

Beyond the

Purple Twilight



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Author's Note

Hi, I'm JJ Labajo, the author. The amazing artwork is by JN Codera. *Beyond the Purple Twilight* was originally meant to be a Webtoon back in 2020. We even managed to release the first four chapters, but life got in the way. Adulting threw us some curveballs, and we had to hit pause to focus on our regular jobs in the tech industry and other life obligations.

Every year, we tried to find time to work on it, but eventually, we decided to turn it into a Light Novel instead. The script was originally written for a comic format, so I had to convert it chapter by chapter into novel form, which has been quite challenging for me.

But —

That doesn't mean it's any less awesome! We've put our hearts into it, and we're really proud of how it's turned out.

We hope you love it as much as we do.

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Prologue

There are times when we wish we knew what would happen next, hoping we could prevent painful events that shouldn't occur, or avoid awkward moments altogether.

But no, we are bound to this book called life, where we cannot know what's on the next page. Or should I say, are there even any next pages? What if today is the last page there will ever be?

These are the thoughts of Gino Han, in the quiet night at 2 AM, where everything is awfully quiet, and anxious thoughts are creeping in. He wants to sleep, but he can't. So he has no choice but to let these thoughts drown him in bed.

Thoughts of the painful past.

Memories of tragic incident.

Fear of invisible problems.

Fear of the future.

But then—

Just as the thoughts threatened to overwhelm him, her face appeared in his mind. Eun Ae. The fiery cheerleader of Richmond High. Somehow, thinking about her always brought him calm, an anchor amidst the storm. They don't know each other, but he always have this gut feeling that the universe had connected them in ways he couldn't explain. Soulmates, destined by Fate itself.

And as impossible as it seemed, someone would soon arrive to prove him right. Eun Ae was the one—his true love. But how could that be?

Chapter 1 – Cupid? Stupid.

The sun's out, a bunch of clouds floating around, and I'm just staring out the window. The kind of day where you'd rather be anywhere but in class, you know? I've got my music on, zoning out as usual. Then I see something weird—feathers, like actual feathers, falling outside.

I blink. Wait, what? Feathers? In the middle of history class? I lean in, watching them float past the window.

“MR. HAAAAAN!” a loud voice snaps me back to reality.

The whole class turns, staring at me, and there's the teacher—standing right in front of me, looking like she's ready to explode. I'm still halfway in my daydream, so I just grin. “Hehe.” Yeah, probably not the best move.

Guidance Office

Here we go again. Professor Holt's leaning back in his chair, arms crossed, giving me that disappointed look he's perfected after seeing me in here one too many times.

“This is the fourth time, Gino Han.”

I shrug. “I already told you, I was just looking out the window because I saw feathers falling.”

Holt raises an eyebrow. “With earphones on? Don't tell me the earphones fell up to your ears too?”

I raise my hands in defeat. “I don't understand.”

His voice gets that *you're missing the point* tone. “You don't understand? You disrespected a teacher, Mr. Han. And your scholarship? It's dying.”

Great. Here we go again. “But I have an A grade in all my subjects,” I say, leaning into the logic. “I’m here to study, not... practicing on going to heaven or whatever.”

Holt sighs, rubbing his temples. “As a matter of fact, Mr. Gino Han, your scholarship doesn’t only depend on grades. It also depends on having a clean record. Look, I know you’re smart. Math? A no-brainer for you. But if you want to survive in this school, you need to start respecting people.”

I frown. “But that’s unfair.”

“We’re done here,” Holt says, waving me off.

I grab my bag, muttering, “Shit,” under my breath as I slam the door behind me.

Canteen

I’m holding my tray of food, minding my own business, and I can’t stop thinking about the scholarship. Why does it even need a Good Moral Conduct certificate? Last time I checked, this isn’t a church. It’s a school*. I’m talking to myself, lost in thought when suddenly—

“What are you looking at, butthead?”

Huh? I snap out of it and realize I’m staring at Lee Ji Yu, one of those high school thugs you just don’t mess with.

“My bad,” I say, trying to de-escalate the situation.

“You better be careful about who you’re staring at,” he growls.

I nod. “Apologies.”

“Get the hell out of my face.”

No need to make enemies. I turn away, reminding myself of my life’s motto. Make no war as possible - be as good as hell.

No one wants a fight, especially with this guy—he's a gym freak. If I'm a rock, he's definitely a mountain.

I quickly move on, thinking to myself, Anyway, where should I sit? I look around the canteen, scanning the options. On my left, people are already eating. Then I glance to the right and— Oh no... There she is.

Eun Ae? She's sitting alone? I blink in disbelief as my heart does a weird flip. Eun Ae is eating all by herself? My brain freezes, and suddenly, I'm blushing like a tomato.

Alright, Gino. Play it cool. I shuffle over, trying to act casual.

“Um, hey,” I say, probably sounding like a complete idiot.

She looks up, confused. “??”

“What’s up?” I add, trying to salvage whatever conversation this is.

“Nothing,” she says, not particularly interested.

Great start, Gino. I glance at her plate. “You’re eating a salad.”

“Yeah.”

Genius observation, Han. But I can't stop myself. “Did you know that ‘salad’ comes from the Latin word *herba salta* meaning salted herbs? They used to season it with a lot of salt. I mean, it’s healthy, but you should drink more water to wash out the salt.”

She blinks. “Well, that’s... amazing.”

Was that sarcasm? “Yeah,” I mumble. “Is this seat taken? I’m kinda looking for a—”

“Yes, it’s taken.”

Dang. I awkwardly step back. “Uh, okay. I’ll just leave you alone then.”

“Thanks.”

I walk away, feeling every ounce of awkwardness. Shit, that was painful.



I find another table and sit down, still watching Eun Ae. Smooth, Gino. Real smooth. She finishes her meal, picks up her bag, and leaves. Wait, she's done eating? I thought she was with her friends?

Then it hits me. Oh... right. She was alone, but she didn't want to sit with me. Reality sinks in. Of course, Eun Ae wouldn't sit with a loser like me. Whom am I kidding? How dare I think I could sit beside her?

Out of nowhere, a voice interrupts my self-pity.

“Don’t worry, that girl likes you.”

I scoff. “No, she doesn’t.”

“It’s true, Eun Ah likes you.”

I frown. “It’s Eun Ae. Wait, who are you?”

The guy grins. “Glad you asked. I’m Samyaza Azi—”

Wait, what? I blink. “Holy shit, you’re naked!”

He looks down, confused. “What?”

“You’re a weirdo.”

He raises an eyebrow. “I’m not. I’m Sam, your guardian angel, Gino.”

I stare at him. “What the heck? Stop messing with me.”

Before I can walk away, I feel a tug on the back of my shirt. He grabs me by the collar, and suddenly I’m *moon-walking* across the cafeteria floor.

Everyone’s staring at me. One guy is pouring juice into a full glass, but it’s overflowing because he’s too distracted by me. Another person’s got their phone out, recording.

Oh no, I look like an idiot.

“What are they looking at?” I ask, my voice almost a whine.

“I’m holding your back, so you look like you’re walking in place,” He says casually.

Wait, what? “They can’t see you?”

He shrugs. “Yep.”

“Oh my God,” I mutter, feeling my sanity slip.

“Please don’t call God. I might get yelled at.”

I rub my temples, exasperated. “Who are you again?”

He gives me a smug grin. “Once again, I’m Samyaza Azikel Von Malach, your guardian angel. And I’m here on Earth to—”

His huge wings are hovering the area.

“—to get you a girlfriend.”

Chapter 2 – The Density of Destiny

As I walk home, I still can't wrap my head around it. Sure, Sam has wings and claims to be an angel, but that's not what I find hard to believe.

Sam notices my silence and turns to me. “So, you’re still not convinced?”

I shake my head. “It’s not that.”

He raises an eyebrow. “People can’t see me, and I have wings. Isn’t that enough? I’m an angel, Gino. And yes, angels exist.”

I stop walking for a moment and glance at him. “No, not that.”

He tilts his head in confusion. “What then?”

“I still can’t believe the Jewish people are right. About angels, I mean. If they’re right about that, what else? Heaven, the Flood, Jesus? It’s too much.”

Sam chuckles softly. “Every religion is right in its own way, Gino. You don’t need to compare them. But I’m not here to talk about religions or the meaning of life. As I said, I’m here to get you a girlfriend.”

I blink, caught off guard. “Get me a girlfriend? Why?”

“Too many reasons to mention, but if you insist.” He starts ticking things off his fingers. “First, you’re pathetic. Second, because your hand is the only thing that touches you, and third—”

“All right, all right! I get it!” I cut him off, feeling my face flush with embarrassment. “What’s your name again?”

“Samyaza Azikiel Von Malach.”

I smirk. “All right, Sam—”

“I’m not Sam. I’m Samyaza Azikiel—”

“Sam for short.”

His eyes narrow. “We angels do not shorten our names. Our names are sacred.”

“Great, so you’ll be the first angel with a nickname.”

He sighs in frustration. “Do what you want, but here’s the real deal.” He snaps his fingers.

Out of nowhere, a book appears, floating in the air between us.

“This,” he says, gesturing dramatically, “is thy Book of Life. Well, your Book of Life. It’s the 17th Volume.”

I stare at the cover, my name etched on it. Gino Han Edition, Volume 17.
“Book of Life? My life?”

Sam nods. “Be careful with it. Unlike me, people can see and touch that book.”

I glance around nervously, holding the book close. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

Before I can ask more questions, I turn to look at Sam — but he’s already gone.

“Sam?” I call out, but there’s no answer.

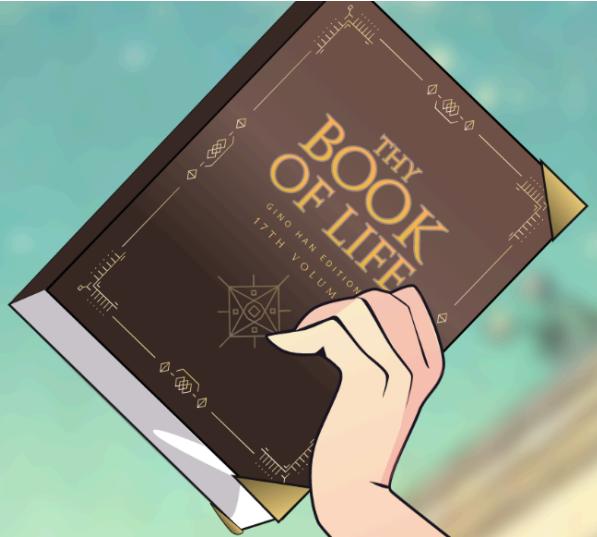
“Of course, he’s gone,” I mutter.

Then I hear her voice. “Ginoooooo!”

Oh no. I don’t even need to turn around to know who it is. Yumi is running toward me, her usual wide grin on her face.

“How’s school?” she asks, slinging an arm around my shoulders like she always does.

Her eyes immediately catch the book in my hands. “What’s this?” Before I can stop her, she grabs it.



“Don’t touch that!” I snatch it back quickly.

She teases me, pinching my cheek. “Your diary, huh? Does it say who your crush is?”

This is Yumi Watson, my childhood friend. We’ve known each other since kindergarten when I tried to save her from bullies. I ended up getting bullied instead, but it’s fine. That day was the start of our friendship, and we’ve been close ever since.

When my mom died, my dad changed. He became a drunk, leaving me alone in the city after we moved. I was 12 when it happened, and I can’t remember exactly how Mom died. Dad said it was a car accident. After that, he left me here with the Watsons, and I’ve been living by myself ever since. He sends money, but I haven’t seen him in years. At least I have Yumi and her family.

As usual, I join the Watsons for dinner, then return to my room. Lying on my bed, I stare up at the ceiling, feeling restless. It isn’t a normal day — not after everything that happened.

I reach for my bag and pull out the book. Book of Life, huh?

“Let’s see what this is all about,” I mutter, flipping it open to the first page. The date reads January 19, 2020, Sunday — my birthday, just two months ago.

“I woke up to Yumi banging on my door, screaming ‘Happy Birthday, Gino!’ Then we went downstairs to the kitchen where Aunt Helen was baking a cake for me,” I read out loud.

I blink. “This is exactly what happened on my birthday.”

Curiosity gets the better of me. I flip to the next page. January 20, 2020, Monday. I arrive late at school because of yesterday’s events.

I stare in disbelief. “Shit.”

I hurriedly turn to today’s date: March 26, 2020, Thursday.

Paragraph 5: I meet Sam, my Guardian Angel. While walking home, he gives me the book called the Book of Life.

My pulse quickens. No way. I skim down.

“7:25 p.m. I rise from my bed, then grab the Book of Life. I read it.”

I look around the room anxiously, feeling watched. “Holy shit.” It feels like someone is observing me from above.

“I look up and around me. Then I hear the sound of an ambulance.”

Just as I read that, the wail of an ambulance siren fills the air outside my window. My heart races.

“I walk to the window while still reading the book.”

I get up, my legs moving on their own, and walk over to the window.

I continue reading, “I look outside, and I see a tree getting struck by lightning.”

I stare out the window. Two minutes pass, and nothing happens. I scoff, shaking my head. “This book is bs.”

Suddenly, a loud crack of thunder echoes through the air. I freeze.

The book slips from my hands and falls to the ground, its pages glowing.

I slowly turn back to the window — and there it is. The tree outside has been split in half, burning leaves fluttering in the wind.

I back away, glancing at the book lying on the floor. “First, an angel. Now, a fortune-telling book?” This is beyond insane.

As far as I understand, it has to be recording everything that happens, is happening, and will ever happen in my life. And if it’s the 17th Volume, nonetheless, the last page would be...

Page 366.

Wait, Page 366? Is 2020 a leap year?



So each page equals one day.

“Pope’s poop, Sam, you’ve gotta be kidding me.”

The next morning, I’m walking to school, still holding the book. Today is March 27, Friday. Let’s see what the book says for today.

“A dog will get hit by a bus.”

Ow.

As I walk, I spot a bus coming down the road. Then I see a dog running toward it, and my stomach twists.

Without thinking, I rush up to the nearest pedestrian. “Excuse me, miss, is that your dog?”

She turns around in surprise. “Wiggles? What are you doing here, dummy?” She scoops him up just as the bus rolls past.

“Thanks!” she calls after me. “I can’t imagine what would’ve happened.”

Your dog could’ve died, idiot. As I continue walking, I feel a distressing thought. I’ve just changed the course of events in the book.

Back at school, I flip through the pages again. Sure enough, the text is fading and reshaping.

“I save a dog from its death.”

The text is changing because of what I did. I stopped the supposed accident from happening, so the book changes its course. In other words, I’ve changed the future.

Mother of God, I’ve changed the future.

But based on Newton’s Third Law of Motion — every action has a reaction. So I’ve changed things.

What did I change? What will happen today?

“By the end of the day, I get beaten up by Lee Ji Yu, the school thug.”

What?!

As if on cue, I spot him — Lee Ji Yu — picking on some poor nerd. This day is about to get worse.

Chapter 3 – The Past is Present

Flashback

The memory rushes back with vivid clarity: A group of children surrounds a girl, their laughter cruel as they snatch away her teddy bear.

“Hey, give it back, that's mine!” she pleads, her voice trembling.

“No,” the bully responds with a sneer, clutching the stuffed toy like a trophy.

I step in, my own anger flaring. “Give it back to her.”

The next thing I know, fists are flying, and I'm taking the blows meant for her. The girl looks on, her eyes wide with a mix of fear and gratitude.

“Thank you for rescuing Mr. Snugglebug. He's my only friend. I don't want to lose him,” she says, her voice barely above a whisper.

I smile through the pain, feeling a warmth in my chest. “Don't worry. From now on, you'll have two friends—Mr. Snufflebug and me.”

“Really?!” Her face lights up with hope.

“Yes,” I assure her.

End of Flashback

I snap back to the present, confused and a bit disoriented. “That's when I met Yumi. Why am I remembering that all of a sudden?”

I see Yu, the school thug, towering over a nerd. He's pushing him around, his face twisted into a sneer. Anger flares up inside me again.

“Hey, get your hands off him,” I command, my voice wavering slightly.

Yu turns, his expression one of mock surprise. “Huh? What did you say?”

I gulp, sweat forming on my brow. “I said, get your hands off him.”

Yu’s lips curl into a smirk. “Why? What are you gonna do? Fart on me?” He and his gang burst into laughter.

My heart races. “You’re the one who’s pathetic. Bullying weak ones just because you’ve got a bunch of douchebags backing you up—nothing’s more pathetic than that.”

The bullies gasp in mock horror. “Oooohhh. Brave.”

Yu’s face darkens, his eyes narrowing. “So you chose death.” His voice is a low growl.

He swings a punch, and I’m sent sprawling across the ground. My body feels heavy, each hit landing with a bone-jarring thud. The bullies’ laughter echoes in my ears, mingling with the gasps of onlookers.

Eun Ae watches from the sidelines, her face a mix of worry and concern.

Yu stands over me, his fists clenched, his face a mask of rage. “You’re dead.”

But before he could continue, a voice cut through the tension. "What is this commotion?"

I looked up to see Mr. Holt, standing in front of me. Yu and the others scattered, leaving me on the ground, beaten and bruised.

"Hi, Mr. Holt," I muttered weakly.

"Mr. Gino Han, come by my office."

He didn’t give me much of a choice, dragging me to the guidance office. I could barely think straight. All I could do was worry about my scholarship. This was it, I thought. This was how I’d lose everything.

Guidance Office

I sit slumped in the guidance office, my face bruised and throbbing. The weight of my situation presses down on me. “This is the end,” I mutter, sighing deeply. “My scholarship’s gone.”

The door creaks open, and I glance up, hoping for a miracle. A teacher walks in, his presence adding to my anxiety.

“Mr. Perez, this is Gino Han from the Seniors. He’s the one in the viral video,” Mr. Holt announces.

“Viral video?” I ask.

Holt nods. “Gino, this is Mr. Perez, teacher-in-charge of Richmond University’s group representatives for the Interhigh Dance Competition.”

“Dance Competition?” I echo, pulling out my phone and checking the video that’s been making waves online.

The video shows me... well, looking incredibly awkward but somehow managing to pull off some unexpected moves. My heart sinks. “Oh no.” I saw myself doing the moon-walk, with some music edited on to it.

Mr. Perez, a man with an air of authority, extends a hand. “Nice to meet you, Mr. Han. I never expected Richmond University to have such talent.”

“Nice to meet you too, sir, but I’m afraid this is a misunderstanding,” I say, trying to brush off the awkwardness.

Mr. Holt chimes in, “Gino, participating in the competition will free you from tuition fees for your remaining semesters. You won’t have to worry about maintaining your scholarship requirements. And if you win, it guarantees a full scholarship for your college career at any school of your choice.”

“But sir, I don’t know how to dance. That video was just a coincidence,” I protest.

Mr. Perez chuckles. “Well, it seems Mr. Han is not only talented but also humble. That’s a good thing.”

The door opens again, and Eun Ae steps in. Her presence is almost as surprising as Mr. Perez’s offer.

“Eun Ae?” I exclaim, recognizing her.

“Sir,” Eun Ae greets with a bow.

Mr. Perez introduces her, “This is Eun Ae, a senior and the president of the dance club on campus.”

Suddenly, Sam materializes out of nowhere, grinning. “There’s your girl.”

“Sam?” I scowl at the familiar face. “Can you stop popping in and out randomly?”

“Oh well, it looks like you’ve made a connection,” Sam says cheerfully.

“Shut up,” I snap, my frustration growing.

Mr. Perez looks at me expectantly. “So, have you made up your mind, Mr. Han?”

I hesitate, caught between confusion and pressure. “Uh...”

Sam’s voice interrupts my thoughts, “Just say yes.”

“Do you like her, right? Right? Right?” Sam continues, almost in a singsong.

“Yes!” I blurt out, then wince at my outburst. “Now shut up!”

Everyone in the room looks at me, puzzled. Shit. I said it out loud.

Mr. Perez raises an eyebrow. “Yes?”

I stammer, “Yes, I mean, no.”

“Pardon?”

“Yes, no.”

“Uh, yes no?”

Eun Ae giggles, which only adds to my embarrassment.

I try to gather my thoughts, looking at Eun Ae, then at Mr. Holt, then back at Mr. Perez. “I mean...”

Sam’s voice, annoyingly persistent, echoes in my mind. “C’mon Gino, this is your only chance to get to know her. All you have to do is say yes.”

“Shut up, Sam,” I mutter under my breath.

After a deep sigh, I finally resign. “Okay, I’ll do it. I’m going to audition for the competition.”

“That’s my boy,” Sam says, sounding satisfied.

Mr. Holt smiles, and Eun Ae’s lips curve into a smile as well.

Mr. Perez claps his hands. “Great. Miss Eun Ae, please assist Mr. Han in filling out the form.”

“Yes sir,” Eun Ae replies, bowing.

I take a deep breath, trying to muster the courage. “Hey, will you go out with me to a coffee shop nearby for some Vanilla Sweet Cream Cold Brew tonight at 8 pm?”

Eun Ae looks at me, puzzled. “You’re familiar. You’re the salad guy from yesterday.”

“Salad guy? No, that wasn’t me. That was a total loser,” I defend, flustered.

“Can you please finish filling out the form so I can leave?” Eun Ae asks, looking at her watch.

“Yeah, sure,” I reply quickly, scribbling the last details.

As Eun Ae tries to take the form, I hold it back. “So, will you go out with me to a coffee shop nearby for some Vanilla Sweet Cream Cold Brew tonight at 8 pm?”

“Did you just repeat your question with the exact same words?” Eun Ae asks, raising an eyebrow.

“No, I didn’t. It’s really different. I said ‘Hey’ first, but ‘So’ later—same thought, though. It’s not like I prepared that question for a week or anything. Totally not,” I ramble, flustered.

Eun Ae sighs. “Um. Okay?”

“Okay? So you will go out with me?” I press.

“No,” Eun Ae says, grabbing the form and turning to leave.

“Shit. This isn’t going to be easy, Sam,” I mutter, feeling defeated.

“I know,” Sam responds sympathetically.

I glance at Sam, who is now conspicuously naked. “Hey, can you put some clothes on?”

I blink, realizing the absurdity of the situation. “Wait, did I just audition for a dance competition?”

“Yep, you just did,” Sam confirms, looking pleased with himself.

“How could a nerd like me possibly dance?” I wonder aloud.

Chapter 4 – Unfit Fate

Dance Hall

The dance hall is alive with energy. Eun Ae and her crew are immersed in a montage of intricate dance moves, each step resonating with a sense of purpose and excitement. It's like watching a well-choreographed scene from a movie, only it's happening right in front of me.

Someone leans in and whispers something in Eun Ae's ear, and she takes center stage. She clears her throat and addresses the group.

"So as you can see," Eun Ae starts, her voice carrying authority, "the Interhigh Dance Competition is coming up. Unfortunately, Richmond University has never won in many years. That's why Mr. Perez and the School Board are offering free tuition fees to all participants, and a full scholarship for college if we win."

Her words hang in the air, and the dance group listens intently. I can't help but feel a mix of admiration and apprehension. Eun Ae is not just a dancer; she's a leader, and it's evident in how she commands attention.

Eun Ae continues, "As the President this year, I promise you, we will be going home with the victory. But that won't happen if we don't work together."

The crew erupts in cheers.

"Yes!"

"That's our Eun Ae!"

I stand there, taking it all in. So this is what Eun Ae is—determined, passionate, and remarkably charismatic. I find myself lost in her intensity.

Sam, ever the practical joker, nudges me. “I find it really weird that you’re so focused on this while you’re disrespecting your teachers during class hours.”

I raise an eyebrow. “First of all, I don’t mean to disrespect teachers. It just happens that I already know the lesson and find it boring to listen to things repeatedly. And secondly, this is Eun Ae we’re talking about.”

Eun Ae turns her attention to the group, her focus now shifting. “So now, we’re looking for a male talent lead for our performance. That’s why these people here on my left side have come to audition. So who wants to go first?”

Sam, with his usual pushy demeanor, gives me a nudge. “You should go first, kid. Impress her.”

I shake my head. “No. I don’t even know how to dance.”

Sam is relentless. “Just go.”

“No, I’ll wait for the perfect moment.”

“Make the moment perfect.” He pushes me forward.

I protest, “Wait, Sam, no.” But he keeps nudging me until I’m standing right in front of Eun Ae.

She notices me and raises an eyebrow. I force a smile, feeling awkward under the gaze of everyone in the room.

Eun Ae nods. “Okay, so we now have a volunteer.”

“You’re Gino Han, right?” she asks.

I nod. “Ah yes.”

I can hear murmurs among the crew.

“Is that the guy from the viral video?”

“Yeah, that’s why he looks familiar.”

“I’m glad he auditioned.”

“With him and Eun Ae, we’ll probably win the competition.”

My heart sinks a little. They’re expecting a lot from me. Damn you, angel—if you’re even real—this feels more like a curse than a blessing.

Sam, ever the tease, makes an Oppah hand sign while giving me a knowing look.

Eun Ae asks, “So what will you dance for us?”

“Uh,” I respond, trying to come up with something that won’t make me look like a total fool.

Suddenly, the music starts—a waltz. I look at Sam, who is grinning like a Cheshire cat.

“Really, Sam?” I ask, glancing at him.

Sam just smiles, making a playful hand gesture.

Eun Ae looks at me, confused. “That?”

“Yes, that. That’s that,” I confirm.

“But that’s a waltz,” Eun Ae points out.

“Exactly. That’s what I love to dance.”

She looks puzzled. “I mean, it needs two people to perform.”

I extend my hand toward her. “Oh yes, would you like to have a dance with me?”

I ask, hoping she’ll take my hand. Eun Ae blushes slightly but shakes her head.



“No, just perform something solo,” she says, crossing her arms.

Sam facepalms, and Eun Ae walks over to take a seat.

I stand there, feeling like an idiot. What was I thinking?

The pulsating beat of "Smooth Criminal" fills the dance hall as I watch the crew perform with intense precision. Their moves are electrifying, and I can't help but feel a twinge of jealousy. How did I end up here, dancing with a voodoo doll?

A flashback whisks me back to my room. I'm pacing endlessly, mumbling to myself. “How can I dance? I'm not a dancer. Dancing is probably the last thing I'll ever do.”

Sam, with his usual air of mischief, is rummaging through my stuff.
“Don't worry, I've got an idea.”

Before I can react, Sam yanks a strand of my hair. “Owwww!” I scream in surprise.

“Do you have any toys in here?” Sam asks, his eyes gleaming with mischief.

“Do I look like a kid?” I retort.

Sam's eyes light up as he spots a Gingerbread plush. “This one will do,” he announces, picking it up.

I glance at the plush, then back at Sam. “Wait, that is...”

“Yes, a voodoo,” he says with a grin.

“No, I was about to say a Gingerbread plush.”

Sam continues, unfazed. “Yes, this is obviously a Gingerbread plush, and I will use it as a Voodoo Doll.”

“A Voodoo Doll? How is that supposed to solve our problem?” I ask, genuinely confused.

Sam begins wrapping the strand of hair around the plush. “Ta-da!”

Suddenly, I’m in the middle of a dance move, but it’s Sam controlling me with the voodoo doll. It’s bizarre, but somehow, it works. I’m dancing, and the crowd is astounded. I end with a dramatic pose, and the applause is deafening.

Eun Ae looks on, her expression unreadable. It’s as if she’s struggling to believe what she just saw.

As Sam and I walk away, he’s munching on donuts, clearly pleased with himself. “I still can’t believe it,” I say, shaking my head.

“Yes, you did well. You’ll probably get chosen,” Sam replies between bites.

“No, not that,” I say, still preoccupied.

Sam looks up from his donut. “Hmm? Hey, you want some?”

“No,” I reply.

“Good. I can eat it all,” Sam chuckles, stuffing another donut into his mouth.

“Have you noticed?” I say, more seriously now. “Everyone was clapping and applauding, but Eun Ae’s expression was just...off. It felt like she couldn’t believe I could pull that off. Her reaction seemed genuine.”

Sam swallows. “You’re probably just overthinking it.”

“No, I’m serious. After my performance, I watched her, and she looked like she was in shock. It was almost as if she knew something about me that I don’t.”

“Maybe she knows you already,” Sam suggests.

“Knows me? Seriously? I don’t even have any girl friends at school,” I protest.

“Why don’t you check the book about her?” Sam proposes.

I nod, intrigued. “Hmm. That’s a good idea. If she’s in the book, I wonder what page she’s on.”

As I flip through the pages, my curiosity quickly turns to shock. “Wait, what?” I say aloud.

“What’s wrong?” Sam asks.

“Eun Ae is going to get caught stealing at a pawnshop tonight and end up in jail,” I read, my voice tinged with disbelief.

Sam looks puzzled. “Stealing? So that cute girl is a klepto. The irony. Haha.”

“No,” I insist. “She can’t be. There must be a mistake. Eun Ae would never steal anything.”

“The Book of Life is never wrong,” Sam says solemnly. “What’s written happens.”

Just then, Lucas Park, a classmate I barely know, runs up to us, panting. “Hey, Gino Han!”

I turn to face him. “Yes?”

Lucas, catching his breath, continues. “I just wanted to thank you for rescuing me yesterday.”

“You were getting bullied by Lee Ji Yu,” I remind him.

Lucas nods. “Yes. I sit behind you in History Class. I’m Lucas Park.”

“Lucas, you can just call me Gino,” I say, trying to be friendly.

“Gino, if you ever need help with anything, just let me know. I’ll do my best to help,” Lucas offers earnestly.

“Wait. You’ll help me with anything?” I ask, intrigued.

“Yes. Anything possible,” Lucas confirms.

“Well then,” I say, “let’s save Eun Ae.”

Lucas looks alarmed. “Save Eun Ae? Is she in danger?”

“She will be,” I reply.

“But she’s right there,” Lucas says, pointing to Eun Ae, who’s chatting with her friends.

“She’s safe for now,” I say, though the uncertainty lingers in my mind.

“What do you mean?” Lucas asks, puzzled.

“She’s safe for now,” I repeat, walking away.

Lucas calls after me, “Hey, care to explain? Can you even hear me?”

I don’t turn back, lost in thought as I walk away with Sam, leaving Lucas standing there, confused.

Chapter 5 – Revved Revelation

I slide into the driver's seat, my mind racing through the latest series of absurdities. Lucas takes the passenger seat, and his anxiety is visible.

“My Dad’s really gonna kill me,” Lucas mutters, staring out the window. “He doesn’t want me to drive until I turn 18.”

I glance at him with a smirk. “Isn’t that the reason why I’m driving?”

Lucas looks over at me, his face a mix of worry and guilt. “That’s not it. We’re using his car without permission.”

I shrug nonchalantly. “I don’t know what got into you, but you agreed to this just before we came here.”

“Yes,” Lucas snaps, “because you played the ‘help me with anything’ card.”

I chuckle. “Well, if I remember correctly, someone offered me that card in the first place.”

Lucas groans. “I know!! I’m such an idiot.”

He hesitates before asking, “How are you so sure that Eun Ae’s gonna come out from that pawnshop around this time?”

“I just know,” I reply, trying to sound confident.

“You just know?” Lucas repeats, clearly skeptical.

Just then, Eun Ae bursts out of the pawnshop, her face a mask of panic as she runs.

“Well, well, well, here’s our girl.”



I can't help but laugh at the sight of the guard, his face twisted in frustration. "Look at the guard's face. He looks so upset. Haha."

"Gino, this isn't funny," Lucas says urgently.

I start the car, my grin widening. "Let's get Eun Ae." I turn the steering wheel with a flourish.

Lucas's concern is visible. "I don't really think we should be doing this."

"Of course we should," I counter, my voice steady.

"We might end up in jail," Lucas says, his voice tinged with panic.

"Only if we get caught," I respond with a shrug.

Suddenly, the car lurches as it hits a wall.

"Oops. I'm sorry," I mutter, feeling a twinge of guilt.

"Oh God, Gino, don't break the car," Lucas exclaims. "This is a convertible. Do you know how much this costs?"

"My bad," I say, feeling a bit sheepish.

The wheel stops its erratic spinning, and I call out, "Eun Ae! C'mon in!"

Eun Ae peers through the window, her confusion evident. "Gino Han?"

"Get in! Hurry!" Lucas urges, waving her in.

Eun Ae jumps into the car, her brow furrowed in confusion. "What are you guys doing here?"

"We're here to rescue you," Lucas says, his tone firm.

"Rescue me?" Eun Ae repeats, bewildered.

I jump in with a hasty correction. "No. I mean, we're just driving around, and we saw you running. You looked like you needed help. So, yeah, we're rescuing you... coincidentally."

“Coincidentally?” Eun Ae echoes, her skepticism clear.

“Yes. Right, Lucas?” I ask, glancing at my co-conspirator.

“Uh, guys, I think he’s catching up,” Lucas says, his voice rising in alarm.

The police guard is still hot on our tail, his determination unwavering. “I will catch you, in the name of duty. Running is not a problem.”

Eun Ae turns to me, a hint of desperation in her voice. “Hey! Gino Han! Can you make this thing go any faster?”

“Of course, milady,” I say with a grin, pressing the accelerator.

The car speeds up, and Lucas’s eyes widen in panic. “Oh my God.”

Eun Ae glances back at the police guard, now more comical than threatening. “His face looks so upset. Haha.”

“Told ya,” I say, trying to suppress my laughter.

The police guard’s wig flies off in the wind, revealing a shiny bald head.

“Holy shit,” I exclaim.

“HE’S BAAAALD!” Lucas howls with laughter.

“This is so hilarious,” Eun Ae agrees, joining in the laughter.

As we speed away, the sound of our combined laughter mingles with the roar of the engine. It’s a chaotic, absurd moment, but I can’t help but revel in the ridiculousness of it all.

We pull up beside the street, the car coming to a screeching halt. Lucas and I are still laughing, unable to get over the absurdity of being chased by a bald police officer in a wig.

“I really can’t believe we got chased by a police,” Lucas says, shaking his head in disbelief.

“A bald police with a wig, hahaha,” I reply, my laughter bubbling up again.

But as I glance over at Eun Ae, I notice her sadness, and my amusement quickly dims.

“Hey, are you okay?” I ask, trying to gauge her mood.

Eun Ae’s expression is grave. “You guys need to go home.”

“What happened?” I press, my curiosity piqued.

“Why are you getting chased?” Lucas asks, mirroring my concern.

Eun Ae hesitates, her eyes darting around. “I can’t tell you. I don’t want you to be in trouble.”

I give her a dry look. “We already are.”

Lucas chimes in, “Yes, and I think it’s fair enough to tell us because we saved you.”

I nod in agreement. “Good one.”

Lucas and I high-five, our camaraderie evident.

Eun Ae looks at us, conflicted. “Okay.”

She pulls out a cellphone and holds it up. “I stole this.”

I raise an eyebrow. “A cellphone?”

Eun Ae nods, her voice tinged with anguish. “This isn’t just an ordinary phone. It’s my Dad’s phone. He’s cheating on my Mom, and this phone is the only evidence. I overheard him talking with a woman named Sasha. I just couldn’t believe he could do that. He was such a perfect father.”

Lucas looks taken aback. “So how did his phone end up at a pawnshop?”

Eun Ae’s face hardens. “Luckily, his phone got stolen by a thief on the sidewalk.”

“Luckily?” I repeat, raising an eyebrow.

Eun Ae nods. “And I had a hunch that thieves are going to sell or pawn things they’ve stolen.”

“So instead of buying it back, you decided to steal it yourself?” Lucas asks, his tone incredulous.

“I had to,” Eun Ae insists. “If I bought it the next day, the pawnshop staff would surely erase all the data before selling it.”

“Wow. You’ve really thought this through,” I remark, impressed.

Lucas takes the phone from Eun Ae. “Let me open it.”

He turns on the phone, the screen lighting up.

“It needs a pin to unlock,” Lucas says.

Eun Ae hesitates before providing the pin. “It’s his birthday. 122569.”

“Sixty-nine... interesting,” Lucas mutters as he enters the pin.

“Wait, his birthday is Christmas?” I ask, astonished.

“Yes,” Eun Ae confirms.

“But... Jesus is...” I start, only to be cut off by Eun Ae’s solemn nod.

Lucas manages to unlock the phone. “I’m in.”

“Look for messages or names or something,” Eun Ae instructs.

Lucas scrolls through the phone and finds something that makes his eyes widen.

“Uh, guys, I think you should see this,” he says, turning the phone around.

On the screen, a video plays. The sultry, familiar sounds make me gasp.

“Holy shit, Lucas, turn it off,” I exclaim, my face flushed.

Eun Ae looks horrified as the video continues.

“Okay, okay,” Lucas says, quickly shutting it off.

“That wasn’t my Mom’s voice. That was Sasha,” Eun Ae says, her voice trembling.

I look at Eun Ae, trying to offer reassurance.

“Look, a text message,” Lucas says, pointing to the screen.

“Read it,” Eun Ae urges.

Lucas reads aloud, “How’s your work, honey? Be sure you won’t be late. The venue is the Grand Hall Crown Jewel Hotel. Happy Anniversary xoxo.”

Eun Ae snatches the phone from him. “I should go.”

“No, Eun Ae,” I say firmly.

“I must tell that home-wrecker to stay away from my Dad,” Eun Ae insists.

I try to calm her down. “Eun Ae, I think Sasha might not be a home-wrecker. I think she might just think your Dad’s away on work or something.”

“Yeah, I think so too,” Lucas agrees.

“So it’s all my Dad?” Eun Ae asks, her eyes filled with hurt.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly.

“Well then,” Eun Ae declares with newfound determination, “I’m gonna kill Dad.”

“Wait, what?” I exclaim, caught off guard.

“Come on, guys, let’s go to the Crown Jewel Hotel,” Eun Ae commands.

“Where’s that sudden spirit coming from?” I ask, bewildered.

Lucas interjects, “It’s Crown ‘Jewel’ Hotel.”

“Gem, jewel, whatever. I’ll kick their asses,” Eun Ae says resolutely.

I’m glad to see her spirit lifted despite the gravity of her situation. She’s one strong girl.

I open the car door, ready to let Lucas take over.

“No, Gino, you’re not driving anymore. You crashed it last time, remember?” Lucas says firmly.

“Okay, you take the wheel,” I concede, stepping aside.

“Finally, I can drive!” Lucas says with a grin.

After all this chaos, his biggest excitement is getting to drive. Why didn’t he say something earlier?

The car engine roars to life, and Lucas turns on the radio.

Take Me Home, Country Roads begins to play, a strangely comforting tune amidst the chaos of our evening.

Samyaza Azikiel Von Malach’s POV

I hover above the scene, my gaze fixed on the car below. Gino and his friends are in the midst of their chaotic, awesome adventure, and I can’t help but chuckle softly. There’s something wonderfully reckless about their antics, and it’s always a pleasure to see Gino so alive with excitement.

“I’m so glad you’re having fun, kiddo,” I murmur to myself, the words tinged with a mix of affection and amusement. It’s moments like these that remind me of the sheer unpredictability of Gino’s life. Watching him from above, I can’t help but feel a sense of pride—despite the mess and madness, he’s finding joy.

But alas, my duties as a guardian angel are not confined to mere amusement. The weight of my responsibilities tugs at me. With a sigh, I shift my focus. “And now I gotta go to check Elizabeth,” I say, the gravity

of my words softened by a touch of old-world charm. Elizabeth, my beloved, is fraught with pain. Her battle with stage 3 cancer is a harsh reminder of the fragility of human life.

As I float away from the car and the laughter it contains, my heart aches with a different kind of sorrow. The lightness of Gino's world contrasts sharply with the heavy burden I carry for Elizabeth. I wish I could weave my celestial influence to ease her suffering, but the reality of her condition is harsh and unforgiving.

Chapter 6 – The Brightest Night

The moment the catchy beats of YMCA blast through the car's speakers, I'm instantly filled with energy. "No way! It's the YMCA!" I shout, pointing at the radio with sheer delight. This song is like an instant mood booster, and I'm ready to embrace every bit of it.

"Let's do it!" I exclaim, grabbing Gino's hand with a grin that says I'm all about having fun right now.

Gino's face turns a deep shade of red, and I can't help but laugh. "Let's do what?" he stammers, clearly caught off guard.

"The YMCA!" I say, as if it's the most obvious thing in the world.

"YMCA?" he repeats, looking like he's trying to process what's happening.

I turn to Lucas, who's driving. "Hey Lucas, this is a convertible, right? Go open the roof."

Lucas looks bewildered. "Yes, okay I'll pull over."

"No, do it now," I insist, feeling the excitement bubbling up.

Lucas shakes his head, clearly anxious. "What? No. It's so dangerous. We can't just open it while driving."

"Come on, don't be a chicken," I tease, nudging him playfully.

Lucas is clearly freaked out about his dad's potential wrath but finally presses the button. The roof begins to retract, and I cheer, "Yay!"

I stand up, letting the wind whip through my hair, and beam at the world. "Yooahoo!" I shout, feeling like the queen of fun.

Gino is still watching me with wide eyes. "Hey Han, c'mon!" I call out, encouraging him.

Chapter 6 – The Brightest Night

"Hon?" he asks, still confused. Well, your last name - Han sounds like Hon, so I'll leave that up to your imagination.

"Come on, stand up. It's gonna be awesome," I say, my excitement barely contained.

Gino hesitates but eventually tries to stand. His hair flies backward in the wind, and he looks like he's in awe. "Wow," he says, looking amazed.

As he starts to wobble, I reach out and grab his hand. "Relax!" I say with a reassuring smile. "Hold this tight."

The wind is blowing our hair around, and we're both laughing and shouting. "Here it is!" I announce, feeling on top of the world.

"Turn the volume to the max!" I command, already knowing this is going to be epic.

Lucas cranks up the volume, and the chorus of YMCA fills the car.

"Y M C A!" I sing out, practically bursting with joy.

Gino joins in, his voice mingling with mine. "Y M C A!"

"That's it!" I cheer, encouraging him to sing louder.

Together, we belt out, "Y M C A!"

"Woohoo!" I shout, feeling absolutely alive.

Gino's smile is contagious, and I can't help but feel this is one of those perfect moments.

"You know," I say, feeling a little emotional, "I really love this feeling."

"What feeling?" Gino asks, his curiosity piqued.

"This. The road, the music, and a few awesome friends," I explain, my voice softening with genuine affection.



"We're awesome?" he asks, looking pleased.

"Of course you are!" I reply, grinning.

Lucas chimes in from the driver's seat, "Am I counted?"

"Just keep driving, we're having a moment here," Gino says. I can't stop laughing.

As I glance around, my eyes start to water a bit, the emotions from the moment hitting me harder than I expected.

Flashback

The same song plays, and I'm transported back in time. My dad's excitement is visible as he points at the radio. "Oh yes, it's the YMCA!" he exclaims, his face lighting up with joy.

He stands up in the car, a huge grin on his face. "Come on Cynthia, max out the volume."

Mom - in the driver seat - responds cheerfully, "Aye aye, Captain."

"What are you doing, honey? Stand up!" he says, urging me.

I'm a bit confused but follow Dad's lead.

"Like this?" I ask, standing up on the seat, a bit wobbly.

"Yeah," he confirms, his smile never fading. "Now hold the rear tight and feel the air smashing your face."

I giggle as the wind rushes around me.

"Now, let's sing it!" Dad says, his voice full of enthusiasm.

"YMCA!" he belts out.

"YMCA!" I join in, our voices blending.

"That's right!" Dad says proudly.

Together, we sing, "YMCA!"

End of Flashback

The memory wraps around me like a warm hug, making this moment with Gino and Lucas even more precious.

Gino Han's POV

The car rolls to a stop outside the Tattoo and Shoppe. The place has that vibe—rich people's hangout, all classy and fancy. Eun's already got her game face on. "It's a dining and wining for rich people," she says, eyes glinting with mischief. "So we guys need to look rich."

I shrug and respond, "Okay, let's do it."

Inside, the atmosphere feels a little off. The tattoo artist looks bored, slumped over the counter. "This day is a slack. We don't have customers. Is tattoo getting obsolete these days?" he grumbles.

The shop owner, lounging with a nonchalant attitude, replies, "Nah, come on, it's not yet midnight. Customers come here at midnight."

Just then, Lucas, Eun, and I walk in. The shop owner's gaze sharpens. "Hey! You can't shop here."

Lucas is quick to question. "Why not?"

Hesitating, the shop owner points to the sign on the door. "Haven't you seen the signboard? No minors allowed."

Lucas's voice drops to a low pitch. "What? We ain't minors."

The tattoo artist smirks. "Lowering your voice won't make you not minor."

Chapter 6 – The Brightest Night

Eun Ae steps in with her charm, “Please, we have money and we can afford to buy.”

The shop owner raises an eyebrow. “We need people who have money... and who are not minors.”

The tattoo artist adds, “We need to see some ID.”

Lucas shakes his head, clearly annoyed. “I don’t have one.”

Eun Ae chimes in, “We don’t have ID and we’re in a hurry.”

The shop owner’s patience wears thin. “Then you can’t shop here. Go out.”

I step forward, trying to reason with them. “Hey, look. We may look young, but we’re not minors. Though, we can’t force you to believe us. But can we get a chance to prove we’re not minors?”

The shop owner looks intrigued. “A chance?”

The tattoo artist seems a bit more open. “There might be.”

I can hear Lucas’s frustrated yells from outside. “No! No! Nooooooo!”

The tattoo artist shakes his head. “I haven’t even started yet.”

“NOOOOOOO!” Lucas runs out, clearly having a meltdown.

The tattoo artist turns to me. “So, how about you? Are you gonna continue?”

I hand over a piece of paper with the design. “Yes. I want this.”

A Moment Later

Eun Ae's waiting outside, looking a bit impatient. As I come out of the shop, she's already there. "You're done?"

"Yeah," I confirm.

Eun Ae smiles playfully. "Looks like Lucas bailed out."

"Yeah, he chickened out." I nod. "What tattoo did you get?"

"Here." She says, turning her back to me. "At my back, below the neck."

I glance at the tattoo. "It's a jellyfish."

Eun Ae's face lights up. "I love jellyfish. I wish they could fly. Haha."

"Well, in the aquatic world, they're already flying," I quip.

Eun Ae's eyes sparkle with excitement. "Really, I'd love to fly with them, up to the skyyy!"

"Guess you really like pink things," I comment.

Eun Ae shakes her head. "Wait, how about you? What have you got?"

I roll up my sleeve to reveal my tattoo. "This."

Eun Ae looks impressed. "That's... mind-matter?"

"No," I explain, "It's read as Mind over Matter. See the dash in the middle? That means 'over'."

"Oh, that's kinda cool," Eun Ae says.

"Yeah," I agree.

"And geeky." She adds.

Eun Ae grins and grabs my hand. "C'mon, we gotta get dressed up."

I can't deny that her holding my wrist feels nice, but it's right where my tattoo is, and it hurts. "Uh, okay."

As we head off to get ready, the tattoo artist and shop owner exchange glances.

The tattoo artist mutters, "Those kids seem to be so close to each other."

The shop owner nods. "They must be childhood friends."

Outside, Lucas waits while Eun tests a dress. I check myself in front of the mirror, adjusting my suit. I feel like I'm the first one here, and there's a certain anticipation in the air.

"Ow. These heels are something." Eun Ae finally emerges, and I can't help but be taken aback. She looks stunning, a true goddess in my eyes.

"You look so manly, Mr. Han," Eun Ae says, her eyes twinkling.

I try to keep my cool. "You look so beautiful, Ms. Ae."

"Thank you," she replies, her voice soft.

"My pleasure," I say, feeling genuinely happy.

We step outside together, and Lucas approaches, looking sheepish. "Hey, I'm sorry I chickened out."

"It's okay, buddy," I reassure him.

Eun Ae adds, "Just drive us to the Crown Gem Hotel."

Lucas corrects her, "It's Jewel."

"Whatever, chicken Lucas," Eun Ae teases.

Lucas huffs. "I'm not a chicken!"

I can't resist pointing it out. "You just said that yourself."

“Shut up!” Lucas snaps, but I can see the smile on his face.

As the car rolls down the road, I lean back, enjoying the ride, feeling like today’s been a blend of excitement and nostalgia.

Third Person POV

Just as the trio left, two police officers entered the shop.

The police officer asked, “Hey, have you seen three kids? One girl and two boys. They were driving in a yellow car.”

“Yes, they just left,” the shop owner confirmed.

The police officer continued, “Do you have any idea where they’re heading?”

Before answering, the tattoo artist inquired, “Do you guys like tattoos?”

Eun Ae’s POV

As we pull up to the Crown Jewel Hotel, Lucas mutters his usual bored, “We’re here.”

Before I can even think about opening the door, Gino’s already moving. He leans over and opens it for me, then casually offers me his hand. For whatever reason, there’s something about it—something in the way his hand feels solid and familiar in mine.

I take it without thinking, and there’s this easy comfort between us as I step out of the car. No big deal, just... natural. Like we’ve done this a thousand times, and it’s no news.

As we walk, his hand lingers for a second longer than necessary, and though neither of us acknowledges it, the air between us feels a little lighter. I don’t overthink it, because it’s Gino. The guy who’s always there

with a joke or some sarcastic comment, who somehow knows when to step up without making a big thing of it.

“So first,” I say, trying to stay focused, “we need to find my dad.”

Gino, ever the straight-faced jokester, raises an eyebrow. “I don’t know what he looks like.”

“He looks like me but, you know, a guy,” I say with a small smile, already anticipating his reply.

“Oh,” he says, deadpan as ever. “That should be easy.”

I roll my eyes and, out of habit, try to pinch him. He dodges, of course, like he always does, and shoots me that lazy grin that I can’t help but laugh at.

“I hate you,” I mutter, but there’s no heat behind it.

He raises a brow. “What did I do?”

“You and your sarcasm,” I say, shaking my head but smiling despite myself.

He just shrugs, his hands now tucked in his pockets as we walk side by side. No fanfare, no big gestures, just this... simple thing we’ve got. That’s what I like about Gino. He knows when to push my buttons but never too hard. He’s steady, even when I’m not, and somehow that makes everything feel easier.

Gino Han’s POV

We finally sit down at some fancy table. I try not to look like I’m too comfortable because I’m not. Fancy places like this are always too much effort. I’m a simple guy. Give me a comfy couch and Wi-Fi, and I’m golden.

Chapter 6 – The Brightest Night

The waiter walks up, all proper and formal, handing me the menu like it's a treasure map. "Here's our menu. Tonight's special is Charcoal Grilled Venison Round Steak."

Venison? Fancy, but my mind is already calculating the cost. "It's French cuisine?" I ask, more out of mild curiosity than actual interest.

"Yes," the waiter responds, like he's proud of it. "But it's cooked by our well-known Japanese chef, Chef Yukihira."

"Okay, we'll get that," Eun cuts in before I can protest. "And a bottle of champagne."

I stare at her, wondering if she's secretly lost her mind. Champagne? "We can't afford that," I say, half-joking, half-serious. I mean, I didn't exactly plan on blowing my savings on dinner tonight.

"So what?" she shrugs, like it's no big deal.

"We can't just eat and run."

Eun smirks. "Of course we do."

My jaw drops. "That'll be so embarrassing."

She laughs. "Only if we get caught."

And then, out of nowhere, a guy at nearby table strolls in, taking a seat. Eun spots him immediately, eyes lighting up like she's found gold.

"Dad," she says.

I turn around and, surprise surprise, he really does look like her. Well, this just got more interesting. "That's him? He actually looks like you," I say, genuinely impressed for once.

As if that wasn't enough, a lady walks in next. Eun gestures toward her. "And that's Sasha."

"Sasha?" I blink, taking in the sight. She's older than I expected. Like, way older. "Sasha's older than I thought."

Chapter 6 – The Brightest Night

Then it hits me. Wait. Wait***. ** I feel the shock creeping up my spine like ice. "Eun, don't tell me—"

Before I can stop her, Eun strides confidently toward them. She's fearless like that. I'd probably overthink everything for ten minutes before doing anything that bold.

And there it is. I sit back, watching this unfold, wondering how I ended up here.

"Hello, Sasha!" she greets cheerily. "Hello, *Dad*."

Chapter 7 – Predictably Unpredictable

There Eun is, standing right in front of Sasha and her dad, as I now realize, not quite the man I thought he was. The tension in the air is suffocating. I feel uneasy, unsure how this is going to go, but I already know it's not going to end well.

"Hello, Sasha," Eun says, her voice steady but charged with emotion. Then she turns to her dad. "Hello, Dad."

He looks caught off guard, like he didn't expect to see her. "Eun? What are you doing here?" There's a hint of fear in his voice, which only makes this situation worse.

Sasha, clearly confused, asks, "Jonathan, who is she?"

I finally catch up to them, feeling the weight of everything as I approach. I glance at the cake on the table—it says *Happy 16th Anniversary Honey*. My stomach tightens. I get it now. This isn't just some casual dinner. It's something much bigger, much messier.

Eun holds up her phone, her hands shaking. "This is why I'm here!" Her voice cracks, and I feel a pang of guilt. I wish I could have stopped her from coming this far, but now we're all in too deep.

I step closer to Eun, trying to calm her down. "Eun, let's go," I say softly, knowing full well she's not going to back down, but hoping she might listen. I can feel everyone's eyes on us now, watching the whole scene unfold. My heart sinks.

Her dad looks confused, maybe even a little scared. "My phone? How did you get that?"

Before he can say anything else, Sasha jumps in, sounding even more confused. "Jonathan Lim, explain to me what's going on."

And then Eun drops the truth. "For your information, miss, he's not Jonathan Lim. He's my father—Jonathan Ae."

Sasha's eyes widen. "What?"

I feel the weight of the room shift, like everything's about to collapse. I can barely breathe. "Oh no," I whisper under my breath. This is worse than I imagined.

Her dad stands up, his expression filled with regret. "Eun, let's talk about this some other time. I'll explain everything, I promise."

But Eun doesn't let him off that easily. She's holding back tears now. "No, Dad! You've been lying to me, and to Mom! Are you really going to destroy everything for this woman?" Her voice is filled with hurt, and I can't stand to see her like this.

I try to step in, but I don't know what to say. I wish I could somehow fix this, make it less painful for her, but I'm not sure how.

Her dad looks at Sasha, desperately trying to explain. "This is Sasha Lim, my wife."

Eun freezes. I can see the shock on her face. "What?"

He takes a deep breath, clearly dreading what he's about to say next. "I'm sorry, Eun, but I'm not Jonathan Ae. Your mother, Cynthia, and I were never married. You've always had your mother's last name. We planned to tell you everything when you turned 18 so you could have a normal life."

I can feel my heart drop. I didn't see that coming. None of us did.

Sasha's reaction is immediate—she slaps him hard across the face. "So you've been cheating on me all this time?"

Her dad stammers, "No, honey! I'm not—" But it's no use.

Sasha shakes her head, eyes full of betrayal. "I can't believe this." She storms out, leaving him standing there, looking more defeated than I've ever seen anyone. He quickly follows her. "Honey, wait!" he calls after her, and then he turns back to Eun, his voice full of desperation. "Eun, you could've talked to me in private."

He runs off after Sasha, and I’m left standing next to Eun, feeling helpless. She’s completely frozen, her face pale as she stares blankly ahead. Then, quietly, as if the weight of everything is too much to bear, she whispers, “So we’re the second family. I’m an illegitimate child.” The words barely make it out of her mouth before she breaks down, tears streaming down her face.

I want to say something, anything, to make this easier for her, but all I can manage is a quiet, “I’m sorry. I figured it out when I saw Sasha, but you’d already approached them.”

She keeps crying, and I stand there, feeling useless. I don’t know how to comfort people—not like this. But seeing her so broken, all I want is to be there for her, even if I don’t have the right words. I sit beside her, hoping my presence at least gives her some small sense of support.

It’s all I can offer.

Eun Ae’s POV

Flashback

The memory hits me like a wave crashing over me. I can see it so clearly—Dad standing by the door, bag in hand, ready to leave. I was just a kid back then, but even then, something about his constant leaving bothered me. I remember how small and uncertain I felt as I watched him get ready to disappear once again.

“Dad, where are you going?” I had asked, my voice tiny but hopeful. Back then, I didn’t understand why he was always leaving. I just wanted him to stay.

“I’ll be going to work,” he had said with that usual calm, reassuring tone. It was always work. Everything revolved around it.

“When will you be coming back?” I had asked, hoping it wouldn’t be too long.

“I’ll be back next week, honey.”

Next week. It felt like forever back then. I still remember how my heart sank a little at his words. “But you just came here last night,” I had protested, my voice tinged with disappointment.

“Yeah, daddy has been busy. Don’t worry, when I come back, we’ll go for a music ride,” he promised, and for a moment, I had felt a spark of hope. A music ride, just the two of us. I loved those trips where we’d play my favorite songs and he’d tell me stories about his younger days.

“And we’ll go fishing,” I added, not ready to let go of the conversation just yet. I needed more assurance. More promises that we’d spend time together.

“Yes, of course,” he had replied, almost too quickly. But I held onto it like it was the truth.

“And barbecuing.” I wasn’t done listing all the things I wanted us to do, as if piling them up would make him stay longer when he came back.

“Yes, yes. We’ll do everything you want, okay?” He kissed me on the forehead, and for a moment, I believed him. I wanted to believe him so badly.

Then he started walking to the door, and that knot in my chest started to tighten. I wasn’t ready to let him go just yet. “Will you not kiss Mom too?” I had asked, more out of curiosity than anything. But the way he stiffened for just a second... even my younger self noticed it.

“I’m in a hurry, honey,” he said, brushing it off and walking out the door.

And just like that, he was gone again.

Now, looking back on that moment, I see it with different eyes. I was too young to understand it back then, but something wasn’t right. That constant leaving, the rushed goodbyes, and how he avoided Mom in those final moments—it all makes sense now. Back then, I was just a girl who wanted her dad to stay. Now, I realize there was always something more beneath the surface, something I couldn’t see.

But that moment... it still stings. It still leaves me wondering what could've been if things were different. If he had chosen to stay just a little bit longer.

Gino Han's POV

The night feels colder than it should, even with the bonfire crackling beside us. The car is parked a few feet away, its dark silhouette barely visible against the night sky. We're off the road, far enough to avoid any passing headlights but close enough that the sound of the occasional car breaks through the stillness. The firelight flickers across Eun Ae's face, casting soft, trembling shadows that mirror the heaviness in her words.

I sit across from her, watching as she struggles to speak, her voice low and strained. The warmth of the fire does little to fight off the chill creeping up my spine as she reveals the weight of her family's secret. I can feel the emotion rolling off her—anger, confusion, betrayal—but mostly pain. The kind that digs deep and doesn't let go.

"Ever since I was a kid, I've never seen my parents kiss. And now I know why," Eun says, her voice trembling. "My Dad was a perfect father. Even if he's busy, he's always there for my important occasions—family day, graduation day, dance recital—he's always there. I just can't believe he could do something like this... this thing called 'cheating.' I've always hated people who cheat. Turns out, I'm the product of it."

I can't stand seeing her like this. "No, I don't think you are. There are always untold parts of the story. Whatever it is, your mom and dad must have their reasons for staying in this setup."

Her eyes search mine, hopeful. "You think so?"

"Of course," I reply. "I haven't met your mom, but I believe she wouldn't do anything to harm you."

"That's a lot of faith for someone who hasn't met my mom," she says, a hint of skepticism in her voice.

“I don’t need to,” I say, trying to offer her comfort. “A mother’s love is unconditional. They’ll do anything to keep their children safe. That’s how love works, right?”

She smiles faintly, a mix of gratitude and sadness. “Thank you.”

I feel a flush of warmth on my cheeks. “What? For what?”

“For saving my ass at the pawnshop. For accompanying me to the hotel. For washing the dishes because we had nothing to pay, haha.” She mentions, and I can’t help but smile at the memory of scrubbing those dishes.

“And thank you for tonight,” she adds softly.

“Lucas was there too,” I remind her, though I’m touched by her words. “And yeah, thanks for the YMCA.”

Eun giggles, and then her expression turns curious. “Why are you doing this?”

I’m taken aback. “Why am I doing this?”

“This,” she clarifies, “what you did tonight. We barely know each other.”

I open my mouth to respond when Lucas bursts in, holding his boom box triumphantly. “Hey guys! Sorry I’m late. I finally found my boom box.”

Eun and I exchange glances, confused. Sam — my guardian angel—pops in again and playfully smacks Lucas on the head.

“Ow! Something hit my head,” Lucas exclaims.

Then, the waltz music starts, and Eun’s face lights up. “C’mon, let’s dance.”

“Huh?” I say, caught off guard.

“I owe you one, remember?” she says, pulling me towards the dance floor.



As we start to dance, the world transforms into a grand ballroom around us. By chance, I'm still in my suit, and she's still wearing her dress. Somehow, the universe nods in approval, as if to say everything is falling into place.

I notice Sam in the corner giving me the Oppah hand sign but I shrug it off.

“I like your hair,” I say, genuinely admiring her.

She chuckles. “Don’t let it fool you.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“It’s not real,” she says with a teasing smile. “It’s just hair color. It’s not naturally pretty.”

“Wait, you’ve been dyeing your hair the same color since freshman year?” I’m surprised.

“Yeah,” she confirms. “It’s a long story.”

“And we have a long night ahead,” I say, smiling. “So, let’s hear it.”

She giggles. “Well, you’re about to get to know Eun’s backstory.”

“It’s my privilege,” I reply, my heart warmed by her openness.

As we continue to dance, she starts to share. “When I was a kid, we lived in a country side. I had a close friend I played with every day. But his family moved to the city halfway through grade school. After that, we didn’t see each other for years. When Mom and Dad decided to move to the city for my high school, I saw him on the first day and approached him. But he unfriended me in front of everyone. Maybe because I was a country girl. Who would befriend a country girl, right?” Her smile is sad but genuine.

“That sounds harsh,” I say, feeling the weight of her words.

“Yeah, everyone laughed at me,” she says, her voice soft. “I felt small and heartbroken. I promised myself that would never happen again. I decided to create a new image—one that everyone would want.”

“Let me guess,” I say, “that’s the part you started coloring your hair.”

She chuckles. “Yeah. I was timid, shy, and weak, but I promised I’d never be that way again. I wanted to be strong, alive, and—”

“And worry-free. As free as the birds flying high,” I finish, smiling.

“Yes, that’s what I meant,” she says, looking at me with a mix of appreciation and vulnerability.

“I see that in you tonight, Eun,” I say, looking into her eyes. “Your smile, your eyes, your joyfulness, even with everything going on. Whatever life throws at you, I know you’ll throw something back even harder.”

We share a moment of understanding and laughter as we continue to dance under the night sky, feeling a deeper connection with each step.

But —

The night is not about to end here.

“Hey! Don’t move! This is the police.”

Yep, we were getting chased.

Lucas freezes, his face paling. “Oh crap.”

I glance around, my heart sinking. “Shit.”

In the Prison

The clanging of the prison cell door closing echoes around us. I glance around the stark, dimly lit cell, trying to wrap my head around the situation. Eun’s voice breaks through my thoughts. “Cool, we’re in a real prison cell.”

I can't help but tease a bit, my curiosity piqued by Eun's reaction. "Is she into this kind of thing? Maybe I should start considering it too."

Lucas, looking more distressed than ever, mutters, "The car is broken, and now I'm stuck in a prison cell in the middle of the night. My dad's really gonna kill me."

I give Lucas a sympathetic look. "That's rough, Lucas. But, has anyone noticed how surprisingly cool this cell is?"

Lucas looks at me, baffled. "Huh?"

Eun, with a hint of mischief in her voice, says, "Yes, we're going to be here rarely, so we might as well make the most of it."

"Exactly!" I exclaim. "Just like in that movie, *The Cell Number 8*."

Eun's eyes light up. "I've seen that movie."

Eun leans toward the guard. "Hey, guard, is this Cell Number 8?"

The guard looks at us blankly. "We only have one cell here."

I try my luck. "Can we call it Cell Number 8?"

The guard just raises an eyebrow, not amused.

Eun smirks. "Silence means yes."

"We're in Cell Number 8!" I declare triumphantly.

Lucas, clearly exasperated, asks, "What is wrong with you people?"

Just then, Sam shows up. "Hey."

"Sam, thank God you're here. Get us out!" I plead.

"Don't worry," Sam reassures, "I've already called Lucas's uncle."

I freeze. "What? That'll make things worse!"

“Hey! Mr. Mayor, what brings you here in the middle of the night?” Police officer asks.

The Mayor, clearly upset, replies, “Someone called me saying my nephew is in your precinct.”

Lucas groans. “Uncle Max?”

Eun’s eyes widen. “Mayor?”

I look from Eun to the Mayor and back again. “Wait. Your uncle is the Mayor?”

A little later

Outside Eun’s house, we’re finally free. The car pulls up, and I turn to Eun. “Thanks for tonight.”

“It’s my pleasure, milady,” I respond with a grin.

Lucas, clearly exhausted, interjects, “Hurry up, love birds. I’m so sleepy.”

Sam gives Lucas a playful smack on the head. “Ow! Something hit my head again.”

I hesitate, then say, “So...”

Eun looks at me, curious. “So?”

“So, goodnight?” I finish, unsure.

“Goodnight,” she replies with a smile.

“Goodnight,” I echo.

Eun, heading toward the door, says, “Goodnight.”

I repeat, “Goodnight.”

Eun almost shuts the door, and I call out one last time, “Goodnight.”

Later at night

In bed, the night stretches on. I’m lying there, thinking about the day. Then Sam’s voice cuts through my thoughts. “Smile now, black eye later.”

“Sam? Can you stop popping in and out randomly? What do you mean by ‘black eye’?”

“Read the book,” Sam says cryptically. “You’ve made a massive change to the future.”

I reach for the Book of Life, flipping through the pages. “What did I change?”

“Turn to March 30, 2020,” Sam instructs.

I find the page and my eyes widen at the entry. “Wait, what?”

The entry reads: “At the end of the day, I got beaten by Lee Ji Yu.”

“Again?” I mutter as I hold the book.

It seems like this is just the beginning of a series of predictably unpredictable events.

Chapter 8 – Foreseen is Forearmed

The phone rings, and my heart jumps a bit. Okay, maybe more than a bit. It's like this weird mix of excitement and nervousness I don't usually feel. But it's Eun picking up the phone, and that alone gives me this small jolt of energy.

"Hello?" Eun's voice comes through, and I find myself smiling like an idiot.

I take a breath and go for it. "Hello, Eun."

There's this brief pause before she responds, "Gino?"

"Yeah, it's me, Gino Han," I say, trying not to sound too eager, but let's be honest—I am. "I just wanna talk—"

"Wait, where did you get my number?" she asks, sounding a bit skeptical. Of course, she'd question that. I should've seen that coming, but I didn't exactly plan for it.

I fumble for a second before saying the first dumb thing that comes to mind. "Your number? Uh, from the Book of Life."

"Book of—what?" She's confused, and honestly, I get it. That was a weird thing to say.

"Uh... I don't know," I admit, trying to laugh it off. Smooth move, Gino. Real smooth.

"You don't know?" she asks, sounding a little suspicious now.

I decide to change the topic fast. "By the way, what's up? Are you free today?"

"Why?" she asks, still wary but at least not hanging up.

“I wanna go out with you,” I say, feeling my heartbeat speed up a little. There it is—no backing out now. I’ve been thinking about this for a while. Maybe it’s because Eun’s one of the few people who can make me feel... well, something. And I want to spend more time with her.

“But we just saw each other yesterday,” she points out.

“Yeah, but I wanna go out with you. Just you and me, you know,” I say, trying to sound casual. But the truth is, I’ve been thinking about this since yesterday. Maybe even longer.

“Okay, but first,” she says, and I can practically hear the smirk in her voice, “recite that speech of asking me out that you’ve been memorizing.”

“What? What speech?” My mind goes blank. Speech?

“The speech thing with a coffee shop or something,” she insists.

Oh. That. Dang, the one I said at the Guidance Office. She still remembers it? That’s odd. “Oh, that. I haven’t memorized that, so... I don’t know,” I admit, feeling a little flustered now.

“Okay, bye,” she says, like she’s about to hang up.

“What? Wait, don’t hang up!” I scramble to save this. “Here, here...”

She’s quiet for a moment, and I imagine her smiling. I don’t know for sure, but I hope she is.

I take a deep breath and just go for it. “Will you go out with me at some coffee shop nearby, have some Vanilla Sweet Cream Cold Brew, and get to know each other today at 10 a.m.?”

There’s another pause, but it feels lighter. “Okay,” she says, and I swear I can hear the smile in her voice now. “See you later, salad guy.”

Beep Beep

The call ends, and I let out a long sigh. “She just called me the salad guy. That *loser* salad guy,” I mutter, feeling a mix of relief and, well, something else.

Sam, who's been watching this whole thing while chewing on... something, chimes in. "Well, at least she likes something natural about you."

I raise an eyebrow. "I'm naturally a loser?"

"If that's what you want to hear, then yes," Sam says, still chewing away.

I roll my eyes. "And you're eating again?"

Sam grins. "I always eat when I'm excited."

I glance at him, knowing exactly what's coming next. "But you're always eating."

"Exactly," Sam says with a laugh, like he's just cracked the secret to life.

"Go, go," Sam waves me off. "Change the future again. Surprise me."

Eun Ae's POV

Sitting in a café with Gino, I look down at the cup in my hand and can't help but smile. The label says "Salad Guy," and it's the perfect little tease. I place it in front of him, waiting for the reaction I know is coming.

Sure enough, Gino frowns, annoyed, but he tries to play it cool. I love how he pretends not to care—it's kinda cute. Then he slides his own coffee toward me. I glance at the label and... oh no. "Future GF." My face immediately heats up. Seriously, what is with this guy?



“Let’s go?” he asks, extending his hand to me like it’s no big deal.

I cross my arms, pretending I’m not already melting. “Where are we going?”

“You’ll never know unless we go,” he replies with that classic mysterious tone of his. Of course, Gino wouldn’t just tell me. He has to make it into a little adventure. Typical.

I roll my eyes but take his hand. And suddenly, we’re running through the streets, laughing like we’re in some rom-com. His hand is warm, and I kinda like how natural it feels—like we’ve done this a hundred times before.

As we walk along the sidewalk, I drift a little too close to the road. Gino, being all gentlemanly, switches places with me without saying a word. I grin, pretending not to notice but... yeah, it’s sweet.

A ball flies out of nowhere, and Gino catches it like some kind of reflex superhero. “Wow. Nice catch,” I say, impressed but trying to sound casual. He just shrugs and throws it back.

Weird thought, but it feels like he knows the ball was coming at that exact moment.

Then a little later, he shows up with two ice creams, handing me one. “Your favorite,” he says, and it’s strawberry—how did he know? He seems to predict everything, huh.

I raise an eyebrow. “How did you know I like strawberry?”

He smirks. “Your hair color?”

I chuckle, shaking my head. “Idiot,” I say, but my heart does this weird little flip. He notices the little things, and it makes me blush a little more than I’d like to admit.

We find a bench, and I sit next to him, taking in the soft colors of the evening. The sky’s fading into this beautiful purplish hue, and I can’t help but get lost in it.

“Look,” Gino says, pulling me from my thoughts.

I follow his gaze to the sky. “Wow. It’s beautiful,” I whisper. It really is.

“Yeah,” he says, but when I glance at him, he’s not looking at the sky—he’s looking at me. “You’re beautiful.”

My heart skips a beat. I look away quickly, pretending the sky’s the only thing I’m interested in, but inside I’m all fluttery. He starts explaining something about the colors in the sky, molecules, and purple twilight. I don’t understand half of it, but the way he talks, like he’s this walking encyclopedia, it’s... oddly endearing.

“You really know everything, huh,” I say, leaning into the moment, half teasing.

“No, not everything. Why? Are you finding me weird?”

“Nah,” I reply, grinning. “I find you adorable. I like talking to you with all these random trivia that you have.”

He smirks. “Well, you should get used to that.”

I smile back. “Sure will.”

We sit in comfortable silence for a bit, just enjoying the view and each other’s company. Then Gino breaks the silence. “I love talking to you, even if we have nothing to say.”

I laugh softly. “No, you’ve got plenty of things to say.”

We both laugh, and I feel this... ease with him. Like I could sit here forever and never run out of things to talk about, even if they’re random facts about the sky.

He takes a spoonful of his ice cream and says, “This kind of chocolate tastes so good and unique.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Wanna taste it?” He holds out the spoon.

I lean in, expecting a bite of chocolate ice cream, but instead, Gino leans over and kisses my forehead. My face turns bright red. That was definitely *not* the chocolate I was expecting.

“That’s not the chocolate I expected,” I say, crossing my arms in mock protest.

Gino just laughs, his whole face lighting up. “But it’s the chocolate you wanted.”

“What? No. Ew,” I say, pretending to be grossed out, but the truth is... I kinda liked it. Okay, I *really* liked it.

As the evening slips into dusk, we end up sitting on a little port by the sea, watching the purple sunset stretch across the horizon. It’s peaceful, romantic even, and I catch myself glancing at Gino more than at the view.

Suddenly, Gino jumps up and runs off, leaving me confused. When he returns, he’s holding an umbrella. “Sorry, I bought an umbrella. Let’s go, I’ll walk you home.”

I raise an eyebrow. “An umbrella? For what?”

“For the rain,” he says, as if it’s the most obvious thing in the world. “My forecast says it’ll rain at 7:11 pm, and it’s a few minutes from now.”

I laugh. “The forecast is just a prediction, Gino. It’s not that accurate. Look at the sky, there are no clouds.”

Gino gives me that smug look of his. “I have a different kind of forecast. It’s 100% accurate.”

I roll my eyes, but before I can say anything else, I feel the first drop of rain on my skin. Then another. And just like that, it starts pouring.

Gino opens the umbrella and grins. “Rain?”

I blink in disbelief, but then I just laugh, shaking my head. “Well, your forecast is impressive.”

Chapter 8 – Foreseen is Forearmed

“I know,” he says, pulling me under the umbrella with him. And as we walk together through the rain, I can’t help but feel... maybe this whole thing was forecasted too.

Gino Han's POV

"Hey, Eun Ae."

A voice calls out behind us, and I already know who it is. I've read this moment before, in the Book of Life. Yu, standing there by his car, looking all smug like he's about to win some kind of twisted game. But he doesn't know what I know. I've seen how this plays out.

"So, this is why you don't want to go out with me? Because of that butthead, that loser?" Yu steps out of his car like he's starring in his own tragic story.

I already know what he'll say next. *Right on schedule.*

"I'm not a loser," I reply, keeping my voice calm. No point in getting riled up. He's going to get what's coming to him.

Eun Ae tugs at my arm, like she hasn't read ahead. "Ignore him, Gino. Let's go."

I could walk away. The logical part of me knows it would be easier, less drama. But I've already seen where that path leads. And Yu? He deserves a wake-up call.

"You called me gay when I had my boys around me. Now, I'm alone. Does that mean you're a chicken?" Yu's voice is full of ego, like he actually thinks he's in control here.

I smirk. "I'm not a chicken."

I don't need to prove anything, but I know how this goes. He's going to swing. He's going to think he's won. But I've already read this chapter—Yu's about to take the hit he deserves.

And, right on cue, Yu swings. The punch connects, and yeah, it stings a little, but I've already seen this coming. I let it happen. I fall back, just as the book said, playing my part. Eun Ae's by my side in an instant.

"Hey! Stop!" she shouts, concern in her eyes as she kneels next to me.

I know what she'll say next too. "Let's go, Gino. Just ignore him." She's right, in a way. But I've already made my choice.

I stand up slowly, wiping the rain off my face. "No, Eun. We're settling this. Once and for all."

Yu thinks he's won because he got that punch in, but this is where things shift. I've been preparing for this, knowing exactly what's coming. I'm not walking away now. Not when I already know how this ends.

I charge at Yu, throwing a punch that I know he'll dodge. It's all part of the plan.

Flashback

Sam warned me. "You really want to take him down head-on?"

I was practicing on the punching bag, already knowing how this moment would play out. "Yes."

Sam looked skeptical, as usual. "He's a school thug. Dude goes to the gym every day."

I shrugged, already bored of the conversation. "The Book of Life tells me what happens that day. I'm going to dodge his moves before he even knows what he's doing."

Sam blinked, like he couldn't wrap his head around it. "Wait, what?"

End of flashback

Yu swings again, and this time, I'm ready. "The book says it's a Forward punch." I step to the side, and Yu's fist cuts through empty air.

He looks at me like I've just pulled off some kind of magic trick. "Huh?"

I don't need magic. I've got the truth on my side. He swings again. I smirk, already knowing the outcome. "Next will be a Right hook." I dodge, casual, like this is all a game I've already won.

Yu's getting frustrated. "What?!"

And then, the final move. I can almost hear the Book of Life flipping pages as he gears up for it. "And last is an Uppercut." I easily evade it, my movements smooth, calculated.

He's stunned. "No way."

I grin. "I can read your moves, bitch." And with that, I deliver the punch I know is coming. Yu flies back, hitting the ground hard, just like I knew he would.

The rain starts pouring down harder, soaking us, but all I feel is the satisfaction of seeing Yu finally get what's been coming to him. The look on his face? Pure disbelief. He never saw it coming, but I did. I've seen this moment a hundred times before in my mind.

I turn to Eun Ae, expecting her to be impressed. "I got him," I say with a smile, knowing this was always meant to happen.

But her face... it's not what I expect. There's shock there, but not in the way I imagined. "You're not Ginger," she whispers, her voice shaking.

Wait, what? "Eun, I got him." Isn't this what she wanted?

Before I can even process it, she's running. In the rain, no less. And I'm just standing here, confused. *This wasn't in the book.*

"Eun, wait!" I shout, chasing after her, my mind racing, trying to figure out where I went wrong. She keeps running, not looking back, and all I can think is, *How did this chapter end like this?*

Looks like I won the battle but lost the war.

Chapter 9 – I Barely Remember the Bear

Black.

That's all I see at first. Darkness swallowing everything. And then... crying. I hear someone crying.

"Eun?" I call out, but my voice barely cuts through. She turns and looks back at me, her face soaked with tears, then dashes like she's running away from me.

"Eun! Wait!" I shout, my legs kicking into gear, chasing after her. Why is she running?

I'm sprinting, not even paying attention to anything else. Of course, I bump into someone. Hard. The impact knocks me back, and before I even have time to process it, I'm staring up at Lee Ji Yu's smug face.

"What's up, butthead?"

Seriously? Now? "Yu, I don't have time for this."

He leans in with that annoying smirk. "Of course you have."

Okay, screw this. Without thinking twice, I throw a punch, landing it squarely on his face. Yu gets thrown to the side, and I feel... oddly satisfied.

Until I hear a voice.

"Why did you punch him?"

I blink and look around. A girl—probably no more than five—stands there with a teddy bear. Where did she come from?

"This isn't you," she says, her tiny voice cutting through the chaos in my head.

Chapter 9 – I Barely Remember the Bear

I frown, looking down at her. "But I need to catch up to Eun Ae."

"You don't have to," she says softly, like she knows something I don't.
"Just be yourself."

Be myself? What does that even mean? "Be me?" I repeat, half-lost.

"Yep," she says confidently, pointing towards a door. "Go there."

I hesitate for a second, then start walking towards the door she pointed at. Why am I listening to a kid with a teddy bear? Honestly, who knows, but something about this feels weirdly... right.

I open the door, and there on the ground is a photo. I bend down, picking it up. It's a picture of me as a kid. Confusion washes over me.

"A photo... of me?"

Before I can even make sense of it, I see her—Eun Ae, standing right in front of me. My heart tightens. "Eun Ae?"

But something's off. She's being lifted, like the wind itself is carrying her up into the air. Slowly, gently, she's being flown above, drifting farther and farther away from me.

"Eun Ae!" I shout, reaching out, but no matter how hard I try to grab her, she's slipping away. I can't reach her, like she's on another plane of existence entirely, floating just out of my grasp.

Her name echoes in my throat as I jump, trying to close the distance.
"Eun Aeeeeee!"

But she keeps rising, higher and higher, until she vanishes into the sky.

Then—

I wake up, gasping for air, drenched in sweat. "What a weird dream," I mutter, wiping my face. My phone's next to me, and it all comes rushing back. Yesterday... Eun Ae left me.

I just don't get it. I stood up for myself, didn't I? So why is she mad? I grab my phone and, before I can think, I call her.

Still ringing... No answer.

Eun Ae's POV

I stare at my phone, the screen blurry because—yep, you guessed it—I'm crying again. Ugh. Seriously, when did I become this emotional? My tears are literally dripping onto the screen, and I'm just sitting here, letting it happen.

Ginger's name flashes across the screen. He's calling. Of course, he's calling. But I don't have the energy to pick up right now. My finger hovers over the answer button for a second... and then I pull away. Nah, not today, Ginger. I let the phone ring, the sound oddly distant through the mess in my head.

Why am I like this? I was always the carefree one, the stubborn one. Now, I'm sitting here, crying over... what exactly? Everything feels so heavy, and I hate that.

I look at Ginger's name on my phone one last time before I do something a little impulsive—okay, a lot impulsive. I swipe to my contacts, find his name, and without thinking twice, I start typing: **Gino Han**.

The moment I hit save, I take a deep breath. It's like renaming him somehow shifts something in me. It feels like I'm cutting ties with the past, just a little. A tiny rebellion, maybe. But it's mine.

Besides, Gino... he's no longer the Ginger I once knew.

Gino Han's POV

April 6, 2020

Cafeteria

I spot Eun sitting by herself, poking at a salad. She looks lost in thought. Typical Eun—she'll say she's fine, but her eyes always give her away. Still, I walk over, sliding into the seat next to her.

"Hey," I greet her casually.

She glances up, her expression neutral. "Hi."

I know something's off. Call it intuition, or maybe just good observation. "You okay?"

"Yeah, why?" She shrugs like everything's cool, but I'm not buying it.

"What happened last Saturday?"

Her eyes flicker for a second. "What do you mean?"

"You left me," I say it as plainly as I can. No drama, just the facts.

"Oh, that. Sorry, the rain got heavy, so I rushed home," she replies nonchalantly, but I can't shake the feeling that there's more to it.

"Are you angry?"

"Angry?" She looks at me like I've asked the dumbest question on Earth.

"No. Why would you think that?"

I lean back, trying to keep it casual, but it's to clear something's up. "Are we... okay?"

"Yes, we're good," she says with a smile, but her words feel forced, like she's saying what she thinks I want to hear.



Chapter 9 – I Barely Remember the Bear

Of course, we're not good. C'mon Eun, I know something isn't right. I've always been lazy about confrontation, preferring to let things simmer until they either boil over or cool down.

"You know," I shift the topic, trying to lighten the mood, "Lucas and I were planning to head out to his vacation house for this history class project on heritage sites. I thought maybe you and your group-mates could come along too. We'll have the road, the music, some awesome friends..."

Her eyes flicker with mild interest. "Ohh?"

"Yeah, Lucas says the house is huge. Two family rooms, four singles. It sounds more like a resort than a vacation house."

"Just you and Lucas?" she asks, her tone casual but probing.

"No, we're bringing Shin and Brad too. You can bring your friends."

She smiles a little, but I can't tell if it's real or not. "Okay, I'll ask them. If they're in, I'll accept the invite."

"Perfect," I say, feeling a small win. Maybe this will help break the weird tension between us.

But then, out of nowhere, she adds, "So Lucas isn't dead yet."

I blink, confused. "What? What do you mean?"

She laughs, but there's something sharp about it. "I mean, his dad must've killed him after what happened that night."

I chuckle, remembering how strange the whole thing was. "Oh, that. Yeah, something *odd* definitely happened when we got back."

Flashback

Lucas and I pull into his driveway, and his parents are already outside waiting for us. Not a great sign.

"Where have you been?" his mom asks, her voice tight.

Lucas scratches the back of his head awkwardly. "I'm sorry, Mom, Dad."

I decide to step in, throwing on my most charming smile. "Hello, Mr. and Mrs. Park, I'm Gino Han. We, uh, had a bit of an adventure tonight."

Lucas's dad just stares at the car, particularly the smashed front bumper. "I can see that," he says with an expression that's hard to read just as the car's bumper falls down to the ground.

I feel a lump in my throat. Okay, this is bad. Real bad. Lucas and I exchange nervous glances, bracing ourselves for the explosion.

"You kids..." his dad says, his face serious.

Here it comes.

"...are growing up well. What was the adventure?"

Wait, what? Did I hear that right?

I blink, trying to keep up. "Uh, we kinda helped a friend with a family problem. So we borrowed your car... and, uh, scratched it a little."

His dad just nods at the wrecked car. "Awesome. I'm proud of you, son."

Lucas and I are both stunned, like we've stepped into some alternate reality.

"And tomorrow," his dad continues, "we'll buy you a 4x4 vehicle for your future adventures. A car that won't get wrecked so easily."

Lucas looks at him, still in shock. "Uh, okay. Thanks, Dad."

End of Flashback

Present

Eun leans back in her chair, looking just as bewildered as I was. "Wow, that's really odd."

"Right?"

At the Watson's Residence

As I sit down at the table, a steaming bowl of ramen in front of me, I glance over at Yumi and Aunt Helen. I'm feeling unusually nostalgic tonight. Maybe it's the warm broth or just the comfortable atmosphere.

"Hey, Yumi," I say, breaking the silence.

She looks up from her bowl, her eyes reflecting curiosity. "Yeah?"

I dig into my ramen, pondering the best way to bring up a random thought that's been lingering in my mind. "The other day, I kinda remembered that moment when we first met in kindergarten."

Yumi raises an eyebrow, clearly surprised. "You remembered?"

"Yeah," I confirm, trying to piece together the memory. "I remember you had that teddy bear with one eye. There was a nickname you gave it, but I can't quite recall what it was."

Yumi's lips curl into a nostalgic smile. "Yes, Mr. Snugglebug."

"Yeah, Mr. Snugglebug," I say, nodding.

Yumi's eyes soften as she fiddles with her chopsticks. "What makes you interested in it?"

"I'm not really sure," I admit with a shrug. "Maybe it's just one of those random memories that sticks with you."

"So where's Mr. Snufflebug now?" I ask, genuinely curious.

Chapter 9 – I Barely Remember the Bear

Yumi looks thoughtful for a moment. “I think he’s in the attic. Do you want me to get him?”

I shake my head. “No, you don’t need to. It’s not that important.”

Aunt Helen chimes in with a smile. “Yumi has grown so fast that we packed away her toys early, but Mr. Snugglebug is safe in the attic.”

“Got it,” I say, finishing off my ramen. “Thanks for the meal, guys. I think I’ll head back to my apartment now.”

Yumi glances at the clock and frowns. “Now? But it’s still early.”

I stand up, bowing slightly. “Goodbye, Aunt Helen.”

“Rest well, Gino,” Aunt Helen replies warmly.

As I head for the door, Yumi suddenly calls out, “Uh, Gino, wait.”

I turn back, a bit puzzled. “Yeah?”

“Can you come to my room for a sec?” she asks, her smile a bit more inviting.

“To your room?” I ask, eyebrows raised.

“Yeah,” Yumi says, smiling more warmly now.

Chapter 10 – The Veil is Unveiling

Eun Ae's POV

Eun Ae's Room

I sit on the edge of my bed, feeling a mixture of frustration and excitement. My friends are gathered around me, each one reacting to my latest plan with a range of emotions. Reyna, always the most outspoken, is currently voicing her disbelief.

“Wait, you want us to go to a place with that douchebag?” Reyna’s tone is incredulous, and I can’t help but feel a bit defensive.

“Yes, that’s right,” I confirm, trying to keep my voice steady.

Reyna’s eyes widen in shock. “What the fck!?”

Rachel steps in, her tone sharper than usual. “Watch your mouth, Choi.”

Reyna ignores Rachel and continues, “That guy, that stupid guy is the reason for all your heartbreaks. He’s the reason you colored your hair. He’s the reason you’ve been like this for years.”

I feel a pang of guilt but nod. “I know...”

Reyna throws her hands up in exasperation. “Then what are you doing, girl? If I were you, I’d kick his balls even if he doesn’t have one.”

Autumn, always the voice of reason, chimes in, “Yeah, Eun. Choi has a point. I don’t get why, after all these years, you chose to let him back into your life. And why now? Why in the last year of high school?”

I let out a sigh, feeling the weight of their concerns. “That’s what I’ve always been thinking. I’ve tried my best to avoid him since freshman

year, but he suddenly appears out of nowhere to save me, just like he always used to.”

Reyna rolls her eyes. “Just like he always used to? Are you kidding me? He drowned you, Eun. And now he’s acting like he can’t remember a thing. Gosh, I need a juice.” She storms off to the kitchen.

Rachel, ever the peacemaker, adds, “Yeah, I’ve noticed that too. I know people who pretend, but I don’t think he’s pretending to know nothing.”

Autumn, trying to lighten the mood, suggests, “Maybe he got amnesia?”

Reyna returns, sipping her juice. “He’ll get amnesia if I smash his face into the wall,” she says, her voice dripping with frustration.

Autumn continues, “He drowned you and caused heartbreak, but maybe he’s also the cure.”

Rachel turns to me, her eyes full of concern. “Yeah, do you still like him, Eun?”

I hesitate, then answer honestly. “Kinda.”

Before I can elaborate, Reyna splashes her juice into Rachel’s face. Rachel’s expression is one of utter annoyance.

“What do you mean, ‘kinda’?” Reyna demands.

I look at them all, feeling a mix of determination and nostalgia. “That night may have been just a few hours, but it relived the happy moments I had with him.”

Reyna crosses her arms, shaking her head. “I won’t go on that field trip.”

“Reyna?” I say, trying to reach her.

Autumn steps in, her voice warm and supportive. “If this will make you happy, Eun, then I’ll go.”

Rachel nods, adding, “I don’t really like you getting hurt, but whatever your decision, I’ll support you.”

I feel a rush of gratitude. “Thanks, Rachel. Thanks, Autumn. Reyna, please. I heard Lucas has a 4x4 now. I know you want to drive one.”

Reyna looks at me, her expression softening. “What’s the model?”

“Of that, I dunno.” I reply, hoping to sway her.

Reyna’s gaze turns sincere. “I’ll think about it.”

Autumn cheers, “Yes! We’re going on a field trip!”

Reyna, still crossing her arms, responds, “I haven’t decided yet.”

Rachel smirks and adds, “You already have.”

Yumi Watson’s POV

“Are you sure you want to do this?” Gino asks.

I nod vigorously, my cheeks flushed with a rosy hue. “Yes.” I can’t help but feel a little embarrassed, but there’s a thrill in breaking the rules for a while.

He sighs, shaking his head. “But your mom isn’t going to like it if she finds out.”

“We’ll keep it a secret,” I say, my blush deepening. The thrill of defying expectations makes my heart race.

“Okay, let’s make this quick,” Gino agrees, his tone a mix of amusement and resignation.

We both take our seats in front of the TV, gripping the controllers with anticipation. The game is about to start.

The screen flickers to life with the Streak Fighters logo. The countdown begins. “3... 2... 1... Fight!”



I'm all in, pressing the controller with determination. “Take this! And that!” I stick my tongue out in concentration, fingers flying over the buttons.

Gino smirks, a confident gleam in his eyes. “You really think you’re gonna win, huh?”

He ramps up the intensity. “I’m on a rage mode now, doubling the damage! Uppercut! Then combo!”

“No! Stop!” I shout, pressing random buttons on Gino’s controller, trying to disrupt his game. My competitive spirit is in full swing.

“Hey, that’s cheating!” Gino protests, but I just laugh.

“It’s a physical rage art combo,” I retort, giggling.

The TV monitor flashes with the victory screen. “Lilia Wins!”

I jump up, throwing my arms in the air. “Yeheeeey! I won!” My shout echoes through the room.

Gino collapses onto the floor, panting. “Phew.”

I follow suit and lie down beside him, feeling a mix of triumph and apology. “I’m sorry for inviting you to play this late.”

“You weren’t in your room last weekend.”

He nods, a little deflated. “Yeah, I had an errand at school.”

“Ohh, that’s why you forgot our play day,” I say, feeling a pang of disappointment.

“I’m sorry, it was important,” Gino explains, sounding genuinely regretful.

“So, I’m not important?” I ask, a bit hurt.

“You are,” he insists, “but school is—wait. Yumi, you’re 17 like me, right?”

“Yeah,” I confirm, curious about where this is going.

“Then what school are you in?” he asks, clearly puzzled.

I smile, trying to stay upbeat despite the topic. “I’m home-schooled, Gino. You’re living here, and you didn’t know?”

He looks surprised. “You’re home-schooled ever since?”

“Yep,” I reply, feeling a bit defensive but also proud of my unconventional path.

“Okay,” he says, nodding in understanding.

I stretch and get up, trying to change the subject. “Oh yeah. Wanna play one more game?”

Gino rises with a grin. “Sure.”

“I’m gonna kill you with Lilia again,” I challenge, my competitive spirit reignited.

“You’re gonna taste Pol’s burning fist.”

As we settle back into our gaming positions, the TV monitor counts down once more. “3... 2... 1... Fight!”

I’m all smiles, feeling the familiar rush of competition. “Take this!”

Gino smirks, unfazed. “I can evade that.”

Just as the game heats up, Gino’s phone rings. He glances at it and then checks his messages. “Who’s that?” I ask, trying to hide my annoyance.

“It’s Eun Ae,” he replies, his tone shifting to one of concern.

He steps out onto the balcony to take the call. I can’t help but feel a twinge of irritation at the interruption. I wait, feeling a bit left out.

Gino’s voice drifts back to me. “Hey, Eun, what’s up? Really? That’s great. Okay, don’t worry, I’m gonna tell Lucas. Okay, see ya.”

Chapter 10 – The Veil is Unveiling

The night sky remains calm, a silent witness to our interrupted game. I lean back on the couch, feeling the cool night air through the open window.

Chapter 11 – The Loudest Silence

Today, I finally get to meet Eun Ae’s friends. Lucas, of course, kicks things off. “Hello, ladies, allow me to introduce the boys,” he says with his signature confidence, like he’s hosting some kind of event. That’s just Lucas.

“I’m Lucas Park,” he says, then points to me. “And this is Gino Han.”

I wave, keeping it simple. “Hi.” I catch Eun Ae’s eye for a second and give her a slight nod. It’s weird—I’m not usually the kind of guy who gets worked up over meeting people, but I really want to make a good impression on her friends. It matters because it matters to her.

Lucas gestures to Shin, who’s already looking like he’s about to melt into the ground. “And this is Shin Yamada. He can’t talk to girls.”

Autumn, one of Eun Ae’s friends, looks intrigued. “He’s shy?”

I jump in, correcting Lucas because, well, someone has to. “It’s *Selective Mutism Anxiety Disorder*.” Eun Ae gives me a look, and I know she appreciates the clarification. I’m not trying to be a know-it-all or anything; it’s just that it feels right to get things straight, especially for someone like Shin.

Lucas shrugs it off, as usual. “Whatever.” He moves on to Brad, who’s completely absorbed in his Rubik’s cube or whatever that thing is. “This is Brad Inoue. He’s glued to his cube most of the time.”

Brad, without even glancing up, just says, “Yeah.”

“All the time,” I add, giving a small grin. That’s Brad for you—living in his own little puzzle world.

Eun looks us over and says, “So, the two boys can’t talk?” She’s looking at us with a curious expression. I glance at Eun Ae again, and for some reason, her friends’ opinions of us suddenly feel more important than usual. Weird, right? But I can’t help it.

Lucas nods. “Technically, yes.”

“I’m Eun Ae,” she says, and even though I already know her, hearing her say her name feels... I don’t know, nice. Like, yeah, that’s Eun Ae.

“And this is Autumn Zeniya,” Eun continues. Autumn gives a nod, and Shin’s definitely struggling not to combust on the spot. I’ve gotta hand it to him, though—he’s holding it together better than I expected.

“And this is Rachel Chang,” Eun Ae says, pointing to another friend. Rachel gives us a polite nod—cool, calm energy.

“Finally, this is Reyna Choi.”

“What’s up, buttheads?” Reyna greets us with a grin that screams trouble. “Be sure we’ll get the fun that we wanted.” She’s got this whole firecracker vibe going on, and I can already tell she’s the wild card of the group.

Lucas, clearly sweating now, looks at her nervously. Reyna’s just staring him down. “What are you staring at? Let’s go!” she says, all fire.

Rachel, ever the diplomat, smiles and says, “Don’t worry, she’s a nice person.”

“Yeah. I can see that,” Lucas mutters, clearly intimidated. I catch Eun Ae smiling at her friends, and I feel a little more relaxed. If she’s comfortable, then I’m good.

So, we all pile into a 4x4 pickup truck. Reyna’s behind the wheel—no surprise there. The girls are in the cab, and we’re all stuck in the back. I don’t mind, though. The open air is nice, and it gives me space to think. Plus, I’m low-key watching Eun Ae. She’s up front, laughing with Autumn and Rachel, and I’m feeling pretty good about all this.

Then, out of nowhere, *Country Roads, Take Me Home* starts playing. It’s kind of funny how perfect the song is for this moment. The wind, the countryside, and the fact that we’re all here, just hanging out. I glance at Eun Ae again.

Sometime later

After three hours of winding roads, pit stops, and general boredom, we finally reach our destination—the temple. It's located right at the top of the mountain, like something out of a history documentary. The whole place feels ancient, like it's been here forever, and considering we're here for our Heritage Sites project for History class, that's probably true.

I'm supposed to be taking mental notes for the assignment, but honestly, my mind's on something else—or someone else. Eun Ae. She's still keeping her distance, and it's driving me nuts. After our date, she have this cold shoulder thing way out of the blue. I mean, she's not even giving me a quick glance or a casual "hey" anymore. Just straight-up ignoring me.

The rest of the group is already scattering across the temple grounds, busy with their cameras and notebooks. I trail behind, trying to keep it cool, even though all I can think about is how off Eun Ae's been acting. She's with Autumn again, laughing and talking like nothing's wrong, while I'm left to figure out what the heck I did to deserve this.

The logical part of me says to just let it go—maybe she's stressed about the project, or maybe I've done something to annoy her without realizing it. But I can't stop overanalyzing it, which, let's face it, is something a norm to me.

The sun dips behind the mountains, and soon enough, we're all standing at the edge of the temple, taking in the night view. The city below is lit up like a sea of stars, and for a moment, I almost forget about everything. It's quiet, serene.

But just as I'm starting to lose myself in the peacefulness, something catches my attention: Eun Ae. She's looking at me. For the first time today, she actually meets my eyes.

I glance back, feeling a spark of hope or maybe just relief, but just as quickly, she turns away. Snubbed. What? What's wrong, really? I stand there, confused, watching her disappear back into her conversation with Autumn. My head's swimming with questions, but I can't seem to make sense of any of it.

After wrapping up all the requirements for the Heritage Sites project, we finally decide to pack up and head to Lucas's vacation house. It's only about an hour or so away from the temple, and we're all ready to crash for the night. A night at Lucas's place sounds like the perfect way to end this trip. Plus, I could use some downtime to clear my head from everything with Eun Ae.

When we pull up to the house, I'm immediately hit with how fancy this place is. Huge house, pool, Jacuzzi—the whole setup. It's not just some regular vacation home; this thing screams wealth. I try to play it cool, but inside, I'm like, "Wow, Lucas's family must be loaded."

As we step out, we're greeted by a group of people waiting for us. Apparently, the caretakers of the place. They've been expecting us and have already prepared a spread of delicious dishes. We've barely even arrived, and we're digging in. The food's amazing—way better than anything I've had in a while.

After we're all full and satisfied, it's time to head to our rooms. The girls are taking the room on the right, because yeah, they're always right. We are taking the room on the left. As we settle into our room, I haven't expected a press conference.

Third Person POV

Press Conference or something

The boys' room and the girls' room are side by side, but the conversations happening in each are completely in sync.

Lucas, lounging on one of the beds, glances at Gino with a knowing smirk. "Well, it seems like she's ignoring you."

In the girls' room, Reyna leans against the wall with her arms crossed. "Now you're ignoring him?"

Both Gino and Eun Ae, from their respective rooms, snap to attention, speaking in unison. "What? No."

Shin, ever the observer, leans forward. "It's so obvious, Gino." Yes guys, he can talk.

Autumn chimes in from the girls' room, her voice teasing. "It's so obvious, Eun."

Gino and Eun look at each other, baffled. "Really?" they both ask, confusion written on their faces.

Lucas, unfazed, shrugs. "Yeah. Right, Brad?"

Brad, ever disconnected from the conversation, doesn't even look up from his phone. "Yeah," he says absentmindedly.

Autumn, Rachel, and Reyna exchange sarcastic glances and say in unison, "Yeah."

Gino and Eun both sigh, realizing they're not going to get out of this conversation. Almost reluctantly, they admit together, "Okay, it happened last Saturday."

Gino, scratching his head, speaks up first. "I asked her out."

Eun follows up, crossing her arms defensively. “And he brought me to the Boardwalk.”

Lucas, eyes widening in surprise, looks at Gino. “You went out with Eun Ae?”

In the girls’ room, Reyna snorts. “You went out with that shtbag?”

Gino nods. “Yeah. I asked her for a date.”

Eun, rolling her eyes. “Yeah, but that wasn’t a date.”

Lucas claps Gino on the back, half in admiration, half disbelief. “Wow, bro. She’s one of the hot babes on campus.”

Reyna doesn’t let that slide. “He’s one of the nerds.”

Gino looks offended. “Don’t call her a hot babe.”

And at the same time, Eun glares at Reyna. “Don’t call him a nerd.”

Shin, ever the calm one, steers the conversation back. “So, what happened?”

Eun sighs, clearly not thrilled to relive the moment. “It went well... until Lee Ji Yu showed up.”

Reyna’s eyes widen, and she cackles. “So Ji Yu beat the nerd’s ass? Pathetic.”

Gino straightens up, his tone sharp. “No, I beat him.”

Everyone in both rooms reacts in shock.

Lucas, Shin, and Brad snap to attention. “What?!”

Autumn, Rachel, and Reyna follow suit. “What?!”

Shin stares at Gino, incredulous. “For the record, you beat Lee Ji Yu, the high school thug?”

Gino nods calmly. “Yes.”

Reyna shakes her head in disbelief. “That’s impossible.”

Eun, to everyone’s surprise. “No, he really beat him.”

Lucas, still not buying it, laughs awkwardly. “You’re lying.”

Brad, still glued to his phone, echoes Lucas without looking up. “Yeah.”

Autumn, intrigued, leans forward. “So why are you ignoring him now?”

Gino, frustrated. “That’s what I’m wondering about. I stood up for myself in front of her.”

Eun looks away, her tone suddenly quieter. “But I left him and rushed home.”

Rachel looks at Eun with confusion. “You’re weird, Eun.”

Lucas, ever the instigator, smirks. “Maybe she likes Lee Ji Yu. She’s upset about you beating her crush.”

Eun immediately denies it. “No, I wouldn’t fall for someone like Ji Yu.”

Shin, thoughtful, speaks up. “Eun Ae wouldn’t fall for a thug. Well, Eun probably likes you, but there’s something... A girl’s first impression often lasts.”

Lucas, Shin, and Brad all turn toward Gino, their curiosity piqued. “How did you two meet?”

Gino looks uncomfortable, clearly not wanting to relive the memory. “You shouldn’t ask that.”

But the flashback starts anyway.

Flashback

It's a quiet afternoon in the school cafeteria. Gino awkwardly approaches Eun Ae, who's sitting alone, eating a salad.

"Um, hey," he says, unsure of himself.

Eun Ae looks up, mildly curious but mostly indifferent. "???"

Gino stammers. "What's up?"

Eun Ae shrugs. "Nothing."

Gino's eyes land on her food. "You're eating a salad."

Eun Ae nods. "Yeah."

Gino, in his usual geeky fashion, can't resist sharing a random fact. "Did you know that salad comes from the Latin word *herba salta*, meaning salted herbs? They used to season it with dressings that had a lot of salt. It's healthy, but you gotta drink a lot of water to wash out the salt."

Eun Ae looks at him, slightly amused. "Well, that's amazing."

Gino, thinking he's made progress, gestures to the seat next to her. "Yeah. Is this seat taken? I'm kinda looking for a—"

Eun Ae cuts him off, her tone flat. "Yes, it's taken."

Gino awkwardly backs away. "Uh, okay. I'm gonna leave you now."

Eun Ae doesn't look up again. "Thanks."

End of Flashback

Back in the present, Shin bursts out laughing. "She definitely lost her appetite."

Reyna, practically in tears, laughs harder. "That was soooo awkward!"

Lucas chuckles, shaking his head. “That’s pretty much every conversation I’ve ever had with a woman.”

Autumn, smiling, adds softly, “Well, that was cute.”

Rachel nods in agreement. “At least the guy did his best.”

Brad, still glued to his phone, mutters his default response. “Yeah.”

Gino groans, burying his face in his hands. “Shut up, guys. I know I was a total ass that time. I wish it didn’t happen.”

Eun, unexpectedly, speaks up. “I ignored him... I wasn’t in the mood that time. That was when I found out about my dad’s affair. I appreciate his effort, though.”

Shin, always the voice of reason, comments, “I think Eun likes that part of you.”

Reyna, ever the skeptic, raises an eyebrow. “What part of him?”

Eun, looking down, admits quietly, “The part of him when he’s weird and not strong.”

Shin, nodding sagely, concludes, “So, when you beat Ji Yu, her first impression of you collapsed.”

Lucas grins, clearly amused. “In short, she likes the loser part of you.” He bursts into laughter.

Reyna follows suit, nearly doubled over. “You like the loser part of him? This is hilarious.”

Autumn tries to calm them down. “Reyna, come on.”

Brad, predictably, adds, “Yeah.”

Midnight

The night sky stretches out, a blanket of deep indigo dotted with stars. In the boys' room, Gino lies in bed, clutching his phone with a perplexed expression. His thoughts swirl around Eun Ae's unexpected revelation.

"She likes the loser part of me?" he murmurs to himself, still trying to process the strange twist of the day.

From the girls' room, Eun Ae's voice cuts through the quiet, soft but clear. "I like the coward side of him."

Gino, now wide awake, sits up abruptly. "I thought I'm weird," he says, shaking his head in disbelief. "Turns out she's weirder than me."

Meanwhile, the other boys in the room are roused from their sleep by the commotion.

Lucas groans, half-awake. "Oh god, Gino."

Shin, rubbing his eyes, adds with irritation, "We're trying to sleep here."

Gino shakes his head, his frustration visible. "She's weird."

Lucas's patience wears thin. "For god's sake, Gino, let us sleep."

Ignoring the grumbling from his friends, Gino gets out of bed. He rummages through his bag and retrieves a book, holding it tightly as he heads toward the door.

As he opens the door, the cool night air rushes in. He steps into the corridor, closing the door quietly behind him while gripping the doorknob.

Turning back, Gino's eyes widen in shock. There, just across from him in the opposite doorway, stands Eun Ae, holding her favorite teddy bear. The moonlight bathes them both in a soft, ethereal glow, casting long shadows that stretch across the floor.

Chapter 12 – Faith in Fate

Under the serene embrace of the night sky, with the full moon casting a gentle glow, the corridor between the boys' and girls' rooms holds a quiet tension. Eun Ae, clutching her stuffed toy behind her, notices Gino standing there and turns to face him, her teddy bear still hidden. Gino, caught in the moment, hides his Book of Life behind his back.

From a distance, their silhouettes are softly framed by the twilight.

“Hey,” Gino breaks the silence, his voice hesitant but sincere.

Eun Ae’s response is equally tentative. “Uh, hey.”

Gino’s eyes search hers, holding a mixture of curiosity and concern. “Can’t sleep?”

“No, I’m sleepy. I’m going to bed now,” Eun replies, beginning to walk away.

“Eun, wait.” Gino’s hand instinctively reaches out, gently grabbing her wrist.

Eun Ae glances down at his hand on her wrist, then lifts her gaze to meet his. “What is it?”

“Let’s cut this cold war out, Eun,” Gino says earnestly.

Eun Ae frowns and pushes his hand away. “What do you mean?”

Gino’s expression is one of frustration and longing. “Don’t respond with something passive-aggressive again.”

Eun Ae just looks at him.

“I know there’s something wrong. I know we’re not okay. I don’t know what I did, but I need clarification,” Gino continues, with his desperate voice.

Eun Ae shrugs. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Eun, please.” Gino pleads, stepping closer.

Eun Ae’s frustration boils over. “You’ve done nothing wrong, okay?” She turns to walk away.

“Don’t make me change my hair color too.” Gino’s voice cracks slightly, revealing his vulnerability.

Eun Ae pauses, her back still turned. Gino’s voice softens as he continues, “I know there’s something wrong. I feel like I know what it is, but I don’t want to make assumptions. I used to feel like it’s okay not to be fine, but when it’s all about you, I can’t stand being okay even if it’s not.”

Gino’s gaze is filled with sincerity and regret. “I know this might sound crazy, but when it’s about you I just can’t help it.”

Eun pauses.

The sound of silence lingers the area.

Eun Ae’s voice trembles as she lowers her head. “It’s me.”

“I expected too much from you. I was wrong to think of you as someone you’re not. Don’t get me wrong; it wasn’t your fault. I know you were just being yourself that time.”

Gino’s eyes widen in pain. “That time? When I stood up against Lee Ji Yu?” He gestures animatedly. “So you’re mad about that?”

“I’m sorry,” Gino’s voice softens further. “I wasn’t myself then, Eun. I... I was in a crisis. I was angry, felt humiliated... I just wanted to stand up for myself... for you.”

Eun Ae turns to face him fully, her eyes searching his. “So you punched him back?”

Gino’s expression is conflicted. “I hate to, but I had to.”

Eun Ae's frustration rises again. "You didn't need to do that! We could have just ignored him and walked away like we used to."

"Like we used to? What do you mean?" Gino's confusion is evident.

Eun Ae starts crying. Gino makes a confused face and dashes to her.

Gino grabs her hand gently, pulling her into a tender embrace. "I'm sorry if I fought back."

Gino's voice is filled with regret. "I'm sorry."

"We don't need to fight back, right?" Eun Ae sobs continuously

"Yes. Yes." Gino's hand moves soothingly over her hair. "Hush. It's okay now. It's fine, I won't do it again, okay?"

Eun Ae's sobs slowly subside as she looks up at Gino. The intensity in his eyes softens her heart. Gino gazes down at her, his eyes meeting hers with a tenderness that speaks volumes.

Just as the emotions bursting in, Gino's gaze drifts to Eun Ae's lips. He hesitates for a heartbeat, he feels the quiet weight of their long wait. Eun Ae's gaze gently drops, her eyes fluttering shut as if to savor the calm before the inevitable.

With a tender, deliberate motion, Gino leans in. Their lips meet in a kiss that is soft and gentle, a sweet release of the feelings they've both kept secretly. The kiss lingers, infused with a warmth and tenderness that contrasts beautifully with the cool, serene night.

Meanwhile, Lucas and Shin are eavesdropping with their ears pressed to the wall.

"I won the bet." Shin smirks.

Lucas, slightly irritated, hands over five dollars. "Shit."

Lucas then pauses, frowning. "Wait. Where's Brad?"

On the other side, Reyna, Autumn, and Rachel are also eavesdropping, their ears pressed to the wall.

Autumn and Rachel high fives, while Reyna crosses her arm in frustration.

The full moon continues to shine brightly, casting a soft, ethereal glow over the perfect scene.

A Little Later

Gino and Eun Ae step outside into the cool night air, drawn by the serene beauty of the starry sky above. Eun Ae tilts her head back, her eyes lost in the cosmic splendor.

“You know..” She begins thoughtfully. “..the stars are like our destiny. Each person's life is already written in them.”

“Do you believe in that?” Eun Ae asks.

Gino answers. “I think so too.”

“But —”

“I wish I could read the stars.” Gino says with his melancholic thoughts swirling in the expanse of the cosmos. “It would be nice to know what’s coming so I could avoid the pain.” He looks down with depth in his eyes longing for something.

Eun Ae turns to him, a curious expression crossing her face. “The pain?” she asks gently.

“Yeah.” Gino replies, his voice tinged with sadness. “My mom shouldn’t have died. And my dad, he wouldn’t have left.”

Eun Ae’s heart aches for him. “What happened?” she asks softly.

“My mom died in a car accident when I was a kid.” Gino explains, his voice heavy with the weight of old wounds. “After Mom died, my father

became a drunkard. And he decided to leave me in the hands of his friend — The Watsons."

Eun Ae pauses in shock, couldn't process the pain Gino is carrying.

"I'm sorry." She says in a sad tone.

"Nah, it's okay." Gino confirms.

Eun Ae responds with a warmth in her voice. "Gino, the stars have their own reasons for everything."

"Knowing what's going to happen might give a sense of control, but it would also rob life of its mystery. The unpredictability makes our experiences meaningful. It brings both joy and sorrow, shaping us in ways we can't understand." She adds.

Gino listens, the weight of her words settling over him. He takes a deep breath, appreciating the depth of her perspective.

"In perfect time, everything will fall into place."

"Faith in Fate." Eun Ae holds Gino's hand. "It's okay now, I am here for you." Eun Ae kisses Gino on his cheek.

"Thank you." Gino grins.

Eun Ae smiles as she gently lowers herself onto Gino's lap. The night is still and peaceful, with only the soft rustling of leaves in the breeze to disturb the silence. Gino looks down at her, his heart swelling with a mixture of affection and wonder.

She reaches up and takes his hand, guiding it to her hair. "Play with my hair." She requests, her voice soft and tender.

Gino chuckles softly, his fingers brushing through the silky strands. "Oh, okay. Yes, madam." His touch is gentle, and he runs his fingers through her hair with a soothing rhythm, feeling the warmth of her presence against him.

As Gino continues his tender gesture, Eun Ae's eyes flutter closed, her breathing becoming steady and relaxed. Within moments, she is asleep, her head resting peacefully on his lap.

Gino gazes down at her, a serene smile spreading across his face. The night sky above seems to wrap around them like a comforting blanket, the stars witnessing this quiet moment of intimacy.

Morning

Gino stirs awake, blinking in the dim light of the early morning. He realizes with a start that he must have dozed off alongside Eun Ae.

Glancing over, he sees her sleeping peacefully beside him, her breathing steady and calm. His gaze drifts to the thing Eun Ae is hugging, where a familiar teddy bear rests.

“That looks like Yumi’s teddy bear.” He murmurs to himself. “Silly girls really like the same things.”

His thoughts then shift as he wonders about Sam. “So, mission success. I wonder where Sam is.” He muses. “Maybe I’ll grab some coffee first.”

Rising quietly, Gino heads somewhere to get some coffee. He soon spots Samyaza from a distance, lounging in the gazebo. Samyaza is dressed in a suit, and a thin wisp of smoke trails from a cigarette held between his fingers.

“Yow. Congrats.” Samyaza calls out with a casual wave.

“You finally have clothes.” Gino mentions the formal attire.

“And you’re smoking,” he continues, eyeing the cigarette.

“Yeah, I miss wearing this.” Samyaza says with a hint of nostalgia.

“You used to wear clothes?” Gino questions, his curiosity piqued.

Samyaza laughs, a knowing smile spreading across his face. “I know everything about you, but you have no clue who I am, you poor little thing.”

Gino raises an eyebrow. “Yeah, you owe me your story.”

Samyaza’s smile widens, his eyes twinkling with mischief. “Well, 3,000 years ago...”

Chapter 13 – Immortal meets Mortal

Sam leans back, his eyes reflecting a distant, almost melancholic gaze. “Well, 3,000 years ago,” he begins, his voice carrying a weight of timeless sorrow, “I was assigned to Earth. My job was to observe humans, to watch their lives unfold and send updates to Heaven if something significant happened.”

“It was meant to be simple, just observing and reporting. But I found myself entangled in something far more complex.” He emphasizes.

Gino, intrigued, watches Sam closely as he continues.

“Long story short.” Sam says with a rueful smile. “I fell in love with a mortal.”

He pauses, allowing his words to sink in. “Her name was Elizabeth. A beautiful young lady with a name as perfect as her face and soul. To my angelic eyes, she was a vision of purity, untouched by greed.”

Sam’s expression grows with a hint of nostalgia. “I became enchanted by her. Despite my divine nature, I could not resist. I disguised myself as a mortal and began to spend time with her. We fell in love, and what followed was the most beautiful love story I had ever known.”

“But that story didn’t last long,” Sam continues, his voice tinged with regret. “I confessed to her that I was not human. I couldn’t bear to deceive someone so precious.”

“Elizabeth was naïve, though. She believed that a mortal and a divine being could never be together.” Sam says with sadness in his eyes.

He continues. “I tried to convince her that love could overcome all boundaries, but she chose to leave me. She decided to forget me.”

“Since then, I’ve watched over her from afar, hoping that one day, someone like her might fall in love with someone like me again.” Sam ends with a deep longingness.

Gino's eyes widen with concern. "Where is she now?"

Sam's gaze turns gloomy. "Her latest incarnation is 40 years old and in a hospital. Whenever I disappear, I visit her. She's battling stage 3 cancer, lying on her deathbed. She could die at any moment now."

"I'm sorry," Gino says softly.

Sam shakes his head. "It's okay. At least she'll find rest from her suffering and move on to her next incarnation."

Gino looks thoughtful. "Next incarnation? So, humans really do reincarnate after dying?"

"Of course," Sam confirms. "I've watched her die countless times. Most of those times, she passed away in my arms."

Sam's voice grows more resolute. "Eventually, I couldn't bear it anymore and sought the Creator. I asked Him to make me human."

"And?" Gino prompts.

"He told me it comes with a price," Sam explains. "I told Him I was willing to pay any price just to be human."

"Then He assigned me as a Guardian Angel," Sam continues. "That's when I met you, a sixteen-year-old you."

"Once my assigned mortal finds true love, I'll be reincarnated as a human." He looks at Gino with seriousness.

Gino's eyes widen. "Wait, so you'll be reincarnated as a human if I find my true love?"

"Yes," Sam confirms.

"So when you're reincarnated, you'll be a blank slate—a baby," Gino realizes.

"That's right," Sam acknowledges.

“Meaning you’ll lose all memories of your angelic life and your love story with Elizabeth,” Gino concludes.

“You are really smart, Gino.” Sam says with a wry smile. “Yes, that’s the case.”

Gino looks both awed and troubled. “How will you find her then?”

Sam answers. “I haven’t figured that part out yet, but I’m determined to find her.”

Gino shakes his head in disbelief. “That’s insane! There are about 7 billion people on Earth. How could you—”

“I’ll find her, Gino,” Sam interrupts firmly. “No matter what it takes, I will find her.”

Sam turns his attention back to Gino with a reassuring smile. “Don’t worry about me.” He says. “I know I’ll find her eventually. But first, let’s focus on fixing things for you.”

Gino furrows his brow, confusion written across his face. “Mine? We’re already together with Eun Ae.”

Sam’s gaze remains steady. “Then why am I still here?” he asks, his tone gentle but firm.

Gino looks at Sam, trying to understand.

“I should’ve been reincarnated earlier.” Sam continues, his voice carrying a hint of regret.

Gino's eyes widen. "So, does that mean Eun Ae isn't the one?"

Sam shakes his head. "Eun Ae is the one, but you're not truly yourself."

"I'm not me?" Gino repeats, bewildered.

"She's loving the wrong Gino," Sam explains, his tone softening. "You're not being yourself. I know you better than you know yourself. You keep pretending to be someone you're not."

Gino's shock is evident. "What are you talking about?"

"I think it's because of the book," Sam says, gesturing towards the tome.

Sam continues, "Look, the book is just a means for you to connect with her. But the real you, deep down inside, is the one she truly loves and is searching for." He places a hand on Gino's chest.

Gino hesitates. "But I don't want her to see me as a loser, someone who can't stand up for himself."

"It's better to be loved for who you are than for who they want you to be," Sam advises. "Besides, Eun Ae won't fall for someone who acts like a thug."

"Shin said something similar," Gino admits.

"You see yourself as a loser." Sam counters "But she sees you as a man with honor. A man who knows right from wrong."

"Alright, I get your point," Gino says.

Sam's expression turns serious. "Gino, you need to tell her the truth. Tell her about the book. Tell her everything. She deserves to know."

"Sure." Gino agrees. "I'll do it. When the time is right, I will tell her."

Meanwhile

Eun stirs awake, her eyes fluttering open to the soft light of morning. She stretches and sits up, reaching for her beloved teddy bear. "Good morning, Mr. Snugglebug." She murmurs, her voice filled with affection.

"Wait, where's Gino?"

Eun's gaze drifts around the area until it lands on the book lying on the grass. Curiosity piqued, she picks it up, examining the cover.

"What's this?" she asks herself, reading aloud.

"The Book of Life, Gino Han Edition, Volume 17."

Chapter 14 – Drowning but not in Waters

I walk towards Eun Ae, coffee in hand, my mind drifts, wondering if she's awake.

But as I get closer, something feels off. Way off.

I stop dead in my tracks. There she is, sitting on the grass, holding the book. The Book of Life. The one that's supposed to stay hidden. Worse, she's crying. I feel my chest tighten. Crap.

“Eun Ae...”

The words barely come out. I want to rush over, explain everything—tell her that it's not what it looks like.

She looks at me, with tears in her eyes.

“Eun.” I say, trying to sound calm. “I can explain.”

Her eyes snap to mine, and it's like a punch to the gut. “You don't have to.” she says, her voice breaking. “The book says it all.”

Gino steps closer. “Eun, let me explain.”

“Don't come near me!” Eun Ae shouted, throwing the book at me.

I flinch, my eyes feel watery. That book contains every decision I made, every tweak to the future to make sure she'd fall for me. It's all out there now, in the open.

“You know what, if only you had all the books of your entire life,” she continues, her words sharp and bitter, “maybe you'd remember who I am.”

What? I blink. “What do you mean?”

“Are you in amnesia, Gino? Ginger? Or whoever the f*** you are?” Her voice rises, each word like a slap. “You can’t really remember me, huh? I’m Onion! The girl who owned a teddy bear with one eye!”

Wait... what?

My brain scrambles to make sense of what she’s saying. A teddy bear with one eye? That rings a bell, but not her. “I thought... that was Yumi.”

Suddenly, I see it. Eun Ae— little Eun Ae—standing beside her younger self in my mind, a kid with a broken teddy bear and teary eyes. Damn, I’m an idiot. *She’s that girl!!*

I feel my heart drop to my stomach.

“All this time, you’ve been lying to me,” she says, and the pain in her voice makes my chest ache. “You set me up!”

“No, Eun,” I protest, stepping forward. “It’s not like that. I swear.”

“How will I ever know that?” she shoots back. “You’re always changing the future, Gino. You know what’s going to happen, but I don’t! How do I even know if I’m really in love with you? Or if I’m just falling into the future you’ve set up for me?”

Her words hit me like a freight train. I... I don’t have an answer for that. I always thought I was protecting her, making things better, but now, I’m not so sure. Did I take away her choice?

Before I can say anything, I see Reyna, Autumn, Rachel, Shin, and Lucas arriving making things worse. I’m so sorry. I’m so sorry for hurting Eun.

Eun Ae turns to face me one last time, eyes blazing with hurt and frustration. “Do you really think we’re going to be together? I pity you.”

I wince. It’s worse than anger—it’s disappointment. And it’s coming from the person I care about most.

“They’re right, you know. You’re pathetic. You’re a nerd, and you’re a loser!” Her voice echoes in the air as she walks away.

“Eun, wait!” I call after her, but Autumn, Reyna, and Rachel step in my way.

I glance at them, desperate to get past. Reyna crosses her arms. “I was keeping an eye on you, and now I can finally do this.” Without warning, she slaps me. Hard.

I barely recover when Rachel steps up. “I was rooting for you, but you’re a disappointment.” Another slap.

Autumn shrugs. “I don’t know what’s happening, but I feel like I need to do this.” Another slap.

Then there’s Lucas, grinning like a Cheshire cat. “Well, well, well, how the turntables...” He’s practically gloating. And of course, Shin hands him five bucks, like this is some kind of joke.

I don’t even have the energy to glare at them. My eyes fall to the ground, and I see it—Mr. Snufflebug. That stupid, one-eyed teddy bear. The one from Eun Ae’s past.

I bend down and pick it up, my hand trembling. And then, it all comes crashing back—everything. The memories, the decisions, the moments I altered to bring us to this point. My head spins, and I can feel the panic clawing at my chest.

The memories come flooding back, like a dam that’s just been shattered. I stand there, staring at the teddy bear—Mr. Snufflebug—and I can’t stop the rush of images, emotions, everything hitting me all at once. It’s overwhelming.

Flashback

I see it. We were just kids. I was there, in the schoolyard, watching Eun Ae being bullied. I hated those kids. They were taking her teddy bear, Mr. Snufflebug, the one with the missing eye. She was crying, pleading with them to give it back, and I... I couldn’t just stand there.

“Give it back to her!” I had shouted. And of course, like the predictable little jerks they were, they beat me up instead. I still remember the taste of dirt and the sting in my nose, but what mattered was that they left her alone.

Afterward, we sat under that tree, the one near the playground with the old wheel-cradle. I remember it so clearly now. Her eyes were still red from crying, and she clutched Mr. Snufflebug like he was the most precious thing in the world.

“They bully me because my teddy bear only has one eye,” she had said.

“What’s his name?”

“Mr. Snufflebug,” she answered, hugging him tighter. I had smiled, introducing myself to the bear, like he was some kind of person. “Hello, Mr. Snufflebug. And you are?”

Her voice was small but steady. “I’m Eun Ae. But they call me On-Eun. Onion. They say I’m a crybaby.”

I had laughed again, the connection hitting me instantly. “Why are you laughing?” she had asked, her face all scrunched up, suspicious. “Are you bullying me too?”

“No, no,” I had said, shaking my head. “I’m laughing because my mom calls me Ginger. And you just said they call you Onion. So, Onion and Ginger.”

“Why does your mom call you Ginger?” she had asked, confused but interested.

I shrugged. “She liked the name Ginger, but I came out a boy. So Dad named me Gino instead, but my mom still calls me Ginger.”

We had both laughed at that—two kids who barely knew anything about life but found something silly to laugh about. Onion and Ginger. A couple of misfit veggies in the playground of life.

From that day, she wasn’t alone anymore. “Don’t worry,” I had told her, “from now on, you have two friends—Mr. Snufflebug and me.”

The look in her eyes when I said that... it was like I'd given her the world.

"Really?!" She had asked, and I had nodded, knowing in that moment that this tiny, fragile girl was going to be someone important to me.

Time flashes by in my head, skipping over scenes like a broken movie reel.

My birthday. I was sitting on the couch, feeling miserable because no one had shown up. I don't care much for parties now, but back then, it was everything. I remember feeling so small, like I didn't matter.

Then I heard it. "Gingeeer!"

My heart had jumped. I rushed to the door, and there she was—Onion, standing there with this goofy grin, holding up a card that said, "Happy Birthday," with a little gift box in her hand. My heart had done that weird fluttery thing, even back then. I invited her in, and she handed me the gift.

Inside the box was a Gingerbread plush. It was ridiculous, but I loved it. We played Streak Fighters that day. We played Streak Fighters a lot, actually, through all the seasons—Easter, Halloween, Christmas. She was always there, and for a long time, that was enough.

But then... we moved. I was leaving town, leaving her behind. The last thing I did was give her my mom's phone number because I needed her to know that she could still call me. Even though I was leaving, I didn't want her to feel like I had abandoned her.

I remember watching her cry as I sat in the back of that car, feeling like I was being torn in two. "Call me!" I had yelled through the window as we drove away. "Call me!"

Flash forward

It's morning. I'm sitting in the kitchen, staring at my mom's phone. I was ten, but I already know how to obsess over things. My brain doesn't know how to let go—it's like some twisted algorithm running on a loop. The longer I sit here, the heavier the silence feels. I haven't heard from Onion in days, and my stomach is in knots. I hate waiting, not knowing.

Night comes, and I'm still stuck in this weird limbo. I haven't moved, barely eaten. The phone is right in front of me like it's mocking me. I'm supposed to be asleep, but sleep feels like a joke right now. I don't sleep when my brain's still whirring away, coming up with every possible scenario about why Eun hasn't called.

Eventually, I drift off, not really by choice. But then I feel something—Mom's carrying me, putting me to bed like I'm five again. Half asleep, I mutter, "On... Eun..." without even meaning to. It's like my brain's programmed to hold onto her, no matter what.

Then I wake up suddenly, heart racing. Something's wrong. I can feel it in my gut, like a knot that won't go away. Without thinking, I bolt downstairs. Mom's on the phone. She looks serious, the kind of serious that makes my chest tighten.

"What hospital?" she's saying. My heart skips a beat. "How is she? Okay, I'll tell him." And that's when I know. It's about Onion. Something happened.

"Mom, who was that?" I ask, my voice a little too shaky for my liking.

She looks at me, her expression soft but heavy. "That was Eun's mom. She's sick, Ginger. They've admitted her to the hospital."

It's like the floor drops out from under me. "What!?" I shout, my voice cracking. Sick? Onion? That can't be right. She's always been fragile, but this feels different. "Mom, let's visit Onion. We need to go now."

Mom shakes her head. "I don't think she wants to see you right now," she says, her voice calm, too calm. As if that's supposed to make any sense.

Not want to see me? She's my best friend. We're *Onion and Ginger*, the vegetable duo. "But Mom, she's my friend! I need to visit her."

Mom sighs, and I hate that sigh. It's the one that means she's about to say something I won't like. "I'll ask your Dad about it when he gets home. But, Ginger, it's a three-hour drive. Maybe we can visit her on the weekend."

The weekend? I can't wait until the weekend. Doesn't she understand? This is life and death. Onion is in the hospital. "But Moom!" I sound like a child, and I hate it, but I don't care. My brain is screaming at me to do something—*anything*—to fix this.

I grab the phone, dialing without a second thought. "I need to call her."

When I hear Eun's voice on the other end, it's like I can finally breathe again. "Hello, Miss Ae, this is Gino. Is Eun there?"

And then I hear her. "Ginger..." Her voice is soft, too soft.

"Eun?" I ask, desperate for her to say more.

"Don't worry, I'm fi—" But she doesn't finish. I hear her mom screaming in the background, her voice panicked. "Eun! Honey! Eun, baby, hold on. Jonathan, call the doctor now!"

My heart stops. "Onion?" I call, my voice cracking, but no one answers me.

The call cuts off. I stare at the phone, my hand trembling. "Onion?" I whisper, my eyes already filling with tears.

Mom looks at me, her face full of worry. "What happened?"

I swallow hard. "The people on the other side... they were screaming. Something's wrong. Mom, we need to go to her. Now."

She's hesitating. Why is she hesitating? "Mom, please!" I'm crying, and I hate it. I hate that I can't hold it together, but I can't stop. This is Eun. My best friend.

The next thing I know, we’re in the car. Mom’s driving, and I’m in the backseat, staring out the window, eyes red and swollen. It’s late, and the roads are empty, but it feels like we’re not moving fast enough. I’m gripping the seat, willing us to go faster, but there’s nothing I can do.

Mom is sweating, her grip tight on the steering wheel. There’s a tension in the air, and I can feel it. Something’s going to happen. I can tell. My mind starts racing with all the worst-case scenarios, and then—it happens.

Mom jerks the steering wheel. The car swerves, and suddenly we’re off the road. Everything goes dark, then light again, spinning in a way that makes my head pound. The impact is fast, too fast to process. I feel a jolt, and then... nothing.

When I open my eyes, everything is blurry. My body feels heavy, like I’m moving through molasses. There’s this sharp pain everywhere, but I don’t care about that. “Mom?” I call out, my voice weak.

I look over, and that’s when I see her. She’s slumped over the wheel, her head bleeding, too much blood. Too much for a ten-year-old to handle.

Present

“Mooooom!” I scream, my voice breaking. This isn’t happening. This can’t be happening.

She’s dead. Mom is dead. She’s dead because of me.

The world fades out again. I’m crying, screaming, but nothing makes sense. All I hear are voices—faint, like they’re underwater. “Gino! Gino! Hey, man! Are you fine? Gino!”

I blink, and through my blurred vision, I see them—Brad, Shin, and Lucas. They’re here, calling my name.

But —

But I’m drowning.

“I think we need to bring him to the hospital.”

Then —

Black.

Chapter 15 – The Good Liar

Flashback

I'm sitting on the bed, staring at nothing. My mind feels like it's stuck in some endless loop, a glitch that won't shut off. *I killed Mom.* The thought plays over and over, repeating like a broken record. I don't know why it's my brain's default mode now. It's like no matter how hard I try to think logically about it—*it wasn't your fault, Gino*—the feeling doesn't go away.

I killed Mom.

Saying it out loud doesn't make it any better. I keep hoping that maybe if I say it enough, it'll stop sounding real. But it doesn't. Each time I say it, it digs deeper. I'm too young to deal with this. What ten-year-old even has the tools to process something like this?

The door swings open. Dad walks in with a bottle of beer in his hand. He's drunk. Of course, he is. He's always like this now—ever since the accident. I don't even recognize him anymore. Maybe he doesn't recognize me either.

"I killed Mom," I whisper again. It's almost like a mantra now. Maybe if I keep saying it, the weight will lift. Spoiler: it doesn't.

"Hey, shut up," Dad snaps, his voice sharp and slurred at the same time. I flinch but don't respond. He moves around the room, throwing my clothes into a bag. "Pack your things. I'll bring you to the Watsons."

Wait, what? "The Watsons?" My brain finally clicks into focus. He's serious. "Who are they?"

He doesn't look at me, still packing, still sipping his beer. "I have this friend—Mark Watson. Old buddy from back in the day. He owns an apartment. You'll stay with his family for a while." His voice is flat, like

he's telling me about a casual errand, not... this. Not like he's shipping me off to live with strangers.

I don't respond. What's there to say? I feel numb. Dad's words barely register, like I'm hearing them through a thick fog. I killed Mom. He's sending me away. Does he even care?

We arrive at the Watsons' place. As soon as we get out of the car, a man—Mark Watson, I assume—walks over with his wife and a little girl, maybe around my age.

"Hey Ronald, long time no see," Mark says, his tone friendly, but it feels forced. There's this weird tension hanging in the air. Dad nods, giving some half-hearted introduction. "This is my kid, Gino."

I stand there, silent. My name sounds weird in his mouth. It's like he's talking about someone else. Like I'm just... there. I don't know what to feel. I barely feel anything.

Mark offers his condolences about Mom, and Dad quickly brushes it off. Typical. He doesn't want to talk about her. Neither do I, to be honest. It's like we're both running from the same thing, but in opposite directions.

Mark's wife, Helen, introduces herself. "I'm your Aunt Helen," she says warmly. Then there's Yumi, the girl. She comes up to me, smiling. "Hi, I'm Yumi."

I look at her, but I don't respond. It's not that I don't want to; I just... can't. I feel like a robot running on empty, too drained to process human interaction.

The adults are talking again, but I barely hear them. Then, I catch Dad saying something that hits me like a punch in the gut.

"I don't want to do this, Mark, but every time I see him... I remember the reason for her death."

It's like everything inside me goes cold. Dad blames me, just like I blame myself. I knew it. I always knew it. My chest tightens, and I have to force myself to breathe.

"But it's not your kid's fault, Ronald," Mark argues. I want to believe him, but I can't. The logic doesn't stick, not in my head. I've run through it all a million times, and I always end up in the same place—Mom's gone because of me.

"Hello, Gino," Helen says softly, her voice pulling me out of my spiral.
"I'll take you to your room."

I follow her, Yumi trailing behind. The apartment feels too small, too quiet. I'm walking, but everything feels distant, like I'm not really here. Like I'm watching someone else live my life.

I can hear Yumi trying to talk to me, but her words don't really land. My brain's already too busy replaying the accident. Over and over again. *I killed Mom.* I remember every detail. And now? Now I'm being left with strangers because my dad can't bear to look at me.

Honestly, I get it. I can't bear to look at me either.

Days Later

Yumi's standing in the doorway, a bit too enthusiastic for this early in the morning. "Do you know how to play Streak Fighters? Let's play in my room!" Her energy feels like nails on a chalkboard to my already overloaded brain.

I don't respond. Instead, tears well up in my eyes without warning. I hate this. I hate that I'm crying in front of a stranger.

"Hey, why are you crying?" she asks, concerned.

"Go away!" I snap, my voice sharp. I didn't mean to lash out, but it just comes out. The tears don't stop. They're like a faucet someone left running.

Yumi looks hurt. “I’m sorry.” She backs out of the room, and I feel guilty. I shouldn’t have yelled at her. But at the same time, I don’t care. No one understands. How could they?

The next day, she’s back again, in different clothes this time. “Hey, Gino! Let’s play!” She’s persistent, I’ll give her that.

“I don’t wanna play with you,” I say flatly. I can’t deal with her right now. Or ever, really.

“Why?” she asks, blinking like she doesn’t get it.

“You’re not Onion. Go away.”

She looks confused. “I’m not Onion?”

The next day, I hear a knock. I open the door just a crack, and there she is, standing in front of me wearing what looks like a makeshift Onion costume. She’s even got a fake onion hat on her head.

“Hey, I’m Onion now! Let’s play!” She grins, all proud of herself.

I stare at her for a second, then scan the costume. “Onion has a teddy bear with one eye. His name is Mr. Snufflebug,” I say, deadpan. “Go away.” I shut the door before she can reply.

Through the crack, I see her face fall. She looks sad, and for a split second, I feel bad. But only for a second.

That night, I hear her struggling in her room. She’s pulling on something, sweating like it’s a real effort. I catch a glimpse of her tugging on the eye of her teddy bear.

Her mom, Helen, walks by, holding laundry. “Hey honey, what are you doing?” she asks.

Yumi doesn't look up. "I'm pulling the eye off my teddy bear so Gino will play with me. He said he'd play if I had a bear with one eye."

Helen just nods like this is totally normal. "Oh, okay."

Eventually, Yumi manages to pull the eye off. She holds the bear up triumphantly, grinning ear to ear. "I made it! I have a teddy bear with one eye!" She hugs it tight and whispers, "Hello, Mr. Snugglebug."

The next morning, Yumi shows up at my door again, waving the one-eyed teddy bear in my face like she's conquered some great quest.

"Hey, Ginoooo! Let's play. I'm Onion with the teddy bear with one eye. Open the door!"

I open the door wider this time. She's standing there with the bear, beaming. I can't help but feel something soften inside me.

"Come oooon!" she says, dragging me out of my room.

We start playing Streak Fighters, but I'm not really into it. The controller feels heavy in my hands. My mind drifts back to that night, the crash, Mom...

Suddenly, I put the controller down, tears pooling in my eyes again. I can't keep up the charade anymore. Yumi notices immediately.

"Hey, what's wrong?" she asks.

"I killed Mom," I choke out. The words feel like a punch to the gut every time I say them. "Mom died because of me."

Yumi looks confused. "What are you talking about?"

"We were going to visit Onion... but we had an accident... and Mom... Mom died." My voice cracks. I can barely get the words out.

Yumi stares at me for a moment, like she's trying to process what I said. Then, she does something unexpected. She grabs my face, forcing me to look at her.

"Hey, look at me." Her voice is soft but firm. "I'm Onion, okay? I'm not in a hospital. You didn't come to visit me."

I blink, confused. "But..."

"Shh..." She cuts me off, pressing her finger to my lips. "Your mom died in a car accident. It wasn't your fault, okay? Stop thinking like that."

I'm stunned. No one has said that to me before. Not like this. Not so directly.

"It's not your fault," she repeats, her eyes locked on mine.

And then, she does something even more unexpected—she kisses me on the forehead. It's such a small gesture, but it feels... comforting. More comforting than anything I've felt in a long time.

"Come closer," she says, pulling me into a hug. I don't resist. I just let her hold me, and for the first time in what feels like forever, I don't feel so alone.

We sit there for a while, just hugging, and then... we go back to playing. But this time, it feels different. I feel lighter, like maybe, just maybe, I can breathe again.

Present

In the darkness, a soft voice cuts through my foggy consciousness. "Yumi..." The name escapes my lips, but it feels like a whisper lost in the void.

I'm slowly pulled from the blackness. I gently open my eyes, though everything is still a hazy blur. "Yumi..." I try again, my voice trembling.

A familiar figure comes into focus, but it's all still too fuzzy. I can make out Yumi's concerned face and Aunt Helen standing nearby. "Gino?"

"Yumi..." I croak out. I see the worry etched on her face, and it tugs at something deep inside me.

Yumi's eyes widen with relief. "Gino, you're awake. You had an anxiety attack, and your friends brought you here—"

Before she can say more, I grab her arm, my fingers clinging desperately. I pull her into a fierce hug, my emotions pouring out uncontrollably. Yumi is taken aback, her body stiffening in shock.

"I remember now what I was about..." My voice is choked with emotion, tears streaming down my face. "Thank you for saving me. You saved me from that trauma."

Yumi's eyes soften, and she starts to understand. "I'm sorry for lying..."

"No," I cut her off, still clutching her tightly. "Thank you. Thank you for saving me." The tears won't stop, and I let them flow freely.

Yumi looks at me, her eyes misty as well. "You're still the crybaby Ginger," she says with a small, genuine smile. She returns my hug, her warmth a soothing balm to my frayed nerves.

I laugh through my tears, a bittersweet sound. "Damn, I miss that name."

Aunt Helen's smile is soft, kind. The boys, Lucas and Shin, who are standing nearby, also show their support with warm, reassuring smiles.

"Wait," Lucas suddenly says, breaking the moment. "Where's Brad?"

Third Person POV

Eun sits alone on the roof of her house, her posture crumpled as she hugs her knees tightly. The chill of the evening air bites at her, but she barely notices. Her gaze is fixed on the horizon, a mix of sorrow and unresolved anger in her eyes.

"He promised to come back for me," she whispers to the wind, her voice trembling. "But he didn't. And now he's here, breaking my heart all over again."

Chapter 16 – The Beauty of Lying

Here I am, on the roof of our house, knees hugged tight to my chest, staring off into nothing. It's quiet up here—just me, my thoughts, and the breeze that won't stop teasing my hair. My mind? It's a chaotic mess of emotions, flashing back to a time I wish I could forget, yet cling to like some weird emotional crutch. Why do I do this to myself?

Flashback

"I always thought tomorrow would be a better day," I mumble, bitterness creeping in. I used to believe that, like an idiot, but things don't always go how you imagine.

"Hey," I say, half-smiling. "I'm Onion."

And Gino? My best friend? "I'm Ginger," he'd respond with that stupid grin of his. God, those were the days, weren't they? No clue what was coming next. No inkling of how wrong I'd be about everything.

Phone rings.

"Ginger..." I whisper, trying to hold back the crack in my voice.

"Eun? Eun, are you there?" the phone echoes, but I'm too wrapped up in my own façade to answer right.

"Don't worry," I try to say, feeling so weak. "I'm fine—"

"Eun? Eun!"

And then it's all mom's voice. Panic. Concern. "Jonathan, call the doctor! Eun, baby, hold on!"

I don't hold on. I let go. My body gives out, staring at ceiling tiles that blur and shift like my hazy memories.

End of Flashback

I got better, sure, but that's just what they tell you, right? "Better" is a funny word when it means rolling out of a hospital in a wheelchair, dialing numbers that never pick up. Gino's mom... unreachable. Always. Like she vanished too.

Years later, I go back to school, and *there he is*. Gino. My Ginger. But something in the pit of my stomach churns like sour milk because this? This isn't the reunion I dreamed of.

"Hey, Ginger!" I call out, my heart stupidly leaping into my throat.

He just looks at me like I'm some random girl on the street. "Are you... talking to me?"

I blink. Of course, I'm talking to you. "Yeah, Ginger."

But his eyes—there's nothing there. "I'm not Ginger. Who are you?"

That moment, man. That was it. I thought, after all these years, seeing him would bring everything back to life. But no. Instead, I get pulled down into the grave I tried so hard to climb out of.

Laughter bubbles up around us, not from joy, but from spite. People pointing, laughing, like I'm some kind of joke. God, the shame burns hotter than anything. And I hate myself for it.

I don't know if I'm overreacting or if the world's just gone cold and gray because of you, Gino. You've painted my life in colors I can't even recognize anymore.

I change my hair—why not? Trying to change everything. Anything. But deep down, it doesn't matter.

"You're beautiful," I whisper to his ghost, the Gino I used to know. "You always were."

But you? You ruin everything. You, standing there in a suit, offering me your hand like that'll fix things. And then what? Punching Lee Ji Yu in the park like you've got something to prove.

It doesn't make sense, none of it. You're not an asshole—at least you weren't. But you're trying so damn hard to be one now.

If only you'd just stop pretending, stop changing.

If only you'd just be *you*. That's all I ever wanted.

It's funny. All those dreams I had of you, of us... I could've loved you, Gino. Loved you in ways I don't think you'd ever understand. Maybe I still do, in some twisted way. You were part of my *bitter-better days*, after all.

I'm back here on the roof, tears streaming down my cheeks. They come easier these days. I don't fight them as much.

"It's the boy, isn't it?" A voice cuts through my misery.

I jolt, looking up. "Why are you here?"

It's Dad. Of course, it is. He's the only one who knows about this place. My safe spot. My sanctuary.

"Well, I couldn't find you anywhere," he says, shrugging like it's no big deal. "I remembered your special place. On the roof."

"Leave me alone!" I snap, but he just sits down next to me like he belongs there. Stubborn, like always.

"I was young once, you know," he starts, and here we go—the life lesson speech I never asked for.

"..doing young things."

"Then I met your mother - Cynthia. She's not the perfect girl out there but I fell in love with her. Then I courted her for months until we've been together. That was worth it. But just like I said, I was young back then. I made a mistake that most young people do. Because of that - we broke up."

"Months after that, I met Sasha. We have the same frequency, it's funny to think that in just a month of meeting each other we ended up a couple.

Then we enjoyed being together that we decided to get married. And we did. At our wedding, I invited your Mom - Cynthia, well, she was part of my life once so I kinda thought that inviting her is a fine thing to do.”

“I wasn't wrong, it was the finest thing that I did in my life. Because that's the time I met you. Cynthia brought you to the wedding. You were so small and so cute. It was my first time seeing my beautiful daughter.”

“After that, I proposed a setup to Cynthia which she agreed. We were going to keep the setup secret and do our best to give you a normal life.”

“I lied to you all these years,” he says, and his voice cracks a little. “It wasn't fair, I know. But I love you. And sometimes people lie because they love you.”

I stay silent, feeling my heart twist in ways I don't fully understand.

"I'm sorry," he whispers, and I can feel his sincerity like a weight in the air between us.

I cry into his shoulder, feeling all the anger, confusion, and pain flow out of me in waves.

"Sometimes people lie to protect you," he continues, his voice soft. "Trust them anyway. Even when it hurts, even when it doesn't make sense. Trust them. That's how love works, right?"

And there it is. Gino's voice echoes in my mind, clear as day. *That's how love works, right?*

"That's how love works?" I repeat, unsure, scared, but maybe... hopeful?

Jonathan nods. "Yes."

Third Person POV

Then, without warning, the ground begins to tremble beneath their feet. Jonathan and Eun Ae, standing on the roof, freeze as the world around them violently shakes. It's not just a tremor—it's a monstrous quake, the kind that sends buildings swaying and hearts racing. Eun Ae instinctively clutches onto Jonathan's arm.

"What's happening?" she gasps, her eyes wide.

"We need to get down!" Jonathan shouts, his voice barely audible over the rumbling earth. They quickly descend the narrow stairs, stumbling as the roof shakes beneath them. The whole house quakes as they reach the bottom, where they spot Cynthia through the window, crouched under the dining table inside.

"She's there!"

They scramble into the house, ducking under the table with Cynthia just as the quake intensifies. The sound of shattering glass fills the air as everything from picture frames to dishes crashes to the floor, breaking into pieces. Books topple from shelves, and furniture slides across the room.

Ten agonizing minutes later, the earthquake finally subsides, leaving the house in disarray, their possessions scattered and destroyed. For a moment, there's only silence—until their phones start buzzing all at once.

Eun Ae reaches for her phone, her hands trembling. The screen lights up with an emergency alert:

"EMERGENCY ALERT: A potential tsunami will happen right after the earthquake. Those in coastal areas should evacuate immediately to the nearest fallout shelter."

As the message sinks in, a sharp cracking sound echoes through the room. Eun Ae looks up, startled. The window nearest them has splintered. Another crack follows, and then another.

"Is someone throwing rocks?" Jonathan mutters, standing up to check.

But when they look closer, they realize it's not rocks. A lifeless bird lies outside on the windowsill. Another thud. Then another. Dead birds rain from the sky like grotesque hailstones, their fragile bodies hitting the roof and ground with sickening thumps.

"What... is going on?" Eun Ae whispers, her voice barely audible.

Jonathan rushes to turn on the TV, hoping for an explanation. The news channel flickers to life, the reporter's voice strained. "We are receiving reports that the earthquake is not localized. It's happening worldwide—all at the same time."

The words barely register when, all of a sudden, the screen goes black. The power cuts out, plunging them into darkness. Eun Ae fumbles for her phone again, trying to check the internet. No signal.

Jonathan turns to her, a grim look in his eyes. "I need to go to Sasha."

Before Eun Ae can respond, he pulls her into a tight hug, his embrace filled with both urgency and fear. "Stay safe, okay?"

Without waiting for her reply, Jonathan runs outside, jumping into his car and speeding down the road. As he drives, the scene around him feels surreal. Dead birds litter the streets. People flood the sidewalks, some running, others pushing and shoving to get into convenience stores. Wild animals, seemingly disoriented, roam the streets amidst the chaos. Fires rage in the distance, smoke billowing up into the already stormy sky.

Jonathan grips the steering wheel tightly as he drives past the devastation. Then, his heart stops as he sees something horrifying—a person, standing on the edge of a tall building, jumps.

"Oh no..." Jonathan whispers, his voice trembling. "What is happening? Is this... the end of the world?"

Chapter 17 – Before the World Ends

Gino stands on the boardwalk, his gaze lost in the distance, where the sky meets the sea. He thinks back to the date he once had with Eun Ae, her laughter still echoing faintly in his mind.

"If only I had been myself," he mutters under his breath. "We wouldn't have ended up like this."

Suddenly, a sound pulls him from his thoughts. A faint flickering noise, growing louder by the second. Curiosity piqued, Gino moves closer to the shore. There, in the shallow waters, a startling sight greets him. The sea is teeming with fish—hundreds, maybe thousands of them, all thrashing about. Some still leap desperately from the water as if trying to escape an unseen force.

A strange noise emerges from farther out at sea. Gino squints at the horizon and sees dolphins and whales breaking the surface, their massive bodies jumping and splashing. Their eerie cries fill the air, almost as if they're warning him. Like the fish, they seem to be swimming toward the shore, fleeing something.

By now, a crowd has gathered, drawn by the bizarre spectacle of marine life behaving unnaturally. They stand in awe, whispering amongst themselves.

And then it happens.

A violent earthquake shakes the ground beneath Gino's feet. Without hesitation, his instincts kick in. He needs to find safety—somewhere open, away from buildings that might collapse.

"The shore," he thinks, rushing toward the open space near the water. "This is the safest place right now, but I need to leave as soon as the earthquake stops. A tsunami might follow."

He ducks down, hands covering his head, trying to stay calm amid the chaos. All around him, people scream. Debris crashes to the ground. The air is filled with panic, but Gino forces himself to remain steady, assessing the situation.

As soon as the tremors subside, Gino sprints away from the shore. His heart pounds in his chest, but his mind remains sharp. "In a few minutes, my phone will ring."

Almost on cue, his phone buzzes. He glances at the screen:
"EMERGENCY ALERT: A potential tsunami will happen right after the earthquake. Those in coastal areas should evacuate immediately."

Just as I thought. Gino smirks. "Guess I didn't need any Book of Life to predict that."

Running through the streets, he sees buildings reduced to rubble. Panic has consumed the city. It's a scene straight out of a nightmare. He shakes his head, amazed at the destruction.

"Newer buildings crumble so easily," he thinks. "The old structures were built stronger. They've survived worse. If I'm going to make it, I need to find one of those buildings."

He pulls out his phone, but there's no signal. "No signal? The earthquake must have taken down the cell towers."

Undeterred, Gino closes his eyes, mentally mapping the city. He thinks through the layout, searching his memory for the closest ancient structure still standing. And then it hits him.

"The Taoist temple. It's only a few blocks away."

Without wasting another second, Gino races through the chaotic streets, dodging debris and frantic people. His legs burn, but he pushes himself harder until finally, the temple comes into view.

When he reaches it, he stops to catch his breath, marveling at the sight. The temple stands untouched, not a single crack in its walls.

"Unbelievable," he whispers. "Not even a scratch."

He steps inside, feeling a strange sense of calm in the ancient building's presence. Gino reaches for the Book of Life, flipping through its pages for answers. But as he turns each page, his heart sinks.

Half of the pages are blank.

"Wait... what's happening?" Gino's voice trembles. Does this mean I'm going to die today? Is this the end of the world?

He panics, shouting into the empty temple. "Sam?"

"Sam, where are you?"

And then, out of nowhere, a familiar, ethereal figure appears.

Sam stands before him, but something is different. His usually confident, almost mischievous demeanor is gone, replaced with a sorrowful expression.

"Gino," Sam says quietly, his voice laced with regret.

"Sam, tell me what's happening." Gino asks, confused by Sam's sudden appearance and tone.

"I messed up," Sam admits, his voice trembling. "I... I'm a stupid Cupid."

"What are you talking about?" Gino's frustration grows as he hears the words.

Sam takes a deep breath, his wings folding behind him as if the weight of his own confession pulls him down. "I cheated the system. I tampered with your fate."

Gino frowns, unsure of what Sam is saying. "You what?"

"The Akashic Records... they hold every person's life. Every moment that has happened, is happening, and will happen. I was assigned to you when you were sixteen, Gino. And in your 35th book—when you're thirty-five—you're supposed to be with Eun Ae." Sam looks away, guilt shadowing his face. "But I... I couldn't wait."

Gino feels his stomach drop. "So you stole the Book and gave it to me?"

“Yes. I stole the book of your seventeenth year—2020,” Sam admits. “I thought... if I gave you an edge, if I let you know what would happen, you could speed things up. You could be with her sooner.”

Gino's mind races. “So you thought by showing me my future, I could change it?”

Sam nods, shame written across his face. “But I didn't realize... everything is connected. Every change ripples through time. Every person you interact with, every small choice, it changes their futures too.”

“It's not just that, everyone in the world.” Sam continues, with slow pause.

“Everyone in the world?” Gino asks, confused.

“Everyone's future is changed too.” Sam continues.

“The Butterfly Effect.” Gino says in awe.

“I broke the balance of space and time, and now—this chaos, this end of the world—it's my fault.” Sam concludes.

Gino's breath catches in his throat. He understands now. The earthquake, the fires, the collapsing buildings—it's all because of Sam's interference.

“The Akashic Records.” Gino realizes. “It is a system.”

“And the system was supposed to unfold as it should,” Gino murmurs, realizing the weight of it all. “But there's a bug in the system.”

“And the bug is me. Without me, without those changes that I have created. Everything should have been fine.” Gino declares.

“No, it's me,” Sam insists. “I did this.”

Gino shakes his head. “Maybe. But I let it happen. I'm the one living in this world. You're just an angel, you don't belong here. I'm the one who's broken the system.”

Gino's eyes meet Sam's, and for the first time, there's a sense of resignation. "Maybe God and Elizabeth were right. Divine beings shouldn't mess with mortals. This is your last time, Sam. You shouldn't intervene again."

Sam's eyes fill with anguish. "Gino, you don't have to sacrifice yourself for this. I'll fix it—I'll talk to God."

"No, Sam," Gino says, his voice firm. "You can't interfere anymore. Let us, humans, deal with our problems."

"Besides... I'm going to die soon anyway. And when I do, things will go back to the way they were supposed to be."

"No!" Sam steps forward, his wings trembling. "You don't have to die!"

Gino smiles, a sad, resigned smile. "In the moments before death, people realize what truly matters. And right now, all I can think about is Eun Ae."

He glances down at the book of life in his hand, flipping through the pages. "Let me borrow this one last time," he says softly. "I'll use this to temporarily escape death, to see Eun Ae one last time. And after that, I can die, and you will take this book back to the Akashic Records. It'll fix everything."

Sam opens his mouth to protest, but Gino cuts him off. "I'm saving the world, Sam. Don't interfere."

A deafening sound pierces the air, echoing from the sky above. Gino looks up, his breath caught in his throat. A meteor shower—thousands of shooting stars streak across the heavens, endless and unrelenting. The once peaceful sky is now filled with falling fire, raining down on the earth below, each fiery streak painting the ground in flames.

The heat intensifies, and the flames spread fast. The ground beneath Gino's feet begins to burn.

"I don't have much time," Gino whispers to himself, panic setting in. His mind races, searching for a way out.

Suddenly, a memory of Eun Ae strikes him like lightning. “33 Meru Street, Northpole Avenue.”

“I have to go to the North...” His voice trails off as he focuses on the route. “Northpole Avenue.”

Closing his eyes for a moment, Gino maps out the distance in his mind. He knows he needs to hurry. With the Book of Life clutched tightly in his right hand, its pages trembling as he runs, Gino takes off into the burning streets. The book is open to a specific page—page 91, April 19, 2020. His eyes quickly scan the last sentence.

“I died from a speeding car down the streets.”

His heart skips a beat. Without hesitation, Gino continues to run but now away from the street, knowing now where his death awaits him if he stays on this path.

As he changes course, the sentence in the book shifts, ink moving as if alive.

“I died from falling down a hole.”

Gino’s breath quickens. His pace slows as his eyes dart across the ground, searching. And then, there it is—a gaping hole, black as night, the earth swallowing itself in silence. Carefully, he dodges the pit, taking another route, his mind sharp and focused on survival.

He continues like this, avoiding death at every turn, each small action altering the course of his fate as described in the book. Gino presses on, determined, until finally, he reaches Northpole Avenue. His eyes frantically scan the houses, looking for numbers.

“1 Meru Street,” he mutters to himself as he spots the first house.

His feet pound the pavement as he sprints forward. Eun Ae’s house is the 33rd. His heart pounds faster than his footsteps.



When he reaches it, he stops. "33 Meru Street." He reads.

"That's Eun Ae's house." He says while looking at the house painted in Black.

Fire dances around the area, the flames licking at the edges of the house. There, in the second-floor window, he sees her—Eun Ae, trapped in her room. Her eyes are wide with fear, her silhouette faint against the glow of the flames.

Without thinking, Gino climbs the burning walls, each movement swift and desperate. His body protests, but he doesn't stop. He hears a faint thud as he lands on the roof, his fingers already reaching for the window latch. With a grunt, he pushes it open.

"Eun Ae," he calls out, his voice thick with emotion.

"Gino?" Her voice trembles as she recognizes him. "Gino, what is happening?"

Gino climbs inside, the heat of the flames pressing against him. He looks at her with regret, a heavy weight in his chest. "I'm sorry, this is all because of me." His words are laced with sorrow, each syllable heavy with guilt.

Confusion floods Eun Ae's face. "What? What do you mean?"

"You are my meant-to-be, my true love," Gino says, his voice breaking. "We are the perfect match. But... we were forced to meet at the wrong time."

Eun Ae stares at him, her brow furrowed. "What? What do you mean?" Her voice is small, fragile against the chaos around them.

Gino looks down, tears welling in his eyes. "You were right. I should have trusted the Future... trusted Fate."

A soft realization crosses her face. "Faith in Fate."

Chapter 18 – Beyond the Purple Twilight

The world is ending.

Chaos spreads across the land like wildfire, but on the rooftop of an old house, two figures sit side by side, bathed in the fading light of the Purple Twilight. Eun Ae and Gino Han are calm, resigned to the inevitable. Death looms over them, but fear has left their hearts. They know this is how it ends.

Gino speaks, his voice soft yet heavy with the weight of his confession. He tells Eun Ae everything. From the time he left the countryside, to when she had fallen sick, to the accident that took his mother's life. He tells her about arriving in the city, abandoned by his father, and how he met the Watsons, how they helped him forget his past and trauma. He tells her about meeting her again, about Sam, and the cursed book he handed over. Every detail, up to this very moment, flows from his lips.

"I'm so sorry," Gino says, his eyes locked on the horizon, unable to meet hers. "I didn't realize how far I'd go for love. I love you, Eun, but... I ended the world just to tell you."

Eun Ae smiles, a small, sad curve of her lips. "Was it worth it?"

Without hesitation, Gino answers, "You're worth it."

A soft blush colors Eun Ae's cheeks. The tension between them lingers, unspoken but visible. Gino glances at her, puzzled. "Why aren't we dead yet? We've been talking for hours."

Eun Ae shrugs, teasing him lightly. "I don't know. Why don't you check the book?"

Gino shakes his head. "Nah. I don't need it anymore. I don't need to know the future."

Chapter 18 – Beyond the Purple Twilight

Eun Ae laughs, a light sound that seems to dance in the air. "Now you say that. It's almost like the world had to end just to teach you a lesson."

"Yeah, I'm cruel," Gino admits with a grin.

"No," Eun Ae corrects him, her tone playful. "You're just dumb."

Gino smirks. "Dumb? I can ace any exam."

"I'm not talking about that. I'm talking about emotionally. Romantically." She leans in slightly, her gaze settling on his lips. "You're so bad at catching hints."

Gino frowns in confusion. "Hints? What do you mean?"

Eun Ae sighs, exasperated but still smiling. "Like now. You still don't get it."

Gino blinks, utterly lost. "Get what?"

Eun Ae's eyes gleam with mischief. "Gino, this is the part where you're supposed to kiss me."

Gino's face turns scarlet as the realization hits him. He leans in slowly, heart pounding in his chest, ready to close the gap between them when suddenly—

A buzzing sound fills the air, like the crackling of electricity. Both of them turn their heads in unison toward the strange noise.

And there, floating above them, is a surreal sight.

Jellyfish. Not in the sea, but drifting gracefully through the sky, their translucent bodies glowing softly in the dim light. Gino stares in disbelief. "Jellyfish? Just like your tattoo."

"And they're flying... flying in the air," Eun Ae whispers, her voice filled with wonder.

One of the jellyfish drifts toward Eun Ae, and as she reaches out to touch it, the creature seems to respond with a gentle nudge, curling into her

hand like a sentient being. She giggles and hugs it, as though it were a plush toy. More jellyfish surround her, their soft tendrils brushing against her skin, seeking her warmth.

"They like you," Gino breathes, amazed by the sight before him.

Eun Ae smiles, her joy has filled the rooftop as the jellyfish seem to lift her off the ground, gently at first, then higher and higher.

"Eun?" Gino calls out, his voice tinged with worry.

"Gino?" Her voice floats down from above, tinged with both awe and fear as she realizes just how high she has risen.

Gino jumps to his feet, arms outstretched, trying to reach her, but she's already too far. "Eun Ae!" he shouts, his heart pounding in panic.

She continues to rise, the jellyfish carrying her into the vast, endless sky. Higher and higher she goes, until Gino can no longer see her, and the light of the jellyfish disappearing into the twilight.

Gino stands alone on the rooftop, his eyes fixed on the empty sky where Eun Ae had disappeared moments ago. His heart aches, a deep, suffocating pain that wells up from within. Tears stream down his face as the weight of it all crashes over him.

"It's my fault," he whispers, his voice barely audible. He sinks to his knees, overwhelmed by guilt. Everything—the end of the world, Eun Ae's disappearance, the chaos—was because of him. He wipes his tears with trembling hands, but they keep falling. He pulls out the old, cursed book from his pocket, the book that had led him down this path. Its pages flutter in the breeze, and Gino stares at the last sentence written there.

"I died on fire."

The words seem to burn into his mind, and as if in response, a fiery glow flickers in the distance. A column of fire falls from the sky, crashing into the earth below with a deafening roar. Gino watches the flames, feeling the temptation rise within him. He could end it all—just walk into the fire

and put an end to this unbearable pain. Maybe then, everything would stop.

But as he stands at the edge of despair, something clicks in his mind. The realization hits him with startling clarity. Everything written in the book had come true. Every event, every twist of fate—it had all unfolded exactly as the book described. And now, as he faces the end, he wonders: if the book controls fate, could destroying it reverse everything?

Gino's mind races. If he burns the book, it might undo everything that happened in 2020—the chaos, the end of the world, Eun Ae's disappearance. But the cost would be high. If he destroys the book, he might erase himself from existence.

He stares at the flames, his chest tight with indecision. Would he be willing to sacrifice his own life to bring everything back? To give Eun Ae and the world a second chance?

With a surge of emotion, he shouts into the heavens, his voice raw and desperate. “Undo it! Undo everything! Please!”

His cry echoes across the silent, broken world. He grips the book tightly in his hands, staring at it for one final moment before hurling it into the fire.

The flames devour the book in an instant. The pages crumple and turn to ash, disappearing into the fire as though they never existed. Gino watches, his breath catching in his throat as the last remnants of the cursed object are consumed.

The book is gone.

Chapter 19 – The End of the Beginning

Eun Ae's POV

I wake up with a headache, my head a jumble of memories and emotions. It's like I've just walked out of a dream, but I know better—it wasn't a dream. Every second of it is real. Gino. The thought of him hits me harder than the sunlight creeping through my window. My phone is the first thing I grab, checking the date. January 19, 2020? The time is turned back to January?

January 19, 2020

I toss the covers off and leap out of bed, my heart pounding as I make a quick decision. I've got to find him. I race out the door without a second thought, my hair in a messy bun and probably looking like a hot mess, but that's not my priority right now. Gino is.

I practically fly down the streets, my feet knowing where they're taking me: the Watson residence. My breath catches as I approach, hoping, praying he'll be there. But instead, it's Yumi who opens the door. She's got this confused look, like she doesn't recognize me. I plead with her to let me in, to see Gino. She hesitates for a second but eventually gives in, taking me to his apartment.

But he's not there.

Where is Gino?

A week goes by, and it feels like every day stretches on forever. Gino has been reported as missing by the Watsons. The police starts searching the town, even the neighborhood starts on helping.

They checked the CCTV footage of the Watsons' residence, and Gino was seen entering on January 18 at 6:11 p.m. But there is no footage of him coming out of the residence.

They think it's weird for him to disappear into thin air, but not for me. I think he's still stuck. Stuck in the future.

But I have this feeling, that he will be back here someday, just like I did. But I don't know, when.

Yumi and I become this duo, putting up missing posters like it's our full-time job. And honestly I'm grateful for her. She's become this unexpected ally. The more we search for Gino, the closer we get, and soon enough, it's like we've known each other forever.

But Gino's still missing.

Days become weeks, weeks become months. No Gino.

And the worst part? It turns out I'm the only person who remembers the future. But people seem to remember a dream, they mention about the End of the World kind of dream, but they don't remember the details, like it's all blurry. But not for me, I remember everything. I remember every bit of it. I remember Gino.

February 20, 2020

It's been a month now, not a word, not a single clue about where he's gone. Aunt Helen and Yumi are starting to lose hope. They're good at putting on brave faces, but I can see the cracks. I meet Gino's dad, and man, that guy is hard to read. He's not cold, but there's this steeliness to him. One day, he makes the call that I never thought would come—he's ready to hold a funeral. He says it's time to let go. To accept that Gino is gone.

Gone? No. Hell no. There's no way I'm giving up that easily. I refuse to believe it. My gut tells me Gino's out there, somewhere. I don't know how

or why, but I know. Call me stubborn, but I've never been one to just roll over and accept something without fighting for it first.

I start spending more and more time on the roof of our house. Something about being closer to the sky helps me think. And maybe it's cheesy, but it feels like if I look long enough, I'll spot him. Gino. "Maybe he's with the stars?"

Life goes on, though, in its messed-up way. I've already learned the big family secret—that I have a stepmom. Her name is Sasha. I remember meeting her in the future, with her and Dad at a fancy place called the Crown Gem Hotel.

Yes, I've seen the future. No, I dreamt it. Wait, no. That wasn't a dream—it was real. I know I experienced it; I even remember the events so clearly. I stole my father's phone, and then Gino was there, and Lucas. We had the music and the road. And we danced in the night.

My tears are falling again, remembering those memories.

One day, I talk to Dad, telling him about this weird dream—that I know everything about our family situation, that I know who Sasha is. And he buys it. He really believes the Lord Above gave me a vision of the future. Well, I can't stop laughing internally. What he doesn't know is that I actually was in the future.

So Dad invites Sasha over to our house, there's no point of keeping it a secret now. And you know what? We get along so well. I even feel bad about ruining their dinner before, or after? The time is confusing but you know what I mean. Even she and Mom have no problems at all. Somehow, I find this silver lining in a time of sorrow.

March 3, 2020

It's March, school is starting. And still, no sign of Gino.

I run into Lucas during one of the school days. He's this quiet, brooding type who barely looks up from his books, but I'm desperate. I ask him if

he knows anything about Gino, I think he hasn't met him yet during this time.

Turns out, Lucas was secretly admiring him all along—Gino, the top student, the one who aces everything without even trying. Even when he sleeps through class or zones out, the guy's a genius. Typical, right? Of course, the guy I'm hopelessly trying to find turns out to be some sort of untouchable legend.

Meanwhile, I've got Lee Ji Yu pestering me with his advances, but honestly? I can't deal with that right now. There's only one person I'm thinking about, and it's not totally him.

April 11, 2020

Just like before, the month of April comes, and we have this Heritage Sites project in History class. I want to experience the same fun as before, even without Gino. So, I organize a music ride to the countryside with my friends—Reyna, Rachel, and Autumn. We also end up merging with Gino's old group—Lucas, Shin, and Brad. It turns out they don't know each other yet, which makes things really awkward. Haha.

As expected, Reyna's on the wheel. We crank up the boombox, have a bonfire, and dance under the stars. I get a tattoo—a jellyfish. It's this tiny symbol of hope and resilience, a reminder of Gino. Every moment feels like we're reliving the times we spent with him, as if by holding onto the memories, we can keep him from disappearing entirely. But as much as I want to live in those moments forever, reality creeps back in.

May 15, 2020

The month of May rolls around, and things take a surprising turn—Sasha's pregnant. Can you believe that? I'm going to have a sibling, and the news brings this unexpected spark of excitement. I can't wait to meet my little half-brother or sister, even if everything else feels like it's

falling apart. Sasha's due in January, and that date gets stuck in my mind. January... Gino's birthday is in January.

The year ends, and we still haven't found Gino.

January 18, 2021

It's the day before Gino's birthday, and Sasha's gone into labor. Dad calls my mom, and she rushes to the hospital to be with Sasha. That leaves me alone in the house, with too much time to think. My thoughts immediately drift to Gino. His 18th birthday is tomorrow, and it feels wrong—everything feels wrong. I pull out my photo album, flipping through pictures of us from when we were kids. I see us from ages five to ten, growing up together, and my heart clenches.

I'm at the roof now, staring at the stars again celebrating Gino's birthday at midnight. "Happy birthday, Gino. I wish you were here." It's stupid, right? Wishing on birthdays like some sort of fairytale. But I do it anyway, lighting a firework and watching it shoot into the sky. The moment it bursts, lighting up the night, something unbelievable happens.

Out of nowhere —

Gino appears.

He's falling—falling from the sky—and I'm too shocked to even move. He crashes onto the roof, making a hole in it, and hits the ground with a thud.

"Gino??" My voice cracks, and I can't believe what I'm seeing. Is this real?

I immediately run downstairs to check.

Oh. My. God. It's really him.

"Eun Ae?" He looks up at me, disoriented but definitely alive.

“Gino?”

The time seems to stop. I cannot believe it. He’s here.

“Where have you been?” I asks, so worried.

The words spill out of him, like he’s been holding them in for ages. “The world was ending... and then... a group of jellyfish caught you Eun and dragged you into the sky.”

“Then.. Then.. I burned the book, and I was transported somewhere.”

“In that place, there was nothing. I couldn’t see anything, it’s not all black, and it’s not all white either. I saw nothingness. And I had no body, no hands, no anything. I couldn’t hear anything or feel anything..”

“..all I knew was I exist. I feel like I was there for months.” His eyes are wild, and he’s rambling.

And then, without thinking, I throw my arms around him. He’s here. He’s really here. My tears begin to flood, like there’s no tomorrow.

“I miss you.” I whisper, my voice cracking, hugging him tightly. He seems stunned for a second, like he’s been gone for a year—which he has. Then he pulls me tighter, and for the first time in months, I feel like I can breathe again.

“Thank God you’re safe,” I murmur, “I thought I lost you.”

And then I do something I didn’t even plan. I lean in and kiss him. It’s soft at first, like testing the waters. But then, we just fall into it, kissing and kissing until we’re lost in the moment, making out under the same stars we once danced beneath. It’s like time doesn’t exist anymore.

Just as we’re catching our breath, Gino stops.

“Sam?” He says, looking around.

“I heard him.” He mentions.

“Who?” I question.

Chapter 19 – The End of the Beginning

“Sam, my guardian angel.”

“I heard him say, ‘Thank you... .kiddo’.” He says, serious.

And all of a sudden my mom calls. Sasha has given birth.

“It’s a boy,” she says, and her voice is filled with excitement.

“His name is —”

“Sam.”