WHAT WAS LEFT UNSAID

EPISODE 1: "HOPE YOU'RE WELL"

1-HOUR TELEVISION ROMCOM

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TEASER

EXT. HIGHWAY - DAY

From above we see a red vintage convertible as it moves along I-40 in Tennessee. Nice car in its day, but now clearly needs some work. Much like Marty himself, some would say. The sun shines brightly on this perfect Saturday morning. Classic country plays on the radio.

MARTY (V0)
You ever notice how people over a certain age just can't seem to connect? Timing's off. One's fresh off a heartbreak, the other's still stalking their college crush on LinkedIn. I'm told. Nobody moves on. Not really. Cause no one ever gets to say the things that needed saying. Too much pride. Too much hurt. Too many half-written texts that end with "hope you're well". Anyway what you're about to see happened to me awhile back. And yea, all the coulda-beens still rattle around my chest like spare change in a dryer. So, brace yourself.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

MARTY (late 20's, handsome in a rode-hard kind of way) unshaven, hair a mess, is behind the wheel. This is a man who hasn't smiled in awhile.

He glances at a green road sign FRANKLIN, 30 MILES, as it rushes past. In the rearview mirror the sign slips away. He turns off the radio as the car slows and veers off the road.

INT. CAR - ROADSIDE TURNOUT - CONTINUOUS

Marty stares ahead for a bit, then picks up the phone, scrolls his messages. Pauses over an old message from RACHEL, and clicks to read.

RACHEL (VO)
Saw a man today looked a lot like you. Took me back. Hope you're well.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

Marty reaches above the visor and pulls out a wrinkled, creased photo of a younger him and a young woman. She's holding his cheek as he hugs her. He rubs his finger over the photo, carefully puts it back. On the phone, he pulls up Rachel's contacts page, thumb hovers over the call button.

He presses CALL.

INT. STEVEN AND RACHEL'S KITCHEN - DAY (INTERCUT)

RACHEL (late 20's, cute in a girl-next-door way) is loading clothes into a washer. She hears the ring and looks at the screen. Surprised, she hesitates, looks to see if she's alone, answers. Warm but cautious.

RACHEL
Hey, stranger.

MARTY
Hey you.

RACHEL
(laughing)
You live dangerously. Where are you?

MARTY
I was driving through. Saw the exit. Thought of you.

She looks offscreen — someone's calling her.

RACHEL
I have to go. We're meeting friends.

MARTY
How about tomorrow.

RACHEL
Church. With family, Marty.

He hesitates.

MARTY
What church?

RACHEL
(Laughing)
You wouldn't dare!

Silence.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
Conduit Church.

She disconnects with a smile on her face.

INT. CAR - CONTINUOUS

Marty sits, phone still at his ear. Lowers the phone, gets back on the highway.

MARTY
What the hell are you thinking.

A billboard announces: "Red Roof Inn 10 miles".

MARTY (V.O.)
Okay. One night. Say hi. Leave.

EXT. CAR - LATER

Marty pulls off the highway and into the Red Roof Inn parking. Turns the car off and goes into the office.

INT. MOTEL OFFICE - DUSK

MARTY
One night.

The CLERK hands him a sheet to fill out.

CLERK
Sign here, initial there.

The CLERK looks him over. No luggage. Marty slides cash. Their eyes meet, like two people who've each lived a hundred versions of this same moment.

CLERK (CONT'D)
You want one night or the kind
where you tell yourself one night?

Marty almost smiles, doesn't. Clerk hands him the key.

MARTY
One night.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - MORNING

Dim. Sparse. A sagging bed. Marty sits on the edge, scrolling on his phone.

He watches an old YouTube video of himself playing drums in a small bar with a 4-piece band. Younger. Hair longer. Eyes brighter. The crowd cheers. These guys are good.

He pauses the video, stares at the screen.

Opens a blank text to Rachel. Types:

“I don’t want to cause problems.”

Deletes it. Starts again:

“This was a mistake.”

Deletes again.

He sighs, tosses the phone on the bed.

Lays back. Stares at the CEILING FAN above him, blades wobbling.

MARTY (V.O.)
Option A: Get in my car and drive home. Option B: Go to the church, sit in the car. See her. Leave. Option C: Walk into church and make a fool of myself.

Checks his phone: 10:22 AM

He reaches over, grabs his guitar case, opens it.

Inside, his old acoustic guitar. Dinged up. A string missing.

He stares at it. Doesn’t touch it.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

INT. MARTY AND RACHEL'S OLD APARTMENT - NIGHT (10 YEARS AGO)

Cramped. Cheap. Christmas lights strung as decor. A keyboard, scattered notebooks, empty takeout containers.

Younger Marty (20), longer hair, brighter eyes) sits on a stool with his guitar. Rachel perches on the kitchen counter, legs dangling, holding a notebook.

She's trying to write lyrics. Scribbling, crossing out, frustrated.

RACHEL
This is terrible. I sound like a greeting card had a stroke.

MARTY
Read it.

RACHEL
No way.

MARTY
Come on. Sing it.

RACHEL
I don't sing.

MARTY
You sang in the car yesterday.

RACHEL
That was private car singing. That doesn't count.

He starts playing a simple, beautiful chord progression. G - Em - C - D.

MARTY
Just try it. I'll cover for you if it sucks.

She hesitates. Then, almost whispering, she sings the words she wrote:

RACHEL
(singing, tentative)
I never knew how to stay in one place/
till you gave me a reason to wait"

Her voice cracks. She stops, embarrassed.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
See? Told you. Greeting card stroke.

But Marty's staring at her like she just invented fire.

MARTY
Sing that again. The reason to wait part.

RACHEL
Marty.

MARTY
No, seriously. That's perfect. That's the whole song.

He plays the progression again, nodding for her to continue.

She sings it again, a little stronger. He joins in on harmony, their voices blending.

They lock eyes. The music swells between them.

She hops off the counter, walks to him. He keeps playing. She puts her hand on his cheek. The same gesture from the old photo.

RACHEL
You make me believe we can do anything.

MARTY
We can, baby.

RACHEL
Promise me something.

MARTY
Anything.

RACHEL
If you ever leave, if this ever ends, just tell me. Don't disappear. Don't make me guess.

MARTY
I'm not going anywhere.

RACHEL
And if you do leave, promise you'll come back to me.

MARTY
Promise.

She kisses him. Deep, certain, unafraid.

The guitar rests forgotten against his leg.

END FLASHBACK

INT. MOTEL ROOM - MORNING

Marty sits with the guitar case open in his lap. His hand frozen over the strings.

MARTY
I promised.

He closes the guitar case, from his pocket he pulls the wrinkled photo of him and Rachel, her hand on his cheek, that same gesture. Studies it. Then he grabs the motel notepad, takes the tiny pencil. Writes in block letters:

DO NOT RUN!

He rips the page off. Folds it. Tucks it in his pocket. Gets up. Grabs his white shirt off the hanger.

MARTY (CONT'D)
C it is.

He puts on the shirt. Tries to straighten his hair in the bathroom mirror. Clips on an ugly green tie.

Walks out.

END TEASER

ACT I

EXT. CHURCH PARKING LOT - LATER

Marty's car pulls into the small gravel lot, parks at the far corner, engine still running. Looks toward the entrance.

Families and kids bustle in. Laughter. Church chatter.

He takes a breath.

Turns off the engine, steps out.

EXT. CONDUIT CHURCH

A modest suburban church building with the obligatory spire. People gathering, chatting, visiting.

A BMW SUV pulls in, parks, and STEVEN (40's, square-shouldered, buttoned up) opens the door for Rachel as she steps out. From the back seat a 10-year-old boy, JOEY (10), jumps out and runs to join his friends.

Rachel looks for Marty. Doesn't see him.

Several greeters mill near the front door. BROTHER DALE, plump, short steps, nearly runs to be the first to pump Marty's hand.

BROTHER DALE
Brother, we're so happy to have you with us today. The spirit told me we'd have a stranger. I just didn't think he'd be so, so mysterious. Here have a breath mint! Amen

MARTY
That's me. Man of mystery. Thanks.

Brother Dale runs off to greet others. Marty walks to stand under a tree near the church door, taking in the scene. What the hell is he doing here.

INT. CHURCH FOYER - LATER

The foyer is packed. Coffee urns steam. Kids run past.

Marty steps inside and pauses, looks around.

He spots a bulletin board covered in construction paper drawings and photos:

– “My Mom is a Superhero!”

– “Jesus and Me”

– A photo pasted to construction paper stands out: a BOY with a guitar and a big smile. Signed: “To the best mom ever, Joey T.”

It’s, Joey, the boy who jumped out of Rachel’s car.

BROTHER DALE (O.S.)
Well I’ll be! Stranger danger’s gone Holy Ghost!

Marty turns.

MARTY
Yea, I figured I’d stay for a bit. Friendly place.

BROTHER DALE
You have no idea. All of us are so so friendly.

MARTY
(sarcastically)
I can only imagine.

Brother Dale claps his hands lightly.

BROTHER DALE
Yes! You get us. You do! You’re going to fit in here so well. This church will complete you.

Brother Dale draws a heart in the air.

INT. CHURCH - DAY

A hymn echoes through the modest sanctuary as Marty enters, sees Rachel with Steven and Joey. Marty takes a seat across from the family and a row back. The choir sings a hymn, way too loudly and off-key. Rachel and Marty’s eyes meet. She gives him an amazing smile.

BEGIN FLASHBACK:

MARTY AND RACHEL’S APARTMENT - NIGHT (10 YEARS AGO)

Christmas lights are gone. No notebooks scattered with dreams. Just bills on the counter and dishes in the sink. Younger Marty and Rachel sit on the floor, backs against the wall. A takeout carton between them, two mismatched wine glasses nearly empty. An empty wine bottle in the corner.

Her hair is longer but less cared for. His shirt has a hole in the shoulder. The window A/C rattles. They've been fighting.

RACHEL
You didn't go.

MARTY
(defensive)
I had a gig.

RACHEL
You had an interview. At 2pm. Your gig wasn't til 10.

MARTY
We had to load in early. Sound check ran long.

RACHEL
There's always something, Marty.

She's not crying, but her voice is tight.

RACHEL (CONT’D)
This was important. The guy called me. He wanted to know where you were.

MARTY
I'll call him back. Reschedule.

RACHEL
He filled the position.

Marty looks away.

RACHEL (CONT’D)
This was the third one. In two months.

MARTY
I'll find something else.

RACHEL
Will you?

MARTY
What do you want me to say, Rach? That I'm gonna put on a tie and sell insurance? Sit in a cubicle and die slowly?

RACHEL
I want you to want a future. With me.

MARTY
I do want that.

RACHEL
Then why does it feel like you're already halfway out the door?

He has no answer. She pulls her knees to her chest. Defeated.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
I need something real, Marty. Something I can count on. A plan. A direction. Anything.

MARTY
So I'm not real now?

RACHEL
You're real. You're just...

She stops. Tries to find the words.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
You're like smoke. I can see you, I can feel you, but when I try to hold on, you slip through. You write these beautiful songs about passing through. About leaving. About the open road and the next town. But you never write about staying. About building something. About me.

Marty can't look at her.

MARTY
Maybe I don't write about staying because I don't know what that looks like.

RACHEL
(quietly)
And I do. That's the problem.

Long silence. The A/C rattles.

MARTY
So this is it?

She opens her mouth. Nothing comes out at first. Then:

RACHEL
I can't keep waiting for you to choose me.

The words land like a punch.

MARTY
Rach—

RACHEL
I love you, Marty.

She's crying now. She doesn't wipe the tears away.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
I love you so much it makes me stupid. But I can't, I can't keep loving someone who won't fight for us.

He looks at her. Sees her breaking. He wants to say it back. Wants to promise. His mouth opens. Nothing comes out. The moment dies.

He reaches out to hug her. She resists, hurt, but then softens. Lets him pull her in. They hold each other. She pulls back. Wipes her face with her sleeve.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
Someday you're gonna realize what you had.

She gets up. Grabs her bag from beside the door, already packed. Stops at the doorway. Hand on the handle. Doesn't turn around.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
When you finally write that song about staying, if you ever do, I hope it ruins you. I hope you think of me and it breaks your heart every single time.

She walks out. The door closes gently. Marty stands, paces, hand on the handle. Thinking about going after her. Doesn't.

His eyes land on his GUITAR, propped against the wall. No missing string. Still perfect. He doesn't reach for it.

CLOSE ON: Marty's face. The exact moment he realizes what he just lost. The exact moment he becomes the broken man we met on the highway.

BACK TO PRESENT:

The hymn ends, and PASTOR LEDBETTER (35), tattoos peeking from under his sleeve, earring, steps to the pulpit.

PASTOR LEDBETTER
Morning, church. I see we got a new face.
(looks right at Marty)
Drummer or guitarist?

Marty freezes. Is he that obvious?

PASTOR LEDBETTER (CONT'D)
Don't worry, brother. I can spot a musician from a mile away. I was one. Before Jesus got ahold of me and wrecked my whole vibe.

Nervous laughter from the congregation.

Pastor Ledbetter thinks for a bit. Then makes a decision.

PASTOR LEDBETTER (CONT'D)
I'm going to ad-lib a bit today. Let's talk about how the devil wears your old band t-shirt.

He runs off-stage and returns with a faded band t-shirt.

PASTOR LEDBETTER (CONT'D)
I wore this for ten years. Played dive bars, crashed on couches, told myself I was "living the dream."

You know what the dream was? Avoiding real life. Avoiding commitment. Avoiding anything that required me to show up sober and on time.

Marty shifts uncomfortably. This is hitting too close.

PASTOR LEDBETTER (CONT'D)
Temptation isn't always about sex or money. Sometimes it's about freedom.
(MORE)

PASTOR LEDBETTER (CONT'D)
The freedom to never settle down. Never be responsible. Never let anyone COUNT on you.

He looks directly at Marty.

PASTOR LEDBETTER (CONT'D)
That's the devil's best trick. Making you think running is the same as livin'.

The congregation is silent. This got way too real for many.

PASTOR LEDBETTER (CONT'D)
But here's the good news. God doesn't give up on runners. He just keeps leaving breadcrumbs show you how to get back home.

Rachel glances at Marty. Marty stares at the floor.

Throughout the sermon Marty and Rachel sneak glances at each other. Chemistry is brewing under the surface and we see it with facial closeups, glances, and sweaty palms. Scratch that. The sexual tension is on the surface and in our faces. Maybe in spite of the church setting, maybe because of it.

He watches her. She feels him watching, twists to smile at him, that amazing one, then quickly turns back when her husband looks at her questioningly.

Further back, two LADIES, MARGARET (60s, sensible, judgmental, nosy) and DARLENE (60s, platinum blonde, free spirit) see the interaction between Marty and Rachel.

DARLENE
(whispering)
Who's that ogling Rachel. Woo, makes my liver tingle.

MARGARET
That ain't your liver talking Darlene. But if it looks like sin, walks like sin, quacks like sin...

DARLENE
Might be her ex. Might be divine intervention. I'm leaning toward a mess.

END OF ACT I

ACT II

INT. CHURCH HALLWAY - DAY

Marty exits the sanctuary, looking for an escape route. The hallway is packed with congregants mingling, laughing, hugging. Brother Dale magically appears.

BROTHER DALE
Brother Mystery! How'd you like the service?

MARTY
It was. Enthusiastic.

BROTHER DALE
That's church talk for "I've never seen anything like that in my life."

MARTY
Pretty much.

BROTHER DALE
Pastor Ledbetter was talking about you. Did you catch that?

MARTY
He doesn't even know me.

BROTHER DALE
He doesn't have to. He WAS you. Fifteen years ago. Minus the guitar, plus heroin.

MARTY
Jesus.

BROTHER DALE
That's what he says too. Constantly. It's annoying but effective.

Brother Dale laughs, claps him on the shoulder.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
First time in a church like ours?

MARTY
First time in any church in about fifteen years.

BROTHER DALE
Well you picked a doozy. Pastor Ledbetter's sermons are like roller coasters. You hold on tight and pray you don't throw up.

Marty almost smiles.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
So what brings you here? Really.

MARTY
I'm, uh, visiting someone.

BROTHER DALE
Rachel?

Marty's face gives him away.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
Oh honey, everyone saw that. You two were eye flirting so hard I thought the altar was gonna catch fire.

MARTY
It wasn't...

BROTHER DALE
Save it. I've been married three times. I know longing when I see it.

Beat. Marty doesn't know what to say.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
You know what your problem is?

MARTY
I have a feeling you're gonna tell me.

BROTHER DALE
You're carrying remorse like luggage. I can see it on you. Heavy, old, needs wheels.

Marty shifts uncomfortably.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
Here's the thing about church, Brother Mystery. It ain't about being perfect.
(MORE)

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
It's about showing up broken and letting people see it.

MARTY
I'm not really the "letting people see it" type.

BROTHER DALE
Yeah, I picked up on that. You got "emotionally constipated" written all over you.

Marty actually laughs.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
Look, I don't know your story. But if you came all this way, it means something's pulling you. Maybe it's her. Maybe it's something else. Either way, running away again won't fix it.

MARTY
Who says I'm running?

BROTHER DALE
Brother, you got one foot out the door and you haven't even made it to the coffee table yet.

Brother Dale reaches into his pocket, pulls out a business card that's clearly hand-written on an index card cut in half.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
Wednesday nights. Seven PM. Choir practice. We need a guitar player and you need somewhere with friends.

He presses the card into Marty's hand.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
Think about it. And if you stick around town, come by my place. I'll make you dinner. I'm a terrible cook but a fantastic listener.

He walks away, then turns back.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
Oh, and Brother Mystery? Whatever you did that you're running from?
(MORE)

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
It probably wasn't as bad as you think. And if it was, well that's what grace is for.

Marty looks at the card. Hand-drawn musical notes in the corner.

EXT. CHURCH - LATER

Families pour into sunlight. Kids chase each other. Coffee urns steam at folding tables next to cookies. Marty lingers on the edge, unsure. Rachel exits, spots Marty. She murmurs something to Steven and walks toward him.

Darlene and Margaret, sip coffee from styrofoam cups next to the coffee table.

DARLENE
Did you see the way he looked at Rachel during the sermon?

MARGARET
Darlene, he looked at her like she was the second coming. That's why I'm concerned.

They watch as Rachel walks toward Marty under the tree.

DARLENE
Who is he?

MARGARET
No idea. But he's got bad decision written all over him.

DARLENE
(fanning herself)
Sometimes bad decisions are the most fun.

MARGARET
You say that about every man under sixty.

DARLENE
And I stand by it.

They sip their coffee, eyes locked on Rachel and Marty.

MARGARET
You think that's her ex?

DARLENE
Has to be. She's doing that thing where she touches her hair. Dead giveaway.

MARGARET
Steven's not gonna like this.

DARLENE
Steven doesn't like anything that threatens his perfectly ordered universe.

MARGARET
That's unfair. He's a good man.

DARLENE
He's boring, Margaret. Stable, yes. Good father, absolutely. But boring as oatmeal.

MARGARET
Oatmeal is healthy.

DARLENE
So is kale. Doesn't mean I want it in my bed.

Margaret chokes on her coffee.

EXT. CHURCH - UNDER A TREE - CONTINUOUS

Marty and Rachel stand close, yet apart. A strange electricity in the air.

RACHEL
You really came. Crazy as ever.

MARTY
Yea. Both counts.

RACHEL
You look,
(corrects)
It’s been a long time.

MARTY
You look as amazing as ever.

RACHEL
You don’t. I genuinely thought you were a hallucination.
(MORE)

RACHEL (CONT'D)
Like that time I fasted too long and saw Beyoncé in the baptismal pool.

MARTY
Nope. Just me. Older, balder, and spiritually under-qualified.

RACHEL
I figured. The pastor said "welcome sinner" and stared right at you.

MARTY
He looked at me like I owed him money.

RACHEL
Do you?

MARTY
Not him. Pretty sure I owe God an apology. And a fruit basket.

EXT. CHURCH PARKING LOT

Darlene and Margaret lean against Darlene's Buick, clearly settling in for the show.

They watch as Joey runs over to Marty.

DARLENE
Oh Lord, now the boy's involved.

MARGARET
This is gonna be a mess.

DARLENE
(excited)
The best kind.

MARGARET
Darlene, this is a family. Rachel's married. That man shouldn't even be here.

DARLENE
Maybe he's got a reason.

MARGARET
Like what?

DARLENE
I don't know. Unfinished business. Lost love. Sudden realization that he threw away the best thing that ever happened to him.

MARGARET
You've been watching too much Hallmark.

DARLENE
And you've been judging too much. Look at her face, Margaret. That's not the face of a woman who's moved on.

EXT. CHURCH - UNDER A TREE

RACHEL
(glancing at Steven)
You've got 30 seconds to repent.

MARTY
That enough time to get you to leave your husband and elope?

RACHEL
Elope where exactly? The church basement? I think they store folding chairs and resentment down there. Marty, I had to move on. It was hard.

MARTY
You still do that thing with your nose when you lie.

RACHEL
I'm not lying. You think you know me now?

MARTY
I remember the version before grad school and carpools.

RACHEL
That version had great legs and poor judgment.

MARTY
I was the poor judgment?

RACHEL
You were a lot of things, Marty. A lot of them good. A lot of them...

EXT. CHURCH

Focus on: A LADY looks at them, nudges her HUSBAND.

LADY
Why don't you look at me like that?

HUSBAND
Why don't you look like that, Marge?

EXT. CHURCH - UNDER A TREE

Marty looks over at Joey, chasing a soccer ball with friends.

MARTY
That one yours?

RACHEL
Yeah.

MARTY
He's got your smile.

Rachel takes a beat, then really looks at Marty.

RACHEL
And your eyes.

Marty freezes. Rachel sips her coffee nonchalantly.

MARTY
Wait, what?

Rachel calls to the boy

RACHEL
Joey come over here.

MARTY
Joseph?

RACHEL
He likes guitar, classic country. Hates carrots. He's got your restlessness, too. It drives me nuts. He's the love of my life.

Joey jogs up to Rachel. Marty instinctively steps back, unsure what to do with a small human.

JOEY
(cheerful)
Hi!

RACHEL
Hey, sweetheart. This is an old friend of mine. His name is Marty.

JOEY
(eyeing Marty's disheveled clothing)
You look like someone who doesn't like church.

MARTY
You're not wrong.

JOEY
Neither do I. Too many hugs, too many kisses from old ladies. Yuck. And no Wi-Fi.

MARTY
Wow. Honest and blunt. You might be my spirit animal.

JOEY
What's a spirit animal?

MARTY
It's a grown-up excuse for being weird in public.

JOEY
Cool. Can you be my spirit animal?

MARTY
Only if you use it to escape Sunday school.

Joey laughs, bright and unguarded. Rachel watches, amused, but quietly emotional. She wipes away a tear.

JOEY
Wanna kick the ball?

MARTY
Only thing I've kicked in years is regret.

JOEY
Regret's a weird name for a ball.

RACHEL
That's your father's genetics talking.

Marty gives her a questioning look, then looks at Joey.

MARTY
Alright. But go easy on me. I'm old, mysterious, and have bad knees.

JOEY
I'm ten. I have no mercy.

MARTY
(looking back at Rachel)
Ten, huh?

EXT. CHURCH - GRASSY AREA

They head to a grassy spot. Joey kicks the ball hard toward Marty who stumbles trying to trap it, and wipes out.

Joey runs up and kneels beside him.

JOEY
You okay?!

MARTY
Totally. Just inspecting the ground for safety hazards.

JOEY
You're weird.

MARTY
Thanks. It's genetic. Give me a minute.

They sit beside each other in silence.

JOEY
You seem sad.

MARTY
I'm not sad. I don't know what I am to tell you the truth.

JOEY
Nope you're sad. My mom gets like that when she listens to old country music.

They sit in silence. A warm, strange kind of peace between them. A FRIEND of Joey's runs up.

FRIEND
Joey, what are you doing? Let's go climb that apple tree.

JOEY
Okay.
(to Marty)
See ya. You're fun.

Marty gets up with a struggle.

EXT. CHURCH - UNDER A TREE - CONTINUOUS

Marty limps back to Rachel, half-laughing, and sits with her.

MARTY
I think he dislocated my soul.

RACHEL
Yeah, he does that. He has this way of crashing through people's boundaries.

MARTY
He's amazing. Like you in a lot of ways. Why didn't you tell me?

Rachel ignores the question.

RACHEL
So. Are you visiting, passing through? Taking a detour to make waves?

MARTY
Actually, impulse. I saw the exit sign on 40 and decided to confront my emotional baggage head-on.

RACHEL
Right. Just what church is for.

Rachel stands, Marty follows suit. She glances to find Steven who's standing by the coffee stand talking to friends.

She strolls beside him toward a spot more private.

RACHEL (CONT'D)
We've got a few minutes.

EXT. CHURCH RETAINING WALL - MOMENTS LATER

Rachel and Marty sit on a retaining wall. Space between them. Physical and emotional. Unspoken weight in the silence.

MARTY
He seems decent.

RACHEL
Steven? He flosses. We've built something steady. Safe. Doesn't mean it's not complicated. He'd fight for me. And for Joey.

MARTY
You think I wouldn't?

She looks at him.

RACHEL
You wouldn't even fight for yourself, Marty. That was always the problem. I tried to pull love out of you. But all I got were leavin' songs.

MARTY
I didn't know how to say it. I was a kid. I thought just. Just being there was enough.

RACHEL
No. For future reference no, it's not.

A long silence. He wants to look away, doesn't.

Something's building. It's hard, but finally,

MARTY
(fumbling)
I loved you Rach.
(correcting)
I love you. I just didn't think...

She hears it. She lets out a slow breath that seems as long as the wait to finally hear the words.

She half-laughs through her tears.

RACHEL
Took you long enough.

MARTY
I’m slow.

Pause. She stands.

RACHEL
You’ve got five minutes before Steven comes over here and knocks your teeth in.

MARTY
Can I chew this mint first?

She laughs. Gives Marty a hug.

RACHEL
(whispering in his ear)
Me too. Everything. Me too.

Marty, surprised, tears welling in his eyes.

She pulls back, straightens her skirt, and looks at him intently.

RACHEL (CONT’D)
I’ll head back to my perfect life now and repent for whatever just happened in my chest.

She turns and heads to the car.

EXT. CHURCH PARKING LOT

Margaret and Darlene watch Rachel hug Marty at the retaining wall.

MARGARET
She shouldn't be hugging him like that.

DARLENE
Why not? Maybe she needs to. Maybe we don't know the whole story.

MARGARET
I know enough. She's married. He's not her husband. End of story.

DARLENE
But what if it's not? What if he's Joey's real father?

Margaret's jaw drops.

MARGARET
You think?

DARLENE
Honey, look at that boy. Then look at that man. They got the same eyes, same walk, same "I don't quite fit here" energy.

Margaret looks.

MARGARET
Oh my stars.

DARLENE
Exactly.

EXT. CHURCH

Marty lingers by the wall, head down. He’s ready to leave, but the weight of it all is pressing.

JOEY (O.S.)
You look like you just got dumped.

Marty turns. Joey stands a few feet away, holding a soccer ball.

MARTY
Not sure it counts as getting dumped if it’s the second time.

JOEY
Second time’s worse. That means you chose to go back.

MARTY
You get all this wisdom from Sunday school?

JOEY
Nah. I watch a lot of Garfield. And Spiderman. And Bambi.

Marty sits on the curb. Joey flops down beside him.

JOEY (CONT'D)
You make my mom sad.

Marty flinches.

MARTY
Did she say that?

JOEY
She doesn't have to. I know her face. She gets that same look when she watches wedding videos on Instagram.

MARTY
I didn't mean to.

JOEY
Yeah. But you did.

They sit in silence.

JOEY (CONT'D)
So, you gonna be around?

MARTY
I don't know. I don't think so.

JOEY
You should be. You're weird. But good weird. Most grown-ups talk at me. You talk with me.

MARTY
You're easy to talk to.

JOEY
I'm ten. That's rare praise.

Marty looks and sees Rachel and Steven in a heated conversation by the coffee table.

They sit in silence for a bit. Both sets of eyes glued to the ground. Suddenly,

JOEY (CONT'D)
You play guitar?

MARTY
Used to. Why?

JOEY
I've been messing around with chords on YouTube. I think I like it.

MARTY
What kind of music?

JOEY
Old country. Sad, twangy stuff. I guess I got that from Mom.

MARTY
You're definitely mine.

JOEY
Huh?

MARTY
Nothing. You've got good taste.

Joey nods. Looks at him hard.

JOEY
If you don't come back, that's okay. I just want my mom to be okay.

MARTY
So do I.

JOEY
Good. 'Cause sometimes I think she's pretending. Like all the time.

A long pause. This kid sees too much.

JOEY (CONT'D)
Anyway. If you do come back, maybe you can teach me guitar.

MARTY
Yeah. I'd like that.

Joey waves over his shoulder and runs toward his parents.

JOEY
Bye strange man.

Marty laughs, watches him go. Swallows hard. Then exhales.

END ACT II

ACT III

EXT. CHURCH UNDER A TREE - CONTINUOUS

Marty walks toward his car, keys in hand. Drained.

JOEY (O.S.)
Wait!

Marty turns. Joey runs up, slightly out of breath, clutching something.

JOEY (CONT'D)
I made this during the sermon. It's boring so I draw.

Joey hands him a folded piece of construction paper. Marty opens it. It's a crayon drawing: two stick figures with guitars. One tall, one small. The word "FRENDS" in uneven letters at the top. Marty stares at it.

JOEY (CONT'D)
That's you. That's me. I made your hair messy 'cause it is.

MARTY
(voice rough)
It's perfect.

JOEY
You can keep it. If you want.

Marty folds it carefully, tucks it in his shirt pocket.

MARTY
I want.

Joey kicks at the gravel.

JOEY
Are you gonna be my guitar teacher?

MARTY
I'm not really a teacher, Joey.

JOEY
But you know how. Mom said you used to play all the time. In a band and everything.

MARTY
That was a long time ago.

JOEY
So? You still know the chords, right?

Marty crouches down to Joey's level.

MARTY
Yeah. I still know the chords.

JOEY
Then you could show me. Just the easy ones.

MARTY
You really want to learn?

JOEY
Mom says music is like feelings you can hold. I wanna hold my feelings.

Marty nods, unable to speak for a second.

MARTY
That's... yeah. That's exactly what it is.

JOEY
So you'll teach me?

MARTY
(deciding)
Yeah. I'll teach you.

Joey grins.

JOEY
Cool! Can we start tomorrow?

MARTY
Let's start with Wednesday. I'll bring my guitar.

JOEY
And snacks?

MARTY
And snacks.

JOEY
Not church cookies though.

MARTY
Never church cookies.

They shake hands, overly formal.

EXT. CHURCH PARKING LOT

Margaret and Darlene lean against Darlene’s Buick. They watch in silence as Steven approaches Marty.

MARGARET
Steven's gonna knock his teeth out.

DARLENE
Good. Finally some excitement around here.

MARGARET
Darlene!

DARLENE
What? I'm sixty-seven. If I can't live vicariously through other people's drama, what's the point?

EXT. CHURCH UNDER A TREE

STEVEN (O.S.)
Joey. Car. Now.

Joey's face falls. He looks back at Steven, then at Marty.

JOEY
(whispering)
He's not gonna let you teach me, is he?

MARTY
We'll figure it out.

Joey nods, turns to go.

STEVEN (O.S.)
Joseph, get in the car!

Joey runs off. Marty watches him go, hand over his pocket where the drawing sits.

Steven comes up, stops a few feet from Marty.

STEVEN (CONT’D)
You said your piece?

MARTY
I said something. Took me ten years.

STEVEN
She’s not yours anymore.

MARTY
Never was.

STEVEN
Joey’s my son.

MARTY
You love him?

STEVEN
More than my own heartbeat.

Marty nods. Accepts it.

MARTY
Good. But don’t pretend he doesn’t wonder why he plays guitar in his sleep and hates carrots.

Steven clenches his jaw. Starts to walk away. Then pauses.

STEVEN
If you come back, don’t do it half-assed. And don’t come looking for Rachel.

MARTY
Wasn’t planning on it.

Steven walks off. Marty watches him go.

EXT CHURCH - PARKING LOT

As Steven opens the door for Rachel, she turns and smiles at Marty. Yes the amazing one. Then she steps into the car. Steven gives Marty a dirty look as he gets in. Several people turn to look.

EXT CHURCH - CONTINUOUS

Brother Dale appears. Again. Like magic

BROTHER DALE
Brother Mystery! You didn’t join the altar call.

MARTY
I'm more of a back row, emergency exit kind of guy.

BROTHER DALE
The Spirit don't mind where you sit, long as you show up.

MARTY
I showed up.

BROTHER DALE
You ever sing harmony?

MARTY
Not since the band.

BROTHER DALE
We're desperate. We got a soprano who sounds like a goose in labor. Come Wednesday night. Bring your guitar. Or just yourself.

Marty considers.

Brother Dale temples his hands for a second and walks off.

INT. STEVEN'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Rachel, Steven, and Joey sit in silence.

JOEY
(quietly, from the back)
Can we get ice cream?

Neither adult answers.

Rachel stares straight ahead.

Steven grips the steering wheel.

STEVEN
Is he staying?

RACHEL
I don't know.

STEVEN
You kissed him.

RACHEL
You didn't see that. I hugged him.

STEVEN
Didn’t have to.

JOEY
I want chocolate.

Steven exhales sharply through his nose.

RACHEL
(to Joey)
We’ll get chocolate.

JOEY
Can Marty come?

Rachel closes her eyes.

STEVEN
Absolutely not.

Joey leans back, disappointed. Fiddles with something in his backpack.

Rachel wipes a tear with her knuckle before Joey sees.

INT. STEVEN & RACHEL'S HOUSE - JOEY'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Joey's room: posters of bands, a small keyboard in the corner, action figures mixed with sheet music. A kid caught between childhood and something else. Steven knocks on the open door. Joey sits on his bed, watching other kids play games on YouTube.

STEVEN
Hey buddy. Homework done?

JOEY
(not looking up)
Yeah.

STEVEN
You sure? Because your backpack's still zipped.

Joey shrugs. Steven enters, sits on the edge of the bed. Not too close.

STEVEN (CONT’D)
You okay?

JOEY
Fine.

STEVEN
You don't seem fine.

Joey finally looks up.

JOEY
Who was that guy at church?

Steven keeps his voice even.

STEVEN
An old friend of your mom's.

JOEY
He seemed nice.

STEVEN
Did he?

JOEY
Yeah. He was funny. And he didn't treat me like a kid.

STEVEN
You are a kid.

JOEY
You know what I mean.

Steven nods. Does know.

STEVEN
What did you guys talk about?

JOEY
Guitar stuff. Music. He said he used to be in a band.

STEVEN
That's cool.

JOEY
(looking at Steven)
Do you know him?

STEVEN
No. Not really.

JOEY
But Mom does.

STEVEN
Yeah. From a long time ago.

Joey processes this. Something's working in his young brain.

JOEY
Is he gonna come back?

STEVEN
I don't know. Maybe.

JOEY
Would that be okay?

Steven looks at his son, this boy he's raised for ten years. Every scraped knee, every bad dream, every parent-teacher conference.

STEVEN
Would you want him to?

Joey shrugs. Non-committal. But Steven sees through it.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
Joey, I need you to be honest with me. Did he say something to you? Something that upset you?

JOEY
No. He was cool.

STEVEN
Then what's going on?

Joey looks down at his hands.

JOEY
Do you ever feel like, like you don't really fit?

STEVEN
Fit where?

JOEY
I don't know. Anywhere. Like you're supposed to be somewhere else but nobody told you where.

STEVEN
Is this about the guy from church?

JOEY
No. Maybe. I don't know.

Steven moves closer. Puts his hand on Joey's shoulder.

STEVEN
Hey. Look at me.

Joey looks up.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
You fit here. With me. With your mom. You're my son, Joey. That's never gonna change.

JOEY
But what if...

STEVEN
No what ifs. You're mine. Okay?

Joey nods, but doesn't look convinced.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
And if you want to play guitar, we'll get you lessons. Real ones. With a teacher.

JOEY
I don't want a teacher. I want

He stops himself.

STEVEN
What?

JOEY
Nothing.

Steven knows he's lying but doesn't push.

STEVEN
Alright. Well, get up and brush your teeth. Almost time for bed.

He gets up to leave.

JOEY
Dad?

Steven stops. Joey rarely calls him Dad without prompting.

JOEY (CONT'D)
Do you think Mom's happy?

The question hangs in the air. Steven doesn't know how to answer.

STEVEN
I think she's doing her best. We both are.

JOEY
That's not what I asked.

Steven looks at his son. This kid who sees too much.

STEVEN
I don't know, buddy. But we're gonna figure it out. As a family.

Joey nods. Steven leaves. Closes the door most of the way.

Joey sits alone. Searches YouTube.

Types: "How to play guitar G chord."

Watches a tutorial. Tries to position his fingers in the air like he's holding an invisible guitar.

CLOSE ON: Joey's face. Frustrated. Determined.

INT. STEVEN AND RACHEL'S KITCHEN - EVENING

Homework scattered on the table. A half-assembled LEGO set. Photos on the fridge held by magnets.

Steven stands at the counter making sandwiches for tomorrow's lunches. Methodical. Precise. Joey's backpack hangs on a chair.

Rachel enters, drying her hands on a dish towel. They move around each other with the choreography of ten years together. Not touching.

STEVEN
He asked for Marty when I checked on him.

Rachel stops.

RACHEL
What did you say?

STEVEN
That he's just someone you used to know. That he's leaving. Is he?

Rachel sits at the table.

RACHEL
I don't know.

Steven sets down the butter knife. Carefully. Controlled.

STEVEN
I knew when I married you there was someone you never stopped loving. I just hoped I could be enough one day. For you. For Joey.

She looks up at him, tears forming.

RACHEL
You are enough. You're good to us. You show up. Every single day you show up.

STEVEN
But I'm not him.

RACHEL
(voice breaking)
No. You're not.

The honesty lands like a punch. Steven exhales, leans against the counter.

STEVEN
I've spent ten years being the dependable one. The one who doesn't run. I read him stories. I coach his soccer team. I love that kid like he's my blood.

RACHEL
I know you do.

STEVEN
But when Joey looks in the mirror, he doesn't see me.

Rachel wipes her eyes with the dish towel.

RACHEL
What do you want me to say?

STEVEN
I want you to tell me that if he comes back, if he stays, you'll stay here. With us.

Rachel looks at her hands, opens her mouth, She can't say it.

STEVEN (CONT'D)
(quiet, devastated)
That's what I thought.

He leaves the sandwiches unfinished and walks out. Rachel sits alone at the table.

INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

Marty sits on the bed, packed duffel beside him. Car keys in hand. His phone sits on the nightstand. Silent. He picks it up. Opens his text thread with Rachel. Opens his contacts. Scrolls to: "DEREK (Band)."

Hesitates. Then presses CALL.

It rings. And rings.

DEREK (V.O.)
(groggy)
This better be an emergency or a lottery win.

MARTY
Hey man. It's me.

Long pause.

DEREK (V.O.)
Marty? Holy shit. Where are you?

MARTY
Tennessee.

DEREK (V.O.)
What the hell are you doing there?

MARTY
Long story.

DEREK (V.O.)
You got time? Because I've got questions. Like where you've been for the past six months.

MARTY
Around.

DEREK (V.O.)
Around. Right. That's specific.

Silence.

DEREK (V.O.)
Dude, you disappeared. Again. Jake's still pissed about the Houston gig.

MARTY
I called Jake. Told him I couldn't make it.

DEREK (V.O.)
Yeah, four hours before we were supposed to go on. We had to cancel. Lost the deposit.

MARTY
I know. I'm sorry.

DEREK (V.O.)
You're always sorry, man. But sorry doesn't pay the bills.

Marty rubs his face.

MARTY
I needed a break.

DEREK (V.O.)
From what? Playing music? The band? Me?

MARTY
From all of it.

DEREK (V.O.)
(frustrated)
We were good, Marty. We were finally getting somewhere. Real gigs. Real money. And you just... bailed.

MARTY
I couldn't do it anymore.

DEREK (V.O.)
Do what? Play drums? Live your dream? What couldn't you do?

MARTY
Pretend it was enough.

Silence. Derek's tone softens.

DEREK (V.O.)
This about Rachel?

Marty doesn't answer.

DEREK (V.O.)
Man, that was years ago.

MARTY
I know.

DEREK (V.O.)
You gotta let it go.

MARTY
I'm trying.

DEREK (V.O.)
By going to see her?

MARTY
She's married. Has a kid.

DEREK (V.O.)
Jesus, Marty.

MARTY
Yeah.

Long pause. Derek sighs.

DEREK (V.O.)
So what are you calling me for? Permission to wreck your life?

MARTY
I don't know. Maybe just to hear a friendly voice.

DEREK (V.O.)
We were friends, Marty. Before you became a ghost.

MARTY
I know.

DEREK (V.O.)
So what now? You gonna chase this girl and blow up her marriage?

MARTY
No. I just. I needed to see her. Say the things I should've said.

DEREK (V.O.)
And did you?

MARTY
Sort of.

DEREK (V.O.)
Sort of. That's your specialty, isn't it? Half measures. Half commitments.

Marty doesn't defend himself.

DEREK (V.O.)
(softer)
Look, I'm not trying to be a dick. But you gotta figure out what you want. You can't keep running away from things and calling it "taking a break."

MARTY
What if I don't know what I want?

DEREK (V.O.)
Then you're in the wrong place, man.

Silence.

DEREK (V.O.)
You still playing?

MARTY
Just started again. Today, actually.

DEREK (V.O.)
That's something.

MARTY
Yeah.

DEREK (V.O.)
If you ever wanna come back, the band's still around. Different lineup, but we're still playing.

MARTY
You'd take me back? After Houston?

DEREK (V.O.)
(laughs)
Probably not. But I'd think about it. You were the best drummer we ever had, even if you were a flaky son of a bitch.

Marty smiles.

MARTY
Thanks, man.

DEREK (V.O.)
Don't thank me. Just don't disappear again. At least not without saying goodbye.

MARTY
I won't.

DEREK (V.O.)
Yeah. I've heard that before.

Silence again.

DEREK (V.O.)
Good luck, Marty. Whatever you're doing down there.

MARTY
Thanks, Derek.

DEREK (V.O.)
And Marty? If she's married? Be careful. Don't blow up more lives than you already have.

MARTY
I'm trying not to.

They hang up.

Marty sits with the phone in his hand. Staring at nothing.

He looks at the guitar case.

Opens it.

Picks up the guitar. Strings one note.

It's off-key. He adjusts. Tries again.

Better.

He starts playing that G - C progression. Slow. Haunted. The song Rachel wrote years ago.

Stares at it. Puts the phone down. He stands, grabs the duffel, heads for the door. Stops. His hand goes to his shirt pocket. Pulls out Joey's drawing. Unfolds it. The two stick figures with guitars stare back at him.

MARTY (CONT'D)
Don't do this. You always do this.

He sits back down on the bed. Sets the drawing on the nightstand beside the photo of him and Rachel. He pulls out the folded note he wrote earlier: "DO NOT RUN." Reads it. Lets out a long, shaky breath.

MARTY (CONT'D)
You're an idiot. You know that?

END ACT III

ACT IV

INT. MOTEL ROOM - NIGHT

He unfolds his phone. Scrolls through contacts until he lands on a name: "MOM." Last call: 6 months ago. He hovers over it. Presses call. It rings. And rings.

VOICEMAIL (V.O.)
You've reached Diana. Leave a message.

MARTY
(after the beep)
Hey Mom. It's me. I uh, I'm in Tennessee. Long story. I just. I think I might stay for a while. I know that sounds crazy. You'll probably say I'm running toward something this time instead of away, but I don't know. Maybe that's the same thing.
(beat)
There's a kid here. His name's Joey. He's ten. He's mine. I mean, biologically. But not, not in any way that counts yet. I didn't know. Rachel never told me. Probably had good reason.
(pause, voice cracking)
I left her, Mom. Just like Dad left us. I did the exact thing I swore I'd never do. And now she's married. He's got a dad. A good one. And I'm the ghost in the parking lot.
(long beat)
But Joey drew me a picture. And I think, I think maybe I could be something. Not a dad. Not yet. Maybe not ever. But something. Anyway. I'll call you next week. Love you.

He hangs up. Sits in the silence. He looks at Joey's drawing again. Then at the photo of Rachel. He picks up the duffel. Opens it. Pulls out his guitar case. Opens it. The missing string stares back at him.

He grabs the note "DO NOT RUN" and tapes it to the bathroom mirror.

MARTY (CONT'D)
He's got my eyes.

He props the photo agains the table lamp. Pulls out his phone. Opens a text thread to Rachel.

Types:

"Joey's a great kid."

Deletes it.

Types:

"Hope you're well."

Deletes it.

Types:

"I may stick around for a few days. Not to cause trouble. Just to fix what I can.

Saves but doesn't send.

Instead, types:

"Goodnight."

He sends it, tosses the phone on the table.

He digs deeper in the guitar case. Finds a spare single string coiled in a paper envelope.

He threads the string through the post. Tightens. Plucks. Tunes by ear, patient.

He strums G - C; it's rough, then cleaner. He nods to himself.

He opens his NOTES app. Titles a new note: "STAYING (DRAFT)"

Below it, bullet points:

· Wed 7pm - choir rehearsal (show up)
· buy real strings (and snacks that aren't church cookies)
· job? day shifts only (no disappearing)
· don't text her for now
· if Joey asks about chords, teach G & C, keep it simple

He grabs his car keys, heads for the door, stops. Returns to the lamp, picks up Joey's photo and tucks it into the case. Pauses. Then leaves it propped on the lamp instead.

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Marty steps out with the guitar case. He locks the door, pockets the key.

He looks toward the church spire. Then toward the darker strip of storefronts.

He heads toward a small music store. On the window: “MUSIC - STRINGS - CAPOS - PICKS.”

INT. MUSIC STORE

A bell dings. An EMPTY COUNTER. Marty scans wall pegs of guitar strings and picks.

He takes one pack of strings, two picks. At the last minute, he adds a bag of chips and chocolate bars next to the checkout counter.

At the register he leaves a POST-IT and a $10 tip in the “Take a Lesson?” jar. He writes:

“If you have a cheap case for a kid’s starter guitar I’ll come by tomorrow. Marty”

INT. MOTEL - LATER

Back inside, Marty lays the new strings on the table like a plan. He looks at his phone, opens Rachel’s draft again. He doesn’t send it.

Instead, he pulls up Brother Dale’s number on the flyer. Taps CALL.

BROTHER DALE (V.O.)
Hello?

MARTY
It’s Marty. I’ll be there Wednesday. And, I’ll try not to make the soprano cry.

BROTHER DALE (V.O.)
Brother Mystery! Bless the Lord and my blood pressure! Blessed news, son.

MARTY
Wanted you to know. See you then.

They hang up. He sits on the bed. Breathes.

Then plays that G - C progression, steadier now.

INT. STEVEN AND RACHEL’S KITCHEN - LATER

Rachel stands alone at the breakfast table. The TV hums softly in the living room.

She checks her phone.

Reads the text from Marty: “Goodnight.”

Smiles.

Her thumb hovers over the keyboard.

She types: "You can't be here."

Deletes it.

Types: "Don't stay for me."

Deletes it.

Types: "Goodnight."

She doesn't send it. Sets the phone on silent.

She opens her photos app. Scrolls way, way back.

Finds a photo of her and Marty. Young, laughing, arms wrapped around each other. Her hair’s in his face.

RACHEL
Bedtime, Joey!

She dries her hands and heads toward the living room.

INT. LOCAL COFFEE SHOP - DAY

A few locals. Quiet. Marty sits alone with a coffee and a notebook. He's trying to write. Scratching out lines. Brother Dale walks in, spots him immediately.

BROTHER DALE
Brother Mystery! You stayed!

Marty looks up, slightly annoyed but not surprised.

MARTY
For now.

BROTHER DALE
Mind if I join you?

MARTY
(resigned)
Sure.

Brother Dale sits, plopping down a massive coffee and a muffin.

BROTHER DALE
Whatcha working on?

MARTY
Nothing. Just words.

BROTHER DALE
Song lyrics?

MARTY
Maybe. Probably.

Brother Dale looks at the crossed-out lines.

BROTHER DALE
"I never knew how to stay in one place". That's pretty.

Marty closes the notebook quickly.

MARTY
It's old.

BROTHER DALE
Sometimes old is good. Like cheese. Or me.

Marty almost smiles. They sit in silence for a moment. Dale takes a huge bite of muffin.

MARTY
Can I ask you something?

BROTHER DALE
Shoot.

MARTY
Why are you so relentlessly friendly?

BROTHER DALE
(laughs)
That's your question?
(MORE)

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
Not "why three marriages" or "what's with the choir obsession"?

MARTY
I mean, those too. But mostly the friendly thing.

Brother Dale sets down his muffin. Gets serious for once.

BROTHER DALE
You really want to know?

MARTY
Yeah.

BROTHER DALE
Because nobody was friendly to me when I needed it most.

Marty wasn't expecting that.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
I was married to my first wife for twelve years. Thought we were solid. Came home one day, she was gone. Note on the counter. Said I was "too much."

MARTY
I'm sorry.

BROTHER DALE
Don't be. She was right. I was too much. Too loud, too eager, too, too desperate to be loved.

He takes a sip of coffee.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
Second wife lasted three years. I tried to be less. Quieter. More contained. Turned out she wanted the loud version. Can't win.

MARTY
And the third?

BROTHER DALE
Third was the charm. For six beautiful years. Then cancer took him.

Marty's face falls.

MARTY
Dale, I

BROTHER DALE
(waving it off)
It's okay. It was five years ago. I've made my peace. Mostly.

He looks out the window.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
When Randy died, I didn't want to get out of bed. Didn't want to see people. Didn't want to be the jolly guy everyone expected. But the church wouldn't let me disappear. They showed up. Every day. With casseroles and prayers and annoying persistence.

MARTY
So you pay it forward.

BROTHER DALE
Exactly. I see someone who looks lost, I show up. Because somebody showed up for me.

He looks at Marty.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
You look lost, Brother Mystery.

MARTY
I am.

BROTHER DALE
Well, good news. Lost people eventually get found. Or they find themselves. Either way, you're not alone.

Marty doesn't know what to say.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
See you tomorrow night. Seven PM. Don't be late. Brenda's already threatened to quit if we don't get a guitar player.

He stands, grabs his muffin.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
Oh, and Marty?

MARTY
Yeah?

BROTHER DALE
That song you're writing? Finish it. Even if it hurts. Especially if it hurts.

He walks out, leaving Marty alone with his coffee and his unfinished lyrics. Marty opens the notebook again.

Reads: "I never knew how to stay in one place / till you gave me a reason to wait."

He picks up the pen. Starts writing.

END ACT IV

TAG

INT. CONDUIT CHURCH - FELLOWSHIP HALL - WEDNESDAY NIGHT

Folding chairs arranged in a semi-circle. Music stands. A piano that's seen better days. The CHOIR is assembled: nine people, including Darlene and Margaret. Pastor Ledbetter sits watching. Brother Dale stands at the front with a pitch pipe, looking mildly panicked.

BROTHER DALE
Alright saints and semi-saints, let's try "Amazing Grace" one more time. And Brenda, bless your heart, maybe aim for the same key as everyone else?

Soprano BRENDA huffs.

BRENDA
I'm singing it the way the Lord intended.

BROTHER DALE
The Lord intended harmony, Brenda. Not aggravated assault.

The door opens. Marty steps in, guitar case in hand. Everyone turns. Brother Dale's face lights up.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
Brother Mystery! You came! And you brought your guitar!

MARTY
Hi, everyone. I'm Marty.

Marty sets the case down, opens it.

BRENDA
We don't do guitars here. This is a hymn choir.

BROTHER DALE
Brenda, we also don't do solos, but you've made that your mission.

Marty smirks. Pulls out the guitar.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
(to Marty)
Can you play "Amazing Grace"?

MARTY
In my sleep.

BROTHER DALE
Perfect. Follow along. Try not to show us up too badly.

Marty sits, guitar across his lap. Tunes a string by ear. Brother Dale raises his hands. The choir begins. Off-key, off-tempo, but earnest. Marty strums along. Simple. Steady. G - C - D. The music starts to cohere. Brenda still wails, but now there's structure beneath her chaos. Brother Dale beams.

The door opens. Rachel walks in holding a casserole dish covered in foil. Marty's fingers falter.

RACHEL
(to Brother Dale)
I brought this. For after.

Brother Dale looks between them, delighted.

BROTHER DALE
Sister Rachel! Join us! We've got a full sound now thanks to Brother Mystery here.

Rachel's eyes meet Marty's. The room shrinks.

RACHEL AND MARTY
I didn't know you were...

BROTHER DALE
Well ain't this the Lord's timing! Rachel, grab a chair. Marty, keep strumming. Brenda, keep doing whatever that is.

Rachel hesitates. Then sets down the casserole on a side table. She pulls a folding chair from the stack. Sits across from Marty in the semi-circle. Their eyes lock. Brother Dale raises his hand to count down again.

Marty starts playing the chord progression. Rachel recognizes. This is her song. Rachel starts singing soft, but clear. Marty watches her sing. She watches him play. Her voice starts getting stronger. The rest of the choir fades into background noise. It's just the two of them, playing the same song, ten years too late.

BROTHER DALE (CONT'D)
(whispering to Darlene)
I am LIVING for this drama.

DARLENE
Jesus.

Margaret shakes her head. The music swells.

EXT. CHURCH PARKING LOT - LATER

Rehearsal over. People trickle out. Laughter. Goodbyes. Marty carries his guitar case. Rachel walks beside him, casserole dish in hand. They stop at her car.

RACHEL
You stayed.

MARTY
I stayed.

RACHEL
Steven's not happy about it.

MARTY
I wouldn't be either.

RACHEL
Joey won't stop asking about you.

MARTY
I told him I'd teach him guitar.

Rachel looks at him, conflicted, hopeful, scared.

RACHEL
Marty, you can't just

MARTY
I know. I'm not trying to blow up your life. I'm just trying to not blow up mine for once.

She nods. Sets the casserole on the hood of her car.

RACHEL
Wednesday nights. Here. If you want to see him, it has to be supervised. Public. Nothing that looks like

MARTY
I get it.

RACHEL
And if you leave.

MARTY
I won't.

RACHEL
But if you do.

MARTY
No. I'm gonna try really hard not to.

She studies him. Wants to believe him.

RACHEL
Don’t hurt him, Marty.

MARTY
I would never.

RACHEL
You can teach him. Keep it basic.

She picks up her casserole. Opens her car door.

RACHEL (CONT’D)
Goodnight, Marty.

MARTY
Goodnight, Rach.

She gets in. Starts the engine. Marty watches her drive away. He looks up at the church steeple. Then down at his guitar case. He exhales. Long, slow, like he's been holding his breath for years. Then he walks to his car.

BROTHER DALE (O.S.)
Brother Mystery!

Marty turns. Brother Dale jogs up, slightly winded.

BROTHER DALE (CONT’D)
You did good tonight. Real good. See you next week?

MARTY
Yeah. Next week.

Brother Dale grins, claps him on the shoulder, and heads off. Marty gets in his car. Sits. He pulls out his phone. Opens his NOTES app. Under "STAYING (DRAFT)" he adds:

Wed 7pm - choir (done) next: teach Joey G & C call Mom back don't mess this up

He sets the phone down.

Starts the car. Drives toward the motel as the church lights fade behind him.

Montage:

- Rachel tucking Joey into bed.

- Steven standing in the shower, water running over his bowed head.

- Marty sitting on the edge of the bed playing guitar and writing words as he composes.

MARTY (V.O.)
They say time heals all wounds. Not sure that’s true. Sometimes time just gives you space to say what you never could, and mean it this time. Love doesn’t always leave a mark. But regret does. And if you’re lucky, you get a second shot. At the people. At yourself.

END OF TAG