

Reciprocity
by
Derrick "King June" Ballard Jr.

Part 1: The Fall

Scene 1

INT. APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The room is dimly lit. Rain taps softly against the window. A tense silence hangs in the air. JAMES (30s, passionate, stubborn) stands by the window, arms crossed. DREA (30s, strong-willed, fiery) stands near the couch, fists clenched.

DREA

(voice raised)

You always do this, James! You shut down and expect me to read your damn mind!

JAMES

(shouting)

Because every time I do open up, you twist it and throw it back in my face!

DREA

That's not true! I've fought for us—more than you ever have!

JAMES

Fought? You call this fighting? No, Drea. You don't fight—you control. You push until I break!

DREA

Maybe because I'm tired of carrying the weight alone!

(a beat of silence)

JAMES

Maybe we're just... not meant to work anymore.

DREA

(scoffs)

Maybe we never did.

(Both stare at each other. The anger fades into sadness. The love is still there—but it's buried too deep.)

JAMES

(quietly)

So what now?

DREA

(softly, almost whispering)

We call it... we call it quits.

(She grabs her keys from the table. James doesn't stop her. She walks to the door, hesitates, then exits. The door shuts softly. James stands there, alone, broken.)

FADE OUT.

Scene 2

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT - NIGHT

Dim lighting. The city glows beyond the window. JAMES (early 30s, composed but emotionally guarded) lounges on the couch in sweats, scrolling through his phone with a drink in hand. A low playlist hums in the background.

He stops scrolling. Blinks. Leans forward.

INSERT - PHONE SCREEN

An Instagram story from DREA:

"Funny how someone can love you in private, lie to you in person, and embarrass you in the end. Glad I dodged that one. ☐ #BreakupSeason #TruthWillSetYouFree"

James taps back to see the previous story – a subtle selfie with red eyes, mascara slightly smudged. Then another post with:

"Lesson learned: Never trust a man who builds himself up by tearing you down."

BACK TO SCENE

James slowly lowers the phone, stunned. He takes a long sip from his glass, then rubs his hand over his face.

JAMES

(speaking to himself)

Wow... so this is how we're doing it now?

Phone buzzes. A message from a mutual friend:

"Hey bro... just saw Drea's post. You good?"

Another buzz – a text from his cousin:

"Yo, she put y'all whole breakup on blast."

James tosses the phone on the couch. Stands. Paces. His face hardens.

JAMES

(slightly louder)

Nah. You don't get to rewrite the story like that. You don't get to play the victim when you were just as reckless.

He stops pacing, stares at the phone. Contemplates responding publicly. His thumb hovers over the app. Then... he sets it down again.

Silence.

JAMES

(sighs)

Nah. Not like this.

He looks out the window. The city keeps moving. He exhales and walks away from the phone – not because he's weak, but because he's trying to be better.

FADE OUT.

Scene 3

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – MORNING

Light pours in through the blinds. The kitchen is clean but quiet. James, still in sweats and a hoodie, pours coffee into a mug. His phone rings on the counter.

CALLER ID: MOM ☐☐

He picks up, answering with a tired tone.

JAMES

Hey, Ma.

INTERCUT – SARAH’S KITCHEN

SARAH (50s, warm but no-nonsense, the type to love you and check you in the same breath) stirs a pot of oatmeal while holding her phone between her ear and shoulder.

SARAH

Boy, don’t “Hey, Ma” me like you just woke up. It’s past nine.

JAMES

(chuckles)

I’ve been up. Just... movin’ slow.

SARAH

Mm-hmm. Still sulking over Drea?

JAMES

I’m not sulking. Just... resetting.

SARAH

Reset faster. That girl moved on already — probably with a soft launch post and a new man with a beard.

JAMES

(laughs)

Ma, really?

SARAH

Yes, really. You sittin' around when you should be bouncing back. I know you. When's the last time you went to the gym?

JAMES

It's been a minute.

SARAH

Exactly. You need to get that body moving again. Get back in shape — not for her, but for you. Sweat out that heartbreak.

JAMES

(sighs, smirking)

Okay, okay. I'll hit the gym this week.

SARAH

Today. Not "this week." And while you're at it, eat something green. Not those fried things you call dinner.

JAMES

What if I told you I had a spinach smoothie yesterday?

SARAH

I'd tell you to stop lying to your mother.

They both laugh. The mood lightens.

SARAH

And don't forget to network. Go to events. Shake hands. Make moves. Drea wasn't the only good thing in your life.

JAMES

You sound like my manager.

SARAH

I am your manager — of common sense and comeback strategies.

James smiles, genuinely moved.

JAMES

Appreciate you, Ma. For real.

SARAH

You're my son. I raised a king, not a couch potato. Now go glow up. And maybe... talk to that nice girl at your gym with the curly hair.

JAMES

Ma...

SARAH

What? I'm just saying — she smiled at you twice. That's a green light.

JAMES

(laughing)

Alright, alright. I hear you.

SARAH

Good. Now text me a selfie from the gym or I'm calling back.

JAMES

(chuckling)

Deal.

FADE OUT.

Scene 4

INT. BARBERSHOP – EARLY EVENING

The shop is winding down for the day. Clippers buzz faintly in the background.

KINGSTON and DANIEL sit in two chairs near the back, fresh cuts, waiting on James, who's running late — again.

DANIEL

(checks his watch)

Man, James is never this late. You notice that?

KINGSTON

Been noticing a lot about him lately. Dude ain't himself.

DANIEL

Facts. His energy's all over the place. He'll show up to kick it, but he's not there. Like mentally... he's stuck in rewind.

KINGSTON

You mean stuck on Drea?

DANIEL

Exactly. And I get it, man. That breakup was messy. But she's living her life. Meanwhile, he's over here moving like a ghost of who he was.

KINGSTON

I know. The hustle used to be nonstop. He was in the gym, working on music, painting. Now he just... spirals. Quietly.

DANIEL

We gotta get him back, bro. I'm tired of seeing him shrink.

KINGSTON

Maybe we take him out — somewhere he can feel like again. Not a rebound, not a pity party. Just... recharge the battery. him

DANIEL

You thinking something chill or something wild?

KINGSTON

A mix. Weekend trip? New space, new people, no "Drea memories" on every block.

DANIEL

I like that. He needs a reset. Real talk? I was even thinking about setting him up with one of Milan's friends, but—

KINGSTON

(shaking his head)

He's not ready. Not emotionally. Not until he's good with again. Otherwise it's just a distraction. himself

They both pause, thoughtful. The weight of their friend's pain sits between them.

DANIEL

What else can we do?

KINGSTON

Keep showing up. Keep pulling him into the light. Remind him of who he was her. The James that had vision — had fire. before

DANIEL

Word. We remind him he's still guy. He just forgot. that

Just then, the barbershop door opens. JAMES walks in, hoodie up, eyes tired but trying to smile.

JAMES

Sorry, y'all. Ran late. Long day.

KINGSTON

(grins, standing up)

Long weekend coming, too. Pack a bag. You're coming with us.

JAMES

Wait, what?

DANIEL

No arguments. Just trust the brothers that know you best.

James raises an eyebrow, confused but curious. They pat him on the back, leading him toward the door – both hopeful this trip might be the spark he needs.

FADE OUT.

Scene 5

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT

James, freshly showered and dressed to impress—button-up, clean sneakers—looks at himself in the mirror. A vibe of subtle confidence. He grabs his phone and calls.

INT. DANIEL'S PLACE – CONTINUOUS

DANIEL (early 30s, charismatic, the life of any party) lounges on the couch watching basketball highlights. His phone buzzes. He answers on speaker.

DANIEL

Yo!

JAMES

What's good, bro? You still tryna slide to that party tonight?

DANIEL

Hell yeah. You finally crawled out the breakup cave?

JAMES

(smirks)

Something like that. I need some new energy, man.

DANIEL

Say less. I'll scoop you in 30. Be ready. I'm tryna see what the vibes lookin' like.

JAMES

Bet. Let's make it a good one.

EXT. HOUSE PARTY – NIGHT

A lively crowd spills out onto the porch. Music bumps inside. Colored lights flash through the windows. Daniel and James walk up, dap up a few people. The atmosphere is light, fun, magnetic.

INT. HOUSE PARTY – LATER

The party is in full swing. People laugh, dance, and mingle. James chats with an old friend in the corner. Daniel walks toward the drink table... and locks eyes with MILAN (late 20s, glowing confidence, effortless style) pouring herself a drink.

A beat of electric silence between them.

DANIEL

(grinning)

You always make drinks look that good, or is it just tonight?

MILAN

(smiling back)

That depends. You always open with recycled lines?

DANIEL

Only when they work.

She laughs. Instant chemistry. They lean in closer—both clearly interested.

MILAN

I'm Milan.

DANIEL

Daniel. And now I'm glad I showed up tonight.

MILAN

(raising her cup)

Cheers to timing.

They clink glasses. Music swells. James watches from a distance, smiling at the connection sparking before his eyes. He sips his drink, relaxed—finally enjoying the moment.

FADE OUT.

Scene 6

INT. DANIEL & MILAN'S LIVING ROOM - EVENING

A cozy, intimate space. Dim lighting. Soft R&B plays in the background. MILAN is curled up on the couch with a blanket and a glass of wine. DANIEL walks in from the kitchen with snacks and plops down beside her.

MILAN

Don't spill that popcorn, babe.

DANIEL

I made it with love — not coordination.

They laugh. After a beat, Daniel grows a little more serious. He takes a breath, glancing at Milan.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Can I talk to you about something real?

MILAN

Always. What's up?

DANIEL

It's James. I've just been thinking about him a lot lately. He's been doing better on the surface... but I know my boy. Something's still missing.

MILAN

You mean, like... relationship-wise?

DANIEL

Exactly. He's healing, yeah. He's doing the self-work. But I can tell — he still carries a weight. Like the right kind of companionship could help him... not save him, just him. balance

Milan listens, nodding gently.

MILAN

That kind of pain takes time, Daniel. You know that. He's been through a lot.

DANIEL

Yeah. But I also think he's ready for someone who isn't going to tear him down. Someone kind, grounded... someone who can meet him where he is.

He hesitates for a second, then leans in.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

So I was thinking... maybe you could, I don't know, introduce him to one of your friends?

Milan raises an eyebrow, amused.

MILAN

You tryna play matchmaker now?

DANIEL

(laughing)

No, I'm tryna play wingman with a wife who has great taste in people.

Milan smiles, thinking it over.

MILAN

I mean... I might have someone in mind. She's not dramatic, she's got a real career, she's smart, spiritual... and she's not on a mission to destroy men for sport.

DANIEL

Perfect. That's the exact dating app filter he have. doesn't

They both laugh again, the mood lightening.

MILAN

Alright. I'll feel her out, see if she's open to meeting him casually — no pressure. Just vibes.

DANIEL

That's all he needs. A good vibe. A fresh start.

Milan leans her head on Daniel's shoulder.

MILAN

You're a good friend.

DANIEL

I just want to see him win — in love this time, not just in life.

FADE OUT.

Scene 7

INT. DANA & RYAN'S LIVING ROOM – EVENING

The room is quiet. DANA and RYAN sit on the couch while JAMES JR. (about 10 years old, thoughtful) sits across from them, legs swinging from a chair. The air feels heavy — something is on his mind.

JAMES JR.

(softly)

Can I ask you something?

DANA

(surprised)

Of course, baby. What's on your mind?

James Jr. looks down, then back up at them with innocent, searching eyes.

JAMES JR.

Why don't y'all really like my dad?

Dana and Ryan exchange a quick glance, caught off guard. Neither speaks immediately.

RYAN

(stumbling)

It's not that we don't like him...

DANA

(cutting in, gently)

Your father... he's just complicated.

JAMES JR.

(confused)

But he's still my dad. He tries. He talks about me all the time when I'm with him.

Silence.

JAMES JR.

Y'all get weird when I bring him up. I can tell.

Ryan leans forward, sighs.

RYAN

We just... we want what's best for you. And sometimes... grown-ups have history. Things that are hard to explain.

DANA

Your dad made choices that hurt people, including me. But that doesn't mean he doesn't love you.

James Jr. processes this, quiet for a beat.

JAMES JR.

I just don't want to feel like I gotta pick sides.

Dana's face softens. She moves beside her son and puts her arm around him.

DANA

You never have to do that, okay? We love you. And no matter what, your dad is your dad.

RYAN

And we'll support your relationship with him — even if we're not the biggest fans.

James Jr. nods slowly, still processing but relieved to be heard.

FADE OUT.

Scene 8

INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE – LATE AFTERNOON

A calm, softly lit space. Books line the walls. Plants in every corner. JAMES sits on a plush couch across from MELISSA, mid-40s, calm energy, notebook in hand. A diffuser hums faintly in the background.

MELISSA

So James... tell me, why are you here today?

JAMES

(sighs)

Because I'm tired. Mentally, emotionally... creatively. I feel like I'm always trying to climb out of something.

MELISSA

That's honest. And heavy. Let's break some of that down. Are you climbing out... or running from?

JAMES

(quiet)

Maybe both. Relationships, disappointments, my past... I keep trying to fix everything, but I'm the one ending up empty.

MELISSA *nods, listening deeply.*

MELISSA

And who's been pouring into you?

James doesn't answer. The silence says enough.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

James, self-preservation isn't selfish — it's survival. You've been bleeding emotionally and handing out bandages to everyone else. No wonder you're exhausted.

JAMES

I never thought about it like that.

MELISSA

You don't need to earn rest. Or prove your worth to people who only love you in pieces. Your value doesn't depend on how much of yourself you give away.

JAMES

(nods slowly)

I guess I've always felt like... if I'm not doing something for someone, I'm not doing enough.

MELISSA

That belief? It's not love — it's performance. And you deserve a life where you're not auditioning just to be accepted.

James leans back, taking that in. A small moment of peace settles in his body.

JAMES

So how do I start preserving myself?

MELISSA

Start small. Boundaries. Honest reflection. Time for yourself that isn't tied to productivity. And above all — start speaking to yourself the way you wish others did.

James smiles faintly, something loosening in his spirit.

JAMES

Thank you... for real.

MELISSA

You're welcome. And James — healing doesn't have a deadline. But now, you've taken the first real step.

FADE OUT.

Scene 9

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT

The living room is cozy, with a game on mute in the background. James and Daniel sit on the couch — pizza box open, drinks half-full. James scrolls through his phone, unimpressed.

JAMES

Bro, these dating apps are all cap. Same poses, same bios, same filters.

DANIEL

(smirking)

You just mad because you're swiping like a hater. Let me see your profile.

Daniel leans over. James pulls his phone away like a teenager hiding text messages.

JAMES

Chill. I got it.

DANIEL

You tryna bounce back, right? Get back in the game. You don't have to marry 'em — just connect.

JAMES

(sighs)

Alright, alright. One hour. After that, I'm deleting the app.

DANIEL

Deal. Now swipe with an open mind, not a bitter heart.

INT. JAMES' BEDROOM – LATER

The room is dimly lit. James lays on his bed, scrolling with one hand, half-interested – until he freezes.

INSERT – PHONE SCREEN

A dating profile appears:

NAME: Naomi

AGE: 30

Bio: "Lover of books, long conversations, and loud laughs. If you have emotional intelligence and good music taste... we might just be something."

Photos: Natural beauty, stylish, one picture holding a vinyl record.

BACK TO SCENE

James sits up, focused. He rereads the profile, then slowly swipes right.

A pause... then:

MATCHED!

His eyes widen. A subtle smile forms.

INT. JAMES' LIVING ROOM – LATER THAT NIGHT

James is now on the phone, pacing slightly, nervous but engaged. His voice is softer, more present.

JAMES

So you really collect vinyl?

INTERCUT – INT. NAOMI'S APARTMENT – NIGHT

NAOMI (30s, intelligent, calm energy, a quiet fire behind her eyes) sits cross-legged on her couch, phone to her ear, smiling.

NAOMI

Absolutely. Music feels different when you play it on wax. It's like... more alive.

JAMES

I feel that. That's rare though. Most people just... stream and skip.

NAOMI

Yeah, well, I don't skip connection. Or conversations.

James pauses, genuinely intrigued. His walls start to fall.

JAMES

Neither do I. Not anymore.

They both laugh. The energy is natural. A spark forming slowly, but real.

INT. JAMES' BEDROOM – LATER

James hangs up the phone, laying back in bed, staring at the ceiling with a soft smile.

JAMES (V.O.)

Maybe this time... it'll be different.

FADE OUT.

Scene 10

EXT. ROOFTOP GARDEN – SUNSET

Soft golden light kisses the city skyline. String lights twinkle above. A private rooftop has been transformed into a small romantic haven – candles flicker, flowers bloom. Music plays gently from a Bluetooth speaker.

DANIEL stands near the edge of the rooftop, adjusting his blazer, slightly nervous but smiling.

He checks his watch, then looks toward the entrance.

The door opens. MILAN steps in, surprised by the setup.

MILAN

(stunned)

Daniel... what is this?

DANIEL

(grinning)

Just something I've been thinking about... for a while now.

Milan slowly walks over, taking in the view, the warmth, the love in the air.

MILAN

(softly)

This is beautiful...

DANIEL

And so are you. Every day I've known you, you've reminded me what peace feels like.
What love feels like. really

Milan's eyes begin to glisten.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

I know it hasn't been long. Some people would call this crazy — reckless even. But I've never been more sure of anything in my life.

He slowly gets down on one knee. Milan gasps, covering her mouth in shock and emotion.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Milan... I don't want to wait for the "right time" — I want to create the right life. With you.

He opens a small velvet box, revealing a simple but elegant ring.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Will you marry me?

The music fades under the sound of Milan's heartbeat pounding in her ears.

MILAN

(tears falling, smiling)

Yes... yes, Daniel. I will.

Daniel slips the ring on her finger. They embrace tightly, both emotional.

The skyline glows behind them as the moment seals itself in time.

FADE OUT.

Scene 11

INT. GYM – DAY

A row of weights clanks in rhythm. House music hums in the background. The gym is active but not packed. JAMES (30s, locked-in, leaner than before) finishes a set of bench presses. KINGSTON (30s, solid build, focused energy) spots him, nodding in approval.

KINGSTON

That's what I'm talkin' about. You back on your beast mode.

JAMES

(grabbing his water)

Trying, bro. Just needed to shake off the distractions.

KINGSTON

(raising an eyebrow)

Distractions? You mean women?

JAMES

(smirks)

I ain't saying names... but yeah.

KINGSTON

(chuckles)

Man, forget all that. This is your season to build — your body, your mind, your business. Not to be out here chasing feelings.

JAMES

Exactly. I been too caught up, man. Heartbreak will have you losing time and momentum.

KINGSTON

Facts. You think these million-dollar moves come from pillow talk and late-night texts? Nah. They come from focus. From hunger.

JAMES

Dead serious. I'm back to writing out goals, hitting the gym, booking meetings... not scrolling through old photos and playing "what if."

KINGSTON

There you go. Love'll come when it's time. Right now, we on grind mode. Tunnel vision. No shortcuts.

They bump fists. Kingston loads more plates on the bar.

KINGSTON (CONT'D)

Now stop talkin' and get under this weight. Heavy reps, heavy mindset.

JAMES

Let's work.

James lies back on the bench, eyes set. No distractions. Just the mission.

FADE OUT.

Scene 12

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – EVENING

The apartment is clean, dimly lit, mellow music playing. JAMES (early 30s, casually dressed) is in the kitchen chopping veggies, clearly mid-meal prep. A knock at the door.

JAMES

Coming!

He wipes his hands and walks over. Opens the door to see DANIEL (early 30s, glowing with energy) standing beside MILAN (late 20s, radiant and smiling), both dressed nicely, practically glowing.

JAMES

(grinning)

Well damn, y'all came dressed like you heading to a magazine cover shoot.

DANIEL

Nah, bro... we came to drop a bomb.

*Milan subtly lifts her left hand – a sparkling **wedding rings** shines under the light.*

MILAN

Surprise.

JAMES

(stunned)

Wait... y'all got married?

DANIEL

(smiling wide)

Married, bro. Courthouse, yesterday. Kept it low-key but real. No delays, no drama – just love.

JAMES

(stepping back, letting them in)

Yo... that's wild. I mean — congrats! Like for real. I'm happy for y'all.

They step inside. Hugs are exchanged. James still processing.

JAMES (CONT'D)

So what happened to “taking it slow,” huh?

DANIEL

Man, sometimes you just know. Life's short. She's the one. Why wait?

MILAN

He stopped looking for perfect timing and just chose us.

James nods, clearly moved but trying not to show it too much.

JAMES

Okay... y'all got me out here feeling single as hell.

DANIEL

That's kinda why we here, too.

MILAN

(joking)

Consider this... an intervention.

JAMES

(laughs)

Aw hell.

DANIEL

Listen man, I know the last one took a chunk out of you. But you're not broken. You're just... paused. It's time to press play again.

MILAN

The right woman's not gonna distract you from your purpose — she's gonna align with it.

JAMES

(deep breath)

Yeah... I hear y'all. Just don't know if I'm ready to jump back in yet.

DANIEL

No one's saying marry the next one tomorrow. Just open up again. Date. Talk. Live. Let the idea of love back in the room.

Beat. James nods slowly. He looks down at the knife and cutting board, then back up at them.

JAMES

Alright. I'll open the app back up.

MILAN

(laughing)

That's a start.

DANIEL

Who knows? Maybe six months from now, we'll be standing at your wedding talking about

how you "just knew."

JAMES

(half-smiling)

One step at a time, married man.

They all laugh. Camera pans out as they gather in the kitchen — a moment of warmth, hope, and renewed faith in timing.

FADE OUT.

Scene 13

EXT. MIDDLE SCHOOL PLAYGROUND – LATE AFTERNOON

The schoolyard is mostly empty now. JAMES JR. (10) and his best friend TERRY (10) sit on the swings, backpacks on the ground. The sun is beginning to set.

James Jr. slowly kicks at the dirt with his sneaker, clearly deep in thought. Terry looks over, sensing something's off.

TERRY

You good, man? You been quiet since lunch.

JAMES JR.

(still looking down)

Can I ask you something... kinda weird?

TERRY

Weird's my specialty.

James Jr. smirks, but his eyes are serious.

JAMES JR.

Why do I have a different last name than my mom and Ryan?

TERRY

(pause)

Wait... you just noticed that?

JAMES JR.

I mean, I knew it, but I didn't think it mattered before. Now it just... feels weird. Like, I don't really know where I come from.

Terry takes a moment, trying to be thoughtful.

TERRY

Well... maybe that's your name, right? dad's

JAMES JR.

Yeah. James McCall. But no one really talks about him. My mom shuts it down every time. Ryan just acts like I don't need to ask.

TERRY

That sucks. But... maybe you should still find out for yourself. Like, your dad really is. Not what everybody else says. who

JAMES JR.

You think it's okay to want to know? Even if they don't?

TERRY

It's more than okay. It's your name, bro. Your story. You deserve to know all the pieces.

James Jr. nods slowly, taking that in.

JAMES JR.

You ever think about stuff like this?

TERRY

All the time. I don't know my dad either. But I know I'm more than just the people who raised me. So are you. do

They sit quietly as the wind rustles the swings a bit.

TERRY (CONT'D)

Maybe it's time you ask the questions they don't wanna answer.

James Jr. stares up at the sky, a new resolve building in his eyes.

JAMES JR.

Yeah... maybe it is.

FADE OUT.

Scene 14

INT. FREYA'S LIVING ROOM – EVENING

The room is warm and tastefully decorated. FREYA (mid-50s, elegant, direct, but loving) sits on the couch with a cup of tea. DREA (early 30s, stylish, guarded) scrolls through her phone, curled in the opposite armchair.

There's a long silence before Freya finally speaks – her tone calm, but intentional.

FREYA

I saw what you posted about James.

Drea doesn't look up.

DREA

(scoffs)

Yeah? So did everybody else.

FREYA

Exactly.

DREA

It's not like I said anything that wasn't true.

FREYA

But you said it to hurt him. And you said it publicly. That makes it wrong, Drea — even if it was true.

Drea finally looks up, defensive.

DREA

He hurt me first, Mom. You don't know the half.

FREYA

I don't have to know every detail to know that revenge disguised as a "truth post" isn't healing. That wasn't about closure — that was about control.

DREA

(sinking a bit)

I was angry.

FREYA

Anger is human. But weaponizing that anger — especially against his business? You crossed a line. What if someone did that to you?

Drea doesn't respond. Her expression softens — guilt creeping in beneath the surface.

FREYA (CONT'D)

You're better than that. And if you really want peace — the kind that lasts — you need to own that you went too far. Apologize. Not because he's perfect, but because want to grow. you

Drea looks away, emotional but stubborn.

DREA

What if he doesn't forgive me?

FREYA

That's not your job. Your job is to do the thing — even when it's uncomfortable. right

Freya leans forward, her voice gentle now.

FREYA (CONT'D)

Closure isn't just about ending something — it's about ending it well.

Drea exhales deeply. She knows her mother is right.

DREA

(low)

I'll think about it.

FREYA

I hope you'll on it. That's the woman I raised. act

They sit in quiet reflection as Drea puts her phone down, her mind beginning to shift from defense to responsibility.

FADE OUT.

Scene 15

INT. JAMES' STUDIO – NIGHT

Soft ambient light spills from a single lamp. An unfinished **canvas** stands tall on an easel. Paint tubes scattered across the table. Brushes dry. The room is quiet – too quiet. The hum of the city outside barely filters in.

JAMES (early 30s, usually composed but clearly worn down tonight) stands in front of the canvas, brush in hand. He stares at it – like it's fighting back.

CLOSE ON – CANVAS

Only a few light strokes. Nothing complete. The energy is missing.

James sighs deeply. He dips the brush in blue paint. Raises it... then hesitates. His hand trembles slightly. He lowers it. Frustrated.

JAMES

(to himself)

Come on. You've done this a hundred times.

He wipes his hands on his shirt and walks across the room. Stares out the window for a beat. The city lights blink back at him – indifferent. He grabs his phone and opens **Drea's old message thread**. Scrolls. Stops.

INSERT – PHONE SCREEN

"I believed in you more than you believed in yourself."

"I just couldn't wait forever for you to show up emotionally."

James locks the phone. Tosses it onto the couch.

Silence.

He sits on the edge of a chair, elbows on knees, head in hands. The weight of it all is heavy. The

breakup. The loneliness. The deadline. The doubt.

JAMES

(soft, bitter)

How am I supposed to make something beautiful... when I feel this empty?

Beat. He gets up suddenly. Walks back to the canvas. Picks up a brush with slight defiance. Puts one stroke down. Then another. But it's erratic. Not inspired —angry.

He stops. Throws the brush against the wall. It leaves a streak of red paint like a wound on white plaster.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Damn it.

He backs away from the canvas, now breathing heavily, eyes damp. Sits down in the corner of the room, under the shadow of his own expectations.

The camera lingers on him — a man stuck between talent and trauma, aching to create but too

heartbroken to move.

FADE OUT.

Scene 16

INT. DANA'S LIVING ROOM – EVENING

The room is modest but cozy. Family photos line the walls. JAMES (early 30s, tense, frustrated) stands near the doorway. DANA (late 20s, guarded, firm) sits on the couch, arms crossed. RYAN (mid-40s, imposing, cold) leans against the wall, arms folded.

JAMES

(calm but firm)

I came here to talk about James Jr. You know I want to be part of his life.

DANA

(cutting)

You think that's the problem? It's about respect. And responsibility.

RYAN

(flat, stern)

Respect means paying what you owe. The trust fund is not optional.

JAMES

(breathes deeply)

You're telling me I can't see my son unless I pay into some trust fund you set up?

DANA

It's not just some trust fund. It's for James Jr.'s future. And right now, you're not contributing.

JAMES

(voice rising)

I'm working on getting back on my feet. You know that.

RYAN

(sharply)

That's not good enough. We're done with excuses.

JAMES

This isn't just about money. It's about my son. You're punishing him by punishing me.

DANA

(angry)

We're protecting him—from you.

JAMES

(profoundly hurt)

You don't get to decide who my son calls "Dad."

RYAN

(stern)

Until you meet your obligations, your access is limited.

James clenches his fists, fighting to stay composed.

JAMES

You want money? Fine. But you won't break this bond over it.

DANA

(sad, but resolute)

Then prove it. Not just with words. With action.

James looks at Dana and Ryan – torn, frustrated, but determined.

JAMES

I'll do what I have to. For James Jr.

Ryan nods curtly. Dana's expression softens just a little.

RYAN

Good. That's all we're asking.

The tension lingers as James turns toward the door, a heavy weight on his shoulders but a flicker of resolve in his eyes.

FADE OUT.

Scene 17

INT. UPSCALE CAFE – AFTERNOON

Sunlight pours in through large windows. DREA and her best friend VICTORIA sit at a cozy table near the back, sipping mimosas. Drea's in full glam — nails done, energy high, but her words are sharp.

DREA

(laughing)

Girl, I saw James the other day on that little podcast of his... looking tired. Broke. Like life's chewing him up.

VICTORIA

(sipping slowly)

Mmm.

DREA

(leaning in, mocking)

All that “I’m an artist, I’m healing” talk. Boy, please. Healing? He looks like he’s about to lose everything — his apartment, his mind, his little “career.”

VICTORIA

(flatly)

You sound... proud of that.

DREA

(defensive)

I’m not proud. I’m just saying — karma’s moving. He made his bed. I’m just watching him lie in it.

VICTORIA

(raising an eyebrow)

Or you’re watching because you still care. That laugh? That energy? It ain’t giving “over it.”

DREA

(scoffs)

Girl, don't do that. I'm just keeping it real.

VICTORIA

No, you're keeping it. Look, I get it. He hurt you. But clowning him like this? That's not healing. That's ego. petty

Drea looks away, suddenly quiet.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)

You act like him losing makes you win. But it doesn't. It just shows you're still holding on.

DREA

(softly)

I gave that man years. And he made me feel invisible. I watched him chase everything except me.

VICTORIA

And now you're still chasing— with your words, your bitterness. That's not closure, Drea. That's a trap. him

Drea blinks, caught off guard by the truth hitting her chest.

VICTORIA (CONT'D)

You're better than that. You don't need to watch him fall. You need to rise. For you.

Beat of silence. Drea looks down at her drink, suddenly less amused, more reflective.

FADE OUT.

Scene 18

EXT. OUTDOOR BASKETBALL COURT – LATE AFTERNOON

A golden sunset bleeds across the sky. JAMES, KINGSTON, and DANIEL play a casual game of 3-on-3. The ball hits the pavement with rhythm as sweat and laughter mix with

frustration.

James bricks a jumper and groans.

KINGSTON

(laughing)

Bruh, that rim is allergic to your shot.

DANIEL

(half-joking)

Just like Naomi was allergic to loyalty.

James glares at him.

JAMES

Real mature, man.

KINGSTON

Nah but for real... that whole situation? You dodged a bullet.

JAMES

(sighs)

Then why does it still feel like it hit me?

They all pause, catching their breath. Kingston bounces the ball slowly, thoughtful.

KINGSTON

'Cause love don't care about logic. We give real, and sometimes they play fake.

DANIEL

Facts. Nowadays? Most of these women out here treating relationships like resumes — what can you for me? How much can you do give?

JAMES

I just wanted something real, man. Not a contract with hidden terms.

KINGSTON

Exactly. We love hard, we build, and sometimes they use that as leverage. Manipulate your kindness, flip your flaws, and dip when it's inconvenient.

DANIEL

And half of 'em already got somebody in their inbox ready to replace you the minute you slip.

James sits on the bench, towel over his head, trying to mask the discouragement.

JAMES

So what, we just stop trusting? Stop trying?

KINGSTON

Nah. We stop over-giving. We stop losing ourselves to prove we're worthy of them.

DANIEL

Bro, you the prize too. Don't let one woman who couldn't see your value make you forget who you are. are

Beat. The words hit James. He nods slowly.

JAMES

I hear y'all. I do. It's just... hard to rebuild from this.

KINGSTON

Then start small. Hit the gym. Paint something. Write. Laugh. Heal. And when you're whole again — you won't needsomebody to complete you.

DANIEL

And when the one comes, she won't compete with your peace — she'll add to it. right

James finally cracks a genuine smile.

JAMES

Alright... enough TED Talks. Who's next to catch this L?

KINGSTON

Let's run it.

They laugh, get back on the court, the sound of the bouncing ball syncing with a sense of brotherhood, healing, and hope.

FADE OUT.

Scene 19

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT

James sits at his cluttered kitchen table, laptop open, phone beside him. He's trying to pay his rent online. He clicks "Submit Payment" – a loading icon spins. Then a message pops up:

ON SCREEN:

"Payment Declined."

James frowns, clicks again. Same result.

JAMES

(frustrated)

What the hell?

He grabs his phone and calls his bank's customer service.

INT. BANK CUSTOMER SERVICE OFFICE (INTERCUT) – CONTINUOUS**BANK REP (V.O.)**

Thank you for calling, how can I assist you today?

JAMES

Hey, I'm trying to pay rent but my card keeps getting declined. I checked my balance – there's definitely enough funds.

BANK REP (V.O.)

I see a recent chargeback on your account. A payment dispute filed by one of your clients. That's why the hold was placed.

JAMES

Chargeback? On what?

BANK REP (V.O.)

It appears a client named Keith disputed a payment. The amount has been temporarily deducted from your available balance pending investigation.

JAMES

(sighs)

Keith? That can't be right. I tried to reach him — no answer. Actually, he blocked me.

BANK REP (V.O.)

Unfortunately, we can't release the hold until the dispute is resolved.

JAMES

(pounding the table lightly)

Man, this is bullshit.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT

James ends the call, leans back in his chair, rubbing his temples.

JAMES

(to himself)

Great... rent's due tomorrow and Keith's playing ghost.

He pulls out his phone, tries calling Keith again — goes straight to voicemail. He tries texting — "Please call me back about the payment." No reply.

JAMES

(bitter)

Blocked. Figures.

He stares at the screen, worried, desperate, trapped by someone else's move.

JAMES (CONT'D)

(whispers)

How am I supposed to fix this if you won't talk to me?

The camera lingers on James' face — frustration mixed with determination — the pressure mounting.

FADE OUT.

Scene 20

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – EARLY MORNING

Darkness. The room is silent except for the relentless ringing of James' phone on the nightstand. The screen shows multiple missed calls from "DANIEL."

James, tangled in sheets, stirs but doesn't move. The phone continues to ring.

Finally, James groans, reaches out, and answers—voice groggy.

JAMES

(gruff, half-asleep)

Daniel? What's going on?

DANIEL (V.O.)

(urgent, breathless)

Bro, you gotta wake up. Some rumor about you just started going viral—Drea's behind it. It's all over social media, man.

JAMES

(sitting up slowly, confused)

Drea? What rumor?

DANIEL (V.O.)

Not exactly sure, but it's bad. People tagging you, screenshots flying everywhere. Your business is getting hit hard.

JAMES

(sighs heavily, frustrated)

Damn... I'm tired, man. Just let me sleep.

DANIEL (V.O.)

You gotta handle this, James. It's spreading fast.

JAMES

(closing his eyes)

Yeah... yeah, I'll deal with it later.

He ends the call, throws the phone back on the nightstand, and pulls the blanket over his head.

Silence.

James drifts back to sleep, weighed down by the news.

FADE OUT.

Part 2: The Rise

Scene 21

EXT. JAMES' APARTMENT BALCONY – EARLY MORNING

Soft morning light filters through a hazy sky. James stands on the balcony, overlooking the city – quiet, contemplative. His breath visible in the cool air.

He pulls a small lighter from his pocket, about to light a blunt, but hesitates. Instead, he drops it back in his pocket.

He closes his eyes, inhales deeply, and slowly sits cross-legged on the balcony floor.

His breathing slows. His hands rest on his knees. The city noises fade, replaced by a gentle inner silence.

JAMES (V.O.)

(soft, tired)

I don't even feel much anymore. Just numb... like I'm watching life pass me by.

The faint sound of his mother's voice drifts through his memory – warm but firm.

SARAH (V.O.)

You need to build a closer relationship with God, James. Pray. Meditate. Find your peace.

James opens his eyes, looks up to the sky. He folds his hands and bows his head, beginning a quiet prayer.

JAMES

(whispering)

Please... give me strength. Help me feel again.

His eyes glisten but hold no tears yet. The city hums around him, indifferent.

He breathes in deeply, closes his eyes again, trying to surrender to the moment.

JAMES (V.O.)

Maybe this is the last option. Maybe it's the only way out of this numbness.

Camera slowly pulls back, leaving James sitting alone on the balcony – vulnerable, searching.

FADE OUT.

Scene 22

INT. COFFEE SHOP – DAY

JAMES sits across from LISA (late 20s, stylish but self-absorbed). She scrolls through her phone, barely engaged.

LISA

So, like, I'm really all about the 'gram. If you're not posting me, what's the point?

JAMES

(trying to stay polite)

I value real connection more than likes.

LISA

(smirks)

That's cute, but honestly, if you can't boost my follower count, I'm out.

James forces a smile, shakes his head slightly.

INT. RESTAURANT – NIGHT

JAMES sits with TIA (early 30s, opinionated). She's on a soapbox about social media drama.

TIA

Everyone's just fake. I mean, if he doesn't have a million followers, what's he even worth?

JAMES

(sighs)

That's not how I measure people.

TIA

Well, you should. The world's changed, James.

James looks drained.

INT. ART GALLERY – EVENING

JAMES stands with AMYA (late 20s, ambitious but cynical). She glances at his work, then back at him.

AMYA

Look, I'm all about the hustle. If you're not making six figures, what's the point of dating?

JAMES

I'm working on building my career — not just chasing numbers.

AMYA

(scoffs)

Good luck with that. I need stability.

James clenches his jaw, frustrated.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT

James sits alone, staring out the window, exhausted and disillusioned.

JAMES (V.O.)

(quiet, bitter)

Maybe it's me... or maybe the right one just isn't here yet.

FADE OUT.

Scene 23

INT. COZY CAFÉ – AFTERNOON

James and Naomi sit across from each other, sipping coffee. The mood is light, laughter flowing easily.

NAOMI

I never thought I'd actually enjoy a first date this much.

JAMES

(smiling)

Neither did I. Feels... different.

NAOMI

Different good or different weird?

JAMES

Definitely good. You're easy to talk to.

They share a genuine smile, eyes locking briefly – something unspoken passes between them.

EXT. PARK – DAY

James and Naomi stroll along a leafy path, leaves crunching beneath their feet. They stop by a small pond.

NAOMI

Remember that vinyl collection I told you about?

JAMES

Yeah, you said you loved the sound of old records.

NAOMI

I thought maybe next time you come over, I'll play some for you.

JAMES

I'd like that.

Naomi looks at him warmly. James hesitates, then gently takes her hand.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT

Soft music plays in the background. James and Naomi sit close on the couch, wrapped in a cozy blanket.

NAOMI

I'm glad we found each other on that app.

JAMES

Me too. It's like... something clicked.

They lean in slowly, sharing a tender kiss.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – LATER

James watches Naomi sleep peacefully. He smiles softly, hope returning to his eyes.

JAMES (V.O.)

Maybe this time... it's real.

FADE OUT.

Let me know if you want to continue their story or add any complications!

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – MORNING

Sunlight streams through the window. James and Naomi share breakfast, laughing softly. The ease between them is palpable.

NAOMI

So, any big plans for today?

JAMES

Got a meeting with a client later. Hoping to close it.

NAOMI

I'll be rooting for you. You've come a long way.

James smiles, grateful.

INT. COFFEE SHOP – AFTERNOON

James sits alone, scrolling through his phone. A social media notification catches his eye – a new post tagging him with a nasty rumor.

He frowns, tension creeping in.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – EVENING

James and Naomi sit together. He hesitates, then shows her the phone.

JAMES

I don't want this to mess with us. But people are talking... about me.

NAOMI

(supportive)

We'll face it together. Don't let this define you.

EXT. PARK – NIGHT

James and Naomi walk hand-in-hand under streetlights.

JAMES

I'm scared this past stuff will keep catching up.

NAOMI

You can't change what happened. But you can decide who you are now.

James squeezes her hand, a renewed sense of hope.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT

James lies awake, staring at the ceiling, Naomi asleep beside him. He breathes deeply, ready to face whatever comes next.

JAMES (V.O.)

For once... maybe I'm not alone.

FADE OUT.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – EVENING

James and Naomi are having dinner. The mood is light until James' phone buzzes. He glances at it, his expression shifts—it's a message from an unknown number.

NAOMI

(concerned)

Everything okay?

JAMES

(shrugs)

Probably just another client. Let me check.

He opens the message. It's a photo of James with his ex, Drea, from months ago, with a cruel caption.

INT. NAOMI'S APARTMENT – NIGHT (FLASHBACK)

Drea is seen angrily typing on her phone, sending the message.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – CONTINUOUS

James looks up, troubled.

NAOMI

Who sent that?

JAMES

(quiet)

Drea. She's trying to stir things up again.

NAOMI

(sighs)

You need to decide how much space she gets in your life.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – LATER

Naomi is packing a small bag.

NAOMI

I'm sorry, James. I want to trust you... but this is hard.

JAMES

(pleading)

Don't leave. I'm trying.

NAOMI

I need some time.

She leaves. James stands alone, devastated but determined.

EXT. CITY STREET – NIGHT

James watches Naomi walk away. He pulls out his phone and dials.

JAMES

(into phone)

Drea... we need to talk.

FADE OUT.

Scene 24

INT. NAOMI'S APARTMENT – LIVING ROOM – EVENING

Candles are lit, wine glasses are half full. NAOMI lounges on the couch with her two close friends, AMBER (bold, outspoken) and GABRIELLE (subtle, judgmental). Music plays softly in the background.

AMBER

(sipping wine)

So, how's it going with Mr. Complicated?

NAOMI

James? It's... I don't know. It's been up and down.

GABRIELLE

(eyeing Naomi carefully)

Girl, you don't sound sure. That's a red flag in itself.

NAOMI

He's trying. He's been through a lot, but he's focused lately. Writing again. Praying. Working on himself.

AMBER

(scoffs)

Please. That's what they say when they're losing you. Don't fall for the "I'm evolving" speech. all

GABRIELLE

How long you supposed to wait while he gets his life together? You're not his rehab, Naomi.

NAOMI

(defensive)

It's not like that. It's deeper.

AMBER

Deeper is how they drag you down. You have a good heart, but you've always made excuses for broken potential.

GABRIELLE

You don't owe him your peace while he finds his. Love isn't supposed to feel like work every day.

Naomi looks down, unsure. She swirls her wine glass slowly.

NAOMI

But when it's good... it's good. really

AMBER

(sincerely, but firm)

Then remember how fast it turns. Ask yourself — does he fill your cup, or drain it?

GABRIELLE

You don't need a man who's still healing. You need one who's whole.

Naomi exhales, her thoughts spinning.

NAOMI

Maybe... maybe I need space to think.

Amber and Gabrielle exchange satisfied glances.

FADE OUT.

Scene 25

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD PARK – LATE AFTERNOON

It's quiet and overcast. Birds chirp faintly in the distance. JAMES sits alone on a bench, hoodie on, staring ahead blankly.

DANIEL and KINGSTON approach from opposite ends, casual but clearly concerned.

DANIEL

(grinning)

There he is. The legend himself.

KINGSTON

Had to make sure you were still breathing, bro.

James forces a faint smile, stands up to greet them. They do quick handshakes and bro-hugs. The energy is light, but James is clearly distant.

JAMES

Appreciate y'all pulling up.

DANIEL

We had to. You been ghosting more than usual.

KINGSTON

You alright?

James shrugs, then sits back down. Daniel and Kingston follow his lead.

JAMES

I'm... here. That's about it.

The three sit in silence for a few moments. The air grows heavy again.

DANIEL

Talk to us, man. What's really going on?

JAMES

(sighs, staring out)

Everything just feels... heavy. Like no matter what I do, I'm stuck under it. Drea's mess, Naomi pulling away, money problems... even my son's starting to ask questions.

Kingston and Daniel exchange a look.

KINGSTON

You don't gotta carry all that by yourself, bro.

DANIEL

You ain't weak for hurting. But you gotta let people in, man. Even us.

JAMES

(tired smile)

It's not about letting people in. It's... I don't know if there's anything left in here worth showing.

Daniel puts a hand on James' shoulder.

DANIEL

That's the pain talking. Not the truth.

KINGSTON

And the truth is — you still standing. Even after all this. That means something.

James looks at them, emotion behind his eyes, but he doesn't let the tears fall.

JAMES

I hear y'all. I do... just don't know how to climb out this time.

DANIEL

One day at a time. One moment. We'll be here for each one.

FADE OUT.

Scene 26

INT. SARAH'S KITCHEN – EARLY EVENING

The kitchen is warm, filled with the smell of fresh herbs and roasted chicken. SARAH, mid-50s, wise-eyed and soft-spoken, pours tea for JAMES, who sits at the table looking emotionally worn.

He stirs his cup but doesn't drink.

SARAH

I've been watching you, baby... You walk in here with a heavy soul. What's going on?

JAMES

(sighs)

It's everything, Ma. Love, work, money... I feel like I'm constantly losing something. Someone. Even myself sometimes.

SARAH

(sitting across from him)

You always carry too much alone. And you act like you gotta be made of steel just because you're a man. But even steel can break if it's bent enough.

JAMES

I try to stay strong. I do. But lately... I feel like I'm just existing. Not living.

Sarah reaches across and holds his hand.

SARAH

You're not weak for feeling that way. You're human. And James, you got more light in you than you realize. I didn't raise you to give up when it gets dark.

JAMES

I don't even know who I am without the pain anymore.

SARAH

Then it's time to reintroduce yourself. Not to the world — but to. The you who dreamed big, who made music that meant something. Who used to wake up excited. you

James looks at her, the corner of his eye holding back tears.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Start small. Wake up early. Eat real food. Go walk in the sun. Write. Pray. And don't chase love — let love find when you're whole again. you

JAMES

(choked voice)

I feel like I failed you, Ma.

SARAH

(shaking her head)

You've never failed me. You're still trying. That means more than anything. But promise me this...

James looks up at her, listening.

SARAH (CONT'D)

Don't build a home inside your sadness. Visit it, feel it, then leave it. There's more ahead of you than behind.

James finally lets a tear fall, nodding slowly.

JAMES

I promise.

Sarah smiles and gets up, moving to hug him from behind.

SARAH

You're my son. You were born with purpose. And I'll remind you every time you forget.

They embrace, the moment tender and restorative. The kitchen is quiet except for the hum of the tea kettle and the beat of a mother's love.

FADE OUT.

Scene 27

INT. DANA & RYAN'S LIVING ROOM - EVENING

The room is quiet. The TV is on low, casting a faint glow across the space. RYAN sits on the couch, thoughtful. DANA walks in from the kitchen drying her hands with a towel. She senses something's on his mind.

DANA

What's up with you? You've been quiet since dinner.

RYAN

(softly)

We need to talk... about James.

DANA

(sighs)

Not tonight, Ryan.

RYAN

No — tonight. especially

Dana pauses, already on edge.

RYAN (CONT'D)

Look... I know how you feel about him. I know the history. But the way we've been handling this? It's not right.

DANA

(defensive)

Excuse me?

RYAN

We're keeping him away from James Jr. Like he doesn't exist. Like he's some danger. He's not.

DANA

(firmly)

He's unreliable. He disappears when it counts. He brings drama. And I refuse to let our son get caught in that.

RYAN

You mean version of him brings drama. People change, Dana. your

DANA

Not James.

RYAN

Maybe not before. But he's trying. I've seen it. And James Jr.? He's questions. You think we're protecting him, but we're just building a wall he'll eventually tear down himself. asking

Dana crosses her arms. Her guard is up.

DANA

He had his chance. He blew it. And now he wants back in because his life's falling apart? I don't buy it.

RYAN

It's not about us. It's about what's best for that boy. You think keeping his father away makes him stronger? It'll make him confused. Resentful.

DANA

And what if James disappoints him? Hurts him?

RYAN

Then we support him through it. But we don't his father from his life just to keep things neat for us. erase

A long silence. Dana turns away, struggling with the truth of his words.

DANA

He doesn't deserve the title of "dad."

RYAN

Maybe not. But James Jr. deserves the to decide that for himself. choice

Dana clenches her jaw, staring out the window, conflicted but unmoved.

FADE OUT.

Scene 28

INT. JAMES' STUDIO – DAY

The room is brighter now, sunlight streaming through the windows. James stands in front of his easel, paintbrush in hand. The unfinished canvas awaits.

His face shows renewed focus and energy. He dips his brush into the paint, making bold, confident strokes.

JAMES

(to himself, quietly)

Alright, let's do this.

He steps back, studying the work with a small smile.

His phone buzzes with a message from Naomi – a heart emoji.

James glances at it, then turns back to the canvas, inspired.

With renewed spirit, he continues painting, the colors coming alive under his brush.

FADE OUT.

Would you like to continue with a scene showing the client's reaction or James sharing this progress with Naomi?

INT. JAMES' STUDIO – DAY

James puts the finishing touches on the vibrant painting. He steps back, satisfied. He grabs his phone and texts Naomi.

JAMES

(texting)

Making progress. Wish you were here to see it.

Seconds later, Naomi's reply pops up:

NAOMI (TEXT)

Can't wait! You're killing it.

James smiles, feeling supported.

INT. CLIENT'S OFFICE – DAY

James stands next to the client, a well-dressed woman in her 40s, as she examines the painting.

LESLIE

Wow, James. This is incredible. You really captured the essence.

JAMES

Thank you. It's been a journey, but I'm proud of it.

LESLIE

I'm glad you pushed through. This piece means a lot to me.

James nods, grateful.

EXT. JAMES' APARTMENT – EVENING

James and Naomi walk hand-in-hand, both smiling.

NAOMI

I'm proud of you.

JAMES

(smiling back)

Couldn't have done it without you.

They share a warm look, hopeful about the future.

FADE OUT.

Scene 29

INT. DANA & RYAN'S LIVING ROOM – NIGHT

The lights are low. A bowl of popcorn sits on the coffee table. DANA and RYAN are on the couch, flipping through channels.

They settle on a film – the title sequence rolls.

TV ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

Tonight's feature: written and directed by James McCall. "The Other Side,"

Dana stiffens instantly. Her face tightens. She snatches the remote and changes the channel without a word.

RYAN

(confused)

Whoa. That was James' film, right? Why'd you change it?

DANA

(coldly)

I don't need to watch stuff. his

RYAN

(turning to her)

Okay... but you looked like you saw a ghost. What's the deal?

DANA

(scoffs)

The deal is I don't want his face or name in my house.

RYAN

(suspicious)

You talk about him like he ruined your life, Dana. I get that y'all share a kid, but that reaction? It felt... personal.

DANA

(defensive)

You think I'm mad because I still have for him? feelings

RYAN

I don't know, do you?

DANA

(frustrated)

Are you serious right now?

RYAN

(leaning forward)

You flinch every time his name comes up. You get tense when James Jr. brings him up. You changed the channel like the man physically walked in the room.

Dana stands up, agitated, pacing.

DANA

I'm tired of defending my boundaries. He left me to pick up pieces — emotionally, financially, as a mother. That anger? It's earned.

RYAN

(slowly)

Anger and love... they live close together, Dana. Just makes me wonder which one you're still holding onto.

Silence. The tension is thick. Dana's eyes narrow, her jaw clenched.

DANA

(coldly)

If you really think I'm still in love with him, maybe you're the one who doesn't belong here.

Ryan stands, equally heated.

RYAN

If I'm wrong, prove it — with action, not attitude.

They stare at each other, both breathing heavy, hurt hanging in the air.

FADE OUT.

Scene 30

INT. NAOMI'S APARTMENT – EVENING

James and Naomi are sitting close on the couch, the atmosphere warm and relaxed. Soft music plays in the background. Suddenly, there's a loud knock at the door.

NAOMI

(surprised)

Who could that be this late?

James watches quietly as Naomi gets up and walks to the door. She opens it, revealing TROY (early 30s, confident, slightly tense), Naomi's ex.

TROY

(trying to sound casual)

Hey Naomi. Long time.

Naomi's face tightens but she stays composed.

NAOMI

Troy. What are you doing here?

TROY

Just wanted to talk. Can I come in?

James rises, sensing the tension.

JAMES

(calm but firm)

Maybe another time, Troy.

TROY

(ignoring James)

Naomi, we need to clear the air.

NAOMI

(firm)

Not tonight.

James nods at Naomi, then grabs his jacket.

JAMES

I'm gonna head out.

NAOMI

(sincerely)

I'm sorry, James.

JAMES

(shaking his head, half-smiling)

It's okay. I get it.

James exits. Naomi closes the door behind him.

FADE OUT.

Scene 31

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – DAY

James' phone buzzes on the kitchen counter. He picks it up, reading a message from DREA:

TEXT MESSAGE (DREA):

"Hey James, been thinking. Want to meet up? Just talk."

James hesitates, then types back:

TEXT MESSAGE (JAMES):

"Alright. Let's keep it peaceful."

EXT. PARK – AFTERNOON

James and Drea sit on a bench, surrounded by trees and sunlight. The mood is calm. They sip coffee from takeaway cups.

DREA

It's been a while. Feels strange but nice to just talk.

JAMES

Yeah, I wanted that too. No drama.

They share a small smile.

EXT. PARK – LATER

The tone shifts as they dig into old wounds.

DREA

You never really listened back then. You were always so focused on your own stuff.

JAMES

I was trying to build a life. I thought you understood.

DREA

(scoffs)

Understanding isn't enough. You never changed, James.

James looks pained but firm.

JAMES

Maybe some things don't change.

Drea stands abruptly.

DREA

Exactly.

She walks away, leaving James alone on the bench.

EXT. PARK – MOMENTS LATER

James watches her go, conflicted.

JAMES (V.O.)

Sometimes peace is just a quiet before the storm.

FADE OUT.

EXT. PARK PATHWAY – MOMENTS LATER

Drea walks briskly away from the bench. James rises, quickly catching up to her. His face is tense but determined.

JAMES

(waiting until she stops, firm)

Drea, wait. Don't just walk away.

Drea turns sharply, her eyes blazing.

DREA

What? You want to keep dragging this out?

JAMES

No, I want to be honest. You say I never changed — but you haven't either.

DREA

(snarling)

Don't put this on me. I was ready to move on, but you kept running from us.

JAMES

Running? I was trying to survive. You chose to blame instead of understand.

DREA

(stepping closer)

Maybe because you never cared enough. You wanted the easy way.

James clenches his fists, pain flashing in his eyes.

JAMES

Easy? It wasn't easy for me. You want to throw stones, then look in the mirror first.

DREA

(sneering)

I'm done with this. You never had what it takes to be better.

James takes a deep breath, voice low but steady.

JAMES

Maybe you're right. Maybe some things never change.

They stare at each other – the silence heavy, filled with unresolved anger and hurt.

DREA

(turning away)

Goodbye, James.

She walks off into the distance. James watches her leave, a mixture of sadness and resolve on his face.

JAMES (V.O.)

Some wounds don't heal... they just teach you where to draw the line.

FADE OUT.

Scene 32

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT

James sits on the couch, flipping through TV channels. He lands on a romantic movie – a couple slow dancing in the rain. He stares at the screen blankly.

TV DIALOGUE (V.O.)

"I don't want anyone else. It's always been you."

James' jaw tightens. He quickly changes the channel. A music video plays – it's a slow R&B song, sultry and nostalgic.

RADIO ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

And that was a classic heartbreak anthem – takes you back, doesn't it?

James grabs the remote and mutes the TV.

INT. STREET – LATER THAT NIGHT

James walks alone, hoodie up, trying to clear his mind. A COUPLE walks past him, laughing, holding hands. The girl leans into the guy's shoulder – a move Drea used to do.

James glances at them, then quickly looks away.

EXT. GAS STATION – MOMENTS LATER

James walks out of the store with a bottle of water. As he steps outside, a white Audi SUV pulls into a pump – same make and model as Drea's.

He freezes. For a split second, he thinks it's her. His breath catches.

A STRANGER gets out of the car. Not Drea.

James exhales hard, rubbing his forehead.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – LATER

James paces the living room, anxious. He opens his phone, scrolls through old photos of him and Drea smiling, laughing. He quickly closes the gallery, tosses the phone on the couch.

He sits down slowly, head in his hands.

JAMES (V.O.)

She's everywhere... and nowhere. And I can't turn it off.

The silence wraps around him – thick and suffocating.

FADE OUT.

Scene 33

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT

James steps inside the dimly lit apartment. The door closes softly behind him. He stands frozen for a moment, the weight of the day pressing down.

His breath quickens. The anger and pain from the confrontation with Drea bubble up.

Suddenly, he sinks down against the wall, sliding to the floor.

His face crumbles. Tears spill over, uncontrolled.

JAMES

(whispering, broken)

Why... why does it still hurt so much?

He buries his face in his hands, shoulders shaking with silent sobs.

The room feels heavy – filled with the echoes of past wounds and shattered hopes.

James lets himself fall apart, releasing all the built-up tension he's been holding inside.

CLOSE UP:

James' tear-streaked face, raw and vulnerable.

After a moment, he wipes his eyes, takes a deep shaky breath.

He looks up, eyes glistening but a flicker of strength returning.

JAMES (V.O.)

Maybe this is the first step... to finally healing.

FADE OUT.**INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT**

James is at his desk, surrounded by scattered notes and a laptop. He's mid-typing on a new script. His phone buzzes next to him.

He picks it up casually – the screen reads: "Naomi □ – 1 New Message."

He opens it. The smile on his face slowly fades as he reads.

TEXT MESSAGE (NAOMI – V.O.)

James, I've been holding this in for a while now... and I owe it to both of us to be honest.

Troy and I reconnected recently. I didn't expect it, but the feelings never really left. I'm not proud of this, but I'd rather tell you now than drag this out.

You're an incredible person. You have a huge heart. But I don't think I'm the one meant to carry it.

Please don't reach out. I need space. I've blocked you for both our peace.

Take care of yourself. – Naomi

James stares at the message, his hand trembling slightly. He opens Instagram – “User not found.” Checks her contact – “Messages not delivered.”

The realization hits. He leans back in his chair, eyes glassy, the silence around him growing louder.

JAMES (V.O.)

She said goodbye like I was just another moment she regretted.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – MOMENTS LATER

James sets the phone down gently. Then slams his fist on the table – papers fly. He stands up, pacing, trying to contain the sting.

But he doesn't cry. He just breathes. In and out. Heavy.

Finally, he sits again, pulls his laptop closer. He opens a blank document.

ON SCREEN: “FADE IN:”

James begins to type.

JAMES (V.O.)

If I can't say it to her... I'll say it through the work.

FADE OUT.

Scene 34

INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE – EARLY EVENING

Soft jazz hums faintly from a speaker. MELISSA sits across from JAMES, who looks more relaxed than ever – but there's a hesitation in his energy today. He shifts in his seat, fidgeting with the cuff of his sleeve.

MELISSA

You've been quiet for the last few minutes. What's on your mind?

James exhales slowly, then smiles nervously.

JAMES

It's probably not something I say, but... I've been thinking about it for a while now. should

MELISSA

Okay... let's talk about it.

JAMES

I've grown so much in the time we've been talking. You've helped me see parts of myself I never knew how to name. But lately... I've caught myself thinking about outside of this room. you

Melissa's posture straightens slightly. She listens intently but professionally.

JAMES (CONT'D)

I know this is a boundary. I that. And it's why I almost didn't say anything. But... would it be crazy if I asked you out sometime? know

Silence. Not awkward – thoughtful. Melissa sets her notepad down gently, then leans forward, calm and kind.

MELISSA

James... I appreciate your honesty. And I understand how emotional connections can form in this space. But our relationship – by its nature – is a therapeutic one. There are strict boundaries for a reason.

James nods slowly, not surprised – but still a little deflated.

JAMES

I figured. Just... needed to say it out loud. Clear the air for myself, if nothing else.

MELISSA

And I'm glad you did. That takes maturity – and courage. But more importantly, it shows your growth. You were honest, vulnerable, and respectful. That's the kind of man you're becoming.

James offers a humble smile, accepting the grace in her tone.

JAMES

Thank you. Really. I just didn't want to keep pretending it wasn't there. Even if it goes nowhere.

MELISSA

And that's what healthy processing looks like. You're learning how to sit in your truth – even when it's hard.

They share a quiet, warm moment – a mutual understanding. No shame. Just clarity.

JAMES

Alright then... guess I'll save my charm for someone who say yes. can

They both chuckle lightly. The air is lighter now.

FADE OUT.

Scene 35

INT. UPSCALE ROOFTOP LOUNGE – NIGHT

The city skyline twinkles behind them. Candlelight glows softly on the table. JAMES, dressed sharp but simple, sits across from MELISSA, who exudes effortless grace and calm confidence. Soft jazz plays under the gentle murmur of other diners.

A small pause. They're sipping wine. There's an air of curiosity and subtle excitement between them.

JAMES

(smiling)

This feels... strange. But in a good way.

MELISSA

Strange how?

JAMES

I'm used to talking to you with a box of tissues on standby and my emotional baggage unpacked across the room.

Melissa laughs, genuinely amused.

MELISSA

Well tonight, no notebooks. No emotional unpacking — unless it's over dessert.

They clink glasses and sip.

JAMES

You know... I always appreciated how you never judged me — even at my lowest.

MELISSA

That wasn't just professionalism, James. That was respect. And... truthfully, admiration.

JAMES

(adjusting in his seat, curious)

Admiration?

MELISSA

(nods, a bit softer)

You came into that room broken, yes — but aware. Willing. Most people don't even get that far. Watching you rebuild yourself, piece by piece... it inspired me.

James looks at her, genuinely moved.

JAMES

I always felt safe with you. But tonight? You feel... different.

MELISSA

That's because I'm not your therapist anymore. I'm just Melissa. And Melissa... has been attracted to you for a while now.

A pause. Their eye contact deepens. The air shifts with emotional honesty.

JAMES

I thought I was crazy for feeling something too. I just kept trying to file it under "therapeutic projection" or whatever.

MELISSA

(smiling warmly)

It wasn't projection. It was connection. We just weren't allowed to until now. name it

They both relax, the tension easing into mutual comfort.

JAMES

So... what now?

MELISSA

Now? We keep it simple. Be present. See where this goes without rushing the end.

JAMES

(softly)

For once... I like the sound of not knowing what happens next.

They sit in silence for a beat – the kind of silence that speaks volumes. Two people, finally unburdened, finally free to explore something real.

FADE OUT.

Scene 36

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT

James lies asleep, peaceful for the first time in days. Soft moonlight filters through the window.

DREAM SEQUENCE**INT. MUSIC STUDIO – DAY**

James stands behind a mixing console, headphones on, immersed in the music. The room is vibrant, filled with instruments, screens, and energy.

He smiles widely, nodding to the beat, hands moving confidently over the controls.

CUT TO:**INT. FILM SET – DAY**

James directs a lively scene with actors and crew bustling around. He holds a script, calling out instructions with enthusiasm.

The camera captures his excitement and creative spark, lighting up his face.

INT. MUSIC STUDIO – DAY (CONTINUOUS)

The music swells. James closes his eyes, fully lost in the moment – pure joy and fulfillment.

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – NIGHT (DREAM ENDING)

James stirs in his sleep, a soft smile on his lips.

JAMES (V.O.)

This... this is where I belong. Where I'm alive.

FADE OUT.

Scene 37

INT. JAMES JR.'S BEDROOM – NIGHT

Posters on the walls, sneakers lined up neatly, and a tablet glowing in the dark. JAMES JR. (10) lies on his bed, scrolling through music videos on his phone.

He stops as a thumbnail catches his eye:

VIDEO TITLE:“James McCall – ‘Wounded Heart’ (Official Visualizer)”

James Jr. tilts his head curiously, tapping play. A mellow beat starts. His father’s voice fills the room – raw, emotional, poetic.

JAMES MCALL (V.O. – MUSIC)

"They said I lost it, but they ain't feel the pain I paint with / Love's a war zone – I was drafted and remained hit..."

James Jr.’s eyes widen. He sits up, fully engaged, watching the visual: slow-moving imagery of a lone figure painting in a studio, shadows dancing over a mic, and glimpses of an old photo of a younger James holding a baby – him.

He pauses the video. Silence.

JAMES JR.

(softly, to himself)

That’s... my dad?

INT. KITCHEN – MOMENTS LATER

James Jr. walks out, holding his phone. DANA is sitting at the counter with a cup of tea, scrolling through her own screen.

JAMES JR.

Mom?

DANA

(looking up)

Yeah, baby?

He shows her the paused video.

JAMES JR.

Is this really him? Was Dad... like, a real artist?

Dana looks at the screen. She swallows hard, a flood of emotion surfacing she wasn't ready for.

DANA

(slowly)

Yeah... he was. He still is.

JAMES JR.

Why didn't you tell me?

DANA

I didn't want you to get confused. Things between me and your father... they're complicated.

James Jr. looks down at the phone again, as if studying a stranger.

JAMES JR.

I want to know him... not the complicated, just... him.

Dana exhales deeply, unsure, but moved.

DANA

(softly)

Maybe... maybe it's time you did.

FADE OUT.

Scene 38

EXT. COFFEE SHOP PATIO – LATE AFTERNOON

The sun is beginning to dip behind the buildings. A slight breeze flows through.

KINGSTON steps out of a local coffee shop with an iced drink in hand. As he looks down at his phone, he nearly bumps into someone.

KINGSTON

Whoa — my bad—

He looks up and freezes for a moment. It's DREA.

DREA

(awkwardly)

Hey, Kingston.

KINGSTON

(flatly)

Drea.

A beat of tension.

DREA

Didn't expect to see you around here.

KINGSTON

Yeah, I live around the corner. You still haunting people's peace or just passing through?

Drea flinches slightly, clearly caught off guard.

DREA

Okay... I probably deserve that.

KINGSTON

Probably? You dragged James' name online, sabotaged his business, played with his heart — and now you're standing here like you tripped and spilled coffee on him.

DREA

I didn't think it'd spiral like that. I was angry. Hurt. But I realize now... I went too far.

Kingston studies her. He sees sincerity starting to show beneath her guilt.

DREA (CONT'D)

He didn't deserve what I did. I've been thinking about it ever since. I just... don't know how to make it right.

KINGSTON

(pauses)

There's no quick fix. But accountability is a good start.

DREA

So what — you think I should reach out?

KINGSTON

I think if you mean it, you'll show it. Not just a text. Not just words. really

She looks down, nodding slowly.

DREA

So what would you do... if you were me?

KINGSTON

James has an event coming up this weekend — a creative showcase. Something personal. Something he's actually proud of.

Drea looks up, surprised.

KINGSTON (CONT'D)

If you want to make amends... show up. Not for attention. Not to take credit. Just... to support. Quietly. Respectfully. Let him see you're not the same woman who tried to tear him down.

DREA

You think he'll even acknowledge me?

KINGSTON

That's not the point. This isn't about what you get out of it. It's about what you're willing to own.

Drea takes a deep breath. The weight of his words lands heavy — but clear.

DREA

Thanks... for being honest. Even if it stung.

KINGSTON

Honesty's the only way through the mess.

They share a silent moment. Then Kingston nods, giving her one last look before walking off. Drea remains standing there, conflicted... but finally willing to try.

FADE OUT.

Scene 39

INT. JAMES' APARTMENT – MORNING

James wakes up, eyes fluttering open, the dream still fresh in his mind. He sits up slowly, a sense of calm settling over him.

He folds his hands and bows his head in a quiet prayer.

JAMES

(softly)

Thank you for another day. Help me find my way.

He reaches over to the table, rolling a blunt with steady hands. Once done, he lights it, takes a slow drag, and exhales thoughtfully.

With renewed focus, James moves to his desk, sits in front of his computer.

His fingers hover over the keyboard, then begin to type—fast and purposeful.

The screen fills with the title of his new script. James smiles — hope and determination shining in his eyes.

JAMES (V.O.)

This time... I'm telling my story my way.

FADE OUT.

Scene 40

INT. ART GALLERY – NIGHT

A tasteful, modern gallery buzzes with creatives, entrepreneurs, and industry professionals. Paintings line the walls, jazz hums in the background. Glasses clink. Laughter floats through the air. This is **James' night**.

JAMES stands near a display of one of his new abstract pieces, sharply dressed, at peace, confident.

DANIEL approaches from the bar with a cocktail in hand, his expression shifting slightly.

DANIEL

(low)

Yo... just a heads up — Naomi and Drea just walked in.

James raises an eyebrow but remains calm, sipping his drink.

JAMES

Both of them?

DANIEL

Together. Weirdly. Might've came with mutuals.

JAMES

(smiling coolly)

Let 'em look. That chapter's out of print.

*James straightens his blazer and walks with Daniel toward the commotion. Naomi and Drea are standing near a corner of the gallery, quietly observing, clearly not expecting to see each other, let alone him.

James approaches them with effortless grace.

JAMES

Naomi. Drea.

They both turn, unsure how to react — expecting tension, perhaps a scene. Instead, they're met with poise.

JAMES (CONT'D)

Glad you came out. Enjoy yourselves.

*He offers a brief, respectful nod. No extra energy. No lingering emotion. Unbothered.

Naomi fumbles slightly, trying to find words.

NAOMI

James, I didn't know you—

JAMES

(interrupting, gently)

It's all good. No hard feelings.

DREA

(squinting, half-insecure)

You look... different.

JAMES

(smiles)

Growth looks good on everybody. Some of us wear it better.

Before they can respond, MELISSA walks up — elegant, radiant, dressed with quiet confidence. She places a hand gently on James' arm.

MELISSA

There you are. Come on — people are waiting to meet the man of the hour.

She smiles kindly at Naomi and Drea, fully aware of the dynamic but unfazed.

MELISSA (CONT'D)

Hi ladies. I'm Melissa. Hope you're enjoying the evening.

They nod awkwardly. Speechless.

JAMES

(to the ladies)

Take care.

He and Melissa walk off, James with a quiet smirk, her hand still on his arm. The camera lingers briefly on Naomi and Drea – both staring after them, stunned.

INT. GALLERY – MOMENTS LATER

James mingles with guests, surrounded by laughter and light. A sense of rebirth fills the room. He no longer carries the past – he hosts the future.

FADE OUT.

Scene 41

INT. THERAPIST'S OFFICE – LATE AFTERNOON

The familiar calm of the space is now more comforting than intimidating. MELISSA sits in her chair, notebook open. JAMES walks in, looking lighter – less weighed down. His posture has improved, his energy calmer.

MELISSA

(smiling warmly)

Well look at you... You seem different already.

JAMES

(grinning)

Felt different walking in.

He sits, more comfortable this time. No hoodie pulled over his face. Just James, present.

MELISSA

So tell me – what's changed since we last talked?

JAMES

A lot, actually. I've been doing the work. Boundaries. Silence. Stillness. Even the gym again. And I've been creating — not out of pain, but from peace.

MELISSA *nods proudly, jotting a note but maintaining eye contact.*

MELISSA

That's powerful. Sounds like you're showing up for yourself in ways you weren't before.

JAMES

Yeah. I realized... I was holding onto a lot that wasn't mine to carry. And when I let go of trying to fix people, I started to feel lighter. Clearer.

MELISSA

Letting go of control is one of the hardest — but healthiest — things we can do.

JAMES

It was like... I had to forgive myself for keeping myself in survival mode for so long.

MELISSA *puts her notebook down.*

MELISSA

That right there — that's growth. When healing becomes less about escaping pain and more about discovering peace, you've stepped into real transformation.

James nods, emotion behind his eyes, but steadiness in his voice.

JAMES

I still have hard days. But I don't get lost in them anymore. I don't feel like I'm drowning. Now I just float... until I find the shore.

MELISSA *smiles, deeply moved.*

MELISSA

You've come a long way, James. And I'm proud of you. But more importantly — you should be proud of yourself.

James exhales, as if finally breathing without weight.

JAMES

I am. For the first time in a long time... I really am.

FADE OUT.