PARALLEL STUDIOS MEDIA NETWORK

ORIGINAL FEATURE SCREENPLAY



SKA8ER BOI

Written by Jon Wayne Ede

SECOND DRAFT

October 27, 2026

Parallel Studios Media Network

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FADE IN:

EXT. VICTORIA WATERFRONT - DAWN

A skateboard rattles over wet concrete before the city is fully awake.

ETHAN REED, 22, lean, tired, and more determined than his clothes suggest, rides along the seawall with a guitar strapped across his back. He reaches a bench, checks the time on a cracked phone, and changes direction.

INT. MRS. DALTON'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - MORNING

MRS. DALTON, seventies, sharp-eyed and kind, pours coffee while Ethan repairs a loose cabinet hinge.

MRS. DALTON
You were supposed to fix the sink.

ETHAN
The cabinet looked insecure.

MRS. DALTON
It has that in common with you.

He smiles. She slides an envelope toward him.

ETHAN
I said Friday.

MRS. DALTON
Rent is not a moral test. Eat first.

Ethan leaves the envelope untouched. On the refrigerator is an old photo of him at fourteen holding a cheap guitar beside Mrs. Dalton.

MRS. DALTON
Open mic tonight?

ETHAN
If Marcus remembers we have one.

MRS. DALTON
He remembers drums. Everything else is hope.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - MORNING

Ethan works behind the counter. He remembers every regular's order, even when they barely remember his name.

A CUSTOMER searches for change. Ethan quietly covers the difference.

LENA, 23, practical and observant, sees it.

LENA
You cannot keep financing strangers.

ETHAN
It was forty cents.

LENA
Your bank account considers that a merger.

MARCUS VALE, 23, energetic drummer and professional distraction, enters with flyers under one arm.

MARCUS
Tonight. Eight o'clock. We have twelve confirmed attendees, including my mother twice.

ETHAN
That is six more than last week.

Marcus tapes a flyer to the wall: ETHAN REED AND THE STATIC - ORIGINAL MUSIC.

LENA
The Static still just means the two of you?

MARCUS
We are selectively minimalist.

Ethan checks his phone. No replies to the demo links he sent.

MARCUS
Stop looking. Nobody discovers anyone before coffee.

ETHAN
People discover bankruptcy before coffee.

The door opens. CLAIRE HART, 22, polished without trying, enters with a folder of university notes. Ethan looks up. For one second, the room goes quiet for him.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - CONTINUOUS

Claire studies the menu as though it is an exam designed to insult her.

ETHAN
You look like you need something complicated.

CLAIRE
Is that an observation or a sales technique?

ETHAN
Both. We charge extra for emotional accuracy.

She smiles despite herself.

CLAIRE
Regular coffee. No syrup. No paragraph.

ETHAN
A minimalist. Marcus will be relieved.

Claire notices the guitar pick tucked behind Ethan's name tag.

CLAIRE
You play?

ETHAN
Mostly in rooms where people came for something else.

He hands her the coffee. Their fingers touch. Neither immediately moves.

LENA
(from register)
Ethan, line.

Claire steps aside. She catches sight of the flyer.

CLAIRE
Is that tonight?

ETHAN
Allegedly.

CLAIRE
You do not sound confident.

ETHAN
Confidence is expensive. Admission is five dollars.

Claire takes a flyer. Outside, a black sedan waits at the curb. DANIEL MERCER, late twenties, composed and successful, watches from behind the wheel.

CLAIRE
Maybe I will come.

ETHAN
Maybe is our most reliable audience.

She leaves. Daniel opens the passenger door from inside. Ethan watches the car pull away, then sees Claire looking back through the window.

EXT. UNIVERSITY CAMPUS - DAY

Claire walks with her friend MAYA through students and bicycles.

MAYA
You kept the flyer.

CLAIRE
It is paper. Paper survives pockets.

MAYA
Daniel has reservations tonight.

CLAIRE
Daniel always has reservations.

They pass Ethan, now carrying a delivery case toward the music department. He tries to balance the case, guitar, and skateboard. Claire stops.

CLAIRE
Do you work everywhere?

ETHAN
The economy enjoys variety.

The case slips. Claire catches one handle.

ETHAN
Careful. That keyboard costs more than my future.

They carry it together.

MAYA
Claire, seminar.

CLAIRE
Two minutes.

At the loading door, Ethan searches his pockets for his access card. A guitar pick falls to the pavement. Claire picks it up.

CLAIRE
You are losing your equipment.

ETHAN
Keep it. It is my least expensive possession.

CLAIRE
What if you need it tonight?

ETHAN
Then you will have to come return it.

Claire turns the pick between her fingers. Ethan heads inside.

MAYA
That was not subtle.

CLAIRE
Neither was I.

INT. MUSIC DEPARTMENT - STORAGE ROOM - DAY

Ethan delivers the keyboard to PROFESSOR HALE, fifties, who signs the form.

PROFESSOR HALE
Still sending songs out?

ETHAN
Still being ignored professionally.

PROFESSOR HALE
There is a showcase next month. University acts only.

ETHAN
I am not enrolled.

PROFESSOR HALE
You were.

ETHAN
Tuition and I developed creative differences.

Hale studies him.

PROFESSOR HALE
Talent does not expire when registration does.

He writes a name on a card: EVELYN SHAW - NORTHLINE RECORDS.

PROFESSOR HALE
Do not contact her until the demo is ready.

ETHAN
It is ready.

PROFESSOR HALE
Then make it better.

EXT. CAMPUS QUAD - LATER

Claire sits with Daniel. He wears a tailored coat and discusses a development project with calm certainty.

DANIEL
Your father wants us at dinner Friday.

CLAIRE
Us?

DANIEL
He invited both of us.

Claire looks across the quad. Ethan skates away with the empty delivery case.

DANIEL
Who is that?

CLAIRE
Nobody.

The word bothers her the moment she says it.

INT. ETHAN'S BASEMENT APARTMENT - EVENING

The room is cramped but alive: cables, notebooks, secondhand speakers, a small Pro Tools session open on an aging computer.

Marcus adjusts a microphone stand with duct tape.

MARCUS
Professional.

ETHAN
The tape is holding the profession together.

Ethan records a guitar part. The computer stutters and stops.

ETHAN
Again.

MARCUS
We need a new computer.

ETHAN
We need an audience before infrastructure.

Mrs. Dalton appears at the stairs with sandwiches.

MRS. DALTON
Musicians require food. Even unsuccessful ones.

MARCUS
I feel seen.

Ethan checks the time, then the spare guitar pick on his desk. It is not there. He remembers Claire.

MARCUS
Coffee girl?

ETHAN
She has a name.

MARCUS
You know it?

ETHAN
Claire.

MARCUS
That was fast.

Ethan plays the opening of a new song.

MARCUS
That is not one of ours.

ETHAN
It is not anything yet.

MRS. DALTON
Most important things begin that way.

INT. SMALL MUSIC VENUE - NIGHT

Twenty chairs. Fourteen people. One flickering EXIT sign.

Marcus counts in. Ethan begins to sing.

At the back, the door opens. Claire slips inside, still dressed for the dinner she abandoned. She holds Ethan's guitar pick.

Ethan sees her. The next line catches in his throat, then becomes stronger.

Daniel's name lights up Claire's phone. She silences it.

After the song, applause fills the small room. Claire claps hardest.

INT. VENUE HALLWAY - LATER

Ethan finds Claire beside a vending machine.

ETHAN
You came.

CLAIRE
I had to return this.

She holds up the pick but does not give it back.

ETHAN
It appears safe with you.

CLAIRE
The song was about someone.

ETHAN
Most songs are.

CLAIRE
Someone recent?

ETHAN
That sounds like a question with consequences.

Claire smiles.

CLAIRE
Coffee tomorrow?

ETHAN
I work in a coffee shop.

CLAIRE
Somewhere you are not required to be nice to me.

ETHAN
That narrows the city considerably.

EXT. INNER HARBOUR - DAY

Ethan and Claire walk with paper cups. Tourists photograph the legislature.

CLAIRE
What happened to university?

ETHAN
Money happened first.

CLAIRE
Will you go back?

ETHAN
Maybe. Music keeps making promises it cannot afford.

CLAIRE
Daniel says plans matter more than passion.

ETHAN
Daniel sounds sponsored.

CLAIRE
He is not wrong.

Ethan watches a street musician pack up after receiving almost no tips.

ETHAN
Plans matter. They just are not guarantees.

CLAIRE
What is your plan?

ETHAN
Write better songs. Play better rooms. Keep working until the answer changes.

CLAIRE
That is not a plan. That is faith.

ETHAN
Sometimes they share an address.

They stop at the railing.

CLAIRE
My family would hate that answer.

ETHAN
Do they interview everyone you drink coffee with?

Claire looks at him, amused and unsettled.

CLAIRE
Only the ones who might matter.

The admission hangs between them. Ethan reaches toward her hand, but a message from Daniel appears. Claire pulls the phone out first.

INT. HART FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT

Old money expressed through silence and polished wood.

ROBERT HART, Claire's father, discusses finance with Daniel. MARGARET HART watches Claire push food around her plate.

ROBERT
Daniel's firm is opening a Vancouver office.

DANIEL
Nothing is final.

MARGARET
Stability is built before it is announced.

Claire's phone vibrates under the table: a photo from Ethan of Marcus wearing a lampshade during rehearsal.

She smiles.

MARGARET
Something amusing?

CLAIRE
A friend.

ROBERT
From school?

CLAIRE
Not exactly.

Daniel notices the guitar pick beside Claire's plate.

DANIEL
New hobby?

Claire closes her hand around it.

CLAIRE
Something like that.

Later, in the foyer, Daniel helps Claire with her coat.

DANIEL
Is there somebody else?

CLAIRE
There is somebody.

DANIEL
That is not an answer.

CLAIRE
It is the only one I have.

Daniel does not become angry. His composure is more intimidating.

DANIEL
Your life is not a rehearsal, Claire.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - AFTERNOON

Claire sits near closing while Ethan wipes tables.

CLAIRE
What would you do with ten thousand dollars?

ETHAN
Pay debts. Replace the computer. Record properly.

CLAIRE
No trip? No car?

ETHAN
A computer is a trip if it stops crashing.

Claire watches him count tips.

CLAIRE
My father could introduce you to people.

Ethan looks up.

ETHAN
People who like music?

CLAIRE
People who fund things.

ETHAN
I do not want to be your project.

CLAIRE
I did not say that.

ETHAN
You heard me talk about music and immediately imagined a rescue package.

Claire bristles.

CLAIRE
Accepting help is not weakness.

ETHAN
Being evaluated before help arrives is exhausting.

The door is locked. They are alone.

CLAIRE
You make everything difficult.

ETHAN
You keep trying to make everything safe.

A long look. Then Claire crosses the distance and kisses him.

For one breath, Ethan is surprised. Then he kisses her back.

Outside, Daniel's sedan turns the corner and passes the darkened shop.

EXT. CITY STREETS - NIGHT

Ethan and Claire ride the last bus, sitting too close and pretending not to notice.

CLAIRE
We should probably talk about that.

ETHAN
Talking has damaged enough good moments.

CLAIRE
You are impossible.

ETHAN
Yet public transit remains available.

The bus stops near Claire's neighbourhood.

CLAIRE
Do not walk me home.

ETHAN
That sounded welcoming.

CLAIRE
My parents are awake.

The truth underneath it: she does not want them to see him.

Ethan understands but lets her avoid saying it.

ETHAN
Tomorrow?

CLAIRE
Tomorrow.

She steps off. Ethan watches from the window as Claire walks toward the large houses. She turns once and lifts the guitar pick between two fingers.

INT. HART HOME - FOYER - NIGHT

Margaret waits.

MARGARET
Daniel called.

CLAIRE
Of course he did.

MARGARET
He is worried about you.

CLAIRE
He is worried about losing.

MARGARET
Sometimes losing is another word for recognizing danger.

INT. REHEARSAL ROOM - DAY

Ethan and Marcus work through the new song. The bassist never arrives.

MARCUS
We need a third human.

ETHAN
Humans are unreliable.

Lena enters with coffees.

LENA
Claire called the shop twice.

ETHAN
Why did she not call me?

LENA
Your phone is dead.

Ethan checks it. Dead.

MARCUS
Technology rejects you because it senses competition.

Lena studies Ethan.

LENA
Be careful.

ETHAN
With the phone?

LENA
With someone who likes your world only when nobody she knows is watching.

Ethan turns back to the microphone.

ETHAN
She came to the show.

LENA
In the dark.

That lands.

EXT. CAMPUS STEPS - LATER

Claire waits with two tickets to a formal charity event.

CLAIRE
Come Friday.

ETHAN
To what?

CLAIRE
A fundraiser. My family will be there.

Ethan looks at the tickets.

ETHAN
You want them to meet me?

Claire hesitates half a second too long.

CLAIRE
I want you there.

INT. THRIFT STORE - EVENING

Marcus helps Ethan choose a jacket.

MARCUS
This says artistic entrepreneur.

ETHAN
It says funeral magician.

Mrs. Dalton adjusts the collar.

MRS. DALTON
Clothes do not make you belong. They only make other people less imaginative.

ETHAN
That is not comforting.

She pins an old silver tie clip to his shirt.

MRS. DALTON
This belonged to my husband. He wore it the night he asked me to dance.

ETHAN
I cannot take this.

MRS. DALTON
Bring it back with a story.

INT. HART HOME - CLAIRE'S BEDROOM - SAME

Margaret lays out a dress while Claire watches.

MARGARET
Daniel will pick you up at seven.

CLAIRE
Ethan is coming.

Margaret stops.

MARGARET
The musician.

CLAIRE
His name is Ethan.

MARGARET
Does Daniel know?

CLAIRE
Daniel is not my guardian.

MARGARET
No. He is the man everyone believes you are building a future with.

INT. CHARITY GALA - NIGHT

A ballroom of donors, executives, and immaculate expectations.

Ethan enters alone. The jacket almost fits. The tie clip shines.

Claire sees him and smiles with genuine relief. Then she sees her parents see him, and the smile tightens.

CLAIRE
You came.

ETHAN
I was promised tiny food.

Daniel approaches.

DANIEL
Ethan, right?

ETHAN
You researched.

DANIEL
Claire mentioned your band.

ETHAN
That already sounds more successful than it is.

Robert joins them.

ROBERT
And what do you do when you are not performing?

ETHAN
Coffee shop. Deliveries. Recording work when I can get it.

ROBERT
Temporary things.

ETHAN
They become permanent if you do them long enough.

Claire touches Ethan's arm, silently asking him not to fight.

An AUCTION HOST announces a donation from Daniel's firm. Applause.

DANIEL
Excuse me.

Daniel takes the stage. Ethan watches Claire watch her family applaud him. For the first time, Ethan understands the size of the world Claire is asking him to enter.

INT. CHARITY GALA - TERRACE - NIGHT

Ethan steps outside for air. Claire follows.

CLAIRE
You disappeared.

ETHAN
I was becoming temporary.

CLAIRE
My father is direct with everyone.

ETHAN
Your father asked what I do like he was checking a credit application.

CLAIRE
You could have tried harder.

ETHAN
To be less honest?

CLAIRE
To show them there is a plan.

ETHAN
I told you the plan.

CLAIRE
Songs and hope are not enough in that room.

ETHAN
They are enough in mine.

Claire is torn between wanting him and wanting him to transform.

CLAIRE
I need you to understand how this looks.

ETHAN
I understand exactly how it looks.

He removes Mrs. Dalton's tie clip, afraid of losing it.

CLAIRE
Do not leave angry.

ETHAN
I am not angry. I am tired of feeling like the version of me you can love has not arrived yet.

He walks back through the ballroom without saying goodbye to her parents.

INT. ETHAN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Ethan returns the tie clip to its box.

Mrs. Dalton stands in the doorway.

MRS. DALTON
Bad story?

ETHAN
Incomplete.

MRS. DALTON
Those are usually the painful ones.

Ethan opens his recording session and begins deleting tracks.

MRS. DALTON
Do not destroy the song because somebody misunderstood the singer.

ETHAN
What if she is right?

MRS. DALTON
About what?

ETHAN
Maybe ambition without money is just a prettier word for irresponsibility.

Mrs. Dalton sits.

MRS. DALTON
Your mother used to say you were born reaching for things before you knew their names.

Ethan looks at the old refrigerator photo he brought downstairs.

MRS. DALTON
Reaching is not failure. But you do need somewhere to put your feet.

Ethan restores the deleted tracks.

ETHAN
There is a university showcase.

MRS. DALTON
Then prepare as though somebody important will listen.

ETHAN
Nobody important ever does.

MRS. DALTON
You are listening.

MONTAGE - BUILDING THE SHOWCASE DEMO

- Ethan works opening shifts, then records until two in the morning.

- Marcus practices with headphones in a laundromat while clothes spin behind him.

- Lena records background vocals after closing the coffee shop.

- Ethan sells an effects pedal, then uses the money to rent studio time.

- Claire types messages and deletes them.

- Daniel drives her home from dinners she barely remembers.

- Ethan hears a mix in his cheap headphones, hates it, and starts again.

INT. SMALL RECORDING STUDIO - NIGHT

The ENGINEER checks the clock.

ENGINEER
Ten minutes left.

ETHAN
Run the final chorus again.

MARCUS
My arms have resigned.

ETHAN
They can file paperwork tomorrow.

They play. This time, everything locks together.

Behind the glass, Ethan listens to playback. For the first time, the song sounds larger than the room that made it.

ENGINEER
What is it called?

Ethan thinks of Claire looking around before admitting she liked him.

ETHAN
Five Minutes Too Early.

INT. UNIVERSITY SHOWCASE - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

Students tune expensive instruments. Ethan and Marcus unload their own gear.

Professor Hale approaches.

PROFESSOR HALE
Evelyn Shaw is here.

ETHAN
You said not to contact her.

PROFESSOR HALE
I contacted her.

MARCUS
I have always respected education.

Across the hall, Claire arrives with Maya. Daniel follows unexpectedly.

CLAIRE
Why are you here?

DANIEL
You said this mattered.

Claire sees Ethan backstage. He sees Daniel beside her.

STAGE MANAGER
Ethan Reed and the Static, two minutes.

MARCUS
We are still calling ourselves that?

ETHAN
Survive first. Rename later.

Claire approaches.

CLAIRE
I wanted to wish you luck.

ETHAN
Thank you.

He is polite, guarded.

CLAIRE
Ethan, about the gala-

STAGE MANAGER
Places.

Ethan steps toward the stage.

CLAIRE
I am here.

He looks at Daniel, then back at her.

ETHAN
I can see that.

INT. UNIVERSITY SHOWCASE - STAGE - NIGHT

The lights are brighter than Ethan expected.

He begins "Five Minutes Too Early."

The first verse is intimate. The room settles. By the chorus, strangers are leaning forward.

Claire listens as though every line has found her address.

Daniel studies Claire instead of the stage.

At the back, EVELYN SHAW writes in a notebook.

The song ends. Applause rises slowly, then fully.

Backstage, Ethan exhales.

MARCUS
We did not die.

ETHAN
Industry standard achieved.

Evelyn appears.

EVELYN
The song is good. The arrangement is trying too hard to apologize for being small.

ETHAN
Is that a compliment?

EVELYN
It is a reason to keep working.

She gives him a card.

EVELYN
Send me the next three songs. Not this one. I already heard it.

She leaves.

Ethan stares at the card. Claire runs to him and hugs him before thinking.

CLAIRE
You were incredible.

For a moment, the rest of the world disappears. Then Daniel appears behind her, and Claire releases Ethan first.

EXT. UNIVERSITY THEATRE - NIGHT

The crowd disperses.

Daniel waits near his car. Claire stands between him and Ethan.

DANIEL
We should go.

CLAIRE
Give me a minute.

Daniel nods and steps away.

ETHAN
He is patient.

CLAIRE
He knows my family.

ETHAN
That explains patience?

CLAIRE
It explains history.

Ethan holds Evelyn's card.

ETHAN
This might become something.

CLAIRE
I know.

ETHAN
You do not sound happy.

CLAIRE
I am. I am also trying to understand where I fit.

ETHAN
You fit wherever you choose to stand.

Claire looks at Daniel, then Ethan.

CLAIRE
It is not that simple.

ETHAN
It keeps becoming complicated only when somebody might see us.

Claire kisses him quickly, hidden by the theatre's shadow.

CLAIRE
Tomorrow.

She goes to Daniel's car. Ethan watches her leave, Evelyn's card in his hand. Claire still has his guitar pick.

INT. HART HOME - STUDY - DAY

Robert closes the door behind Claire.

ROBERT
Daniel says you are confused.

CLAIRE
Daniel says many things calmly enough that people mistake them for facts.

ROBERT
The musician embarrassed you at the gala.

CLAIRE
He embarrassed you.

Margaret enters.

MARGARET
Claire, attraction is not architecture. You cannot build a life on a feeling.

CLAIRE
You built one on appearances.

Robert's face hardens.

ROBERT
We have given you every opportunity.

CLAIRE
And selected the person I should become grateful beside.

MARGARET
Ethan may be talented. Talent is not provision.

CLAIRE
He works harder than anyone I know.

ROBERT
At jobs with no future.

Claire wants to defend Ethan completely. Instead, the fear enters.

MARGARET
What happens when love becomes rent?
When ambition becomes resentment?
When you are supporting a dream that
never chooses to support you?

Claire says nothing. Her silence is the first victory her parents have won.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Ethan shows Lena Evelyn's card.

LENA
That is real.

ETHAN
It is card-shaped.

LENA
You are allowed to be happy.

ETHAN
I am waiting for the invoice.

Claire enters. She looks tired.

CLAIRE
Can we talk?

They sit in a corner.

CLAIRE
My parents know.

ETHAN
About me or the scandalous coffee?

CLAIRE
About us.

The word warms him.

ETHAN
There is an us?

Claire cannot give him the answer he wants.

CLAIRE
I need time.

ETHAN
Time for what?

CLAIRE
To make decisions without everyone pushing.

ETHAN
Including me?

CLAIRE
Especially you, because when I am with you everything feels possible and then I go home and possibility feels reckless.

ETHAN
I am not asking you to gamble your life.

CLAIRE
You do not have to ask. Loving you might do it for me.

Ethan absorbs the beauty and damage in that sentence.

EXT. BEACH - SUNSET

Ethan and Claire sit on driftwood. Their shoes are in the sand.

CLAIRE
Tell me where you will be in five years.

ETHAN
Hopefully not answering this question.

CLAIRE
I am serious.

ETHAN
Writing. Recording. Maybe touring. Maybe teaching. Maybe still making coffee between all of it.

CLAIRE
You are comfortable with maybe.

ETHAN
I am comfortable earning the next step.

CLAIRE
Daniel already has the next ten.

Ethan looks at her.

ETHAN
Then why are you here?

Claire's eyes fill.

CLAIRE
Because I do not feel anything when he looks at me.

ETHAN
And when I look at you?

CLAIRE
I forget what I am supposed to want.

They kiss. It is deeper than before, carrying both love and an approaching ending.

Later, Claire rests her head on his shoulder.

CLAIRE
Do not become someone I regret losing.

ETHAN
That sounds like a warning to both of us.

INT. ETHAN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Ethan sends three new demos to Evelyn.

The email leaves his outbox. He stares at the screen.

Claire sits on the bed, looking around the small room.

CLAIRE
You live under Mrs. Dalton?

ETHAN
Economically and architecturally.

She notices unpaid bills beside lyric sheets.

CLAIRE
How far behind are you?

ETHAN
That is intimate information.

CLAIRE
We are being intimate.

ETHAN
Not with accounting.

Claire picks up a past-due notice.

CLAIRE
Let me help.

ETHAN
No.

CLAIRE
Ethan-

ETHAN
I need you to believe in me, not purchase relief from me.

CLAIRE
Pride is not a career.

ETHAN
Neither is fear.

They stop. The same argument, wearing different clothes.

Claire sets the notice down carefully.

CLAIRE
I love you.

Ethan looks at her, stunned.

ETHAN
Then why does it always sound like an apology?

INT. HART HOME - FORMAL DINING ROOM - NIGHT

A dinner planned to restore order.

Daniel sits beside Claire. Robert opens a bottle of wine. Margaret speaks of an upcoming family trip.

Claire barely listens. Ethan's guitar pick rests in her closed hand beneath the table.

DANIEL
I was offered the Vancouver position.

ROBERT
Excellent.

MARGARET
That changes everything.

Daniel turns to Claire.

DANIEL
It could change things for us.

Claire looks at the life already furnished around her.

Her phone vibrates: ETHAN - "THE DEMOS ARE SENT. I THINK I CAN BREATHE NOW."

She types: "I'M PROUD OF YOU." She does not send it.

MARGARET
Claire?

CLAIRE
Congratulations, Daniel.

Daniel reads the distance in her voice.

DANIEL
Thank you.

Across town, Ethan performs in a small venue. The chair he hoped Claire would fill remains empty.

He begins the song anyway.

INT. HART HOME - FORMAL DINING ROOM - LATER

The dinner is ending.

Servants quietly remove plates from the long table. Crystal glasses remain half full. The chandelier casts warm, expensive light over everything.

DANIEL speaks with ROBERT near the windows.

MARGARET watches CLAIRE.

Claire still holds ETHAN'S GUITAR PICK beneath the table.

Margaret notices the closed fist.

MARGARET
What are you holding?

Claire opens her hand.

The small guitar pick looks strangely out of place against the white tablecloth and polished silverware.

CLAIRE
Nothing.

MARGARET
It does not look like nothing.

Claire puts it into her purse.

CLAIRE
It belongs to someone I met.

Margaret looks toward Daniel, making sure he cannot hear.

MARGARET
Someone from school?

CLAIRE
Not exactly.

MARGARET
What does that mean?

Claire takes a drink of water.

CLAIRE
It means I met somebody who doesn't fit into one of your approved categories.

MARGARET
Claire.

CLAIRE
He's a musician.

Margaret waits.

MARGARET
Professionally?

Claire does not answer.

That is an answer.

MARGARET
Does he attend university?

CLAIRE
I don't know.

MARGARET
What does he do?

CLAIRE
He writes songs. He works. He plays music.

MARGARET
Where?

CLAIRE
Small places.

Margaret's expression remains gentle, which somehow makes it worse.

MARGARET
Then he is trying to become a musician.

CLAIRE
He is a musician.

MARGARET
There is a difference between loving something and building a life from it.

Claire looks toward Daniel.

He laughs at something her father says. Composed. Certain. Already accepted.

MARGARET
Daniel has been very patient with you.

CLAIRE
I didn't ask him to be.

MARGARET
No. You simply expect everybody to remain available while you decide which version of your life feels most interesting.

The remark lands.

CLAIRE
That's not fair.

MARGARET
Neither is allowing a decent man to believe he has a future with you while you carry another man's belongings in your hand.

Claire looks down.

MARGARET
Be curious about whoever you wish. But do not confuse curiosity with compatibility.

Margaret rises and joins the others.

Claire remains seated.

Her hand enters her purse and closes around the guitar pick again.

INT. SMALL MUSIC VENUE - NIGHT

Applause.

Ethan finishes his song.

It is not thunderous, but it is real.

A few people stand. Others clap with the enthusiasm of listeners who had not expected to care.

Ethan looks toward the empty chair near the back.

Still empty.

MARCUS meets him as he steps offstage.

MARCUS
You survived.

ETHAN
Did I?

MARCUS
Three people asked where they can hear the song again.

ETHAN
Three?

MARCUS
At this rate, you'll be moderately unknown by Christmas.

Ethan begins putting his guitar away.

MARCUS
She didn't come?

ETHAN
She never said she would.

MARCUS
You stared at that chair through the entire second verse.

ETHAN
I was looking at the exit.

MARCUS
Romantically?

Ethan closes the guitar case.

His phone lights up.

A message from Claire:

I'M SORRY. FAMILY DINNER. HOW DID IT GO?

Ethan reads it twice.

He begins typing.

GOOD. MISSED YOU.

He studies the words, then deletes the last two.

He sends:

GOOD. NOBODY THREW ANYTHING.

A moment later:

CLAIRE: THAT SOUNDS LIKE SUCCESS.

Ethan smiles.

Then another message appears.

CLAIRE: WE SHOULD TALK TOMORROW.

The smile disappears.

EXT. UNIVERSITY COURTYARD - DAY

Students cross beneath grey skies.

Claire waits beside a stone wall, holding two coffees.

Ethan approaches on his skateboard.

He steps off before reaching her.

ETHAN
You bought me one?

CLAIRE
Regular coffee. No paragraph.

ETHAN
You're learning.

She gives him the cup.

Ethan notices that she is dressed more formally than usual.

ETHAN
You look expensive.

CLAIRE
Thank you?

ETHAN
I meant nervous.

Claire sits on the wall.

Ethan remains standing.

CLAIRE
How was the show?

ETHAN
You already asked.

CLAIRE
You avoided answering.

ETHAN
It went well.

CLAIRE
Marcus said people liked the new song.

ETHAN
You talked to Marcus?

CLAIRE
He found me online.

ETHAN
That sounds like him.

A pause.

ETHAN
You wanted to talk.

Claire looks across the courtyard.

CLAIRE
I think we should stop doing this.

ETHAN
Drinking coffee?

CLAIRE
You know what I mean.

ETHAN
I was hoping you didn't.

Claire takes a breath.

CLAIRE
Daniel and I have history.

ETHAN
You and I barely have bus fare.

CLAIRE
That's part of it.

Ethan's humour fades.

ETHAN
What is?

CLAIRE
Daniel knows my family. Our families know each other. He understands the life I'm trying to build.

ETHAN
And I don't?

CLAIRE
You don't even know what you're doing next month.

ETHAN
I know what I'm trying to do.

CLAIRE
Trying is not the same as knowing.

Ethan absorbs that.

ETHAN
That sounds like your mother.

Claire looks at him sharply.

CLAIRE
You've never met my mother.

ETHAN
I've met the part of her that talks through you.

Claire stands.

CLAIRE
This is exactly what I mean. Everything serious becomes a joke or an accusation.

ETHAN
Because you're not saying the serious part.

CLAIRE
What serious part?

ETHAN
That you like me, but you don't want anybody important to know you like me.

Claire looks around instinctively.

Ethan notices.

ETHAN
There.

CLAIRE
What?

ETHAN
You just checked who might be watching.

CLAIRE
I did not.

ETHAN
You did.

Claire lowers her voice.

CLAIRE
You don't understand my world.

ETHAN
Then show it to me.

CLAIRE
You would hate it.

ETHAN
Maybe. But at least I'd hate the real thing instead of whatever you're protecting me from.

CLAIRE
I am not protecting you.

ETHAN
No. You're protecting yourself from having to explain me.

That hits too close.

CLAIRE
Explain what, Ethan?

He waits.

Claire immediately regrets the question, but she continues.

CLAIRE
That you work in a coffee shop? That your card didn't have twenty-five cents on it? That you play songs in rooms where nobody knows your name?

Ethan's face changes.

Not anger.

Recognition.

CLAIRE
I'm not saying those things make you a bad person.

ETHAN
That's generous.

CLAIRE
I'm saying they matter.

ETHAN
To who?

CLAIRE
To people who have to think about the future.

Ethan looks down at his skateboard.

ETHAN
I think about the future every day.

CLAIRE
Thinking about it is not the same as preparing for it.

ETHAN
I work. I rehearse. I write. I send recordings to people who never answer. I get up and do it again. What part of that looks unprepared?

CLAIRE
The part where none of it guarantees anything.

ETHAN
Nothing guarantees anything.

CLAIRE
Some choices offer better odds.

ETHAN
Daniel.

Claire says nothing.

ETHAN
That's what this is.

CLAIRE
Daniel has direction.

ETHAN
Daniel has a job your father can explain at dinner.

CLAIRE
He has stability.

ETHAN
And I embarrass you.

CLAIRE
I didn't say that.

ETHAN
You didn't have to.

Students move around them.

Claire's eyes shine, but her posture becomes more rigid.

CLAIRE
I cannot build my life around somebody's potential.

ETHAN
I never asked you to.

CLAIRE
You asked me to come to your show.

ETHAN
That is not a marriage proposal.

CLAIRE
You wrote a song about me.

ETHAN
I wrote a song about meeting somebody who made me feel something.

CLAIRE
Exactly.

ETHAN
You made me feel something too. I didn't realize there was an income requirement.

Claire flinches.

CLAIRE
That isn't fair.

ETHAN
Neither is deciding what I'm worth based on where I am at twenty-two.

CLAIRE
I'm deciding what I can live with.

ETHAN
No. You're deciding what everybody else can live with.

Claire picks up her bag.

CLAIRE
Maybe I don't want to struggle.

ETHAN
I didn't ask you to struggle.

CLAIRE
It comes with you.

Silence.

The sentence surprises even Claire.

Ethan looks at her for several seconds.

ETHAN
There it is.

CLAIRE
Ethan-

ETHAN
No. That was honest.

He takes the untouched coffee she bought him and sets it on the wall.

ETHAN
You should keep the twenty-five cents.

Ethan places one foot on his skateboard.

CLAIRE
I didn't mean it the way it sounded.

ETHAN
You meant it exactly the way it sounded. You just didn't expect to hear yourself say it.

He pushes off.

Claire watches him disappear through the courtyard.

She looks at the abandoned coffee.

INT. UNIVERSITY WASHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Claire enters quickly and locks herself inside a stall.

She covers her mouth, trying to control her breathing.

Her phone vibrates.

A message from Daniel:

DINNER AT SEVEN? I MADE RESERVATIONS.

Claire stares at it.

She types:

YES.

She sends it.

Then she cries silently.

EXT. CITY STREET - DAY

Ethan skates hard through downtown.

Too hard.

He cuts around pedestrians, crosses an alley, launches off a curb-

His board catches.

Ethan hits the pavement.

His palms scrape against concrete.

The skateboard rolls into the street.

A DELIVERY DRIVER brakes and sounds the horn.

DRIVER
Watch where you're going!

Ethan retrieves the board.

Blood runs across one palm.

He sits on the curb, breathing heavily.

Marcus approaches carrying drumsticks and a paper bag.

MARCUS
You look graceful.

Ethan says nothing.

Marcus sits beside him.

MARCUS
Claire?

ETHAN
Apparently poverty is contagious.

MARCUS
That sounds dramatic, even for you.

ETHAN
She said struggling comes with me.

Marcus looks at Ethan's bleeding hand.

MARCUS
At the moment, she has evidence.

Ethan almost smiles.

Almost.

MARCUS
You want me to say she's terrible?

ETHAN
No.

MARCUS
Good, because I don't think she is.

Ethan looks at him.

MARCUS
I think she's scared. Scared people usually borrow the opinions of whoever makes them feel safest.

ETHAN
That is incredibly mature.

MARCUS
I read half a book.

Marcus offers him the paper bag.

Inside is a sandwich.

MARCUS
Eat.

ETHAN
I'm not hungry.

MARCUS
It was two for one.

Ethan takes it.

MARCUS
We got invited to play Saturday.

ETHAN
Where?

MARCUS
Roller rink.

Ethan looks at him.

ETHAN
That sentence got worse with every word.

MARCUS
Paid gig.

ETHAN
How much?

MARCUS
Enough to restore your dignity or buy new strings. Not both.

Ethan unwraps the sandwich.

MARCUS
You doing it?

Ethan looks down the street where Claire disappeared from his life.

ETHAN
Yeah.

INT. UPSCALE RESTAURANT - NIGHT

Daniel and Claire sit across from each other.

Daniel talks about a possible promotion.

Claire hears only fragments.

DANIEL
-would mean longer hours initially, but the position creates options later.

Claire stares at the tablecloth.

DANIEL
Claire?

CLAIRE
Sorry.

DANIEL
Where are you?

CLAIRE
Here.

DANIEL
Physically.

She forces a smile.

CLAIRE
Tell me about the position.

Daniel studies her.

DANIEL
I don't want to compete with somebody who isn't in the room.

Claire's smile disappears.

CLAIRE
You're not competing.

DANIEL
Good.

He takes her hand.

DANIEL
Your mother called me.

Claire pulls her hand back.

CLAIRE
Why?

DANIEL
She's worried.

CLAIRE
About me?

DANIEL
About us.

CLAIRE
There is no 'us' for her to manage.

DANIEL
She said you met someone.

Claire looks toward the window.

DANIEL
Did you?

CLAIRE
It doesn't matter.

DANIEL
That wasn't my question.

Claire finally looks at him.

CLAIRE
Yes.

Daniel nods slowly.

DANIEL
Do you love him?

CLAIRE
I barely know him.

DANIEL
That wasn't my question either.

Claire cannot answer.

Daniel sits back.

DANIEL
What does he do?

Claire almost laughs at the familiarity of the question.

CLAIRE
He plays music.

DANIEL
Professionally?

Claire closes her eyes.

CLAIRE
Why does everybody ask it that way?

DANIEL
Because 'plays music' can mean an orchestra, or it can mean somebody's basement.

CLAIRE
He plays in basements.

Daniel nods.

No mockery. No cruelty.

Only relief.

That hurts Claire more.

DANIEL
Then this will pass.

CLAIRE
You sound very certain.

DANIEL
Because you like possibilities, Claire. But eventually you choose what is real.

CLAIRE
He is real.

DANIEL
Then why are you here with me?

Claire has no answer.

INT. ETHAN'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Ethan cleans the cut on his hand.

His guitar rests nearby.

He tries to play.

Pain shoots through his palm.

He stops.

On his computer screen is an unfinished recording session.

The file is titled:

FIVE MINUTES TOO EARLY

Ethan highlights the title and deletes it.

He types:

NOTHING GUARANTEED

He presses RECORD.

INT. CLAIRE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Claire removes the guitar pick from her purse.

She places it on her desk.

Then, after a moment, she opens a drawer and puts it inside.

She closes the drawer.

A beat.

She opens it again.

Takes the pick out.

Claire's phone rings.

LENA.

Claire answers.

CLAIRE
Hello.

LENA (PHONE)
What did you do?

CLAIRE
Why does everyone assume I did something?

LENA (PHONE)
Because Ethan came into the coffee shop, quit his shift, and looked like somebody had driven over his dog.

Claire sits on the bed.

CLAIRE
He quit?

LENA (PHONE)
Apparently he got more hours delivering equipment.

Claire closes her eyes.

LENA (PHONE)
What did you say?

CLAIRE
The truth.

LENA (PHONE)
Your truth or your parents'?

Claire does not answer.

LENA (PHONE)
There's a roller-skating fundraiser Saturday. Ethan's playing.

CLAIRE
I'm not going.

LENA (PHONE)
I didn't invite you.

CLAIRE
Good.

LENA (PHONE)
You answered quickly.

Lena hangs up.

Claire looks at the guitar pick.

EXT. COMMUNITY ROLLER RINK - SATURDAY NIGHT

A faded sign flickers above the entrance.

Music leaks through the walls.

Teenagers, families and young couples line up outside.

Claire stands across the street.

She wears a coat over clothes far too formal for a roller rink.

She watches people enter.

She could still leave.

A city bus stops between Claire and the building.

Passengers get off.

When it pulls away, she is still there.

Claire crosses the street.

INT. COMMUNITY ROLLER RINK - NIGHT

Coloured lights rotate above the rink.

Skaters circle beneath a mirrored ball. Children crash into padded walls. Teenagers laugh. The air smells like popcorn, floor wax and old carpet.

The band sets up on a small stage beside the rink.

Ethan adjusts his microphone.

Marcus sees Claire enter.

He looks at Ethan.

Ethan follows his gaze.

Claire and Ethan see each other across the crowded room.

Neither smiles.

A SKATE ATTENDANT approaches Claire.

SKATE ATTENDANT
What size?

CLAIRE
I'm not skating.

A CHILD loses control and gently collides with her.

Claire catches him.

CHILD
Sorry.

CLAIRE
It's okay.

The attendant waits.

Claire looks toward Ethan.

CLAIRE
Seven.

The attendant hands her a pair of battered rental skates.

Claire stares at them like they are medical equipment.

Onstage, Marcus taps his sticks together.

MARCUS
One, two, three, four-

The band begins.

Ethan plays the new song.

Claire sits on a bench and laces the skates.

The lyrics are not directly about her.

That makes them feel more personal.

Claire stands.

Immediately unstable.

She grips the railing and steps onto the rink.

Ethan watches while singing.

Claire pushes forward.

One foot.

Then the other.

She nearly falls, recovers, and continues.

For the first time, she is inside Ethan's world without asking whether she belongs there.

Ethan finishes the song.

Applause rises from the rink.

Claire reaches the far side, still holding the railing.

Ethan steps away from the microphone.

Their eyes meet across the moving crowd.

Claire raises the guitar pick between two fingers.

Ethan sees it.

But he does not go to her.

Marcus begins counting the next song.

Ethan turns back to the microphone.

Claire lowers her hand.

She understands.

For the first time, wanting Ethan does not guarantee that Ethan will still be waiting.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. COMMUNITY ROLLER RINK - NIGHT

The band launches into another song.

ETHAN stands at the microphone, still aware that CLAIRE is somewhere beyond the moving wall of skaters.

But he does not look for her again.

Near the side of the stage, NICOLE, mid-twenties, carries a plastic crate filled with tangled cables, extension cords and rolls of tape.

She is not dressed to impress anyone.

Jeans. Worn boots. A plain sweater with the sleeves pushed up.

She stops when she hears Ethan sing.

Not because he is technically perfect.

Because something in his voice feels unguarded.

Nicole looks toward the stage.

She sees Ethan for the first time.

The room continues moving around her, but Nicole does not.

Her expression changes almost imperceptibly.

Recognition without familiarity.

Interest without permission.

She studies the way Ethan sings with one hand still bandaged from his fall.

The way he closes his eyes during one line as though he is not performing it for a room, but surviving it in public.

Nicole's eyes soften.

She does not smile yet.

She simply cannot look away.

A RINK MANAGER nearly walks into her.

RINK MANAGER
Nicole.

She does not respond.

RINK MANAGER
Nicole.

Nicole finally turns.

NICOLE
Sorry.

RINK MANAGER
Cables go behind the stage.

NICOLE
Right.

She starts walking.

Then looks back at Ethan.

The pull is still there.

She does not understand it.

ONSTAGE

Ethan finishes the verse.

For the first time since Claire entered the room, his eyes drift away from her side of the rink.

He notices Nicole.

Their eyes meet.

Nicole freezes.

There is no flirtatious smile.

No performance.

For one suspended moment, neither of them knows what to do with the fact that they are looking at each other.

Ethan misses his next guitar change.

MARCUS hears it.

He glances over.

Ethan recovers.

Nicole lowers her eyes and continues carrying the cables, embarrassed by how completely she had been caught staring.

Marcus leans toward Ethan between beats.

MARCUS
You alive?

ETHAN
Play the song.

MARCUS
I am playing the song.

Ethan tries not to look toward Nicole again.

He fails.

INT. COMMUNITY ROLLER RINK - LATER

The band finishes.

Scattered applause fills the room.

Families gather coats. Teenagers return rental skates. Employees begin cleaning spilled drinks and collecting paper cups.

Claire stands near the exit.

She watches Ethan step down from the stage.

She considers approaching him.

Then Nicole reaches the stage first, carrying the crate.

Claire sees the way Nicole looks at Ethan.

It is not admiration for a musician.

It is something more immediate.

More personal.

Claire quietly leaves.

Ethan kneels beside an amplifier and begins unplugging cables.

Nicole places the crate nearby.

NICOLE
The black cables go in here.

Ethan looks up.

It takes him a moment to realize she is the woman he noticed during the song.

ETHAN
All the cables are black.

Nicole looks inside the crate.

NICOLE
That does complicate the system.

Ethan smiles despite himself.

Nicole notices the smile.

Her eyes brighten.

She looks away before it becomes too obvious.

NICOLE
The audio cables go in the left side.
Power cables on the right.

ETHAN
That sounds dangerously organized.

NICOLE
I've been accused of worse.

Ethan reaches for a cable.

His injured palm hurts.

He tries not to show it.

Nicole notices immediately.

NICOLE
What happened to your hand?

ETHAN
Creative disagreement with a sidewalk.

NICOLE
Did the sidewalk apologize?

ETHAN
Not sincerely.

Nicole crouches beside him.

She does not grab his hand.

She waits.

NICOLE
Can I see?

Ethan hesitates, then offers it.

Nicole examines the bandage carefully.

Her touch is gentle but practical.

Ethan watches her.

There is no pity in her face.

Only concern.

NICOLE
You played the whole set like this?

ETHAN
It only hurts when I use it.

Nicole looks at him.

NICOLE
You use your hand to play guitar.

ETHAN
That explains a lot.

She smiles.

This time she does not hide it.

Ethan looks at her a second longer than necessary.

Nicole releases his hand.

NICOLE
The bandage is coming loose.

She reaches into the crate and pulls out a roll of black electrical tape.

ETHAN
That feels medically questionable.

NICOLE
I run events. I fix everything with tape.

ETHAN
People too?

NICOLE
People are usually more complicated.

She tears off a short piece and secures the loose edge of his bandage.

Her eyes stay focused on his hand.

Ethan studies her face.

There is something peaceful about her attention.

Nothing is being measured.

Nothing is being judged.

ETHAN
You work here?

NICOLE
Sometimes. I help organize the fundraisers. Tonight I'm apparently assistant cable philosopher.

ETHAN
A respected position.

NICOLE
Years of training.

Marcus appears carrying a cymbal stand.

MARCUS
Ethan, are you going to introduce me to the person repairing you?

Ethan stands.

ETHAN
Marcus, this is-

He realizes he does not know her name.

Nicole notices.

NICOLE
Nicole.

ETHAN
Nicole.

The name lands gently.

ETHAN
I'm Ethan.

NICOLE
I know.

Ethan raises an eyebrow.

Nicole immediately becomes self-conscious.

NICOLE
They announced you.

MARCUS
For a second, that sounded much more mysterious.

Nicole looks at Marcus.

NICOLE
You're the drummer.

MARCUS
I prefer rhythmic architect.

NICOLE
I prefer drummer.

Marcus nods.

MARCUS
I respect that.

He walks away with the stand.

Ethan and Nicole are alone again.

NICOLE
Your song was good.

ETHAN
Which one?

NICOLE
The one you didn't want to sing.

Ethan's expression changes.

ETHAN
What makes you think I didn't want to sing it?

Nicole searches for the right words.

NICOLE
You kept looking toward the door like part of you wanted someone to leave and part of you wanted them to stay.

Ethan looks toward the entrance.

Claire is gone.

Nicole sees the answer in his face.

NICOLE
Sorry. That was none of my business.

ETHAN
No. You're right.

Nicole picks up another cable.

NICOLE
That doesn't happen often. I'm going to enjoy it.

Ethan helps her coil the cable.

Their hands nearly touch.

Nicole's eyes flick toward his.

Again, that pull.

She looks away first.

EXT. COMMUNITY ROLLER RINK - NIGHT

The parking lot is almost empty.

Ethan carries his guitar case toward the bus stop.

Marcus loads equipment into the back of an old van.

Nicole exits the rink carrying two garbage bags.

One tears open.

Paper cups and napkins scatter across the pavement.

NICOLE
Perfect.

Ethan sets down his guitar case and starts helping.

NICOLE
You don't have to do that.

ETHAN
I know.

They gather the trash.

Nicole watches Ethan pick up a cup with his injured hand, wince, then switch hands without complaint.

NICOLE
You always help people who are carrying garbage?

ETHAN
Only after midnight.

NICOLE
Very specific moral code.

ETHAN
I'm still developing it.

They finish.

Nicole ties the bag again.

NICOLE
Thank you.

ETHAN
You fixed my hand.

NICOLE
I put electrical tape on a bandage.

ETHAN
You saved my career.

NICOLE
Your career was in danger?

ETHAN
Constantly.

Nicole laughs.

Ethan notices that he likes the sound of it.

A bus approaches in the distance.

NICOLE
Is that yours?

ETHAN
Probably.

He picks up his guitar case.

NICOLE
Probably?

ETHAN
I believe in keeping travel unpredictable.

The bus comes closer.

Ethan starts toward the stop.

Nicole watches him go.

There it is again in her eyes.

Not merely attraction.

The beginning of attachment.

A feeling moving faster than reason.

NICOLE
Ethan.

He turns.

Nicole almost loses her nerve.

NICOLE
We have another fundraiser next month.

ETHAN
You asking the band?

NICOLE
I'm asking if you'd want to play.

ETHAN
The band usually comes with me.

NICOLE
That seems inconvenient.

Ethan smiles.

ETHAN
Give Marcus the information.

Nicole nods.

The bus stops.

The doors open.

Ethan steps aboard.

Before entering, he looks back.

Nicole is still watching him.

Their eyes meet through the open bus door.

Neither one looks away this time.

The DRIVER clears his throat.

DRIVER
You getting on?

ETHAN
Yeah.

Ethan steps inside.

The doors close.

Nicole watches the bus pull away.

She remains standing there long after the taillights disappear.

INT. CITY BUS - CONTINUOUS

Ethan sits by the window with his guitar beside him.

He looks back toward the roller rink.

Nicole is now only a distant figure.

Marcus texts him.

MARCUS: CABLE GIRL LIKES YOU.

Ethan types:

HER NAME IS NICOLE.

Marcus responds immediately.

MARCUS: THAT WAS FAST.

Ethan puts the phone away.

He looks through the window.

For the first time that night, he is not thinking about Claire.

INT. NICOLE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Nicole enters a modest apartment.

Books, records, plants and half-finished event posters fill the room.

Her roommate, TARA, sits on the couch eating cereal.

TARA
How was the fundraiser?

Nicole removes her boots.

NICOLE
Fine.

TARA
That sounded suspicious.

NICOLE
A band played.

TARA
Bands often do.

Nicole moves toward the kitchen.

Tara watches her.

TARA
Who was he?

Nicole stops.

NICOLE
Who?

TARA
The person who made you come home pretending nothing happened.

Nicole opens the refrigerator.

She stares inside without seeing anything.

NICOLE
His name is Ethan.

Tara smiles.

TARA
And?

NICOLE
And nothing.

TARA
You said his name like it had a second sentence.

Nicole closes the refrigerator.

NICOLE
I don't know him.

TARA
That has never stopped anybody from making a bad decision.

Nicole sits at the table.

NICOLE
It wasn't like that.

TARA
What was it like?

Nicole struggles to explain.

NICOLE
I looked at him and-

She stops.

TARA
And?

NICOLE
It felt like I already missed him.

Tara's teasing disappears.

Nicole looks embarrassed by the admission.

NICOLE
That sounds ridiculous.

TARA
A little.

Nicole looks down at her hands.

NICOLE
He seemed sad.

TARA
So you want to rescue him?

Nicole looks up sharply.

NICOLE
No.

The answer is immediate.

Certain.

NICOLE
I don't think he needs rescuing.

A beat.

NICOLE
I think he needs somebody to stop assuming he does.

INT. ETHAN'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Ethan sits at his computer.

He opens the recording session titled:

NOTHING GUARANTEED

He listens to the unfinished track.

His phone buzzes.

A message from an unknown number.

NICOLE: MARCUS GAVE ME YOUR NUMBER. I HOPE THAT'S OKAY.

Ethan stares at it.

Another message arrives.

NICOLE: THE NEXT FUNDRAISER IS OCTOBER 14. ALSO, YOUR BANDAGE SHOULD PROBABLY BE REPLACED WITH SOMETHING NOT DESIGNED FOR ELECTRICAL WIRING.

Ethan smiles.

He types:

ETHAN: I THOUGHT YOU SAID YOU FIXED EVERYTHING WITH TAPE.

Her reply arrives almost immediately.

NICOLE: I LIED TO IMPRESS YOU.

Ethan laughs.

He looks toward his guitar.

Then back at the message.

ETHAN: IT WORKED.

He pauses before sending it.

Then presses SEND.

INT. NICOLE'S APARTMENT - SAME TIME

Nicole reads the message.

Her eyes widen slightly.

A slow smile appears.

Tara walks past and sees it.

TARA
Oh, no.

Nicole looks up.

NICOLE
What?

TARA
You're smiling at your phone.

NICOLE
People smile.

TARA
Not like that.

Nicole tries to hide the smile.

It only grows.

EXT. INDEPENDENT RECORD STORE - DAY

A few days later.

Nicole unlocks the front door of a small record store.

She flips the sign to OPEN.

Across the street, Ethan exits a delivery van carrying a keyboard case toward a rehearsal studio.

Nicole sees him through the window.

Again, everything is in her eyes.

That same immediate pull.

But now it is accompanied by warmth.

She watches him hold the studio door open for an older musician carrying an amplifier.

The older man barely acknowledges him.

Ethan does it anyway.

Nicole smiles to herself.

She does not love what Ethan might become.

She is beginning to love the person he already is.

INT. INDEPENDENT RECORD STORE - LATER

Ethan enters.

A bell rings above the door.

Nicole looks up from behind the counter.

She tries to act surprised.

NICOLE
You found the place.

ETHAN
Marcus said you worked here.

NICOLE
Marcus gives out a lot of personal information.

ETHAN
He's building community.

Ethan looks around.

Old records fill wooden shelves.

Handwritten cards recommend obscure albums.

A small stage occupies one corner.

ETHAN
This is nice.

NICOLE
That sounded almost sincere.

ETHAN
I'm working on sincerity.

Nicole steps from behind the counter.

NICOLE
What kind of music do you listen to?

ETHAN
Music made by people who sound like they mean it.

NICOLE
That eliminates half the store.

She leads him through the aisles.

Ethan stops at a used album with a cracked cover.

ETHAN
How much?

NICOLE
Eight dollars.

He checks his wallet.

Not enough.

Nicole sees it.

Ethan puts the album back casually.

ETHAN
Maybe next time.

Nicole does not offer to buy it.

She does not embarrass him.

Instead, she takes the record from the shelf and brings it to the listening station.

NICOLE
You can hear it for free.

She places the record on the turntable.

Ethan puts on the headphones.

Nicole stands beside him.

He offers her one side of the headphones.

They listen together, each holding one earphone.

Close enough to feel the other's presence.

Nicole watches Ethan as the music begins.

He closes his eyes.

Her eyes remain open.

She studies him with quiet wonder.

No calculation.

No question about money, status or stability.

Only the unmistakable realization that she wants to know everything about him.

Ethan opens his eyes.

Finds her watching.

ETHAN
What?

Nicole could deny it.

She does not.

NICOLE
Nothing.

A beat.

NICOLE
I like the way you listen.

ETHAN
What does that mean?

Nicole searches his face.

NICOLE
You don't wait for your turn to speak.

Ethan's expression softens.

That sentence reaches somewhere deep.

ETHAN
Most people don't notice that.

NICOLE
Most people are waiting for their turn to speak.

They continue listening.

Their shoulders touch.

Neither moves away.

EXT. RECORD STORE - SUNSET

Ethan and Nicole sit on the curb outside the store after closing.

A paper cup of coffee rests between them.

They share a small bag of fries.

NICOLE
What happens if the music doesn't work?

Ethan looks at her.

The question sounds familiar.

But Nicole's tone is different.

There is no judgment in it.

Only curiosity.

ETHAN
I keep making it.

NICOLE
Even if nobody pays you?

ETHAN
I'd prefer they did.

Nicole smiles.

ETHAN
But yes.

NICOLE
Why?

Ethan thinks.

ETHAN
Because I don't know who I am when I'm not trying to make something.

Nicole studies him.

Her eyes fill with affection before she realizes it.

NICOLE
That sounds exhausting.

ETHAN
It is.

NICOLE
And honest.

Ethan looks at her.

ETHAN
Most people hear irresponsible.

NICOLE
Most people confuse certainty with character.

Ethan goes still.

Nicole takes a fry.

NICOLE
You show up. You work. You help people when you don't have to. You played through an injured hand because you made a commitment.

She looks at him directly.

NICOLE
That doesn't sound irresponsible to me.

Ethan does not know how to respond.

He is not accustomed to being described accurately.

Nicole sees the emotion in his face.

She does not press him.

She simply sits beside him.

Their shoulders touch again.

This time Ethan lets the contact remain.

ACROSS THE STREET

Claire stands near a parked car.

She had been walking toward the record store.

She sees Ethan and Nicole sitting together.

She sees Ethan laugh.

Not perform.

Not defend himself.

Simply laugh.

Claire watches Nicole look at him.

She recognizes that look immediately.

Because she once looked at Ethan that way too.

The difference is that Nicole is not afraid of being seen.

Claire turns away before Ethan notices her.

EXT. RECORD STORE - CONTINUOUS

Nicole looks toward the street, sensing movement.

She sees only Claire's back disappearing around the corner.

NICOLE
Do you know her?

Ethan follows her gaze.

Claire is already gone.

ETHAN
I used to think I did.

Nicole looks at him.

She hears the hurt beneath the sentence.

But she does not ask him to explain before he is ready.

NICOLE
Do you want the last fry?

Ethan looks into the bag.

ETHAN
That's a serious commitment.

NICOLE
I believe in taking risks.

Ethan takes the fry.

Nicole smiles.

The sun drops behind the buildings.

For the first time in a long time, Ethan is sitting beside someone who is not evaluating whether he belongs in her future.

Nicole is simply happy that he is here now.

FADE OUT.

INT. INDEPENDENT RECORD STORE - NIGHT

The store is closed.

Only the lamps above the listening stations remain on.

ETHAN sits on the small performance stage with his guitar across his lap.

NICOLE sits on the floor below him, surrounded by event posters and a half-empty box of pushpins.

Ethan plays the final chord of a new song.

The sound hangs between them.

NICOLE
That one is different.

ETHAN
Bad different?

NICOLE
Honest different.

ETHAN
That sounds dangerous.

Nicole studies him.

NICOLE
Who is it about?

ETHAN
Nobody.

NICOLE
You look at me every time you sing the chorus.

Ethan lowers his eyes to the guitar.

ETHAN
Then I guess my technique needs work.

NICOLE
Your technique is fine.

A beat.

NICOLE
Your hiding needs work.

Ethan smiles, but it fades quickly.

ETHAN
Claire came by the store.

Nicole's expression changes, though she tries not to let it.

NICOLE
I know.

ETHAN
You saw her?

NICOLE
Across the street.

ETHAN
Why didn't you say anything?

NICOLE
Because she wasn't sitting beside me.

Ethan looks at her.

NICOLE
You were.

Ethan sets the guitar down.

ETHAN
You make things sound simple.

NICOLE
They usually are before people get scared.

ETHAN
Are you scared?

Nicole meets his eyes.

Everything is there: fear, hope, and a feeling she no longer wants to hide.

NICOLE
Yes.

ETHAN
Of me?

NICOLE
Of wanting something that matters.

Ethan steps down from the stage.

He sits beside her on the floor.

ETHAN
I don't have much to offer.

NICOLE
You keep saying that like I haven't been paying attention.

ETHAN
I mean money. Security. A plan that makes sense on paper.

NICOLE
I can earn money. I can build security. And every plan I ever made changed anyway.

She turns toward him.

NICOLE
What I can't manufacture is character.

ETHAN
Nicole-

NICOLE
You show up. You work when nobody is watching. You make people feel less alone. You notice when somebody needs help, even when you need help more.

Her eyes glisten.

NICOLE
That is what you offer.

Ethan is quiet.

Nicole looks away, suddenly embarrassed by her own honesty.

NICOLE
You don't have to say anything.

ETHAN
I do.

Nicole looks back.

ETHAN
I think about you when you're not there.

Nicole's breath catches.

ETHAN
I hear something funny and I save it because I want to tell you. I finish a song and your opinion is the first one I want.

He moves closer.

ETHAN
And when I'm with you, I don't feel like I'm auditioning for a place in your life.

Nicole's eyes soften completely.

NICOLE
You're not.

Ethan kisses her.

Not rushed. Not desperate.

A kiss that feels less like a beginning than an answer.

EXT. RECORD STORE - LATER

Ethan and Nicole lock the front door.

They walk together beneath the streetlights.

Their hands brush once.

Then again.

Nicole finally takes his hand.

Ethan looks down at their joined hands.

ETHAN
You know this is how reputations begin.

NICOLE
I have survived worse.

They keep walking.

INT. REHEARSAL STUDIO - DAY

The band rehearses.

MARCUS attacks the drums with too much enthusiasm.

Ethan stops the song.

ETHAN
You're speeding up.

MARCUS
I'm emotionally supporting the chorus.

ETHAN
Support it slower.

Nicole sits near the wall, assembling flyers for an upcoming showcase.

She watches Ethan lead the room.

Not controlling. Listening.

A YOUNG BASS PLAYER struggles with a difficult change.

BASS PLAYER
I keep missing it.

ETHAN
Then we keep playing it until you don't.

They repeat the section.

Again.

Again.

The bass player finally lands it.

Ethan points at him.

ETHAN
There. That's yours now.

The bass player grins.

Nicole watches Ethan with unmistakable love.

Marcus notices.

MARCUS
Nicole.

NICOLE
What?

MARCUS
You are staring at him like he invented music.

NICOLE
I'm not staring.

MARCUS
You forgot to blink.

Nicole looks down at the flyers.

NICOLE
Play your drums.

MARCUS
Rhythmic architecture.

Ethan hears none of it.

INT. SMALL SHOWCASE VENUE - NIGHT

A more serious room than the roller rink.

Industry people stand near the back with folded arms and unreadable faces.

Nicole clips backstage passes onto lanyards.

Ethan paces behind the curtain.

ETHAN
I hate this room.

NICOLE
You haven't even played yet.

ETHAN
Exactly. It still has expectations.

Nicole steps in front of him.

NICOLE
Look at me.

He does.

NICOLE
You are not here to prove you deserve to exist.

ETHAN
That is an aggressively specific pep talk.

NICOLE
You're here to play the songs you already earned.

She straightens his jacket.

NICOLE
The rest is their problem.

Ethan breathes.

ETHAN
What if I fail?

NICOLE
Then I will still be standing right here.

That settles him more than any promise of success.

STAGE MANAGER
Two minutes.

Ethan kisses Nicole's forehead.

ETHAN
Don't disappear.

NICOLE
Not planning to.

INT. SMALL SHOWCASE VENUE - LATER

The final song ends.

A moment of silence.

Then applause.

Real applause. Loud enough to surprise Ethan.

Near the back, Evelyn Shaw of Northline Records makes notes on the performance, just as she did at the university showcase.

Nicole sees her.

But Nicole looks back to Ethan.

His success matters.

He matters more.

BACKSTAGE - MOMENTS LATER

The band spills backstage, breathless.

MARCUS
Moderately unknown by Christmas.

ETHAN
You promised.

Evelyn enters.

EVELYN
Ethan Reed. I was hoping you would play something new.

MARCUS
Is this good news?

ETHAN
Evelyn. Good to see you again.

EVELYN
I listened to the three demos you sent.

She opens her notebook.

EVELYN
You have two songs worth discussing and one song worth fighting about.

ETHAN
Which one?

EVELYN
The last one.

Ethan glances at Nicole.

EVELYN
I want you in our studio next week. No promises. No fantasy. Just a serious conversation.

ETHAN
Okay.

EVELYN
Bring the band.

Marcus tries to look professional and fails.

EVELYN
And bring whoever talked you out of panicking before the show.

Evelyn looks toward Nicole.

EVELYN
That person is useful.

She leaves.

Silence.

MARCUS
Did we just become slightly less unknown?

Ethan looks at Nicole.

Nicole smiles, proud but unsurprised.

NICOLE
You played the songs you earned.

MONTAGE - ETHAN'S RISE

- Ethan records in a professional studio for the first time.

- Nicole sits behind the glass, reading, never interrupting, always there.

- Marcus signs a release form without reading it. Nicole takes it away and makes him read it.

- Ethan unloads equipment after midnight, still working the day job between sessions.

- Nicole leaves food beside him while he edits a demo.

- A local station plays Ethan's song.

- Ethan and Nicole hear it from inside her old car.

- They scream, laugh, and pull over because Nicole is crying too hard to drive.

- The band plays a larger club.

- Then a theatre.

- Then an outdoor festival where strangers sing the chorus back to Ethan.

- Nicole watches from the wings. Her eyes hold the same look they did at the roller rink, only deeper now.

- Claire sees Ethan's face on a poster outside a venue.

- She stops, touches the edge of the poster, then walks on.

INT. NICOLE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Ethan and Nicole eat takeout on the floor.

A contract lies open on the coffee table.

NICOLE
Six cities.

ETHAN
Seven if the Chicago date confirms.

NICOLE
How long?

ETHAN
Eight weeks.

Nicole nods, processing.

ETHAN
Say something.

NICOLE
I'm happy for you.

ETHAN
That sounded like somebody reading a hostage statement.

Nicole sets down her fork.

NICOLE
I'm happy. I'm also going to miss you.

ETHAN
Come with us.

NICOLE
I have the store. The fundraiser schedule. Rent.

ETHAN
Right.

He looks disappointed, then ashamed of being disappointed.

NICOLE
Do not make that face.

ETHAN
What face?

NICOLE
The one where you decide I don't believe in you because I can't abandon my life on three days' notice.

ETHAN
I wasn't-

NICOLE
You were.

Ethan looks down.

ETHAN
Claire taught me to hear rejection before people finish speaking.

Nicole softens.

NICOLE
Then listen until I finish.

She takes his hand.

NICOLE
Go. Play every city. Call me when you're tired, call me when you're excited, and call me when you start believing your own publicity.

ETHAN
What happens then?

NICOLE
I remind you that you once used electrical tape as medical care.

Ethan smiles.

NICOLE
I am not asking you to stay small so I can feel secure.

ETHAN
And you're not leaving.

NICOLE
No.

She kisses him.

NICOLE
I'm staying in the relationship. There is a difference.

EXT. BUS TERMINAL - MORNING

The band loads equipment into a tour van.

Nicole stands with Ethan beside the open passenger door.

ETHAN
Eight weeks.

NICOLE
You have said that twelve times.

ETHAN
I don't like it.

NICOLE
You will like the part where people clap.

ETHAN
I like when you clap.

NICOLE
I will clap over the phone.

Marcus leans out the van window.

MARCUS
This is beautiful, but parking enforcement does not respect love.

Ethan kisses Nicole.

He gets into the van.

As it pulls away, Nicole raises one hand.

Ethan watches her until she disappears from sight.

INT. UPSCALE HOTEL BAR - NIGHT

Weeks later.

Claire sits alone at a table.

Ethan enters with the band after a show.

He sees her.

She sees him.

For a moment, both are twenty-two again in a university courtyard.

Ethan approaches.

ETHAN
Claire.

CLAIRE
You look different.

ETHAN
Better lighting.

She smiles faintly.

CLAIRE
I heard the song on the radio.

ETHAN
Which one?

CLAIRE
The one you didn't want to sing.

Ethan understands.

CLAIRE
Congratulations.

ETHAN
Thank you.

An awkward silence.

CLAIRE
Are you happy?

Ethan looks toward the lobby, where Marcus is arguing with a luggage cart.

ETHAN
Mostly.

CLAIRE
With her?

ETHAN
Nicole.

CLAIRE
I know her name.

Ethan waits.

CLAIRE
I used to imagine that one day you would come back and prove I was wrong.

ETHAN
I wasn't trying to prove anything to you.

CLAIRE
I know that now.

Claire struggles to continue.

CLAIRE
I was afraid of becoming the kind of woman people whispered about. The girl who threw away the safe future for a boy with a guitar.

ETHAN
So you threw away the boy.

CLAIRE
Yes.

No defence.

CLAIRE
And then the world decided the guitar mattered.

ETHAN
Nicole decided I mattered before the world knew my name.

Claire's eyes fill.

CLAIRE
Do you ever think about what would have happened if I had chosen differently?

Ethan considers it honestly.

ETHAN
Sometimes.

Claire looks up, hopeful despite herself.

ETHAN
But I don't wish it happened differently.

The hope leaves quietly.

ETHAN
You hurt me. But you also forced me to stop begging people to see value in me.

CLAIRE
And Nicole saw it.

ETHAN
She saw me.

Claire nods.

CLAIRE
Then don't make her wait for what I was too afraid to give you.

Ethan studies Claire.

ETHAN
I won't.

He begins to leave.

CLAIRE
Ethan.

He turns.

CLAIRE
I am sorry.

Ethan nods.

ETHAN
I know.

He walks away.

Claire watches him go.

This time, she lets him.

EXT. RECORD STORE - NIGHT

Nicole closes the store.

A taxi pulls up.

Ethan steps out with his guitar and tour bag.

Nicole freezes.

NICOLE
You're early.

ETHAN
We cancelled the last hotel night.

NICOLE
Why?

ETHAN
The pillows were emotionally unavailable.

Nicole runs to him.

They embrace.

Ethan holds her tighter than expected.

NICOLE
What happened?

ETHAN
Nothing bad.

He looks at her.

ETHAN
I just got tired of being somewhere you weren't.

Nicole's eyes fill.

NICOLE
That is extremely inconveniently romantic.

ETHAN
I practiced on the drive.

He kisses her.

INT. RECORD STORE - LATER

The lights are low.

Ethan places a small box on the listening station.

Nicole looks at it.

NICOLE
What is that?

ETHAN
A terrible financial decision.

NICOLE
Ethan.

He opens the box.

A ring.

Simple. Beautiful.

ETHAN
I spent a long time believing love was something people gave you after you proved you were worth the risk.

Nicole covers her mouth.

ETHAN
You loved me before there was proof.

He kneels.

ETHAN
You loved the unfinished version.

Nicole is crying now.

ETHAN
Nicole, will you marry me?

NICOLE
Yes.

Ethan exhales, almost laughing.

NICOLE
You thought I might say no?

ETHAN
I have a complicated history with questions.

She pulls him up and kisses him.

EXT. COMMUNITY PARK - DAY

A small wedding.

No mansion. No ballroom.

String lights. Folding chairs. Friends. Musicians. Families gathered under summer trees.

Marcus stands beside Ethan as best man.

MARCUS
You know, I introduced you.

ETHAN
You gave her my phone number without permission.

MARCUS
History will decide.

Music begins.

Nicole walks toward Ethan.

She wears a simple dress.

Her eyes find his immediately.

The same look from across the roller rink.

Recognition before explanation.

Only now, Ethan fully understands it.

He looks at her with the certainty she once gave him.

LATER - WEDDING RECEPTION

Ethan takes the small stage with his guitar.

Nicole sits at the front.

ETHAN
I wrote this before I knew what it was about.

He looks at Nicole.

ETHAN
Turns out it was waiting for the right person.

He begins to play.

The song is the one from the record store.

Nicole listens.

Claire stands near the back of the gathering.

She was invited.

She watches Ethan and Nicole without bitterness.

Daniel is not beside her.

For once, Claire is alone by choice.

Ethan finishes the song.

Applause.

Nicole walks onto the stage.

NICOLE
You still rush the second verse.

ETHAN
I was emotionally supporting it.

Marcus points from his table.

MARCUS
That's my line.

Laughter.

Nicole kisses Ethan.

The crowd cheers.

EXT. COMMUNITY PARK - SUNSET

The reception winds down.

Ethan and Nicole stand apart from the others beneath the string lights.

NICOLE
Do you miss it?

ETHAN
What?

NICOLE
Being the underdog.

ETHAN
I still am.

NICOLE
You have a record contract.

ETHAN
Against the world, maybe not.

He takes her hand.

ETHAN
But against your expectations, definitely.

NICOLE
My expectations are terrifying.

ETHAN
I know.

They look toward their friends, the band, the small life they built before success made anything easier.

NICOLE

What happens now?

Ethan smiles.

ETHAN

Now we keep making things.

Nicole rests her head against his shoulder.

Across the park, children ride skateboards along the path.

One falls.

Another stops to help him up.

Ethan watches.

He smiles.

FADE TO BLACK.

SUPER: SOME PEOPLE LOVE THE PERSON YOU MAY BECOME.

SUPER: THE RIGHT PERSON LOVES THE ONE ALREADY STANDING THERE.

THE END