

Sunshine *meets* Snowstorm

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Thank You

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I am a school student, and writing this book came from my passion for stories.

I hope readers enjoy my book and feel inspired to follow their own interests.

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Prologue

The Girl Who Never Had a Bad Day

Denise Park had never had a bad day in her entire life.

Not once.

Not when she spilled strawberry smoothie on her designer shoes.

Not when she accidentally set off the school fire alarm during a science experiment involving glitter and a toaster.

And definitely not when she failed a math test.

Actually... that never happened.

Denise lived in Los Angeles in a huge house with a pool shaped like a swan and a dog named Mochi who had his Designer Clothes.

If Denise wanted something, it appeared.

New phone? Done.

Concert tickets? Done.

A limited-edition hoodie that sold out in five seconds?

Already delivered.

Her biggest problem in life was deciding between **Boba tea** or **iced coffee**.

Which is exactly why the universe decided it was time to ruin her streak.

Chapter 1

The Most Important Crisis Ever

Denise burst into the kitchen dramatically.

“Mom. Dad. This is serious.”

Her parents looked up from their laptops.

“Did something happen?” her mother asked.

Denise nodded.

“The Boba place ran out of brown sugar pearls.”

Her father slowly lowered his coffee.

“...That’s the emergency?”

“Yes,” Denise said solemnly.

Her mother sighed. “We will survive.”

Denise collapsed onto the counter like her life had ended.

Little did she know, somewhere across the city, someone was about to arrive who had experienced **actual problems**.

Chapter 2

The New Kid from Canada –

At Westwood High , Rumours spread fast.

“New transfer student.”

“From Canada.”

“Apparently he punched a locker on his first day.”

“Wait WHAT?”

Denise listened to the gossip while eating a pizza slice in the cafeteria.

“Maybe he’s mysterious,” her best friend Hana said.

“Or dramatic,” Denise replied.

Just then the cafeteria doors opened.

A tall boy walked in with messy dark hair and a tired expression like he had already experienced five Mondays that week.

Everyone stared.

He looked around like he had accidentally walked into the wrong movie.

Denise took one bite of her pizza slice.

“Wow,” she said. “He looks like someone stole his maple syrup.”

But what she didn't know is that he comes from a very harsh family.

But she didn't know 'bout it cause she's been spoiled her entire life.

Chapter 3

The Worst Group Project Ever

Unfortunately for Denise,

The universe had more plans.

In English class, their teacher clapped loudly.

“Time for group projects!”

The class groaned.

“You will work with the person sitting next to you.”

Denise turned.

Guess who was sitting next to her.

Canada Boy.

He didn’t even look excited. He looked like he had just been assigned a prison sentence.

“Hi!” Denise said brightly.

“...Hi.” He said in a quiet manner.

“I’m Denise.”

“Ethan.”

She smiled. “You look like you need coffee.”

“I had three.”

“Then you need four.”

For the first time that day, Ethan almost smiled.

Denise was so happy as if she won the Guinness world record.

Chapter 4

The Disaster Presentation

Their project was simple.

Make a presentation about classic literature.

But somehow Denise turned it into chaos.

Step 1: She added animated dancing Shakespeare.

Step 2: She inserted meme sound effects.

Step 3: She accidentally connected her phone to the classroom speakers.

Which meant the entire class heard Mochi the dog barking loudly from a voice recording.

Ethan stared at the screen.

“...Is that a dog?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“He’s part of the presentation now.”

For some reason, Ethan started laughing.

Like really laughing.

And Denise realized something shocking.

This grumpy Canadian boy had a **nice laugh**.

Now she is more happier than before and they both had a nice laugh.

Chapter 5

The Bet

At lunch, Denise's friends watched Ethan sitting alone outside.

"You should talk to him again," Hana said.

"Why?"

"Because you like helping people."

Denise crossed her arms.

"I don't help people."

"You adopted three stray cats last month."

"...That was different."

Her friend grinned.

"I bet you can't make him smile three times this week."

Denise smirked.

"Easy."

She grabbed her tray and walked outside.

Ethan looked up.

"What now?"

Denise sat down.

"I'm here to improve your mood."

“...Why?”

“Because apparently that’s my new mission.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow.

“This should be interesting.”

Denise smiled.

And just like that...

her **perfect life** was about to become **very complicated**. I
mean very.

Chapter 6

Detention Day Disaster

Denise Park had been in detention exactly **three times** in her life.

The first time was for bringing her dog Mochi to school inside her backpack.

The second time was because she tried to sell homemade bubble tea in the hallway.

And the third time—

Well.

That was Ethan's fault.

"This is your fault," Denise whispered dramatically.

Ethan leaned back in his chair. "You were the one who put googly eyes on the principal's portrait."

"It needed personality."

Their teacher supervising detention, Mr. Brown, looked up from grading papers.

"Quiet."

Denise leaned closer to Ethan.

"This is the worst day of my life."

Ethan raised an eyebrow.

“You’re in detention with snacks and air conditioning.”

“...Good point.”

She quietly slid a packet of gummy bears onto the desk between them.

Ethan looked at it.

“Bribery?”

“Friendship offering.”

He took one.

The unexpected visitor

Halfway through detention, the classroom door opened.

A tall man stepped inside.

Denise noticed him immediately.

His expression was cold, and his voice was sharp.

“I’m here for Ethan Carter.”

Ethan stiffened in his chair.

Denise looked between them.

Oh!.

That must be his dad.

Mr. Brown nodded. “Step outside.”

Ethan slowly stood up and walked into the hallway.

Denise tried not to stare.

But curiosity was stronger than self-control.

She quietly peeked through the slightly open door.

The man was speaking in a low, angry voice.

“You’re already causing trouble here?”

Ethan didn’t respond.

Then suddenly—

SMACK.

“Never do that again you freak.”

The sound echoed down the hallway.

Denise froze.

The man had slapped Ethan across the face. He slapped Ethan’s face so hard you can see the red mark on the cheek

Even the teacher inside the classroom looked shocked.

“Sir!” Mr. Brown said sharply.

The man didn’t apologize. He just glared at Ethan.

“Stop embarrassing me.”

Then he turned and walked away down the hallway.

Silence

Ethan stood there for a moment without moving.

Denise slowly opened the door.

“Ethan...?”

He walked back into the classroom and sat down again.

But something was different. This time he wore a Band-Aid on his cheek.

The sarcastic expression he always wore was gone.

Denise noticed his hands shaking slightly.

She pushed the gummy bears toward him again.

“You can have the rest.”

He didn’t respond.

A few seconds passed.

Then Ethan quickly wiped his face with his sleeve.

Denise blinked.

Oh.

He was crying.

Not loudly.

Just quietly, like he was trying really hard not to.

Denise had never seen someone cry like that before.

Her brain, which was usually full of jokes and dramatic speeches, suddenly had **no idea what to say**.

So she did the only thing she could think of.

She slid the entire bag of gummy bears onto his desk.

“...Emergency candy.”

Ethan let out a small, shaky laugh.

“Is that supposed to fix everything?”

“No,” Denise said softly.

“But it’s a start.”

For the first time since she had met him...

Ethan didn’t look like the grumpy mysterious Canadian boy.

He just looked like someone who had been holding in sadness for a very long time.

And Denise realized something important.

Maybe her new mission wasn't just making him smile.

Maybe it was helping him remember **how to feel happy again.**

Chapter 7

Operation: Make Ethan Smile

Denise Park had a mission.

A **very serious mission**.

Step 1: Make Ethan Carter smile.

Step 2: Make Ethan Carter smile again.

Step 3: Make Ethan Carter smile enough that he stops looking like someone cancelled his favorite TV show.

Unfortunately, Ethan Carter was **not cooperating**.

Attempt #1 emergency snacks

The next day at school, Denise dramatically placed three items on Ethan's desk.

A chocolate bar.

A pack of gummy bears.

And a tiny plush toy shaped like a strawberry.

Ethan stared at the items.

"...What is this?"

"Emotional support snacks," Denise said proudly.

"And the strawberry?"

“That’s emotional support fruit.”

Ethan sighed.

But the corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

Denise pointed at him immediately.

“That counts as a smile.”

“It does not.”

“It absolutely does.”

Attempt #2 terrible jokes

At lunch, Denise sat across from him.

“I have jokes,” she announced.

“That sounds dangerous.” Said Ethan with full tense.

“Why did the math book look sad?”

Ethan rubbed his forehead. “Why?”

“Because it had too many problems.”

Silence.

Then Ethan groaned.

“That was terrible.”

“But you laughed.”

“...Barely.”

Denise leaned back proudly.

“Mission progress.”

For the first time since detention, Ethan looked a little lighter.

And Denise noticed something strange happening.

Every time he smiled...

Her stomach did a weird little flip.

The almost confession

After school, they sat outside near the basketball court.

The sky was turning orange with sunset.

"You didn't have to keep trying so hard," Ethan said quietly.

Denise shrugged.

"I like helping people."

He looked at her for a moment.

"You're really different from everyone I've met."

Denise raised an eyebrow.

"Different good or different weird?"

"...Both."

She laughed.

For a second, neither of them spoke.

Then Ethan said softly,

"You're the first person here who actually talks to me."

Denise suddenly felt shy.

"Well... you're not that scary once people get used to your grumpy face."

"My face is not grumpy."

"It absolutely is."

They both laughed.

And for a moment it felt like the world had gone very quiet.

Ethan looked like he wanted to say something.

Denise felt like she might say something too.

But—

The problem

A car suddenly stopped near the school gate.

Ethan's expression changed immediately.

Denise followed his gaze.

A man stepped out of the car.

Ethan's father.

He walked toward them quickly.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Ethan stood up.

"Just talking."

His father's eyes moved to Denise.

"Who is she?"

Denise stood too, confused.

"I'm Denise."

The man's expression hardened.

"I didn't send you here to waste time."

Ethan tried to speak.

"We were just—"

Suddenly his father grabbed his arm roughly.

Denise gasped.

“Hey! Stop!”

The man turned angrily toward her.

“Stay out of this.”

Just then another voice shouted across the parking lot.

“Excuse me!”

Denise’s father was walking toward them quickly.

He had just arrived to pick her up.

“What’s going on here?” he asked firmly.

The two fathers stood facing each other.

The air suddenly felt tense.

Ethan looked trapped between them.

Denise felt her heart pounding.

Neither of them knew what was about to happen next.

But one thing was clear.

This was only the **beginning of a much bigger problem.**

Chapter 8

The Rule That Made No Sense

The parking lot argument lasted exactly **four minutes and thirty seconds**.

But it felt like an entire movie.

Denise stood frozen while the two fathers argued.

Her father never raised his voice, but right now he looked furious.

“You cannot treat your son like that,” he said firmly.

Ethan’s father scoffed. “How I discipline my child is none of your business.”

Denise glanced at Ethan.

He stared at the ground, jaw tight, like he wished the pavement would swallow him.

Denise hated that look.

Her father stepped closer. “It becomes my business when it happens in front of my daughter.”

Ethan’s father crossed his arms.

“Then maybe your daughter should stop distracting my son.”

Denise blinked.

Distracting?

They had literally been sitting on a bench talking about bad jokes and snacks.

Her father's voice turned colder.

"My daughter is not responsible for your son's problems."

The silence between the two men felt like a thunderstorm waiting to explode.

Finally Ethan's father grabbed Ethan's arm.

"We're leaving."

Ethan didn't argue.

He just walked to the car.

But before he got inside, he glanced back for a second.

Denise noticed.

And somehow that tiny look made her chest feel tight.

Then the car drove away.

The drive home

Denise's father sighed as they walked to their car.

"Are you okay?" he asked gently.

Denise nodded slowly.

"I think so."

They sat in the car for a moment before driving.

Her father started the engine.

"That boy... Ethan," he said carefully.

"Yeah?"

"He seems like a good kid."

Denise blinked.

“You think so?”

“Yes,” her father said. “But his father clearly has some issues.”

Denise stared out the window.

“Ethan’s not like him.”

Her father nodded.

“I could tell.”

The car was quiet for a minute.

Then her father said something that surprised her.

“You’re allowed to talk to him.”

Denise turned quickly.

“Really?”

“Yes. But I don’t want you getting involved in his family problems.”

Denise nodded.

“Okay.”

But her father wasn’t finished.

“I did speak to the principal before leaving.”

Uh oh.

That sentence never ended well.

“And Ethan’s father had... a different rule.”

Denise frowned.

“What rule?”

Her father sighed.

“He said Ethan is not allowed to see you.”

Denise blinked twice.

“...Wait.”

“That’s what he told the school.”

“That doesn’t make sense,” Denise said.

Her father shrugged.

“I agree.”

“So I’m allowed to see him.”

“Yes.”

“But he’s not allowed to see me?”

“Correct.”

Denise leaned back in her seat.

“That is the most confusing rule in human history.”

The next day

The entire school already knew something dramatic had happened.

Because high school gossip travelled faster than Wi-Fi.

When Denise walked into the hallway, Hana immediately ran up to her.

“WHAT HAPPENED?”

Denise groaned.

“Why does everyone know already?”

“Because someone recorded part of the parking lot argument.”

“...Of course they did.”

Hana lowered her voice.

“Is Ethan okay?”

Denise looked down the hallway.

He was at his locker.

Looking tired again.

Like the smile from yesterday had disappeared overnight.

Denise crossed her arms.

“Operation Make Ethan Smile is not over.”

Hana raised an eyebrow.

“Your missions always end in chaos.”

“Probably.”

Denise started walking toward Ethan.

But just as she got close—

Ethan turned around.

And immediately froze.

“Oh,” he said quietly.

Denise blinked.

“...Oh?”

He looked nervous.

Like someone had just placed a giant “danger” sign above her head.

“What’s wrong?” she asked.

Ethan rubbed the back of his neck.

“My dad talked to the principal this morning.”

“And?”

“I’m not allowed to talk to you.”

Denise stared at him.

“...Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“That is ridiculous.”

“I know.”

They stood there awkwardly.

Then Denise suddenly grinned.

“Well.”

Ethan looked suspicious.

“Well what?”

“My dad said I *can* talk to you.”

Ethan blinked.

“...What?”

“So technically,” Denise said proudly, “I’m not breaking any rules.”

“But I am.”

“Only if you talk back.”

Ethan stared at her.

Then he laughed.

A real laugh.

Denise pointed again.

“Smile number one.”

“You’re impossible.”

“Thank you.”

The not so secret plan

During lunch, Denise sat at her usual table.

Ethan sat three tables away with a sandwich and a very confused expression.

Denise waved at him.

Ethan panicked and looked away.

Hana watched the whole thing.

“So... what exactly is your strategy?”

Denise grinned.

“Easy.”

“Easy?”

“Yes.”

She stood up with her tray and walked to Ethan’s table.

Ethan looked like he might fall out of his chair.

“You can’t sit here,” he whispered urgently.

“I can.”

“My dad will lose his mind.”

“Your dad isn’t here.”

Ethan sighed.

“You’re enjoying this way too much.”

Denise shrugged.

“A little.”

She leaned forward slightly.

“You don’t have to talk,” she said quietly.

“I’ll do the talking.”

Ethan shook his head.

“You’re unbelievable.”

“And yet you’re still smiling.”

“...Barely.”

Denise grinned again.

“Smile number two.”

The suspense

After school, Denise waited outside the gate again.

She didn’t see Ethan anywhere.

Which was strange.

Very strange.

Normally he walked out right after the final bell.

Ten minutes passed.

Then fifteen.

Denise frowned.

Something felt wrong.

She walked back toward the school building.
The hallways were almost empty now.
Then she heard voices near the office.
One of them sounded familiar.
Ethan's father.
Denise froze behind the corner.
"...I told you," the man said angrily, "that girl is distracting him."
The principal tried to calm him down.
"Sir, your son's grades are actually improving—"
"I don't care about that!"
Denise's heart started pounding.
Ethan's father continued,
"If he sees her again, I'm pulling him out of this school."
Denise's stomach dropped.
Pulling him out?
Leaving the school?
Leaving the city?
She stepped back slowly, trying not to make noise.
But one thought kept repeating in her head.
What if Ethan disappears from school tomorrow?
And for the first time in her life...
Denise felt something very unfamiliar.
Fear.

Chapter 9

The Worst day

Denise Park had a bad feeling.

A really bad feeling.

It started the moment she heard Ethan's father yelling in the school office.

"If he sees her again, I'm pulling him out of this school."

Denise slowly backed away from the hallway corner.

Her mind was racing.

He's going to take Ethan away.

The thought made her chest feel tight.

She quickly walked outside the school building, trying to figure out what to do.

And then she saw him.

Ethan was standing near the bike rack, looking frustrated.

"Ethan!" she called.

He turned quickly.

"Denise? You shouldn't be here."

"I heard your dad talking to the principal," she said.

Ethan's face immediately changed.

“You heard that?”

“He’s trying to take you out of school?”

Ethan looked away.

“...Maybe.”

Denise felt a wave of anger.

“That’s not fair.”

“Life isn’t fair,” Ethan said quietly.

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Cars were passing on the road outside the school gate.

The sky was turning grey like it might rain.

Denise suddenly stepped closer.

“Then we’ll fix it.”

Ethan blinked.

“You say that like it is easy.”

“Well obviously it’s not easy,” Denise said. “But we can at least try.”

Ethan looked at her like he wanted to believe that.

But before he could answer—

A loud voice shouted from across the parking lot.

“ETHAN!”

Ethan froze.

His father had arrived.

And he looked furious.

The argument

Ethan's father walked toward them quickly.

"I told you to stay away from her," he snapped.

Ethan clenched his fists.

"We were just talking."

"I don't care."

Denise stepped forward.

"Sir, this isn't his fault—"

"Stay out of this," the man snapped.

Ethan suddenly stepped in front of her.

"Stop yelling at her!"

For a moment everything went silent.

His father looked shocked.

"You're talking back now?"

Denise's heart started pounding.

Ethan never raised his voice.

But right now he looked angry.

And scared.

The man grabbed Ethan's arm.

"We're leaving."

Ethan pulled his arm away.

"No."

Denise gasped softly.

She had never seen Ethan stand up to him before.

His father's expression turned dark.

"You think that girl is worth ruining your future?"

Denise stepped forward again.

"Please stop—"

But at that moment something unexpected happened.

Ethan's father started walking toward her.

Ethan immediately turned and shouted—

"Denise, watch out!"

The accident

Denise turned just as a car sped around the corner of the street near the school gate.

Everything happened too fast.

The sound of brakes.

Someone shouting.

The world spinning.

And then—

Darkness.

The hospital

When Denise opened her eyes again...

She didn't see anything.

Because she wasn't awake.

She was in a hospital room.

Machines beeped softly beside her bed.

Doctors said she was in a **coma**.

A small one.

But still serious.

The guilt

Ethan sat in the hospital waiting area every single day.

He barely spoke.

He barely slept.

Hana visited once and found him staring at the floor.

“You can’t blame yourself,” she said gently.

Ethan shook his head.

“If I hadn’t argued with my dad...”

He couldn’t finish the sentence.

Hana sighed.

“She ran into the street trying to help you.”

“That’s exactly why it’s my fault.”

He rubbed his face tiredly.

“I ruin everything.”

But still, every day after school, Ethan came back to the hospital.

He sat quietly beside Denise’s bed.

Sometimes he talked.

Sometimes he didn’t.

But he was always there.

One week later

Seven days later...

The hospital room was quiet.

Ethan was sitting in the chair beside her bed again.

"You know," he said softly, "this is the longest you've ever been quiet."

No response.

Ethan looked at the floor.

"I'm sorry, Denise."

He swallowed hard.

"I should've protected you."

The room was silent for a moment.

Then suddenly—

"Wow."

Ethan froze.

"That's the saddest speech I've ever heard."

His head snapped up.

Denise was looking at him.

Her voice was weak, but her eyes were open.

"You've definitely told better jokes."

Ethan stared at her like he couldn't believe it.

"Denise?"

She blinked slowly.

“You look like you haven’t slept in a week.”

“...Because I haven’t.”

For a moment Ethan just sat there.

Then he laughed in relief.

A real laugh.

“You scared everyone.”

Denise smiled faintly.

“Mission accomplished.”

Ethan shook his head.

“You’re unbelievable.”

She looked at him carefully.

“You’re smiling again.”

Ethan paused.

Then he realized she was right.

And for the first time in a week...

Ethan felt like everything might actually be okay.

The night everything changed

Denise had only been out of the hospital for two days.

Her parents were treating her like she was made of glass.

“No running.”

“No stairs alone.”

“No sports.”

“No school for a week.”

Denise groaned dramatically while sitting on the couch.

"I survived a coma," she said. "I think I can survive stairs."

Her father shook his head.

"Nice try."

Across the room, Mochi the dog barked happily and jumped onto the couch beside her.

"At least someone believes in me," Denise said, hugging him.

But even while joking, something about the past few days felt strange.

Ethan hadn't visited since she came home.

She knew why.

His father.

Ethan's problem

Across the city, Ethan was arguing with his father again.

"I told you to stay away from that girl," the man said coldly.

Ethan clenched his fists.

"She almost got hurt because of us!"

"That's exactly why you should stay away."

Ethan's voice shook with anger.

"You don't get to control everything."

His father's eyes narrowed.

"You think you understand the world?"

Ethan didn't answer.

But for the first time in his life, he wasn't afraid to look his father in the eye.

That made the man even angrier.

And later that night...

He made a phone call.

The suspicious stranger

The next evening, Denise decided to sit outside in the garden.

The air was cool, and the sky was turning dark blue.

Her older brother had come to visit, sitting inside with her father and talking loudly about his college in uk.

Denise laughed softly to herself.

Adults always sounded like they were debating world politics.

Mochi suddenly started barking.

"Hey, what's wrong?" Denise asked.

The dog ran toward the gate.

Denise stood up slowly and walked toward it.

A man was standing outside.

He wore a cap pulled low over his face.

"Hello?" Denise said cautiously.

The man pushed the gate open.

And suddenly something about him felt... wrong.

Denise stepped back.

“Who are you?”

The man didn’t answer.

Instead he moved closer.

Denise’s heart started pounding.

“Dad!” she called loudly.

But before she could run inside—

The man grabbed her arm.

The rescue

Inside the house, Denise’s father immediately heard her shout.

He stood up.

“Denise?”

Her brother rushed to the door.

Outside, Denise struggled to pull away.

“Let go of me!”

The man tried to drag her toward the street.

But suddenly another voice shouted—

“HEY!”

Ethan came running down the sidewalk.

He had been walking past the house after arguing with his father again.

When he saw what was happening, he didn’t even think.

He sprinted forward.

“Leave her alone!”

Denise’s father and elder brother burst through the front door at the same moment.

The kidnapper looked around nervously.

Now three people were running toward him.

He shoved Denise away and ran down the street.

Within seconds he disappeared into the darkness.

Aftermath

Denise sat on the ground, shaking.

Her father knelt beside her immediately.

“Are you okay?”

Denise nodded weakly.

“I think so...”

Her brother helped her stand.

But Ethan noticed something else.

Bruises were already forming on her arm where the man had grabbed her.

Ethan felt his stomach twist.

“Denise... I’m so sorry.”

She looked at him, confused.

“Why are you apologizing?”

Ethan didn’t answer.

Because deep down he had a terrible feeling.

Only one person hated Denise enough to do something like this.

His father.

The suspense

Later that night, the police came to take a report.

Denise's father looked furious.

"This wasn't random," he said quietly.

Someone had sent that man.

Across the room, Ethan stood silently.

His mind was racing.

If his father really did this...

Then things were about to become much worse.

And Ethan knew one thing for sure.

He would do **anything** to protect Denise now.

Even if it meant standing completely against his own family.

Chapter 10

The Truth in the Shadows

After the incident at Denise's house, nothing felt normal anymore.

Denise had bruises on her arm, and the doctor said it would take time to heal.

Still, her father refused to let her go anywhere alone.

Meanwhile, Ethan couldn't stop thinking about one thing.

Did my father really do this?

The thought made his stomach twist.

But deep down...

He already knew the answer.

Ethan's Investigation

Late that night, Ethan waited until his father left the house for a meeting.

Then he quietly walked into his father's office.

The room smelled like expensive cologne and paperwork.

Ethan had never searched the room before.

But tonight he opened the desk drawers carefully.

Most of them had boring things—documents, files, and business papers.

Then he found something strange.

A folded piece of paper.

It had a **phone number** written on it.

And beneath it were two words:

“Take care of the girl.”

Ethan felt cold.

That couldn’t mean what he thought it meant.

Right?

Just then he heard a noise outside the window.

He turned quickly.

Someone was standing in the backyard.

The Kidnapper Returns

Ethan rushed outside.

The man from the night before stood near the fence.

The same cap.

The same nervous expression.

Ethan walked closer.

“What do you want?” he asked.

The man looked around anxiously.

“I need to talk.”

Ethan crossed his arms.

“You tried to kidnap someone.”

“I didn’t want to!” the man said quickly.

Ethan frowned.

“What?”

The man sighed heavily.

“Your father paid me.”

Ethan’s chest tightened.

“I knew it.”

“But listen,” the man continued. “He didn’t tell me to hurt her.”

“Then why were you dragging her away?”

“He told me to scare her,” the man admitted. “Said she needed to stay away from you.”

Ethan clenched his fists.

“That’s insane.”

The man hesitated.

“There’s something else.”

Ethan looked at him sharply.

“What?”

The man lowered his voice.

“Your father hates that girl because of her family.”

The Big Twist

Ethan froze.

“My father doesn’t even know her.”

The man shook his head.

“Oh, he knows.”

Ethan waited.

“Years ago,” the man said quietly, “your father had a business partner.”

“Okay...”

“They had a huge fight. Lost millions of dollars.”

Ethan’s stomach dropped.

“Who was the partner?”

The man looked at him seriously.

“Denise’s father.”

The words felt like a thunderstorm hitting Ethan’s mind.

“That’s impossible.”

“They haven’t spoken in years,” the man said. “Your father blames him for everything that went wrong.”

Ethan leaned against the fence.

All this time...

This wasn’t about school.

Or rules.

Or discipline.

It was about **revenge**.

The Confession

The next afternoon, Ethan went straight to Denise’s house.

Her father opened the door.

His expression was serious.

“Ethan.”

“Can I talk to Denise?” he asked.

After a moment, the man nodded and stepped aside.

Denise was sitting in the living room with a blanket and Mochi beside her.

When she saw Ethan, her face lit up.

“You look like you just solved a mystery.”

Ethan sat down across from her.

“I kind of did.”

Denise tilted her head.

“What do you mean?”

Ethan explained everything.

The phone number.

The kidnapper.

The old business fight between their fathers.

Denise listened quietly.

When he finished, the room was silent.

“So... basically,” she said slowly, “our dads hate each other.”

“Yeah.”

“And we’re stuck in the middle.”

“...Yeah.”

Denise leaned back and sighed.

“That’s really dramatic.”

Ethan laughed softly.

“You almost got kidnapped and that’s your reaction?”

“Well,” she said, “I did just wake up from a coma last week. My life is already weird.”

For a moment they both laughed.

Then Ethan became serious again.

“There’s something else.”

Denise looked at him.

“What?”

Ethan rubbed the back of his neck.

“I stayed at the hospital every day.”

Denise blinked.

“You did?”

“Yeah.”

He hesitated before continuing.

“I thought you might never wake up.”

His voice became quieter.

“And I realized something.”

Denise’s heart started beating faster.

“What?”

Ethan looked straight at her.

“I really care about you.”

The room suddenly felt very quiet.

Denise stared at him.

“You mean... like... friend care?”

Ethan shook his head.

“No.”

Denise felt her face getting warm.

“Oh.”

She looked down at Mochi for a second.

Then she looked back at Ethan.

“Well... that’s convenient.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow.

“Why?”

Denise smiled.

“Because I like you too.”

For a moment neither of them spoke.

Then Ethan laughed in relief.

“So after all this chaos...”

“We finally figured it out,” Denise finished.

The Suspense Returns

Just as the moment was getting peaceful—

Denise’s father walked into the room.

He looked serious.

“Ethan,” he said.

Ethan stood up immediately.

“Yes, sir?”

Denise’s father crossed his arms.

“I just received a phone call.”

Denise frowned.

“From who?”

Her father looked at Ethan.

“Your father.”

The room went silent again.

“And he said something very interesting,” the man continued.

Ethan swallowed.

“What did he say?”

Denise’s father’s expression hardened.

“He said this situation isn’t over.”

Chapter 11

The Trip That Changed Everything

Two weeks after the hospital incident, life at Westwood Heights High School slowly started feeling normal again.

Well...

Almost normal.

Denise still had faint bruises on her arm, but they were healing.

Ethan still had problems with his father.

And both of them were pretending everything was fine at school.

Which worked... until Monday morning.

Because that was when the principal made an announcement.

The Announcement

The loudspeaker crackled during first period.

“Attention students,” the principal said. “Next month, the school will be hosting a one-week trip to **Disneyland in California.**”

The entire classroom exploded with excitement.

“What?!”

“No way!”

“A whole week?!”

Denise spun around in her seat.

“DISNEYLAND?!”

Even Ethan looked surprised.

The principal continued speaking.

“Students interested in joining must bring back a signed consent form and pay the trip fee by Friday.”

Denise immediately grabbed the paper from the teacher.

Her eyes were sparkling.

“Ethan,” she whispered, “this is destiny.”

“Destiny?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because nothing bad ever happens at Disneyland.”

Ethan stared at her.

“...You literally woke up from a coma two weeks ago.”

Denise waved her hand.

“That was unrelated.”

The Consent Form

That evening, Denise burst into the living room at home.

“Mom! Dad!”

Her parents looked up.

“Yes?”

She held the paper dramatically in the air.

“School trip to Disneyland.”

Her father read the form carefully.

“A whole week?”

“Yes.”

“With teachers?”

“Yes.”

“And your friends?”

“Yes!”

Her father smiled slightly.

“Alright.”

Denise blinked.

“...That’s it?”

Her mother laughed.

“You survived a hospital stay. You deserve some fun.”

Her father signed the form and handed it back.

“Just be careful.”

Denise grinned.

“Best parents ever.”

She was so happy that her parents even helped her pack her suitcase and her mobile, medicines and snacks and obviously airpods.

Ethan's Problem

Across the city, Ethan stood in his kitchen holding the same paper.

His father read it.

Then placed it back on the table.

“No.”

Ethan expected that answer.

“Why?”

“Because I said so.”

“It’s a school trip.”

“I don’t trust that school.”

Ethan clenched his jaw.

“You don’t trust anything.”

His father’s voice turned cold.

“The answer is no.”

The conversation was over.

But Ethan didn’t move.

Instead, he picked up the paper again.

And slowly walked back to his room.

The Forged Signature

Later that night, Ethan stared at the form on his desk.

Everyone at school was going.

Denise was going.

If he stayed home...
He would be completely alone.
He picked up a pen.
His heart was beating fast.
“This is a terrible idea,” he muttered.
But after a moment...
He copied his father’s signature carefully.
Then he opened his wallet.
Inside was the money he had been saving for months.
Birthday money.
Part-time tutoring money.
All of it.
He sighed.
“Well... there goes my savings.”

The Bus Ride

Two weeks later, the entire class gathered outside school before sunrise.
Students were dragging suitcases and backpacks everywhere.
Denise was wearing a bright hoodie with cartoon characters on it.
Hana stared at her.
“You look like a walking gift shop.”
“That’s the goal.”

Denise scanned the crowd.

Then suddenly she saw him.

Ethan stepped off the bus with a small backpack.

Denise's eyes widened.

"ETHAN?!"

He walked over nervously.

"Surprise."

"You're coming?"

"Yeah."

"How did your dad allow that?"

Ethan coughed.

"...He didn't."

Denise stared.

"You forged the signature?"

"...Maybe."

Denise grinned.

"That's the most rebellious thing you've ever done."

"Don't remind me."

Disneyland

When the buses arrived at Disneyland, the entire class went wild.

Music played through the park speakers.

Colourful decorations were everywhere.

Denise looked like she might explode from happiness.

“This is the best day of my life.”

“You say that a lot,” Ethan said.

“This time I mean it.”

They spent the whole day exploring rides with their classmates.

Roller coasters.

Parades.

Food stalls.

Denise forced Ethan onto a giant roller coaster.

“I regret every decision that led to this,” he said.

“You’ll survive.”

He did.

But he screamed the entire ride.

Denise laughed so hard she nearly fell over.

“You screamed louder than the kids!”. Said Denise

“I did not.”

“You absolutely did.”

The Almost Perfect Moment

That evening the class gathered near the castle to watch the fireworks show.

The sky turned dark.

Colourful lights exploded above them.

Denise and Ethan stood beside each other.

For a moment, everything felt peaceful.

No family problems.

No arguments.

Just music, lights, and laughter.

Denise looked at him.

“You know what?”

“What?”

“I’m glad you came.”

Ethan smiled softly.

“Me too.”

For a second it looked like he might say something else.

Something important.

But his phone suddenly buzzed.

He checked the screen.

And his face went pale.

Denise noticed immediately.

“What happened?”

Ethan swallowed.

“That’s... my dad.”

Denise’s stomach dropped.

“What did he say?”

Ethan read the message slowly.

“I know where you are.”

Denise felt her heart sink.

Ethan continued reading.

“When you get back... we are going to have a serious conversation.”

The fireworks exploded again in the sky.

Everyone around them cheered.

But Ethan didn't move.

Because he knew one thing for sure.

When the trip ended...

Things at home were about to get **much worse**.

Chapter 12

The Message

The fireworks were still exploding above the castle.

Blue lights.

Red sparks.

Golden stars.

Everyone around Denise and Ethan was cheering and recording videos.

But Ethan wasn't watching the fireworks anymore.

He was staring at his phone.

Denise noticed immediately.

"You look like someone just told you math homework exists during vacation."

Ethan slowly put the phone away.

"It's nothing."

Denise crossed her arms.

"Ethan Carter."

He sighed.

"That tone means you're not going to drop this."

"Correct."

For a moment he hesitated.

Then he showed her the message.

Denise read it quietly.

“I know where you are.”

“When you get back, we are going to have a serious conversation.”

Her smile faded.

“Oh.”

Ethan tried to sound calm.

“It’s fine.”

Denise looked at him.

“No it’s not.”

The fireworks burst again above them, lighting the sky purple.

Ethan forced a small smile.

“Hey, you said nothing bad happens at Disneyland.”

Denise thought for a moment.

Then suddenly grabbed his arm.

“Come with me.”

“Where?”

“You’ll see.”

Operation: Fix Ethan’s Mood

Five minutes later they were standing in front of a giant roller coaster.

Ethan blinked.

“Absolutely not.”

Denise grinned.

“Absolutely yes.”

“I screamed on the last ride.”

“That’s why we need practice.”

“I don’t want practice.”

But before he could escape, Denise dragged him into the line.

Twenty minutes later...

They were strapped into the front seat.

Ethan looked like he had made several bad life choices.

“If I die,” he said, “tell my teachers I finished my homework.”

Denise laughed.

“You’re not dying.”

The ride suddenly dropped.

Ethan screamed.

Very loudly.

Denise laughed so hard she almost forgot to scream herself.

When the ride finally stopped, Ethan stumbled out of the seat.

“I regret trusting you.”

“You had fun.”

“I did not.”

“You screamed like a happy person.”

“That’s not how happiness works.”

But despite everything...

He was smiling again.

A Quiet Moment

Later that night, the class gathered near the hotel entrance.

Everyone was tired from running around the park all day.

Students were comparing souvenirs and photos.

Denise and Ethan sat on a bench nearby.

For a while, neither of them spoke.

Then Denise said quietly, handing him some of the souvenirs since she had a lot of them.

“You don’t have to face everything alone.”

Ethan looked at her.

“I’m used to it.”

“Well,” she said, “get used to having backup.”

“Backup?”

“Me.”

Ethan smiled softly.

“That sounds dangerous.”

“It is.”

They both laughed.

Then Denise looked up at the sky.

“You know something?”

“What?”

“If your dad is mad... we’ll deal with it later.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow.

“That’s your strategy?”

“Yes.”

“What’s the plan exactly?”

Denise grinned.

“Step one: enjoy Disneyland.”

“And step two?”

“Worry tomorrow.”

Ethan thought about that for a moment.

Then he nodded.

“Okay.”

For the first time since receiving the message...

Ethan finally felt a little calmer.

Maybe Denise was right.

Maybe tomorrow could wait.

But across the city...

Someone else was also waiting.

And he was very angry.

Chapter 13

The Last Night in Disneyland

The third day at Disneyland was somehow even more chaotic than the first two.

Students were running everywhere.

Some were buying souvenirs.

Some were eating so many snacks that the teachers started complaining.

And Denise Park had officially decided that this was the **best school trip in history**.

Ethan Carter, however, was sitting on a bench holding three shopping bags and questioning his life choices.

Denise returned from a gift shop with another small bag.

Ethan stared at it.

“You already bought seven things.”

“Correction,” Denise said proudly. “Eight.”

“What could possibly be inside that one?”

She opened it dramatically.

Inside was a tiny Mickey Mouse keychain.

Ethan blinked.

“You waited in line twenty minutes for that?”

“Yes.”

“...Why?”

Denise tossed it to him.

He caught it.

“It’s for you.”

Ethan looked surprised.

“For me?”

“Obviously.”

He turned the small keychain in his hand.

“You didn’t have to buy me anything.”

Denise shrugged.

“Well, you did scream on three roller coasters for me.”

“That’s not a fair trade.”

“I disagree.”

For a moment Ethan just stared at the tiny keychain.

Then he smiled.

“Thanks.”

Denise pointed immediately.

“That’s smile number five today.”

“You’re counting?”

“I always count.”

The Quiet Walk

That evening the teachers allowed the students some free time inside the park.

Denise and Ethan walked along a quieter path lined with glowing lanterns.

Music from the parade floated through the air.

Denise kicked a small pebble along the path.

“You’ve been quieter today.”

Ethan rubbed the back of his neck.

“I’ve been thinking.”

“That’s dangerous.”

“About my dad.”

Denise’s expression softened.

“You don’t have to talk about it if you don’t want to.”

“I do,” Ethan said quietly.

They stopped near a small bridge overlooking the water.

“My dad wasn’t always like this,” he said.

Denise listened carefully.

“When I was younger, things were different. But after his business failed... he changed.”

Denise thought about what the kidnapper had said.

“Because of the fight with my dad?”

“Yeah.”

Ethan looked down at the water.

“He thinks your dad ruined everything.”

Denise sighed.

“But my dad says your dad misunderstood what happened.”

“Exactly.”

They both stood there silently.

Then Denise suddenly said,

“Well that’s annoying.”

Ethan blinked.

“What?”

“Our dads are fighting over something from years ago and now we’re stuck dealing with it.”

Ethan laughed softly.

“When you say it like that, it sounds ridiculous.”

“Because it *is* ridiculous.”

The Almost Moment

A soft breeze moved through the trees.

The lights from the lanterns reflected in the water.

Denise leaned against the railing.

“You know something?”

“What?”

“You looked really happy today.”

Ethan smiled.

“That’s because someone forced me onto roller coasters.”

“That’s called therapy.”

He looked at her for a moment.

“You make things easier.”

Denise suddenly felt shy.

“Me?”

“Yeah.”

The air between them felt different.

Quiet.

Warm.

Denise looked down at their hands resting on the railing.

Ethan noticed too.

For a second it looked like he might reach for her hand.

But just before he did—

Denise’s phone rang loudly.

Both of them jumped.

Denise groaned.

“Worst timing ever.”

She checked the screen.

“Oh. It’s Hana.”

She answered.

“Yes?”

Hana’s voice exploded through the phone.

“WHERE ARE YOU?!”

Denise winced.

“...Outside?”

“The teachers are doing a headcount and you’re missing!”

Ethan laughed.

“Oops.”

Denise rolled her eyes.

“We’re coming back!”

The Suspicious Message

Later that night, back at the hotel, the students gathered in the lobby.

Teachers checked names on a clipboard.

“Everyone here?” one teacher asked.

“Almost,” another replied.

Denise sat on the floor beside Ethan.

“Tomorrow is our last day.”

Ethan nodded.

“Yeah.”

Denise sighed.

“I wish we could stay longer.”

“Same.”

Just then Ethan’s phone buzzed again.

He frowned and looked at the screen.

Denise leaned closer.

“Another message from your dad?”

Ethan slowly shook his head.

“No.”

“Then who is it from?”

Ethan read the name quietly.

“The kidnapper.”

Denise’s eyes widened.

“What?!”

Ethan opened the message.

There was only one sentence.

“We need to talk again. Things are about to get worse.”

Denise felt a chill run down her spine.

“What does that mean?”

Ethan looked just as confused.

“I don’t know.”

But deep down...

He had a feeling this trip to Disneyland wasn’t the break they thought it was.

It might actually be the **beginning of something much bigger.**

Chapter 14

The Ride Home

The bus ride back from Disneyland was supposed to be loud.

Students had snacks.

Music was playing.

Someone in the back was singing terribly.

But Denise noticed something strange.

Ethan was quiet.

Very quiet.

He was staring out the window while the bus drove through the highway lights.

Denise leaned across the seat.

“You’re doing the mysterious movie character thing again.”

Ethan didn’t look away from the window.

“I’m thinking.”

“That’s never good.”

He finally turned toward her.

“You remember the message from the kidnapper?”

Denise nodded slowly.

“Yeah...”

“He said things are going to get worse.”

Denise tried to lighten the mood.

“Well maybe he just meant the school cafeteria food.”

Ethan almost smiled.

“Your optimism is unbelievable.”

“That’s my brand.”

She pulled something from her backpack.

A small plastic crown from the Disney store.

She placed it on Ethan’s head.

“There.”

Ethan blinked.

“...What is this?.”

“You are now officially the **King of Surviving Roller Coasters.**”

Students nearby started laughing.

Ethan sighed.

“This is humiliating.”

Denise nodded proudly.

“Exactly.”

For the first time in hours...

Ethan laughed.

But when he looked back out the window, the smile slowly faded again.

Because he knew the trip was ending.

And real life was waiting.

The Return to School

Three hours later the buses finally pulled into the school parking lot.

Parents were already waiting.

Students jumped off the bus excitedly.

Denise spotted her father immediately.

He waved.

She ran over and hugged him.

“Welcome back,” he said.

“I survived.”

“I heard that roller coaster was terrifying.”

“That was Ethan’s reaction, not mine.”

Her father laughed.

But Denise suddenly noticed something else.

Across the parking lot...

Ethan had stepped off the bus.

And standing beside a black car...

Was his father.

Denise’s stomach dropped.

Ethan saw him too.

For a second he looked like he might turn around and run back onto the bus.

But he didn't.

He walked slowly across the parking lot.

Denise watched nervously.

"Dad," she whispered, "can we stay for a minute?"

Her father followed her gaze and immediately understood.

"Of course."

The Confrontation

Ethan stopped in front of his father.

The man looked furious.

"Disneyland," he said coldly.

Ethan didn't answer.

"You forged my signature."

Still no response.

The man grabbed Ethan's arm.

"You embarrassed me."

Denise stepped forward instinctively.

"Stop!"

Everyone turned toward her.

Ethan's father looked irritated.

"This is not your business."

Denise crossed her arms.

"Well he's my friend."

Ethan's father scoffed.

“You are exactly the problem.”

Denise opened her mouth to argue—

But Ethan suddenly said quietly,

“Denise... it’s okay.”

She looked at him.

His voice sounded tired.

Like he was trying to protect her from something.

The Emotional Moment

Ethan’s father dragged him toward the car.

But just before getting inside, Ethan stopped.

He turned back toward Denise.

For a second neither of them spoke.

Denise suddenly ran forward.

She shoved something into his hand.

Ethan looked down.

It was the Mickey Mouse keychain she had given him earlier.

“With a safety pin,” she said quickly.

“So you don’t lose it.”

Ethan stared at it.

“Why are you giving this back?”

Denise shook her head.

“I’m not.”

He looked confused.

“Then what—”

“So when things get really bad,” she said quietly, “you’ll remember at least one good day.”

Ethan felt his chest tighten.

He tried to joke.

“You’re making this sound like a sad movie.”

Denise forced a smile.

“Well don’t blame me if you start crying.”

Ethan laughed softly.

But his eyes looked suspiciously shiny.

“You’re unbelievable,” he said.

“And you’re dramatic.”

His father’s voice interrupted sharply.

“Enough.”

Ethan got into the car.

Before the door closed, he looked at Denise one last time.

Then the car drove away.

Denise stood there watching until it disappeared down the street.

Her father walked beside her quietly.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Denise nodded.

But her voice sounded smaller than usual.

“Yeah.”

Then she looked down.

And realized something.

The keychain she gave Ethan had a tiny note attached to it.

A note she forgot to remove.

And on it she had written earlier that day:

“Best day ever... because of you.”

Denise covered her face with her hands.

“Oh no.”

Her father blinked.

“What happened?”

Denise groaned dramatically.

“I accidentally gave him my embarrassing confession note.”

Her father tried not to laugh.

But he failed.

And somehow...

Denise ended up laughing too.

Right there in the parking lot.

Even though her eyes were still a little watery.

Chapter 15

When Everything Falls Apart

The car ride home was silent.

Ethan sat in the back seat staring out the window.

His father drove without saying a word.

Which was somehow worse than yelling.

The car finally stopped in front of their house.

Ethan stepped out and walked inside without looking back.

“Go to your room,” his father said coldly.

Ethan didn’t argue.

He climbed the stairs and shut the door.

For the first time that day...

He finally let out the breath he had been holding.

The Note

Ethan sat on his bed and pulled the Mickey Mouse keychain from his pocket.

The tiny metal figure swung back and forth.

He turned it over slowly.

Then he noticed something.

A folded piece of paper attached to it.

“...What?”

He carefully opened the note.

It read:

“Best day ever... because of you.”

Ethan froze.

For a moment he just stared at the words.

Then he laughed softly.

Denise had accidentally confessed.

He leaned back against the wall.

“She’s unbelievable,” he murmured.

But the smile slowly faded.

Because things weren’t simple anymore.

The New Message

Just then his phone buzzed.

Ethan looked at the screen.

Unknown number.

His stomach dropped.

He opened the message.

“Your father is planning something bigger.”

It was the kidnapper.

Ethan typed quickly.

What do you mean?

A reply came almost immediately.

“He’s planning to send you away to another school.”

Ethan felt cold.

Another school?

Another city?

The second message appeared.

“And he’s blaming Denise for everything.”

Ethan clenched his fists.

“Unbelievable...”

The Next Day at School

Denise walked into school the next morning expecting things to feel normal again.

Instead, everyone was staring at her.

Whispering.

Her stomach tightened.

“What’s going on?”

She spotted Hana near the lockers.

“Hana!”

Her friend turned slowly.

But her expression looked different.

Cold.

“You’re still talking to me?” Hana said.

Denise blinked.

“...What?”

Hana crossed her arms.

“You caused so much drama on the school trip.”

Denise frowned.

“What are you talking about?”

“Everyone knows Ethan’s father hates you.”

Denise felt confused.

“That’s not my fault.”

Hana scoffed loudly so nearby students could hear.

“Maybe you should stay away from Ethan instead of ruining his life.”

Denise stared at her.

“Hana... what are you saying?”

But Hana turned away.

“We’re not friends anymore.”

The words hit harder than Denise expected.

The Bullying

Over the next few days things got worse.

Hana started spreading rumours.

“She just wants attention.”

“She’s the reason Ethan is always in trouble.”

Some students believed the gossip.

A few laughed when Denise walked by.

One day someone even shoved her books off her desk.

Denise tried to ignore it.

But it hurt.

More than she wanted to admit.

Ethan Finds Out

Ethan arrived late to school one morning.

He had barely slept.

When he walked into the hallway, he immediately heard someone say:

“Hey look, it’s Denise’s bodyguard.”

Ethan stopped.

“What?”

Another student pointed toward the lockers.

Hana was standing there with a group of girls.

Denise stood alone while they laughed.

Something inside Ethan snapped.

He walked straight toward them.

“What’s going on here?”

Hana looked surprised.

“Oh look. The hero arrived.”

Ethan didn’t smile.

“Leave her alone.”

Hana shrugged.

“I’m just telling the truth.”

Denise tried to stop him.

“Ethan, it’s fine—”

“It’s not fine,” he said.

Several other students nearby stepped closer.

One of them spoke up.

“Yeah, Hana. This is getting weird.”

Another student nodded.

“She didn’t do anything.”

Hana looked annoyed.

“Oh please. You’re all defending her now?”

Ethan stepped in front of Denise.

“Yes.”

For a moment nobody spoke.

Then Hana rolled her eyes and walked away.

“Whatever.”

Her group followed.

The Quiet After

The hallway slowly returned to normal.

Denise bent down to pick up her books.

Ethan helped her.

“You didn’t have to do that,” she said quietly.

“Yes I did.”

She looked at him.

“You’re already in trouble because of me.”

Ethan shook his head.

“No.”

He pulled the keychain from his pocket.

Denise noticed immediately.

“You kept it?”

“Of course.”

He held up the note.

“And I read this.”

Denise’s face turned bright red.

“That was supposed to be removed!”

Ethan smiled.

“I’m glad you forgot.”

Denise covered her face.

“This is so embarrassing.”

Ethan leaned closer.

“For the record...”

She peeked through her fingers.

“...it was the best day for me too.”

For a moment the hallway felt quiet again.

Like the world had paused.

But Ethan knew the peace wouldn’t last.

Because his phone buzzed again.

Another message from the kidnapper appeared.

“Your father has already started the transfer process.”

Ethan’s heart dropped.

He looked at Denise.

And realized something terrifying.

If his father succeeded...

This might be the last time they stood in the same hallway together.

Chapter 16

Lines That Shouldn't Be Crossed

The cafeteria was louder than usual.

Students were laughing, trays clattering, and someone across the room was arguing about homework.

Denise sat quietly at a table with her lunch tray.

She had barely eaten all morning.

Across the cafeteria, Hana stood with a group of girls, whispering and giggling.

Denise tried not to look.

Just ignore it, she told herself.

But suddenly footsteps stopped beside her table.

Denise looked up.

Hana.

“Well look who’s eating alone,” Hana said loudly.

Some students nearby turned their heads.

Denise sighed.

“Hana... please just stop.”

Hana tilted her head.

“Why? Afraid people will see who you really are?”

Denise stood up slowly.

“I never did anything to you.”

Hana rolled her eyes.

“Everything bad around here started because of you.”

Denise grabbed her tray, trying to leave.

But as she stepped forward—

Hana’s arm bumped the tray.

The food slid off.

Rice, juice, and noodles splashed across the floor.

The cafeteria went silent.

Denise froze.

Her lunch was everywhere.

Someone gasped.

For a moment Denise just stared at the mess.

Her eyes started to fill with tears, but she blinked them away.

Hana laughed.

“Oops.”

That was when Ethan walked in.

He saw the spilled food.

He saw Denise standing there.

And he saw Hana.

Ethan’s expression changed immediately.

He walked straight over.

“What happened?”

Denise quickly shook her head.

“It’s nothing.”

But a student nearby spoke up.

“Hana pushed her tray.”

Ethan looked at Hana.

“Seriously?”

Hana crossed her arms.

“Oh please, she dropped it herself.”

Ethan stepped forward.

“That’s enough.”

The cafeteria felt tense.

Denise gently touched Ethan’s arm.

“Ethan... it’s okay.”

But Ethan wasn’t looking at her.

He was staring directly at Hana.

“You need to stop.”

Hana scoffed.

“Or what?”

Ethan didn’t answer.

Instead, he bent down and started helping Denise clean the spilled food.

A few other students joined.

Soon a teacher walked over.

“What is going on here?”

Everyone started talking at once.

The teacher looked at Hana.

“You. Come with me to the office.”

Later That Afternoon

The situation became much bigger than anyone expected.

The school had already heard about Hana’s behaviour before.

Now this incident made things serious.

Denise’s parents were called to the school.

Hana’s parents were called too.

Ethan sat outside the principal’s office with Denise.

She looked nervous.

“This is too much,” she whispered.

Ethan shook his head.

“No, it’s not.”

Inside the office, the adults were talking.

Through the door they could hear Hana’s parents.

“What were you thinking?!” her mother said angrily.

“You embarrassed us and hurt someone!”

Hana didn’t say anything.

Her father spoke next.

“You will apologize immediately.”

Denise looked uncomfortable hearing it.

“I didn’t want her to get in trouble like this.”

Ethan glanced at her.

“You didn’t do anything wrong.”

The Apology

A few minutes later the door opened.

Hana stepped out with her parents behind her.

Her face was red.

She walked slowly toward Denise.

“I... I’m sorry,” Hana said quietly.

Denise nodded.

“It’s okay.”

But the tension in the hallway remained.

Hana’s parents apologized to Denise and her parents before leaving.

Denise’s father gently placed a hand on her shoulder.

“If anything like this happens again, you tell us immediately.”

Denise nodded.

“Okay.”

Something Unexpected

Later that day, school was ending.

Students were heading out the gates.

Denise was putting books in her locker when she noticed something strange.

Ethan was standing near Hana.

Not arguing.

Talking.

Hana looked surprised.

“So you’re defending her now?” Hana said.

Ethan shrugged.

“No.”

Hana frowned.

“Then why are you here?”

Ethan looked calm.

“Because things went too far today.”

Hana scoffed.

“You think?”

Ethan continued.

“But getting yelled at by your parents in front of everyone... that’s not great either.”

Hana blinked.

She didn’t expect that.

Ethan leaned against the locker.

“Just stop all this.”

Hana looked away.

“...Why do you care?”

Ethan sighed.

“Because fighting like this doesn’t fix anything.”

For a moment Hana looked conflicted.

Then she grabbed her bag.

“Whatever.”

She walked away quickly.

Denise had watched everything from the end of the hallway.

When Ethan returned, she raised an eyebrow.

“You were protecting Hana?”

Ethan shrugged slightly.

“Someone had to.”

Denise smiled faintly.

“You’re weird.”

Ethan grinned.

“I’ve been told that.”

But deep down, both of them knew something.

The drama at school wasn’t over.

Not even close.

Chapter 17

The Festival Announcement

The next morning at school felt strangely calm.

Almost **too calm**.

Denise walked into the hallway and noticed people whispering again, but this time it wasn't about bullying.

It was excitement.

"What's happening?" she asked one of her classmates.

The girl grinned.

"You didn't hear?"

"Hear what?"

"The principal is making a big announcement today."

Denise raised an eyebrow.

"About what?"

"No idea," the girl said, "but everyone says it's something fun."

The Morning Assembly

Soon the entire school gathered in the auditorium.

Students filled every seat.

The principal stepped onto the stage with a microphone.

“Good morning, everyone!”

“Good morning!” the students replied.

The principal smiled.

“I know the last few weeks have been stressful for many of you, so the school has decided to organize something special.”

Students started whispering excitedly.

The principal continued.

“Next month, we will be holding a **school festival and talent show!**”

The auditorium exploded with cheers.

“And the winning performance will receive a special prize.”

Denise leaned toward Ethan.

“What kind of prize?”

Ethan shrugged.

“Hopefully not homework.”

Denise laughed.

The principal added one more thing.

“And this year, students can perform **in pairs or groups.**”

Denise and Ethan both froze.

Then they slowly looked at each other.

“No,” Ethan said immediately.

Denise smirked.

“Oh yes.”

Hana Watching

Across the auditorium, Hana watched them.

Her expression was unreadable.

Her phone buzzed quietly.

She checked the message.

The screen showed only one sentence.

“Keep them apart.”

Hana’s eyes widened slightly.

She quickly locked her phone and looked toward Denise again.

The Performance Idea

Later in the hallway, Denise walked beside Ethan.

“You’re performing with me,” she said confidently.

Ethan shook his head.

“I don’t perform.”

“You literally sing in music class.”

“That’s different.”

Denise crossed her arms.

“You’re scared.”

“I am not scared.”

“Then prove it.”

Ethan sighed.

“You’re impossible.”

Denise grinned.

“Yet here I am.”

The Funny Practice

After school, Denise dragged Ethan to the music room.

“Stand here,” she ordered.

Ethan stood awkwardly.

Denise pressed play on a song.

“Dance.”

Ethan stared at her.

“...What?”

“Dance!”

“I don’t dance.”

Denise demonstrated dramatically.

“Like this!”

Her spin was so dramatic that she accidentally slipped.

She almost fell—

But Ethan caught her.

For a second they were very close.

Too close.

Denise blinked.

Ethan blinked.

Then Denise quickly stepped back.

“That was... part of the choreography.”

Ethan smirked.

“Sure.”

The Message

Later that evening Ethan sat in his room doing homework.

His phone buzzed.

Unknown number.

His heart immediately started racing.

He opened the message.

“You are running out of time.”

It was the kidnapper again.

Ethan typed back quickly.

What do you want?

A few seconds later another message appeared.

“Your father is planning something worse.”

Ethan frowned.

What do you mean?

The reply came slowly.

“Watch Hana.”

Ethan stared at the screen.

Hana?

Why Hana?

The Suspicion

The next day at school Ethan couldn't stop thinking about the message.

He watched Hana from across the hallway.

She was texting again.

And when she looked up and saw Ethan watching...

She quickly hid her phone.

Ethan's suspicion grew stronger.

Meanwhile Denise walked up beside him.

"Why are you staring at Hana like a detective?"

Ethan hesitated.

"...Just thinking."

Denise narrowed her eyes.

"You're hiding something."

Ethan smiled slightly.

"Maybe."

Denise poked his shoulder.

"Tell me."

"Not yet."

Denise sighed dramatically.

"You're so mysterious."

Ethan chuckled.

"You're so dramatic."

But inside his mind, Ethan knew something.

The message about Hana...

The strange texts...

And the kidnapper's warning...

All of it meant **something big** was about to happen.

Chapter 18

Secrets in the Dark

The music room was chaos.

Denise stood in the centre of the room with a notebook, acting like a very serious director.

“Again!” she said dramatically.

Ethan groaned.

“We’ve done this ten times.”

Denise pointed at him.

“And you messed up nine times.”

“I slipped once!”

“You slipped into the piano!”

Ethan rubbed his head.

“That piano attacked me first.”

Two of their friends sitting nearby burst into laughter.

Denise crossed her arms.

“If we want to win the festival, we have to be perfect.”

Ethan sighed.

“Remind me again why I agreed to this.”

Denise grinned.

“Because you secretly enjoy spending time with me.”

Ethan froze.

“...That’s not why.”

Denise smirked.

“Sure.”

The Practice Disaster

The music started again.

Denise sang confidently.

Ethan joined in.

For a moment everything actually sounded good.

But then Ethan stepped backward...

Right onto a rolling chair.

The chair slid.

Ethan flailed his arms.

“WOAH—”

CRASH.

He fell onto the floor again.

The room exploded with laughter.

Denise tried to stay serious.

But she failed.

Soon she was laughing harder than everyone else.

Ethan looked up at her from the floor.

“You’re a terrible partner.”

Denise wiped tears from her eyes.

“You fell three times!”

“You distracted me!”

“With what?!”

Ethan pointed at her dramatically.

“Your face!”

Everyone laughed again.

But the happy moment didn’t last long.

Because across the hallway...

Hana was watching them.

Ethan’s Suspicion

Later that afternoon Ethan remembered the message he received.

Watch Hana.

He decided to follow her.

Quietly.

Hana walked out of school and headed toward a quiet street behind the building.

Ethan stayed far enough away so she wouldn’t notice.

She stopped near the corner.

And pulled out her phone.

Ethan moved closer, hiding behind a tree.

Hana spoke softly.

“I’m doing what you asked.”

Ethan's heart started racing.

A few seconds passed.

Then Hana spoke again.

"Yes... they're still close."

Ethan frowned.

Who is she talking to?

Then Hana said something that made Ethan freeze.

"I said I'll keep them apart."

Ethan's stomach dropped.

The phone call ended.

Hana turned suddenly.

Ethan quickly stepped behind the tree.

She looked around suspiciously.

But after a moment she walked away.

Ethan slowly exhaled.

Something was definitely wrong.

The Romantic Moment

The next evening Denise was practicing alone in the music room.

She sang softly.

Her voice filled the quiet room.

Ethan stood in the doorway listening.

He hadn't planned to interrupt.

But he accidentally bumped the door.

Denise jumped.

“Oh!”

Then she saw him.

“You scared me!”

Ethan shrugged.

“You sound good.”

Denise smiled.

“Thanks.”

She sat on the edge of the stage.

Ethan sat beside her.

For a moment they just looked at the empty room.

Denise spoke quietly.

“Do you ever wish things were normal?”

Ethan looked confused.

“What do you mean?”

“No drama. No problems. Just school and friends.”

Ethan thought for a moment.

“...Yeah.”

Denise leaned back slightly.

“But if everything was normal...”

She glanced at him.

“...I probably wouldn’t have met you.”

Ethan smiled softly.

“Then maybe chaos isn’t that bad.”

Denise laughed.

The Clue

As Ethan stood up to leave, something caught his eye.

A small piece of paper on the floor near the door.

He picked it up.

It looked like it had fallen from someone’s pocket.

On the paper was a strange symbol.

A circle with a line through it.

Densie looked at it.

“What is that?”

Ethan frowned.

“I don’t know.”

But something about it felt familiar.

Very familiar.

Then Ethan remembered.

His heart skipped.

He had seen that symbol before.

It was the **same symbol on the kidnapper’s ring.**

Ethan slowly folded the paper.

Denise noticed his serious expression.

“What’s wrong?”

Ethan forced a small smile.

“Nothing.”

But inside his mind, one thought kept repeating.

Someone at school is connected to the kidnapper.

And if that was true...

Things were about to get much more dangerous.

Chapter 19

The Day Everything Changed

The school auditorium was brighter than ever.

Colourful lights shone across the stage.

Banners hung from the walls saying:

“Annual School Festival & Talent Show!”

Students filled every seat, cheering loudly.

Backstage was chaos.

People were practicing dances, singers were warming up, and someone accidentally dropped a drumstick.

Denise stood near the curtain, nervous.

She flexed her fingers.

“I can’t believe we’re actually doing this.”

Ethan stood beside her.

“You forced me to do this.”

Denise smiled.

“And you secretly enjoyed practicing.”

Ethan rolled his eyes.

“Let’s just survive this performance.”

A teacher called out:

“Denise and Ethan! You’re next!”

Denise’s heart started racing.

Ethan noticed.

“Relax,” he said quietly.

She looked at him.

“What if we mess up?”

Ethan shrugged.

“Then at least we mess up together.”

Denise laughed.

“Worst motivational speech ever.”

The Performance

The music started.

The curtain opened.

The bright lights hit their faces.

For a second Denise froze.

But then Ethan nodded at her.

Denise took a breath and started singing.

Her voice filled the auditorium.

Students began clapping along.

Ethan joined the song.

The performance actually went perfectly.

Their small choreography, the singing, the mix of Korean and English lyrics and even the funny moment where Ethan almost slipped again made the crowd laugh.

When the music ended...

The auditorium exploded with applause.

Denise looked shocked.

“Did that really happen?”

Ethan smiled.

“Yep.”

The Results

After all the performances ended, the principal walked onto the stage.

“Everyone did an amazing job tonight.”

Students cheered.

“Now it’s time to announce the winners.”

Denise squeezed Ethan’s arm nervously.

The principal opened the envelope.

“In second place...”

The auditorium became silent.

“...Denise and Ethan!”

Students clapped loudly.

Denise blinked.

“Second place?”

Ethan smiled.

“That’s still good.”

The principal continued.

“And the winners of this year’s festival are...”

A pause.

“...Hana and her team!”

The crowd cheered again.

Hana walked onto the stage with a proud smile.

Denise clapped politely.

Ethan noticed Hana glancing at them strangely.

Something about her expression looked... bitter.

The Incident

After the ceremony, students crowded the hallway.

Denise carried her bag while talking to Ethan.

“Second place isn’t bad,” she said.

Ethan nodded.

“Yeah.”

Suddenly Hana approached them.

Her expression looked tense.

“So you enjoyed the show?” Hana said.

Denise tried to stay calm.

“Congratulations on winning.”

Hana laughed slightly.

“You really think you deserved second place?”

Ethan frowned.

“Hana, just stop.”

But Hana stepped closer.

“You think everyone loves you, don’t you?”

Denise sighed.

“I’m not doing this again.”

She tried to walk past.

But Hana suddenly shoved her shoulder.

Denise lost her balance.

She fell hard against the locker.

CRACK.

A sharp pain shot through her arm.

Denise gasped.

“My arm—”

Students nearby shouted.

Ethan rushed forward.

“Denise!”

She was holding her arm tightly.

Tears filled her eyes.

“I can’t move it...”

A teacher ran over.

“What happened here?!”

Hana looked shocked by what she had done.

“I... I didn’t mean—”

But Denise was already being helped to the nurse’s office.

The Diagnosis

Later at the hospital, the doctor examined Denise's arm.

Denise sat quietly while Ethan waited outside.

After a few minutes the doctor came out.

"She has a fracture in her right arm."

Ethan's stomach dropped.

"How long will it take to heal?"

"About two months," the doctor replied.

Denise would not be able to write normally during that time.

Ethan felt guilty for some reason.

When Denise came out with her arm in a cast, she tried to smile.

"Well... this is embarrassing."

Ethan looked angry.

"This is not okay."

Parents and Consequences

The next day at school things became serious.

Denise's parents came to the school immediately after hearing what happened.

Hana's parents were called again.

But this time the atmosphere was much more intense.

The principal spoke firmly.

"Hana's behaviour has crossed a serious line."

Denise's parents looked worried seeing their daughter's arm in a cast.

Her father said calmly but firmly,

"We are filing an official complaint with the school."

Hana's parents looked furious with her.

"Hana!" her mother scolded.

"What were you thinking?!"

Her father added,

"You will face serious consequences for this."

Hana lowered her head, ashamed.

Ethan's Promise

After the meeting ended, Ethan walked with Denise outside the school.

She struggled slightly carrying her bag.

Ethan took it immediately.

"I can carry that."

Denise sighed.

"I hate this."

Ethan looked at her broken arm.

"Two months."

Denise tried to joke.

"Looks like you'll have to write my notes."

Ethan nodded seriously.

"I will."

Denise blinked.

“...You’re serious?”

“Of course.”

He looked directly at her.

“I’m not letting you deal with this alone.”

Denise smiled softly.

“Thanks.”

But across the parking lot...

Hana stood watching them.

Her expression looked conflicted.

And in her pocket...

Her phone buzzed again.

Another message.

“You failed.”

Hana’s eyes widened.

Because she knew exactly who sent it.

And that meant something worse was coming.

Chapter 20

Learning with One Arm

The next morning at school felt strange.

Everyone noticed Denise's bright white arm cast.

Students whispered as she walked through the hallway.

"Did you hear what happened?"

"Her arm is broken..."

"Two months!"

Denise tried to pretend it didn't bother her.

But it did.

A little.

Ethan walked beside her carrying **two backpacks**.

Denise raised an eyebrow.

"You know I can still walk, right?"

Ethan shrugged.

"Doctor said no stress on your arm."

"That doesn't mean you have to carry my entire life."

Ethan smirked.

"Too late."

The Locker Problem

Denise reached her locker.

She tried opening it using her left hand.

The locker door swung open... then hit the locker next to it.

CLANG.

“Okay,” Denise sighed. “This is harder than I thought.”

Ethan leaned against the lockers watching.

“Need help?”

“No.”

Denise tried grabbing her books.

But they slipped.

THUD.

Three textbooks fell onto the floor.

A group of students nearby laughed quietly.

Denise looked embarrassed.

Ethan bent down and picked them up.

“You’re officially banned from lifting things.”

Denise frowned.

“You’re enjoying this too much.”

“Absolutely.”

The Note-Writing Problem

During math class, Denise realized something terrible.

She couldn't write.

At all.

The teacher began explaining equations on the board.

"Please copy this into your notebooks."

Denise stared at her notebook helplessly.

Ethan noticed.

Without saying anything, he slid his notebook slightly toward her.

Denise whispered,

"You'll get in trouble."

Ethan whispered back,

"Relax."

He started writing **two sets of notes**.

Denise watched him quietly.

"You didn't have to do that."

Ethan shrugged.

"I promised."

For a moment Denise felt something warm in her chest.

Hana Watching

Across the classroom...

Hana sat silently.

She watched Ethan helping Denise.

Her expression looked uneasy.

Her phone buzzed under the desk.

She glanced at it.

“You were supposed to keep them apart.”

Hana’s hands tightened around the phone.

She quickly turned the screen off.

The Cafeteria Scene

At lunch, Denise struggled again.

Opening a juice box with one hand was nearly impossible.

She tried squeezing it.

The straw fell.

The juice spilled a little.

Denise groaned.

“This is the worst.”

Ethan grabbed the juice box.

“Here.”

He opened it and placed the straw perfectly.

Denise looked at him.

“...Are you my assistant now?”

Ethan grinned.

“Temporary.”

Their friends sitting nearby started teasing them.

One student said loudly,

“Wow, Ethan treats her better than most boyfriends.”

Denise nearly choked on her drink.

“WE ARE NOT DATING!”

Ethan said at the exact same time,

“WE ARE NOT DATING!”

The whole table burst into laughter.

Denise covered her face.

“This school is embarrassing.”

Ethan’s Investigation

Later that afternoon Ethan remembered the messages.

Watch Hana.

After school he waited near the gate.

Hana eventually walked out.

Ethan followed from a distance again.

She stopped near a quiet alley.

Ethan hid behind a parked car.

Hana pulled out her phone.

“I told you it wasn’t supposed to happen like that,” she whispered angrily.

Ethan’s heart started pounding.

Who was she talking to?

Hana continued,

“I already got into trouble with my parents!”

Silence.

Then she said something that made Ethan freeze.

“I can’t control everything!”

The call ended.

Hana looked around nervously.

Ethan quickly moved away before she could see him.

His mind raced.

Someone is definitely controlling her.

But who?

A Small Moment

That evening Denise sat on a bench outside school waiting for her ride.

Her arm still hurt slightly.

Ethan walked over and sat beside her.

“You look tired.”

Denise sighed.

“I didn’t realize how hard life is with one arm.”

Ethan laughed softly.

“You’re surviving.”

Denise looked at him.

“Thanks for helping today.”

Ethan shrugged.

“No problem.”

Denise smiled.

“You’re nicer than you pretend to be.”

Ethan looked away slightly.

“Don’t tell anyone.”

Denise laughed.

For a moment everything felt peaceful.

But Ethan’s phone buzzed again.

Unknown number.

His stomach dropped.

He opened the message.

“You’re getting closer to the truth.”

Another message appeared immediately.

“But if you keep investigating...”

Ethan’s heart pounded.

The final message appeared.

“...someone else will get hurt.”

Ethan slowly looked up.

At Denise.

And suddenly he felt afraid.

Chapter 21

Two Months Later

Two months passed quickly.

The white cast on Denise's arm was finally gone.

She stretched her fingers happily.

"Freedom!" she said dramatically.

Ethan laughed.

"You're acting like you escaped prison."

Denise flexed her arm proudly.

"Two months of not writing is basically prison."

Ethan shook his head.

"Your handwriting was terrible anyway."

Denise gasped.

"My handwriting is beautiful."

"Your 'A' looks like a broken triangle."

Denise shoved him lightly.

"Rude."

For the first time in weeks, things felt almost normal again.

But something much more important was coming.

Final exams.

Exam Week

The entire school was tense.

Students studied in the library.

Some were whispering formulas in the hallways.

Others looked like they hadn't slept for days.

Denise studied seriously.

She wanted to prove something to herself.

Ethan, on the other hand, looked half asleep during most study sessions.

Denise poked him during one practice test.

"Focus."

"I am focusing."

"You're staring at the ceiling."

"I'm thinking."

"About what?"

"Lunch."

Denise sighed.

"You're impossible."

The Results

A week later, the principal walked into class holding a stack of papers.

"Your final exam results are ready."

The classroom became silent.

Denise felt her heart beating faster.

The teacher began calling names.

Students walked up nervously to collect their scores.

Then the teacher smiled.

“I’d also like to congratulate the student who scored the **highest marks in the entire grade.**”

Everyone looked up.

“That student is... **Denise Park.**”

The classroom erupted with applause.

Denise blinked in surprise.

“Wait... what?”

Her friends cheered loudly.

Ethan clapped with a proud smile.

Denise walked up to the front, slightly embarrassed.

“Congratulations,” the teacher said.

Denise smiled shyly.

“Thank you.”

When she returned to her seat, Ethan leaned toward her.

“Top of the grade. Not bad.”

Denise grinned.

“Not bad?”

“I expected nothing less.”

Ethan's Result

But when Ethan received his paper...

His smile disappeared.

Denise noticed.

"What happened?"

Ethan quickly closed the paper.

"Nothing."

Denise frowned.

"Ethan."

He sighed quietly.

"I failed."

Denise's eyes widened.

"What?!"

Ethan shrugged casually.

"It's fine."

But Denise knew it wasn't.

Because she knew something else.

Ethan's father.

The Celebration

That evening Denise's house was full of excitement.

Her parents were incredibly proud.

Her mother hugged her tightly.

"You worked so hard."

Her father smiled.

“We’re very proud of you.”

They ordered her favourite food.

Denise laughed as her elder cousin kept congratulating her.

For a moment she forgot all the school drama.

Everything felt happy.

Until her phone buzzed.

A message from one of Ethan’s friends.

“Ethan is in serious trouble.”

Denise’s smile disappeared.

She quickly typed back.

What happened?

The reply came instantly.

“His dad found out he failed.”

Denise’s stomach dropped.

She knew Ethan’s father could be very strict.

Another message appeared.

“Things are really bad at his house right now.”

Denise stood up quickly.

Her parents looked confused.

“What’s wrong?” her mother asked.

Denise grabbed her jacket.

“I have to go.”

Her father frowned.

“Go where?”

Denise hesitated.

“...A friend needs help.”

Her parents exchanged looks but nodded.

“Be careful,” her father said.

Denise rushed out of the house.

Her heart was pounding.

She didn’t know exactly what was happening at Ethan’s house.

But she had a terrible feeling.

Meanwhile...

At Ethan’s house...

The front door slammed.

And his father’s angry voice echoed through the hallway.

“You failed your exams?!”

Ethan stood silently.

His father stepped closer.

“You’re wasting your life!”

Ethan clenched his fists.

“This is unacceptable.”

At that exact moment...

A car stopped outside the house.

Denise stepped out.

She looked at the door nervously.

And took a deep breath.

Because she was about to walk straight into the storm.

Chapter 22

The Storm

Denise stood outside Ethan's house.

The lights inside were still on.

From the outside she could already hear shouting.

Her heart started beating faster.

Maybe I shouldn't interfere...

But then she remembered Ethan's face earlier that day.

The way he tried to pretend everything was fine.

Denise took a deep breath and rang the doorbell.

Inside the house, the shouting stopped for a second.

The door opened.

Ethan stood there.

His eyes widened in surprise.

"Denise?"

She looked worried.

"Are you okay?"

Before Ethan could answer, a deep voice came from behind him.

"Who is that?"

Ethan's father walked into the hallway.

His expression immediately hardened when he saw Denise.

"You again."

Denise felt uncomfortable but stayed calm.

"Hello, sir."

Ethan's father crossed his arms.

"Why are you here?"

Denise answered honestly.

"I came to check on Ethan."

That answer made his father even more annoyed.

"You should focus on your own life instead of interfering with my son."

Ethan spoke quickly.

"Dad, it's not like that—"

But his father cut him off.

"You failed your exams, Ethan."

The room became quiet.

His father continued angrily.

"And instead of studying, you spend all your time with distractions."

His eyes moved toward Denise.

The word **distractions** clearly meant her.

Denise felt her chest tighten.

But she didn't step back.

Instead she spoke calmly.

“Sir, Ethan failing one exam doesn’t mean he’s a failure.”

Ethan looked shocked.

Denise had never spoken to his father like that before.

His father stared at her coldly.

“You think you understand my son?”

Denise didn’t answer.

But she didn’t look away either.

That made Ethan’s father even more irritated.

“This is none of your business.”

Denise took a breath.

“Maybe not.”

She looked at Ethan.

“But Ethan is my friend.”

For a moment nobody spoke.

Ethan’s father sighed angrily.

“I don’t want you coming here again.”

Ethan clenched his fists.

“Dad—”

“Enough.”

The tension in the room felt heavy.

Denise realized staying longer might make things worse.

She turned toward Ethan.

“I’ll see you tomorrow.”

Ethan nodded quietly.

“Yeah.”

Denise walked toward the door.

But just before leaving, she said something softly.

“Your exam score doesn’t define you.”

Ethan looked up.

For the first time that night, he smiled slightly.

Later That Night

Ethan sat alone in his room.

His father’s angry words kept repeating in his head.

But Denise’s words repeated too.

Your exam score doesn’t define you.

His phone buzzed.

A message from Denise.

“You survived?”

Ethan smiled a little and replied.

“Barely.”

Another message came.

“Don’t worry. I’ll help you study next time.”

Ethan typed back.

“That sounds terrifying.”

Denise replied immediately.

“Excuse me?? I’m the top student.”

Ethan laughed quietly.

For the first time that night, he felt slightly better.

But across the city...

Someone else was watching.

In a dark room, a phone screen lit up.

A message was sent.

“They’re still getting closer.”

Another message came in response.

“Then separate them.”

The phone screen turned dark again.

Because whoever was behind everything...

Still wasn’t finished.

Chapter 23

The Hidden Message

The next day

Most students had already left after the celebration of the exam results. Laughter and chatter faded down the hallway while the evening sun cast long shadows across the lockers.

Ethan stood near the notice board, staring at the results sheet.

His name.

At the bottom.

Failed.

He clenched his fist quietly. The paper crumpled slightly under his fingers, but he forced himself to step back before anyone noticed.

But the exam results weren't the only thing on his mind.

The messages.

Those strange, anonymous messages that had appeared weeks ago... warning him, guiding him, and sometimes confusing him.

He had tried to ignore them.

But tonight, he couldn't.

Ethan slipped his phone out of his pocket and opened the old message thread. There were only a few texts, but each one was strange.

“Watch who you trust.”

“The truth is closer than you think.”

“Look where the snow melts first.”

Ethan frowned.

Snow melts first...

What did that even mean?

He walked slowly through the corridor, thinking.

Then suddenly, something clicked in his mind.

The rooftop.

The rooftop garden of the school always melted snow first because sunlight hit it directly.

Ethan’s heart started beating faster.

Without thinking twice, he turned and hurried up the staircase that led to the roof. His footsteps echoed in the empty stairwell.

Step.

Step.

Step.

When he pushed open the rooftop door, cold wind rushed past him.

The sky was turning orange as the sun slowly set behind the buildings. The rooftop was quiet, except for the soft rustling of plants in the garden boxes.

Ethan walked forward carefully.

“Hello?” he called.

No answer.

He looked around.

Nothing seemed unusual.

Then he noticed something strange.

One of the wooden benches had a small piece of paper taped underneath it.

Ethan quickly pulled it off.

Another message.

But this time, it wasn’t a text message.

It was handwritten.

He unfolded the paper slowly.

Three words were written in dark ink.

“She isn’t who you think.”

Ethan’s heart skipped.

She?

His mind raced through every possibility.

Denise?

Hana?

Someone else?

Before he could think further, a sudden sound came from behind him.

A soft creak.

Ethan turned quickly.

The rooftop door was slowly closing.

And for just a second...

He thought he saw someone standing behind it.

Watching him.

Then the door shut.

And whoever it was... was gone.

Chapter 24

The Camera

Ethan barely slept that night.

The message he found on the rooftop kept repeating in his mind.

“She isn’t who you think.”

Who was the message talking about?

Denise?

Hana?

Or someone else?

The next morning at school, Ethan walked through the hallway quietly, observing everyone more carefully than usual.

Students were laughing and talking like normal.

But to Ethan, everything felt suspicious.

When he reached his locker, Denise suddenly appeared beside him.

“Good morning,” she said cheerfully.

Ethan jumped slightly.

“Whoa—don’t scare me like that.”

Denise raised an eyebrow.

“Why are you acting like a detective today?”

Ethan forced a small smile.

“No reason.”

But Denise narrowed her eyes.

“You’re hiding something.”

Ethan quickly changed the subject.

“Did you finish your math homework?”

Denise groaned.

“Don’t remind me.”

She leaned against the locker.

“I still can’t believe I scored the highest in the grade.”

Ethan smirked.

“Of course you did.”

Then Denise looked at him more seriously.

“And I still can’t believe you failed.”

Ethan shrugged.

“I’ll survive.”

Denise crossed her arms.

“No. You’re studying with me from now on.”

Ethan blinked.

“...What?”

“After school,” she said confidently.

“I’m not letting you fail again.”

Ethan laughed.

“That sounds terrifying.”

Denise pointed at him.

“Be ready at 4 PM.”

Then she walked away.

But Ethan’s thoughts returned to the mysterious message.

She isn’t who you think.

His eyes slowly moved around the hallway.

That’s when he noticed something strange.

A small black object above the lockers.

A camera.

Ethan frowned.

Of course the school had security cameras.

But this one looked different.

It was slightly tilted... and the red light was blinking.

He stepped closer and looked carefully.

Then his stomach dropped.

There was a small sticker under the camera.

A symbol.

The same symbol he had seen on the kidnapper’s ring.

Ethan’s heart started racing.

That meant only one thing.

Someone connected to the kidnapper had access to the school cameras.

Someone could be watching every move Denise made.

Ethan quickly stepped back.

If the cameras were connected to whoever was sending the messages...

Then the person might already know he was investigating.

Suddenly his phone vibrated in his pocket.

A new message.

Unknown number.

Ethan slowly opened it.

The message read:

“You’re getting closer.”

Another message appeared.

“But be careful.”

Ethan swallowed nervously.

Then the final message appeared.

“Because the person you trust the most... might be part of the plan.”

Ethan’s hands froze.

His mind immediately thought of one person.

Denise.

But he quickly shook his head.

No... that can’t be right.

Still...

For the first time since this mystery began...

Ethan felt something even worse than fear.

He felt doubt.

And that doubt could destroy everything.

Chapter 25

Study Session Chaos

At exactly 4:00 PM, Denise was already sitting in the library.

Her books were neatly arranged on the table.

Highlighters.

Notebooks.

Practice tests.

Everything looked perfectly organized.

Ethan walked in slowly and stared at the table.

“...Are you opening a school store?”

Denise didn’t even look up.

“Sit down.”

Ethan dropped into the chair dramatically.

“You’re enjoying this too much.”

Denise finally looked at him and smiled.

“Of course I am. The top student is now your teacher.”

Ethan sighed.

“This is humiliating.”

Denise pushed a notebook toward him.

“Start with this math problem.”

Ethan glanced at it.

Then he stared at Denise.

Then back at the paper.

“...I don’t understand any of this.”

Denise blinked.

“You didn’t even read it.”

“I tried.”

“You looked at it for two seconds.”

Ethan leaned back in his chair.

“My brain works differently.”

Denise crossed her arms.

“Your brain is lazy.”

A student at the nearby table laughed quietly.

Ethan glared at him.

“Mind your business.”

Denise grabbed Ethan’s pencil and placed it in his hand.

“Focus.”

Ethan reluctantly started solving the question.

Five minutes passed.

Then ten.

Suddenly Ethan slammed the pencil down.

“I got it!”

Denise leaned forward excitedly.

“Really?”

Ethan showed the answer proudly.

Denise stared at the page.

Then she slowly looked up.

“That is completely wrong.”

Ethan collapsed onto the table.

“This is torture.”

Denise burst into laughter.

Later

An hour passed.

Surprisingly... Ethan was actually improving.

Denise watched him solve another problem.

“That one is correct.”

Ethan looked shocked.

“Wait... really?”

Denise nodded.

Ethan raised both arms dramatically.

“I am a genius.”

Denise rolled her eyes.

“You solved one question.”

Ethan smirked.

“Still counts.”

Denise leaned closer to check his notebook.

For a moment their heads were very close.

Too close.

Ethan suddenly stopped talking.

Denise noticed too.

They both awkwardly leaned back at the same time.

Denise cleared her throat.

“Next question.”

Ethan smiled slightly.

“Scared?”

Denise threw an eraser at him.

Across the Library

Someone was watching them.

From behind a bookshelf.

Hana.

She wasn't smiling.

Her phone buzzed in her hand.

A message appeared.

“Are they together?”

Hana hesitated before replying.

She typed slowly.

“Yes.”

A few seconds later another message appeared.

“Then stop them.”

Hana’s grip tightened around the phone.

She looked toward Denise again.

But this time her expression looked... conflicted.

Back at the Table

Denise packed her books.

“Okay, study session over.”

Ethan stretched his arms.

“Freedom.”

Denise smiled.

“You actually did well today.”

Ethan shrugged.

“Maybe I’m secretly smart.”

Denise laughed.

“Let’s not get carried away.”

As they stood up, Ethan’s phone vibrated again.

Unknown number.

His heart skipped.

He opened the message.

“The game has already started.”

Ethan’s stomach tightened.

Denise noticed his expression.

“What’s wrong?”

Ethan quickly locked the phone.

“Nothing.”

But inside his mind one thought kept repeating.

Someone was watching them.

And whoever it was...

Was getting closer.

Chapter 26

The Truth behind the Messages

The next morning at school felt strangely tense.

Denise walked through the hallway carrying her books while Ethan walked beside her.

“So,” Denise said, smiling slightly, “are you ready for today’s study session after school?”

Ethan groaned.

“Please give me one day off.”

“No.”

“You’re enjoying this way too much.”

“Correct.”

Ethan laughed, but his mind was somewhere else.

He kept thinking about the mysterious messages.

The game has already started.

What game?

And who was playing it?

The Sabotage

As Denise reached her locker, Hana suddenly appeared beside her.

The hallway went quiet.

Students nearby slowly stepped back, remembering what happened before.

Denise looked surprised.

“Hana?”

Hana didn’t smile.

“Congratulations on being the top student.”

Denise hesitated.

“...Thank you.”

But Hana’s expression quickly changed.

Suddenly she pushed Denise’s books off the locker shelf.

They crashed onto the floor.

Gasps filled the hallway.

Ethan stepped forward immediately.

“Hana, stop!”

But Hana suddenly grabbed Denise’s notebook.

The one with all her study notes.

And before anyone could react—

She tore several pages out.

RIP.

Denise stared in shock.

“Hana, what are you doing?!”

Students whispered around them.

But Hana suddenly froze.

Her phone buzzed in her pocket.

She looked at the screen quickly.

Then her expression changed.

Fear.

Without saying another word, Hana dropped the notebook and ran down the hallway.

Denise stood there confused.

“What just happened?”

Ethan frowned.

“This doesn’t make sense.”

The Investigation

That afternoon Ethan couldn’t stop thinking about everything.

Hana’s strange behaviour.

The messages.

The camera with the symbol.

So he made a decision.

He would check the security system.

Late in the evening, when most students had left, Ethan quietly walked toward the school office.

The security room door was slightly open.

He slipped inside.

Several monitors showed live camera feeds of the school.

Hallways.

Classrooms.

Entrances.

Ethan searched carefully.

Then suddenly—

One camera caught his attention.

The hallway camera near Denise's locker.

Someone had accessed the recordings recently.

Ethan opened the file.

The footage started playing.

He watched students passing by.

Then he saw Hana standing alone near Denise's locker earlier that day.

But she wasn't just standing there.

She was talking on her phone.

Ethan turned the volume up.

"...I told you I can't keep doing this," Hana whispered in the video.

A voice responded through the phone.

Ethan couldn't hear clearly.

But the next words shocked him.

"Just send the messages yourself," Hana said angrily.

"I'm not doing this anymore."

Ethan's eyes widened.

Send the messages?

That meant—

Denise Finds Out

Suddenly the door behind Ethan opened.

He spun around.

Denise stood there.

Her arms crossed.

“Ethan.”

Ethan froze.

“...How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough.”

Denise looked at the screen.

“You’ve been investigating the messages this whole time.”

Ethan sighed.

“I didn’t want you involved.”

Denise stepped closer.

“You think I wouldn’t notice something was wrong?”

Ethan rubbed his forehead.

“Things were getting dangerous.”

Denise stared at the screen again.

“Hana was sending the messages?”

Ethan nodded slowly.

“But she wasn’t the mastermind.”

Denise frowned.

“Then who was?”

Just then another message appeared on Ethan’s phone.

Unknown number.

Ethan and Denise looked at the screen together.

The message read:

“You finally figured it out.”

Denise’s heart started racing.

Another message appeared.

“Meet me behind the gym.”

Ethan looked at Denise.

“Should we go?”

Denise nodded.

“Let’s end this.”

The Truth

Behind the gym, the sun was already setting.

The area was quiet.

A single figure stood waiting.

Hana.

Denise stepped forward.

“Hana... why?”

Hana looked exhausted.

Her eyes were red like she had been crying.

“I didn’t want to hurt you.”

Denise frowned.

“Then why did you send those messages?”

Hana looked down.

“Because someone forced me to.”

Ethan’s heart skipped.

“Who?”

Hana hesitated.

Then she finally said the name.

“Your father.”

Ethan felt like the ground disappeared beneath him.

“My... dad?”

Hana nodded slowly.

“He told me to send the messages... to separate you and Denise.”

Denise’s eyes widened.

“Why would he do that?”

Hana shook her head.

“I don’t know.”

Ethan stood frozen.

Everything suddenly made terrible sense.

The warnings.

The pressure.

The attempts to separate them.

His own father had been behind it.

Denise looked at Ethan carefully.

“Ethan...”

But Ethan couldn't speak.

Because the mystery wasn't just solved.

It had just become personal.

Chapter 27

The Confrontation

Ethan barely remembered how he got home that night.

His mind kept repeating Hana's words.

"Your father forced me to send the messages."

It didn't make sense.

His father was strict.

Sometimes even cruel.

But manipulating people at school?

Watching Denise through cameras?

Ethan pushed the front door open.

His father was sitting in the living room, reading a newspaper like nothing had happened.

"You're late," his father said without looking up.

Ethan clenched his fists.

"We need to talk."

His father slowly lowered the newspaper.

"That sounds serious."

Ethan stepped closer.

"Did you force Hana to send those messages?"

For a moment the room was silent.

Then his father folded the newspaper calmly.

“So you finally figured it out.”

Ethan’s heart dropped.

“You admit it?”

“Yes.”

The answer came so easily that it shocked Ethan.

“Why?” Ethan demanded.

“Why would you do something like that?”

His father stood up slowly.

“Because I was protecting you.”

“Protecting me?!” Ethan shouted.

“You humiliated me at school, scared Denise, and controlled Hana!”

“You don’t understand,” his father said coldly.

“Then explain it!”

Ethan’s voice echoed through the house.

“I’m tired of living like this!”

For a moment his father stared at him silently.

Then he spoke quietly.

“That girl will only bring you trouble.”

Ethan’s anger exploded.

“Denise did nothing wrong!”

His father’s eyes hardened.

“You don’t know everything about her family.”

Ethan froze.

“What does that mean?”

But his father turned away.

“You’ll understand soon enough.”

“That’s not an answer!” Ethan yelled.

But his father walked toward the stairs.

“This conversation is over.”

Ethan stood there shaking with anger.

“Dad!”

His father stopped halfway up the stairs.

Ethan’s voice was quieter now.

“If you try to hurt Denise again...”

“I will never forgive you.”

His father didn’t respond.

He simply walked upstairs and closed his door.

The sound echoed through the silent house.

Ethan stood alone in the living room.

For the first time in his life...

He realized something terrifying.

His own father might be the real enemy.

And whatever truth his father was hiding...

Could destroy everything.

Chapter 28

The Truth between Families

The next morning, the sky was grey.

Denise sat quietly at a small café near the school, stirring her drink slowly. She hadn't slept much the night before.

Neither had Ethan.

He walked in a few minutes later, looking tired but determined.

Denise noticed immediately.

"You didn't sleep," she said softly.

Ethan sat across from her.

"Neither did you."

For a moment they just sat there in silence.

Finally Denise asked the question that had been bothering her all night.

"Did you talk to your father?"

Ethan nodded slowly.

"And?"

Ethan looked down at the table.

"He admitted it."

Denise's eyes widened.

“So it was really him?”

“Yeah.”

Denise frowned.

“But why would he hate me so much?”

Ethan shook his head.

“He said it has something to do with your family.”

Denise blinked.

“My family?”

Before Ethan could respond, the café door opened again.

Both of them turned.

A tall man walked inside.

Denise’s expression immediately changed.

“Dad?”

Her father looked serious.

“I need to talk to both of you.”

Something in his tone made Ethan’s stomach twist.

Denise’s father sat down slowly.

For a moment he didn’t say anything.

Then he sighed deeply.

“This is my fault.”

Denise looked confused.

“What are you talking about?”

Her father looked at Ethan.

“Your father and I used to work together.”

Ethan’s eyebrows rose.

“What?”

Denise’s father nodded.

“Years ago, before you two were even born.”

He continued quietly.

“We were business partners.”

Ethan leaned forward.

“What happened?”

Denise’s father looked regretful.

“There was an accident in the company.”

“A financial disaster.”

“Your father believed I caused it.”

Denise’s eyes widened.

“But you didn’t?”

Her father shook his head.

“No. But he never believed me.”

Ethan slowly understood.

“So he hates your family because he thinks your dad ruined his career.”

Denise whispered,

“All this... because of something that happened years ago?”

Her father nodded sadly.

“I tried to apologize many times.”

“But he never listened.”

Ethan leaned back in his chair.

Everything suddenly made sense.

The messages.

The threats.

The attempts to separate them.

Denise looked at Ethan nervously.

“What are we going to do?”

Before Ethan could answer, his phone vibrated.

A message from his father.

He opened it slowly.

“Come home immediately.”

Another message followed.

“And bring Denise.”

Denise looked at him.

“What did he say?”

Ethan swallowed.

“He wants us both to come home.”

Denise’s father frowned.

“That doesn’t sound good.”

Ethan stood up slowly.

“No.”

His eyes were serious now.

“This ends today.”

Denise stood beside him.

Her heart was racing.

Because somehow...

They both knew something big was about to happen.

And whatever happened next...

would decide everything.

Chapter 29

Where Sunlight Meets Snowstorm

Ethan's house looked colder than usual that evening.

Denise stood beside him at the gate, her hands nervously gripping the straps of her bag.

"Are you sure about this?" she asked quietly.

Ethan nodded.

"We can't run from this forever."

He rang the doorbell.

The door opened almost immediately.

Ethan's father stood there, his expression unreadable.

"Come in."

The living room felt tense.

Denise's father was already there.

So were Ethan's parents.

For a moment, no one spoke.

Finally Ethan stepped forward.

"You said you wanted to talk."

His father looked at Denise.

"Sit down."

Denise hesitated, but Ethan sat beside her.

The silence felt heavy.

Then Denise's father spoke.

"We can't keep dragging the past into our children's lives."

Ethan's father scoffed.

"You ruined everything I built."

"I didn't," Denise's father replied calmly.

"The investigation proved that years ago."

Ethan's father froze slightly.

Denise blinked.

"Investigation?"

Denise's father pulled out a folder.

"I found the old reports again."

He placed them on the table.

"The company didn't collapse because of me."

He looked directly at Ethan's father.

"It collapsed because of a third partner who secretly moved the money."

The room went silent.

Ethan's father stared at the papers.

His hands slowly tightened.

"That's impossible."

"It isn't," Denise's father said quietly.

"You were too angry to listen back then."

For a long moment, Ethan's father didn't speak.

Then he finally looked at Ethan.

And Denise.

"You're saying... all of this..."

"...was a misunderstanding?"

Denise's father nodded.

Ethan suddenly stood up.

"So you spent years hating someone for nothing?"

His voice shook.

"You scared and hurt Denise. You controlled people. You tried to ruin everything!"

His father looked down.

For the first time, Ethan saw something he had never seen before.

Regret.

"I thought I was protecting you," his father said quietly.

"From a family that destroyed mine."

Ethan shook his head.

"You almost destroyed your own family."

The words hung in the air.

Denise slowly stood too.

Her voice was gentle but firm.

"We're not your past."

"We're just two people who care about each other."

Ethan's father looked at them.

At how close they stood.

At how Ethan instinctively moved slightly in front of Denise, protecting her.

The room felt quiet again.

Then Ethan's father sighed deeply.

"I made a mistake."

Those four words shocked everyone.

He looked at Denise.

"I'm sorry."

Denise blinked in surprise.

Then she nodded slowly.

"I accept your apology."

The tension in the room finally eased.

Denise's father stood up.

"Then let's end this."

Ethan's father nodded.

"Yes... let's end it."

Later that evening, Ethan walked Denise home.

The sky had turned soft pink as the sun began to set.

For once, everything felt peaceful.

Denise kicked a small pebble along the sidewalk.

"So... your father apologized."

"Yeah," Ethan said.

“That was unexpected.”

Denise smiled slightly.

“You shouted at him pretty bravely.”

Ethan laughed.

“I was terrified.”

They walked quietly for a moment.

Then Denise stopped.

“Ethan?”

“Hmm?”

She looked a little nervous.

“Do you regret meeting me?”

Ethan looked surprised.

“What?”

“You know,” Denise said softly.

“All the trouble... the drama... the fights...”

Ethan stepped closer.

“Denise.”

She looked up.

Ethan smiled.

“You’re the best chaos that ever happened to me.”

Denise burst into laughter.

“That’s the worst confession ever.”

“Hey, it’s honest.”

Denise shook her head, still laughing.

Then Ethan suddenly looked serious.

“I mean it.”

He took a small step closer.

“Before you, everything in my life felt like a snowstorm.”

Denise tilted her head.

“And now?”

Ethan smiled.

“Now there’s sunlight.”

Denise’s cheeks turned pink.

She looked down shyly.

“Well... sunlight needs snow sometimes.”

Ethan raised an eyebrow.

“Why?”

Denise smiled.

“Because that’s how beautiful things happen.”

They both laughed quietly.

The wind moved softly through the trees.

Ethan looked at her for a moment.

Then he gently took her hand.

Denise didn’t pull away.

Instead, she squeezed his hand back.

And as they walked down the street together—

It felt like the world had finally become calm.

Not perfect.

But hopeful.

Like sunlight meeting a snowstorm.

And somewhere in the distance...

Their story was just beginning.

Epilogue

Years Later

The school looked smaller than Denise remembered.

She stood near the front gate, sunlight warming the quiet courtyard.

It had been years since she last walked through these halls.

Back then, everything felt so dramatic.

Exams.

Friendships.

Arguments.

Love.

Now it all felt like a beautiful memory.

Denise smiled to herself as she walked slowly toward the old lockers.

Some things had changed.

New paint.

New students.

But some things were exactly the same.

Like the rooftop door.

She pushed it open.

The wind brushed gently against her hair.

The rooftop garden was still there.

And so was the old wooden bench.

Denise sat down quietly.

For a moment she simply looked at the sky.

Then she laughed softly.

“Still late, Ethan.”

A voice behind her answered immediately.

“I’m not late.”

Denise turned around.

Ethan stood at the rooftop entrance, slightly out of breath like he had run up the stairs.

Some things about him had changed.

He was taller.

More confident.

But his smile was exactly the same.

Denise crossed her arms.

“You are ten minutes late.”

Ethan walked toward her.

“I was getting something important.”

He sat beside her.

Denise raised an eyebrow.

“Oh really?”

Ethan pulled something from his jacket pocket.

Denise blinked.

It was an old notebook.

Her old **math study notebook**.

The same one she used when she forced Ethan to study years ago.

Denise laughed in surprise.

“You kept that?”

Ethan shrugged.

“Of course.”

He opened it.

Inside were the messy math problems Ethan once struggled with.

And Denise’s notes in bright highlighter.

Denise shook her head.

“I can’t believe you still have this.”

Ethan looked at her gently.

“That notebook changed my life.”

Denise smiled softly.

“Because you finally learned math?”

Ethan laughed.

“No.”

He looked directly at her.

“Because that’s when I realized I never wanted to lose you.”

Denise's smile slowly faded into something more emotional.

The wind moved quietly around them.

"You know," Denise said softly, "sometimes I think about everything that happened."

"The fights. The drama. The mystery."

Ethan nodded.

"Same."

Denise looked at the sunset.

"Back then, it felt like the world was ending every week."

Ethan chuckled.

"It kind of did."

They both laughed.

Then Denise whispered,

"But somehow... we survived it."

Ethan gently took her hand again.

"We didn't just survive."

"We grew."

For a moment neither of them spoke.

The sky slowly turned golden as the sun began to set.

Students below were laughing and talking, just like they once did.

Denise squeezed Ethan's hand.

"Do you ever miss those days?"

Ethan thought for a moment.

Then he smiled.

“No.”

Denise looked surprised.

“Why not?”

Ethan looked at her with the same warmth he had years ago.

“Because the best part of those days...”

“...is still with me.”

Denise’s eyes filled slightly with tears.

But she was smiling.

A big, beautiful smile.

The kind that only appears when someone realizes something important.

Some stories end.

But the people inside them...

Keep living.

Keep laughing.

Keep loving.

And somewhere in the world—

Two teenagers who once fought through storms and sunlight...

Were still walking forward together.

And if you ever visit that school rooftop someday...

You might still hear them laughing.
Like their story never really ended.
“Together forever and ever.”

The End