LEGACY

A One-Hour television Pilot

Written by

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TEASER

INT. THE VORTEX - AUSTIN ROCK CLUB - NIGHT

Sweat-slicked walls. Beer-sticky floors. A crowd of 200 packed shoulder-to-shoulder. This is authentic Austin: no polish, all passion.

On stage, a three-piece punk band WIRE & RUST tears through their set. The lead singer, MAYA (25, sleeve tattoos, raw energy), screams into the mic with abandon.

In the back, leaning against the soundboard AVI MONROE (32), leather jacket, vintage Lucchese boots, watches and listens.

Beside her, MARCUS (40s) shakes his head.

MARCUS
They're too loud. Half the crowd's got their fingers in their ears.

AVI
Listen past the volume.

MARCUS
I'm trying. All I hear is noise.

AVI
Exactly. That's the point.

The band hits a bridge. Maya's voice drops to something vulnerable, almost broken. The chaos falls away for eight bars of pure emotion.

Avi's expression shifts. She's found something.

AVI (CONT'D)
There. That's it.

MARCUS
What am I missing?

AVI
Truth. She means every word. You can't fake that.

The song ends. Scattered applause. Avi moves through the crowd toward the stage.

MARCUS
(calling after her)
Avi, your phone's been blowing up!

She doesn't hear him. Or pretends not to.

INT. THE VORTEX - BACKSTAGE - CONTINUOUS

Cramped, cluttered. Band equipment everywhere. Maya chugs water, still buzzing with adrenaline.

Avi approaches.

AVI
That bridge in "Rust Belt Heart." Who wrote it?

MAYA
(surprised anyone noticed)
I did. Why?

AVI
Because it's the only honest thing I've heard all week. You got a demo?

MAYA
We've got like fifteen. Nobody wants to hear them.

AVI
I do. Send them to me.

She hands Maya a card. Maya stares at it.

MAYA
Wait. You're Avi Monroe? Like, Royce Monroe's daughter?

Avi's face tightens.

AVI
That's not relevant.

MAYA
Holy shit. My dad has every one of your dad's albums. He's like a legend.

AVI
Send me the demos.

She walks away. Maya watches her go, confused by the reaction.

Marcus intercepts Avi, holding her phone.

MARCUS
Your mom's called six times. Your brother twice. Something's wrong.

AVI
It's always something with them.

MARCUS
Avi.

Her phone erupts again.

CLOSEUP: MOM (CALLING).

Avi takes a breath. Answers.

AVI
Mom, I'm working.

She stops. The color drains from her face.

AVI (CONT'D)
(barely audible)
When?

Beat. Marcus watches, concerned.

AVI (CONT'D)
Was he, did he say anything?

Her voice cracks. She turns away from Marcus, her eyes brimming with tears.

AVI (CONT'D)
The funeral's when? Mom, I don't know if I can get there in time.

She listens.

AVI (CONT'D)
Okay. Okay. I'll try. I'll... I'll be there.

She hangs up. Stands frozen. The muffled bass from the stage pulses.

MARCUS
What happened?

AVI
(hollow)
Dad died. Yesterday.

MARCUS
Yesterday? Why didn't they call.

AVI
They tried. I didn't answer.

MARCUS
Jesus. Avi.

AVI
I need to go home and pack. Find a flight, or a car, or

MARCUS
Of course. I'll cover the club. Take as long as you need.

AVI
I'll be back in three days.

MARCUS
Avi, this is about family.

AVI
I know what it is.

She grabs her jacket. Marcus catches her arm.

MARCUS
You okay to drive?

AVI
I'm fine.

MARCUS
You're not fine. Let me take you home.

AVI
I said I'm fine!

The outburst surprises them both. Avi softens.

AVI (CONT'D)
Sorry. I just need to be alone right now.

She leaves. Marcus watches her go, worried.

INT. AUSTIN AIRPORT GATE - DAY

Avi slumps in a gate chair, a duffel bag at her feet. She keeps her head down, hoodie pulled up.

A bank of TVs line the wall above the gate. Every one is tuned to the same story.

ON THE TVs

News reports, all showing the face of ROYCE MONROE.

NEWS ANCHOR 1 (V.O.)
The undisputed King of Country Music, found dead in his Nashville home.

NEWS ANCHOR 2 (V.O.)
A legacy that defined a generation of country music.

The word "legacy" echoes from a dozen speakers.

FLASHBACK - SUPER 8 FILM FOOTAGE

The worn fretboard of a Martin guitar. A 10-year-old AVI's small hands trying to form a chord. ROYCE's larger, calloused hand gently correcting hers. His low, rumbling laugh.

END FLASHBACK

Avi's eyes snap open. Below, the flat, brown landscape of Texas has given way to the rolling green hills of Tennessee. She's almost there.

EXT. MONROE ESTATE - DAY

A black town car drives toward the open gate, its approach slowed by a swarm of PAPARAZZI and NEWS VANS camped outside. Several fans hold flowers or signs showing their love for the legend.

Looming at the end of the driveway is the Monroe home, a white columned fortress of old music money.

The car pulls to a stop in front of the house.

Luxury cars are parked everywhere. Mercedes, BMWs, a Bentley. Nashville royalty has come to pay respects.

Avi, in a black dress, steps out at the front steps. The driver pulls her duffel bag out of the trunk and takes it inside. She looks exhausted. Takes a breath. Climbs.

INT. MONROE ESTATE - FRONT HALL - DAY

Marble floors. Crystal chandeliers. Gold records lining the walls. This is a museum to Royce Monroe's legacy.

The house is full of people. Family friends, music industry executives, politicians. Everyone in black. Everyone whispering.

Avi stands in the doorway, taking it in.

PATRICIA MONROE (60s, elegant, composed) sees her from across the room. Her face crumples with relief.

PATRICIA
Avi!

She rushes over, pulls Avi into a tight hug.

PATRICIA (CONT'D)
Thank God. I was so worried. Why didn't you answer your phone?

AVI
I'm here now, Mom.

PATRICIA
The funeral's tomorrow at eleven. We're having a private burial here in the plot, then the public memorial at the Ryman.

AVI
Mom, I just got here.

PATRICIA
I know, sweetheart. I'm sorry. It's just been, there's so much to do. The press won't leave us alone. The label's in chaos. Beau's been handling everything, but

BEAU (O.S.)
Well, well. The prodigal daughter returns.

BEAU MONROE (36, tailored suit, perfect hair, practiced charm with an edge) descends the grand staircase.

BEAU (CONT'D)
Cutting it a little close, aren't we? Service starts in eight minutes.

AVI
I got here as fast as I could.

BEAU
Really? Because Dad died two days ago. You couldn't get here any faster than the day we honor him?

PATRICIA
Beau, please. Not now.

BEAU
I'm just saying, Mom. Three hundred people managed to make it on time. But Avi.

AVI
I didn't know. I didn't get the messages until last night.

BEAU
Because you were too busy running your little dive bar to answer the phone when your family needed you.

AVI
Don't talk to me about family.

The room goes quiet. People pretend not to listen.

BEAU
Excuse me?

AVI
You heard me.

PATRICIA
(urgent whisper)
Both of you, stop it. People are watching.

BEAU
Let them watch. Avi's good at making scenes.

AVI
And you're good at playing the perfect son. How's that working out for you?

BEAU
Better than running away to Austin and pretending you're not a Monroe.

AVI
I'm not pretending anything. I just don't want to be you.

BEAU
(cold smile)
Don't worry. You never could be.

He walks past her. Stops. Leans in close.

BEAU (CONT'D)
(low, only she can hear)
Dad waited for you. For three days. Kept asking if you'd called. You broke his heart. Again.

He continues outside. Avi stands frozen.

Patricia touches Avi's arm.

PATRICIA
He's just upset. We all are. Your father. He asked for you. At the end.

AVI
(surprised)
What did he say?

PATRICIA
He said, he said he was sorry. That he should have tried harder.

Avi's eyes fill with tears.

PATRICIA (CONT'D)
Come. We need to go outside. The visitation is starting.

She guides Avi toward the back lawn.

EXT. MONROE ESTATE - BACK LAWN - CONTINUOUS

Rows of white chairs. A casket surrounded by flowers. A minister at the podium.

Avi and Patricia take their seats in the front row, next to Beau and his wife CAROLINE (33, pregnant, polished).

Avi stares at the casket, numb. Royce's biggest hit plays softly as the remaining few take seats.

She closes her eyes. Lets the song wash over her. When she opens them again, the minister is finishing.

The minister finishes speaking. People stand. The service is over.

Avi doesn't move. She stares at the casket as people file past, offering condolences to Patricia and Beau.

Finally, she stands. Approaches the casket alone.

She places her hand on it.

AVI
(whispered)
I'm sorry, Dad. I'm so sorry.

HAROLD (O.S.)
Miss Monroe?

She turns. HAROLD CHEN (60s, expensive suit, kind eyes) stands nearby with a briefcase.

HAROLD (CONT'D)
I'm Harold Chen, your father's attorney. I'm very sorry for your loss. Do you mind meeting me in his office? Your father was very specific. He wanted the will read today. Before the public memorial at the Ryman tomorrow.

AVI
Today?

HAROLD
He said he didn't want you to have to pretend to mourn him if you were angry about what he'd decided.
(hesitates)
He aso said to tell you this isn't the meeting you think it is.

Avi's stomach drops.

END OF TEASER

ACT I

INT. MONROE ESTATE FRONT HALL - DAY

Avi walks in with the other mourners.

BEAU (O.S.)
We need to meet with Chen. In Dad's study now.

Avi turns to See Beau following her in.

AVI
I came to sign papers, make things official. I'm gone by the weekend.

BEAU
Fine by me.

He pockets the phone and walks toward her, the Monroe swagger that's part charisma, part control.

BEAU (CONT'D)
You look good. Austin must be treating you better than family ever did.

AVI
It wasn't Austin. It was distance.

He studies her. For a fleeting second, the mask slips, pain behind the smirk. The years of silence, unhealed.

BEAU
He wrote you in the will, you know.

AVI
Great. Another thing I didn't ask for.

She starts walking toward the study. He calls out after her.

BEAU
Just remember. Around here, legacy is everything.

Avi stops. Turns.

AVI
Legacy's a word people use when they mean ownership.

She turns to go. Beau's voice stops her, softer.

BEAU
He played your demo. Last week.

Avi freezes. Doesn't turn around.

BEAU (CONT'D)
The one you sent him in '19. The one he said he never listened to. He'd play it in his office. Late. When he thought no one was around.

Avi's shoulders rise and fall.

AVI
(without turning)
Why are you telling me this?

BEAU
Because in six months one of us walks away with five million dollars. I want a clear conscience.

He walks past her into the study.

INT. ROYCE'S STUDY - CONTINUOUS

Dark wood. Leather. Royce's presence is everywhere. Awards, photographs, a guitar in the corner.

Avi enters, runs her hand along the desk.

Coffee cup still on the desk. Reading glasses. A legal pad with notes in his handwriting.

She picks up the pad. Reads:

"Call Avi. Try again."

Her breath catches.

She notices a framed note on the desk in Royce's handwriting:

"TRUST THE SONG, NOT THE SINGER."

She picks it up. Stares at it.

FLASHBACK - INT. HOME STUDIO - 12 YEARS AGO

Avi (22) and Royce, mid-argument.

YOUNG AVI
You don't get to tell me what music matters!

YOUNG ROYCE
I'm not telling you what matters. I'm telling you what Nashville is. If you can't handle that

YOUNG AVI
Then what? I should leave? Is that what you want?

YOUNG ROYCE
(frustrated)
That's not what I'm saying.

YOUNG AVI
Then what ARE you saying?

YOUNG ROYCE
(softer)
I'm saying you should trust yourself. Trust the song. Not what Beau says. Not what the industry says. Not even what I say.

YOUNG AVI
I don't trust anything in this town.

YOUNG ROYCE
Then maybe you shouldn't be here.

The words hang in the air. Both of them realize what he's said.

YOUNG ROYCE (CONT'D)
Avi, I didn't mean.

YOUNG AVI
No. You're right. I shouldn't be here.

She storms out. Royce watches her go, helpless.

BACK TO PRESENT

Avi sets the frame down carefully. Her hands are shaking.

The study door opens. Beau comes in and takes one of four visitor chairs, not speaking.

A door opens behind her. Harold steps in, carrying a single leather folder.

Avi stands and moves to a visitor chair as Harold sits at Royce’s desk.

The door opens again and we see Patricia, followed by WES PRITCHARD (55, polished), the weathered A&R man who’s spent thirty years shepherding Monroe Music's stars. They take the two remaining chairs, Wes sitting next to Avi.

HAROLD
Miss Monroe, Mr. Monroe, Patricia, we should begin. I’ve taken the liberty of inviting Wes to join us today.

WES
Hi, Avi. Good to see you again. It’s been a minute.

AVI
Hi, Wes. Good to see you.

Wes squeezes her knee. Avi smiles and puts her hand on his.

HAROLD
Before we begin, your father wanted me to thank you both for being here.
(beat)
He said, quote, “This isn’t about inheritance. It’s about family.”

Beau’s jaw ticks in restrained irritation. Avi raises an eyebrow, already bracing herself.

HAROLD (CONT’D)
As you know, the estate’s financial position has deteriorated in recent years. The Monroe Music label remains, but significantly leveraged.

BEAU
(snapping in)
We can manage that. We have assets. Publishing, masters.

AVI
And a platinum graveyard of pop-country singles.

Beau shoots her a glare. She smirks back.

Harold clears his throat, firming his tone.

HAROLD
Firstly, all of Royce’s physical assets - the house, cars, furniture, and so forth, naturally go to Mrs. Monroe.

Patricia cries softly. Harold begins reading.

Harold reads from the document.

HAROLD (CONT’D)
"To my children, Beau and Avi. You've both disappointed me in different ways."

Beau shifts uncomfortably. Avi's face is stone.

HAROLD (CONT’D)
"Beau, you forgot why we make music. You turned my label into a hit factory. You chase trends instead of creating them. You've helped us survive, but you've made us soulless."

Beau's jaw tightens.

HAROLD (CONT’D)
"Avi, you forgot that making music requires being here. You ran away from Nashville, from the family, from me. You chose righteousness over responsibility. You're pure, but you're absent."

Avi looks away.

HAROLD (CONT’D)
"So here's what's going to happen. You're going to run Monroe Music together. Co-presidents. Equal authority. For six months. You two will run it together long enough to remember what real family sounds like. Then let the people who’ve been listening all along decide who sings true.”

BEAU
What?!

AVI
You're joking. No.

HAROLD
"At the end of six months, the board will vote on who becomes sole owner. Whoever wins gets the label, the catalog, the publishing rights. Everything. The other gets five million dollars and walks away."

BEAU
This is insane. I've been running the label for five years.

HAROLD
"Beau, you'll argue you've earned this. You haven't. You've maintained it. There's a difference."

Beau stands, furious.

BEAU
He can't do this.

HAROLD
He can. And he did.

HAROLD (CONT'D)
"Avi, you'll argue you don't want this. You do. You just don't know it."

Avi's face flushes.

HAROLD (CONT'D)
"If either of you quits before the six months, the label doesn't go to the other. It goes to auction with money going to my charity, Opry Trust Fund. So you're stuck with each other. Figure it out."

Silence. The weight of it settles.

Wes waves to speak. Harold nods. Wes stands.

WES
There's more you should know. We lost two major artists last quarter. Travis Cole and The Brennan Brothers. They signed with Curb.

AVI
Why?

WES
They said we weren't true to our roots.

BEAU
Whatever the hell that means.

WES
(to Beau)
We gave them producers and marketing plans. And instructions. We didn't give them trust.

BEAU
This is a business, Wes. Not an art project.

WES
It used to be both.

BEAU
Yeah, well, "both" doesn't pay the bills anymore.

WES
Speaking of bills, the bank's calling the loan in ninety days if we don't show improved revenue.

AVI
Ninety days?

WES
Your father was, optimistic about the label's finances. He kept thinking the next hit would solve everything. It didn't.

AVI
How bad is it?

WES
We're three million in the red. If we lose Chloe Jax, we're done.

AVI
Who's Chloe Jax?

BEAU
Our only profitable artist. And she's not happy.

WES
She's been asking for creative control.

BEAU
Because "creative control" means she'll tank her career with some self-indulgent folk album nobody wants to hear.

AVI
Or maybe she'll make something people actually care about.

BEAU
(to Avi)
This is perfect. You'll be gone in a week, and I'll have to clean up another one of Dad's messes.

AVI
Or maybe I'll stay and stop you from turning his legacy into a jingle factory.

BEAU
His legacy? You haven't been here. You don't know what it takes to keep this place alive.

AVI
I know what it takes to kill it. And you're doing a great job.

BEAU
(standing)
I'm done with this.

HAROLD
There's one more thing. Your father left individual letters for each of you. To be opened privately.

He hands them each an envelope. Royce's handwriting on the front.

Beau stares at his.

BEAU
I have calls to make. Avi, enjoy your week in Nashville.

He leaves, taking the letter with him.

WES
(to Avi)
For what it's worth, he missed you. Badly. He talked about you all the time.

AVI
(through tears)
What did he say?

WES
He played me a voicemail you left him in 2019. You were yelling at him about some band he wouldn't sign. He saved it. Played it whenever he was about to make a bad call.

Avi stands, still crying, and hugs Wes tightly.

WES (CONT'D)
Maybe we take a breath before y'all burn the place down.

AVI
You staying on, or heading for higher ground?

WES
Depends who's steering. Been through this rodeo before.

AVI
(soft but pointed)
Not this one.

Wes and Patricia leave the study. Harold gathers his papers.

HAROLD
If you have any questions about the will.

AVI
Why did he do this?

HAROLD
Do what?

AVI
Force us together. He knew we'd destroy each other.

HAROLD
I think he hoped you'd save each other.

He leaves. Avi is alone with the letter.

She stares at it. Doesn't open it.

INT. MONROE ESTATE - LIVING ROOM

Avi goes to the bar. Orders.

AVI
(to bartender)
Blanton’s. Triple. Neat.

MARGARET (O.S.)
Add a Macallan 18 and put it on Royce’s tab. He oes me from ‘07.

Margaret Sinclair (70’s, old Nashville money) takes a stool beside her without invitation.

MARGARET (CONT’D)
Margaret Sinclair. I’m on the board. I’m the reason this co-presidency exists, and I’m the reason it’ll probably destroy you.

AVI
That’s a hell of an opener.

MARGARET
I’m seventy-three. I don’t have time for the slow version.

She raises her glass. Avi reluctantly clinks.

MARGARET (CONT’D)
Your father played me your demo. The one from college. The Townes cover.

AVI
Apparently he played it for a lot of people.

MARGARET
He played it for me twice. Once when he was proud. Once when he was drunk and trying to figure out where he went wrong. I told him both times: that girl has the ear.
(MORE)

MARGARET (CONT'D)
Her brother has the spine. Put them in a room and don't let them out until they remember they're the same blood.

AVI
So this is your fault.

MARGARET
(small smile)
Mostly.

She sets down her glass. The smile disappears.

MARGARET (CONT'D)
Here's what nobody in this house will tell you, sweetheart. Beau isn't wrong. The market HAS changed. Authenticity is a luxury good now that Monroe Music can't afford. He's kept the lights on while your father chased ghosts.

AVI
Then why install me at all?

MARGARET
Because the lights aren't enough. A label without a soul is just a distribution company. And distribution companies get bought, gutted, and forgotten. Your father knew he was dying for two years, Avi. He didn't tell anyone. He had time to fix this any way he wanted. He chose this.

She stands, set's her empty glass down.

MARGARET (CONT'D)
Six months. Either you save each other, or you bury what's left of Royce's legacy together.

She walks away as Patricia walks up.

PATRICIA
What did she say?

AVI
That Dad knew he was dying.

Patricia goes still, doesn't answer.

AVI (CONT'D)
(devastated)
How long?

PATRICIA
He didn't want you to come home out of pity. He wanted you to come home on your own.

She squeezes Avi's hand. Looks down at the unopened letter Avi still holds.

PATRICIA (CONT'D)
The letter. Read it. Then decide.

She moves on. Avi stares at the envelope.

INT. MONROE ESTATE - AVI'S OLD BEDROOM - NIGHT

Avi opens the door. The room is exactly as she left it ten years ago.

Posters of Patsy Cline, Johnny Cash, Lucinda Williams. A guitar in the corner. Notebooks filled with lyrics.

She sits on the bed. Puts the unopened letter in the nightstand.

Notices a box sitting there.

Inside: old cassette tapes labeled in her handwriting. "Avi & Jake - Demo 2015." "Avi & Jake - New Songs."

She picks one up. Stares at it.

Her phone buzzes. Text from Wes:

"Board meeting Friday 9am. Beau's making his pitch. You should be there."

She stares at the message. Then at her father's letter.

INT. BEAU'S BEDROOM - SAME TIME

Beau sits on his bed, still in his suit, staring at his unopened letter.

CAROLINE sits beside him.

CAROLINE
You should read it.

BEAU
I know what it says.

CAROLINE
Do you?

BEAU
He's disappointed in me. He thinks I sold out. He wishes I was more like Avi.

CAROLINE
Beau.

BEAU
I kept his label alive, Caroline. For five years. Through streaming, through the pandemic, through everything. And it's still not enough.

CAROLINE
Maybe it's not about enough. Maybe it's about something else.

BEAU
Like what?

CAROLINE
Like why you're doing this. Is it for him? Or for you?

Beau doesn't answer. Caroline sits beside him.

CAROLINE (CONT'D)
Read the letter. Whatever it says, you need to know.

She leaves. Beau stares at the envelope.

Finally, he opens it.

ROYCE (V.O.)
"Beau, you're going to be angry when you read this. You'll think I'm punishing you. I'm not. I'm trying to save you."

Beau's jaw tightens.

ROYCE(V.O.)
"You've become everything I was afraid of. Successful. Respected.
(MORE)

ROYCE(V.O.) (CONT'D)
You make hits, but you need to be true to the Monroe legacy. There's a difference."

BEAU
Fuck you, Dad.

He throws the letter onto the nightstand, the rest unread.

END OF ACT I

ACT TWO

INT. BRIDGESTONE ARENA - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

Organized chaos. Crew members rush passed with equipment. The muffled roar of 20,000 fans waiting.

Avi stands in the wings watching, visitor badge around her neck.

Wes appears beside her.

WES
Thought I'd find you here.

AVI
Need to understand things.

WES
Royce used to do the same thing.
Come to shows. Stand in the wings.
Just listen.

AVI
What was he listening for?

WES
The truth. Whether the artist
believed what they were singing.

On stage: CHLOE JAX (26, stunning, rhinestone everything) performs "Cowgirl in Chrome", a pop country anthem that's already a standard.

CHLOE
(singing)
I'm a cowgirl in chrome, baby,
watch me shine/
Got my boots on the ground/
But my head in the sky/
I'm a small-town girl with a big-
time dream/
I'm a cowgirl in chrome, living the
American dream/

The crowd loves it. Avi watches with the expression of someone at a funeral.

WES
Not your style?

AVI
It's very. Shiny.

WES
It's also our only hit in two years. If we lose Chloe...

AVI
And if we don’t? Have we lost our soul? Our legacy?

WES
Your father used to say the same thing. As he signed the checks.

AVI
Did he hate it? What the music became?

WES
He hated that he couldn't stop it. That the market changed and he had to change with it or die.

AVI
So he chose to die slowly instead of all at once.

WES
Yeah. Good way to put it.

Chloe finishes the song. The crowd erupts. She takes her bow, all smiles and waves.

But as she walks off the stage, Avi sees her face change. The smile drops. The exhaustion shows.

WES (CONT’D)
She's good, you know. Under all that chrome.

AVI
I know.

WES
Your father knew it too. He wanted to let her make a real album. Beau said no.

AVI
Why?

WES
Because real doesn't sell. Safe sells.

Avi watches Chloe disappear into her dressing room.

AVI
I want to meet her.

WES
Now?

AVI
Now.

INT. BRIDGESTONE ARENA - CHLOE'S DRESSING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Chloe sits at her mirror, removing stage makeup. Her team buzzes around her. Manager, publicist, assistant.

A knock. Wes enters with Avi.

WES
Chloe, this is Avi Monroe. Royce's daughter.

Chloe's eyes meet Avi's in the mirror. She doesn't turn around.

CHLOE
I know who she is.

DEREK (30s, slick) steps forward.

DEREK
This isn't a good time. Chloe needs to rest.

CHLOE
It's fine, Derek. Give us a minute.

DEREK
Chloe.

CHLOE
I said give us a minute.

The team files out reluctantly. Wes follows, closing the door.

Chloe finally turns to face Avi.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
So. The prodigal daughter. Come to save the family business?

AVI
I'm still deciding.

CHLOE
Well, while you're deciding, maybe you can figure out how the label's going to stay afloat. Oh, and pay my staff. Word on the street is you're in major financial trouble.

AVI
I didn't know.

CHLOE
Of course you didn't. You weren't here. But I've got offers from every label in town, so here's the deal. Give me a reason to stay, or I'm gone.

AVI
What kind of reason?

CHLOE
Creative control. Real songs. Not this manufactured bullshit your brother keeps feeding me.

AVI
You don't like Cowgirl in Chrome?

CHLOE
I hate it. But it pays for this.

She gestures at the dressing room.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
Your brother says this is what people want. That if I try to make real music, I'll tank my career.

AVI
What do you think?

CHLOE
I think I used to write my own songs. Before I signed with Monroe Music. Before Beau convinced me to go pop.

AVI
Do you still write?

Chloe hesitates. Then reaches for her guitar in the corner.

CHLOE
Sometimes. When no one's listening.

She plays a few chords. Sings softly:

CHLOE (CONT'D)
I wore the crown they gave me/
Smiled for every camera/
But the girl in the mirror/
She don't know me anymore/

It's raw. Vulnerable. Completely different from her stage persona.

Avi is transfixed.

AVI
That's beautiful.

CHLOE
(stopping)
It's not commercial.

AVI
It's honest.

CHLOE
Same thing.

AVI
No. It's not.

Chloe sets down the guitar.

CHLOE
Look, I appreciate whatever this is. But I've heard the speeches. "Be authentic." "Trust your art." It's easy to say when you're not the one risking everything.

AVI
You're right. I don't know what it's like to be you. But I know what it's like to compromise until you don't recognize yourself anymore.

CHLOE
Is that why you left Nashville?

AVI
Part of it.

CHLOE
And the other part?

AVI
The other part is none of your business.

Chloe smiles, genuinely for the first time.

CHLOE
I like you. You're not like your brother.

AVI
I'll take that as a compliment.

CHLOE
It is.

A knock. Derek pokes his head in.

DEREK
Chloe, we need to go. You've got the after-party.

CHLOE
Cancel it.

DEREK
Chloe, we've got 100 VIP guest who paid $500 to see you.

CHLOE
I said cancel it. I'm tired.

Derek looks at Avi suspiciously, then leaves.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
You want to get a drink? Somewhere that's not a VIP room full of people kissing my ass?

AVI
I know a place.

INT. THE B-SIDE BAR - NIGHT

A dive bar on Music Row. Neon signs, worn wood.

Avi and Chloe sit at the bar, Chloe in a baseball cap and hoody.

CHLOE
This place is a dump.

AVI
It's authentic.

CHLOE
Same thing.

Avi smiles. Orders two bourbons.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
So why'd you really leave Nashville?

AVI
Long story.

CHLOE
I've got time.

AVI
Let's just say my brother and I had a disagreement about a few things.

CHLOE
Music or money?

AVI
Something like that.

CHLOE
And you chose music.

AVI
I chose myself.

Chloe nods, understanding.

CHLOE
I wish I'd done that. Before I signed my life away.

AVI
It's not too late.

CHLOE
Isn't it? I'm the "Cowgirl in Chrome." That's my brand. My identity. If I change now, I lose everything.

AVI
Or you gain everything that actually matters.

CHLOE
Easy for you to say. You're not the one with a mortgage and a team of twenty people depending on you.

AVI
You're right. I'm not. But I know what it's like to wake up and not recognize yourself in the mirror.

Chloe looks at her, really looks at her.

CHLOE
What happened to you here?

Before Avi can answer, the bartender announces the next performer.

BARTENDER
Next up, Jake Riley!

Avi's head snaps up.

On the small stage, JAKE RILEY (34) sits on a stool with a battered acoustic guitar.

He starts to play. The room doesn't quiet. But Avi's world stops.

The song is devastating. Raw. Real. Everything Nashville isn't anymore.

JAKE
I traded my truth for a radio lie/
Sold my soul for a chance to fly/
But the higher I climbed, the further I fell/
Now I'm singing my songs to an empty hotel/

Avi is transfixed.

Chloe notices.

CHLOE
You know him.

Avi nods, unable to speak.

Jake finishes. Scattered applause. He looks up. Sees her.

Their eyes lock.

He sets down his guitar and walks off stage, heading for the back exit.

Avi stands.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
Avi.

AVI
I'll be right back.

She follows him.

EXT. THE B-SIDE BAR - ALLEY - NIGHT

Jake pushes through the door. Avi catches it.

AVI
Jake.

JAKE
(not turning around)
No.

AVI
Please. Just.

JAKE
(whirling around)
Ten years, Avi. Not a word. Not a text. Nothing. And now you show up here?

AVI
I didn't know you'd be here.

JAKE
Bullshit. It's Tuesday. I play here every Tuesday. Have for five years.

AVI
I didn't.

JAKE
You left. You left Nashville, you left the music, you left me. So what the hell are you doing back?

AVI
My father died.

That stops him.

JAKE
(quieter)
I heard. I'm sorry.

AVI
Are you?

JAKE
He was complicated. But he loved you. Even when you made it impossible.

Silence. The distant sound of traffic.

AVI
That song. That’s one of the songs we wrote. Together.

JAKE
So you want me to throw it away.

AVI
So I can tell you it's exactly what Nashville needs.

JAKE
(bitter laugh)
Nashville doesn't want what it needs. It wants what sells. You know that better than anyone.

AVI
Maybe. But I'm back now. And things are going to change.

JAKE
You're staying?

AVI
I don't know yet.

JAKE
Then why are you here, Avi? Really?

AVI
Because your songs remind me why I loved music in the first place.

The air between them crackles. Ten years of unfinished business.

JAKE
I've got a hundred songs. All of them too honest for radio. If you're serious about changing things.

AVI
I want to hear them. All of them.

JAKE
And if you leave again?

AVI
Then you'll have wasted your time. But at least someone will have heard them.

Jake studies her. Decides.

JAKE
I'm playing at The Bluebird next week. Come if you're still here.

AVI
Jake.

JAKE
That's all I've got right now, Avi. Take it or leave it.

He walks back inside. Avi stands alone in the alley, something shifting in her chest.

Chloe appears in the doorway.

CHLOE
You okay?

AVI
No. But I will be.

CHLOE
That's the guy, isn't it? The reason you left.

AVI
Part of it.

CHLOE
What's the other part?

Avi looks at her.

AVI
My brother destroyed his career.
And I let him.

END OF ACT II

ACT III

EXT. MONROE MUSIC BUILDING - DAY

Music Row. Historic brick building with "MONROE MUSIC" in gold letters.

Avi stands outside, staring up at it.

She takes a breath. Walks in.

INT. MONROE MUSIC - LOBBY - DAY

Vintage posters. Gold records. A shrine to country music history.

The receptionist, KELLY (20s, eager), looks up and does a double-take.

KELLY
Oh my God. You're

AVI
Yea, that’s me. I'm here to see Wes.

KELLY
Of course. He's expecting you. I'm so sorry about your father. He was

AVI
Thank you.

She moves past before the conversation can continue.

INT. MONROE MUSIC - CORRIDOR - CONTINUOUS

Wes meets her, two coffees in hand. Avi takes a cup.

WES
Thought you might need this. Welcome to the family business.

AVI
I'm not staying.

WES
Then why are you here?

AVI
Curiosity. And I need to understand what I'm walking away from.

WES
Fair enough. Let me show you around.

They walk. Wes points out offices, studios, the history embedded in every wall.

WES (CONT'D)
Your father started this label in 1980. Forty-five years of hits. Willie recorded here. Dolly. Garth. The real deal.

AVI
And now?

WES
Now we're trying to stay relevant in a world where country music sounds like pop with a twang.

They pass a conference room. Through the glass: Beau in a meeting with executives, animated, in control.

WES (CONT'D)
Your brother's good at this. The business side. He knows how to work a room, close a deal, keep the machine running.

AVI
But?

Wes shrugs his shoulders.

They stop outside Studio A.

WES
Speaking of which.

INT. STUDIO A - CONTINUOUS

State-of-the-art recording studio. Through the glass: Chloe Jax with an acoustic guitar, alone.

She's playing the song from last night. Raw, vulnerable, completely different from her stage persona.

Avi watches, transfixed.

Then the door opens. Derek and the entourage flood in.

DEREK
Chloe, what are you doing? We've got the radio promo in an hour.

CHLOE
I'm working.

DEREK
On what? We've got three singles ready to go.

CHLOE
On something real.

Derek notices Avi through the glass. His expression hardens.

DEREK
Is this because of her?

CHLOE
This is because of me.

Chloe sees Avi. Their eyes meet. Chloe gives a small nod.

Then she turns back to Derek.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
I want to record that song. The one I just played.

DEREK
Absolutely not. Beau would never approve.

CHLOE
I'm not asking Beau. I'm telling you.

DEREK
Chloe, be reasonable.

CHLOE
I'm done being reasonable. Set up the session.

She walks out, leaving Derek throwing his hands in the air.

He glares at Avi through the glass, then follows Chloe.

WES
(to Avi)
You just made an enemy.

AVI
Good. I was getting bored.

INT. MONROE ESTATE - AVI'S OLD BEDROOM - NIGHT

Avi returns to her childhood room. Sits on the bed.

She pulls out her phone. Scrolls way back through old photos. Her and Jake, ten years ago. Young. In love. Full of dreams.

She stops on one: the two of them in a recording studio, guitars in hand, laughing.

FLASHBACK - INT. RECORDING STUDIO - 10 YEARS AGO

Young Avi (22) and Young Jake (23) record a duet. The chemistry is electric.

YOUNG JAKE
(singing)
We're two hearts beating out of time/

YOUNG AVI
(singing)
But somehow we make a perfect rhyme/

They finish. Look at each other. Kiss.

Royce watches from the control room, smiling.

YOUNG ROYCE
(into mic)
That's the one. That's the hit.

Young Beau enters the control room.

YOUNG BEAU
What's going on?

YOUNG ROYCE
Your sister and Jake just recorded something special.

YOUNG BEAU
(watching them through the glass)
Yeah. I can see that.

His expression darkens.

BACK TO PRESENT

Avi's phone rings. Marcus.

INTERCUT CONVERSATION

AVI
Hey.

MARCUS (V.O.)
How's Nashville?

AVI
Complicated.

MARCUS (V.O.)
You coming back?

AVI
I don't know.

MARCUS (V.O.)
Avi, the club needs you. I can’t pick the acts like you can. I‘m lost.

AVI
I know. I just need to figure some things out first.

MARCUS (V.O.)
This about the label, the legacy you keep talking about?

AVI
It's about a lot of things.

MARCUS (V.O.)
Just don't lose yourself trying to find it.

AVI
Too late for that.

She hangs up. Stares at the cassette tapes.

She picks one up. Finds an old cassette player in the closet. Pops it in.

Her and Jake's voices fill the room. Young, hopeful, in love.

She closes her eyes. Listens.

INT. MONROE MUSIC - BEAU'S OFFICE - DAY

Corner office. Floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking Music Row. Everything is sleek, modern, expensive.

Beau sits at his desk with three BOARD MEMBERS, Margaret, Tom, and RICHARD HAYES (50s, corporate type).

BEAU
Thank you all for coming. I know this is a difficult time, but we need to discuss the label's future.

MARGARET
Your father's will was, let’s say unusual.

BEAU
It was vindictive. But I'm not here to argue with a dead man. I'm here to save his legacy.

RICHARD
How do you propose to do that?

BEAU
By doing what I've been doing for five years. Keeping us profitable. Relevant. Alive.

He clicks a remote. A presentation appears: charts, revenue projections, market analysis.

BEAU (CONT’D)
We double down on what works. Pop country. Radio-friendly. Proven formulas. We sign two more acts like Chloe Jax. We increase marketing spend. We show consistent revenue.

TOM
And what about artistic integrity?

BEAU
Artistic integrity doesn't pay the bills, Tom. You know that.

MARGARET
Your father believed it did.

BEAU
My father was a romantic. I'm a realist.

RICHARD
What about Avi?

BEAU
What about her?

RICHARD
She's co-president now. Doesn't she get a say? Shouldn’t she be in this meeting?

BEAU
Avi will be gone in a month. Nashville eats idealists for breakfast.

MARGARET
You seem very confident.

BEAU
I know my sister. She doesn't have the stomach for this business.

TOM
And if you're wrong?

BEAU
I'm not.

MARGARET
Beau, your father included a clause in the will. If either of you quits before the six months, the other doesn't automatically win. The label goes to auction.

BEAU
I’m aware. Of course we’ll keep her on as co.

RICHARD
He wanted to make sure you couldn't just wait her out.

BEAU
Then I'll make sure she wants to leave.

MARGARET
Beau

BEAU
Gentlemen, Margaret, I've been running this label for five years.
(MORE)

BEAU (CONT'D)
I've kept it profitable in an impossible market. Avi's been running a dive bar in Austin. Who do you think is better equipped to lead Monroe Music into the future?

The board members exchange glances.

TOM
Your father thought you both were.

BEAU
My father was wrong.

MARGARET
We'll be watching, Beau. Both of you. And in six months, we'll vote for whoever proves they understand what this label is supposed to be.

They leave. Beau sits alone, his confidence cracking.

He pulls out his phone. Dials.

BEAU
Derek, it's Beau. We need to talk about Chloe. No, I heard about the studio session. Shut it down. I don't care what she wants. She's under contract. Good. And Derek? Keep an eye on Avi. I want to know everywhere she goes, everyone she talks to.

He hangs up. Stares out at Music Row.

INT. MONROE MUSIC - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

Long table. Staff members seated nervously. Wes at the head.

Beau enters from one door. Avi from another. They take seats on opposite sides.

WES
Alright. First official meeting of the co-presidents. Beau, you want to start?

BEAU
Thank you, Wes. I'll keep this simple. Monroe Music has survived forty years by understanding the market.
(MORE)

BEAU (CONT'D)
We give people what they want. Right now, that's pop country. Accessible. Radio-friendly. Profitable.

He clicks a remote. The presentation from the board meeting appears.

BEAU (CONT'D)
My plan: Double down on what works. Sign acts that fit the current sound. Increase marketing spend on proven formulas. This isn't about art. It's about survival.

The staff nods. It's logical. Safe.

WES
Avi?

Avi stands.

AVI
I don't have a presentation. No charts. My father started this label because he believed country music should tell the truth. Not sell products. Not chase trends. Tell the truth.

BEAU
(interrupting)
And that's a beautiful sentiment. But truth doesn't pay the bills.

AVI
Neither does mediocrity. We've lost two artists because they wanted something real. Chloe's about to leave for the same reason. You can't build a legacy on songs that sound like commercials.

BEAU
And you can't build a business on songs nobody wants to hear.

AVI
Maybe nobody wants to hear them because nobody's giving them a chance.

STAFF MEMBER #1
So, what's your plan?

AVI
Sign artists who have something to say. Not just something to sell. Give them creative freedom. Trust them to connect with audiences who are starving for authenticity.

BEAU
That's not a plan. That's a fantasy.

AVI
It's what our father built this label on.

BEAU
And look where that got him. Three million in debt and ninety days from bankruptcy.

The room goes silent.

AVI
That's not because of the music. That's because of you.

BEAU
Excuse me?

AVI
You've been so busy chasing hits, you forgot to develop artists. You sign them, squeeze them dry, and throw them away when they stop producing. That's not a business model. That's exploitation.

BEAU
(standing)
I've kept this label alive!

AVI
You've kept it breathing. There's a difference.

Before Beau can respond, the door opens.

Chloe Jax walks in, flanked by Derek.

CHLOE
Sorry to interrupt. But I wanted you all to hear this at the same time.

She looks between Beau and Avi.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
Beau, I hear you want to cancel my session. I'm taking meetings with other labels. Warner, Sony, Universal. They're all interested. So here's the deal. Whoever convinces me I'm allowed to be me gets my vote. You've got forty-eight hours.

She leaves. Silence.

BEAU
(to Avi)
Hope you're ready to compete.

He walks out. The staff disperses nervously.

Wes approaches Avi.

WES
You've got a plan, right?

AVI
I'm working on it.

WES
Work faster. We can't lose her.

INT. STUDIO A - NIGHT

Avi sits alone at the mixing board. The studio is dark except for the glow of the equipment.

She's listening to one of Jake's song on her phone. It plays through the studio speakers. Raw, imperfect, but full of feeling and remorse.

The door opens. Chloe enters, surprised to see anyone here.

CHLOE
Didn't expect to find you here.

AVI
Couldn't sleep.

CHLOE
Yeah, well. Nashville does that.

Chloe sits. For a moment, they're just two women in an empty studio.

AVI
That song you were just playing yesterday. Before your team came in. Did you write it?

CHLOE
(defensive)
Why?

AVI
Because it was good. Really good.

Chloe's defenses lower.

CHLOE
I used to write all my own stuff. Before Beau convinced me to go pop country. Said it was the only way to make it.

AVI
And did you? Make it?

CHLOE
I'm playing arenas. Making millions. Living the dream.

AVI
That's not what I asked.

Silence. Chloe looks away.

CHLOE
What do you want from me, Avi?

AVI
I want to play you something.

Avi cues up Jake's song. It fills the studio.

Chloe listens. Her expression changes.

AVI (CONT'D)
That's what real sounds like. That's what people are hungry for, even if they don't know it yet.

CHLOE
Who wrote that?

AVI
Jake.

CHLOE
And you want me to record it?

AVI
I want you to record whatever you want. Your songs. His songs. Whatever makes you feel like an artist again instead of a product.

CHLOE
That's a big risk.

AVI
You're talented enough to sing something that matters. Question is, are you brave enough?

Chloe stares at her. The challenge hangs in the air.

CHLOE
I'll think about it.

She stands to leave. Pauses at the door.

CHLOE (CONT'D)
Your brother's offering me double the marketing budget. A guaranteed radio campaign. Everything I need to stay on top.

AVI
And what's he asking in return?

CHLOE
More of the same. "Cowgirl in Chrome Part 2." Safe. Profitable. Soulless.

AVI
Then you already know your answer.

CHLOE
Do I?

AVI
You're here, aren't you? At midnight. In an empty studio. Listening to a song that'll never get played on the radio.

Chloe smiles sadly.

CHLOE
Yeah. I guess I am.

She leaves. Avi sits alone, song playing in a loop.

END OF ACT III

ACT IV

INT. BEAU'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Beau on the phone, pacing.

BEAU
I don't care what it costs. Get me a meeting with Chloe. Tonight. No, I'll double whatever Avi's offering.

He pauses and listens.

BEAU (CONT'D)
Because I'm not losing this label to my sister's naive idealism, that's why.

He hangs up. Stares out at Music Row.

His phone buzzes. Text from Derek:

"She wants to meet with Avi first. Sorry."

Beau's jaw tightens. He throws his phone across the room.

Then he picks it up. Dials another number.

BEAU (CONT'D)
It's me. I need you to dig into Jake Riley. Everything. DUIs, debts, bad press. Anything I can use. Because Avi's about to make him the face of this label, and I need leverage.

Pauses and listens.

BEAU (CONT'D)
No, I don't care if it's ethical. I care if it works.

He hangs up. Sits in the dark.

INT. THE BLUEBIRD CAFE - NIGHT

Four songwriter's in the round. The bar place is packed. Jake plays, working through a new song.

Avi enters. He sees her as he plays two incredible new songs. After his set he walks over and sits next to her at the bar.

JAKE
Thought you might not make it.

AVI
I almost didn't.

JAKE
I’m too old to make it in this town, Avi. Too old, too old country, too...

AVI
I played your song for Chloe Jax.

JAKE
(surprised)
And?

AVI
And I think she's going to record it. If I can convince her to stay.

JAKE
That's, that's huge.

AVI
It's a start. Come by the studio tomorrow. Just to play. No contracts. No promises.

JAKE
And if I do?

AVI
Then we’ll see what we sound like after ten years of silence.

JAKE
And what about us?

AVI
There is no us. There hasn't been for ten years.

JAKE
Then why did you come find me?

AVI
Because your songs remind me why I loved music in the first place. Why I loved this.

She gestures vaguely.

JAKE
I wrote a hundred songs about you. About us. About what we could have been.

AVI
Jake.

They're inches apart. The air crackles.

Avi pulls back.

She extends her hand.

AVI (CONT'D)
See you tomorrow?

Jake doesn't answer, heads back to the stage for the next set.

INT. MONROE ESTATE - ROYCE'S STUDY - NIGHT

Avi sits at her father's desk. The note "Trust the song, not the singer" in front of her.

Beside it: the sealed letter, still unopened. She picks it up, turns it over. Sets it down.

Picks it up again. After a moment she breaks the seal, pulls out a single page. Reads.

We don't see the contents. But whatever it says, it lands hard. Her hand goes to her mouth. Eyes fill with tears.

Opens her phone and scrolls to Jake's contact info. Hesitates, turns the phone off.

She opens her laptop. Starts typing an email:

"Marcus, I need you to run The Vortex for a few weeks."

Stops. Doesn't click send. Closes the laptop.

She picks up the note, stares at her father's handwriting.

She looks up at Royce's portrait on the wall. Turns the note face-down on the desk.

AVI
What if the song's a lie too, Dad?

INT. BEAU'S OFFICE - DAY

Beau on the phone, voice low and urgent.

BEAU
What do you mean you can't find anything? Everyone has something. Keep digging.

He hangs up. Opens his laptop. Searches "Jake Riley Nashville."

Articles pop up from ten years ago:

"Rising Songwriter Jake Riley Dropped from Monroe Music"

"Plagiarism Allegations End Promising Career"

"Jake Riley: From Next Big Thing to Nobody"

Beau clicks on one. Reads. His expression is unreadable.

He picks up his phone. Dials.

BEAU (CONT'D)
Derek, it's me. I need you to leak something to the press. The plagiarism story. From ten years ago. I don't care if it's old news. Make it new. The world needs to remember what kind of person he really is.

He hangs up. Stares at his computer screen. A photo of Avi and Jake from ten years ago from social media archives.

BEAU (CONT'D)
(to himself)
You want to play with fire, little sister? Let's see how you handle the burn.

INT. MONROE MUSIC - HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Avi walks with a new, restless energy. She's not wandering anymore, she's searching. She passes the sleek, modern offices, the buzzing interns, the whole corporate machine that Beau has built.

She heads toward a part of the building she hasn't seen in years. A forgotten, dusty corridor at the back.

INT. LABEL ARCHIVES - DAY

The door groans open to reveal a room that time forgot.

Not a digital server farm, but a physical library of music history. Floor-to-ceiling shelves are packed with thousands of master tape boxes, each one a neatly labeled spine in a story that stretches back forty years.

Avi walks slowly down an aisle, her fingers lingering over each box. She sees the names of legends who got their start here. She sees the titles of songs that became the soundtrack to millions of lives.

A voice from the shadows makes her jump.

WES (O.S.)
Looking for something? Or just hiding out like the rest of us ghosts?

Wes emerges from behind a towering shelf, holding a dusty tape box. He looks more at home here than he ever did in the boardroom.

AVI
I don’t know what I’m looking for.

WES
Sometimes that’s the best time to find something.

AVI
But?

Wes stops, looks at her, his gaze steady.

WES
But your father never made the smart move. He made the right one. Or at least, the one that felt right to him. Usually after a bottle of Jack and a two-day bender. But he always trusted the song.

He gestures around the room.

WES (CONT’D)
This is the only thing that ever really mattered to him. The rest was just noise.

Avi looks at the endless rows of tapes. An overwhelming, impossible legacy.

AVI
He was working on something. Before he died. Do you know what it was?

WES
He was chasing something down here. In the vaults. Kept pulling old tapes, listening for hours. Never said what. Just said he was looking for an echo.

He walks over to a forgotten corner of the archive, a section filled with mislabeled boxes and discarded reels.

WES (CONT'D)
He spent his last few weeks in this section. Said he was trying to find the note he forgot to play.

He pulls out a dusty, bankers box. There's no official label. Just a single word scrawled in Royce's familiar handwriting: "UNWOUND."

He holds the box out to her.

WES (CONT'D)
Maybe this is what you're looking for.

Avi takes the box. It feels heavier than it should.

END OF ACT IV

TAG

INT. ROYCE'S OFFICE - NIGHT

The office is dark, almost black, save for a single desk lamp casting a warm, isolated pool of light. Outside the massive window, the lights of Nashville glitter.

AVI sits in her father's oversized leather chair, the "UNWOUND" tape box resting on the desk in front of her. She stares at it, a relic from a man she thought she knew.

After a long moment, she gets up and moves to a vintage credenza against the wall. She opens a cabinet to reveal a beautiful old reel-to-reel tape player.

She brings it to the desk, plugs it in. The VU meters flicker to life.

Her hands hesitate as she opens the tape box. Inside are a stack of reels. She carefully lifts one out, threads the tape through the machine.

She takes a deep, steadying breath. And presses PLAY.

The reels begin to turn, slowly, silently at first. Then, a soft HISS.

And then a voice.

Not the polished, stadium-filling voice of Royce Monroe.

This is the voice of a man alone in a room with his ghosts. Accompanied only by the simple strum of an acoustic guitar.

ROYCE (V.O.)
(singing)
I sold my truth for a song and a smile/
Called it living, but was dying in style/

Avi listens, her body perfectly still.

ROYCE (V.O.)
Loved the crowd, but I lost my kin/
Sang my sins till they wore me thin/

CLOSE ON AVI'S FACE

A single tear breaks free, tracing a silent path down her cheek, then more tears fall.

ROYCE (V.O.)
I traded love for a long highway/
Sang truths I never learned to say/
Now I’m down to my last sound/
Lord, don’t let me die unwound/

FLASHBACK

A 10-year-old Avi sits on a roadie case backstage, watching her father on a monitor. He’s a giant under the lights. He waves to the roaring crowd, but his eyes look tired, empty.

BACK TO PRESENT

The song continues.

ROYCE (V.O.)
Let the tape roll, let the strings moan/
I built an empire built on being alone/
If she ever hears this, maybe she’ll know/
The hardest part was letting her go/

The music fades, the last chord ringing out into the hiss of the tape. The reel ends and spins in silence.

Avi doesn’t move. The tears fall freely now.

INT. BEDROOM - LATER

AVI steps into her old bedroom carrying a box of her things. Photos, notebooks, the “Unwound” master tapes. She’s moving back in.

She sets the box down on the bed.

She pulls open the nightstand drawer to put away a pen then stops.

Inside still sits the unopened envelope from Royce.

She stares at it for a long beat, her hand hovering but not touching.

After a moment, she carefully closes the drawer.

AVI
Not yet.

The phone RINGS. She lets it ring several times before answering.

AVI (CONT'D)
Hello?

VOICE (O.S.)
(distorted, low)
Did you find it?

AVI
(tense)
Who is this?

VOICE (O.S.)
Be careful, Avi. The debt didn't die with him.

CLICK. The line goes dead.

Avi's gaze slides back toward the drawer where the unopened letter still waits.

END OF TAG