ignored.

Covered by noise.

Just like the bell.

People simply stopped listening. Silence followed.

A comfortable silence.

Then, almost as if the universe wanted to make a point—A sound echoed across the campus.

A bell.

Clear.

Strong.

Beautiful.

Students looked up.

Teachers paused.

Even birds scattered from nearby trees.

For the first time in years, Greenwood High's bell rang again. Not hidden.

Not forgotten.

Heard by everyone.

Aryan smiled.

Riya smiled.

And together they listened. Not to the end of a mystery.

But to the beginning of something new. THE END

Epilogue

One year later, a copy of "The Vanishing Bell" sat in Greenwood High's library. Inside the cover, a handwritten note read:

No ambition is worth losing your humanity.

Professor Dev Roy

And beneath it, written in different handwriting: And no mystery stays buried forever.

Aryan Sen END OF NOVEL

By Suvashree Sarkar