

BROKEN BONDS

Written by

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Address  
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FADE IN:

INT. GRACE'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT (YEARS AGO)

One lamp on. The rest of the house holds its breath.

GRACE (50s then), robe and slippers, sits on the edge of the couch with a chipped mug cooling in her hands. She watches the front door the way some people watch the ocean—knowing it will take and take and still be beautiful.

Keys skitter against the lock. The door shoves open.

EVAN (20s then) stumbles in. Too wide at the eyes. Sweat at his hairline; a chemical sweet on his breath. He grins like a man doing a bad impression of himself.

EVAN

Hey, Ma. See? I remembered where you live.

GRACE

It's three in the morning.

He drops a half-empty miniature bottle on the coffee table. It rolls, knocks an unpaid bill to the floor.

EVAN

Time's a... fake thing. Philosophers agree. I asked them.

Grace rises, keeps her voice even.

GRACE

Evan—

EVAN

I'm fine. I'm... extra fine.

He tries for charm; it curdles. His hand shakes when he shoves it in his pocket.

GRACE

You promised me. No more coming in like this.

EVAN

(gesturing to himself)  
Promise kept. I didn't come in like this. I... drifted.

The laugh he tries dies in his throat. For a half-second, the mask slips—fear, old as childhood, flashes across his face.

From the hallway: the pad of small feet. CASSIE (7), hair a sleep-tangle, clutches a stuffed animal.

CASSIE  
Grandma? Is Daddy—

Evan turns away so she can't see his eyes.

GRACE  
Go back to bed, honey. Daddy just  
needed some air.

CASSIE  
(squinting at Evan)  
You smell like the gas station.

GRACE  
(smiling for Cassie)  
That's enough truth for one night.

Cassie nods, obeys the spell of her grandmother's voice,  
shuffles back down the hall.

EVAN watches her go. His throat works.

EVAN  
I'm not... I don't— I didn't mean—

GRACE  
You scare her. And you scare me.  
That's the whole sentence.

EVAN  
Then maybe I should stop giving  
sentences. Just... go.

GRACE steps between him and the door. She's small. He's not.  
She does not move.

GRACE  
You walk out now, you don't come  
back like this again.

EVAN meets her eyes. The anger has no gas in it; it sputters.

EVAN  
Then you better hope I don't.

He dips his shoulder, slides past her, gone into the night.  
The door closes like a held breath finally exhaled.

Grace lowers herself to the floor beside the lamp. The little  
bottle finishes its slow roll and kisses her knee.

She presses the heel of her hand to her chest until the hurt obeys.

SMASH CUT TO:

TITLE CARD: BROKEN BONDS

EXT. SMALL TOWN MAIN STREET - EVENING (PRESENT DAY)

Late autumn dusk. Strings of unused festival lights sag between storefronts. The mountain line is a cutout against a washed blue sky.

SARAH (30s), a lived-in sweater and a quick stride, carries a coffee like it's ballast. She's the kind of pretty that looks better when she's not trying.

Her phone buzzes. She checks the ID. Stops. Answers.

SARAH  
(into phone)  
Hey, Mom.

INTERCUT WITH:

INT. GRACE'S KITCHEN - SAME

Morning light lives in this room even at night. GRACE (60s now) stands by the sink, the calm in her voice an act of endurance.

GRACE  
Sarah... it's Evan. He's back.

Sarah's body goes still from the neck down. Only her jaw moves.

SARAH  
Back as in "drove through" or back  
as in "staying until we all get  
amnesia"?

GRACE  
He's staying here for a bit. He  
says he's clean.

Sarah watches her reflection in a dark shop window: a woman who knows better.

SARAH  
We've heard that one.

GRACE  
People can change.

SARAH  
Sure. And cats can swim.

She hangs up before anger can make her say something she can't unsay. She resumes walking, faster. Her coffee leaps with each step.

A ragged banner over the street reads: WELCOME HOME VETERANS & VOLUNTEERS. A corner has torn free, flaps helplessly. Sarah huffs a laugh with no humor in it.

INT. SARAH'S BOOKSTORE - NIGHT

A bell chimes. Warm light. The air: dust, cinnamon tea, paper. A haven built for escapees.

Sarah flips her CLOSED sign to OPEN out of habit and loneliness. She resets a display nobody will notice; the ritual matters.

The bell tinkles again.

NOAH (30s), damp jacket, soft eyes, leans in the doorway. He's a man who keeps apologies in his pockets and spends them slowly.

NOAH  
You ever heard of home?

SARAH  
You ever heard of knocking?

NOAH  
This is Main Street. We barter in proximity.

She fights a smile and loses.

NOAH (CONT'D)  
I, uh- heard from a guy who heard from a guy. Your brother's back.

SARAH  
It's a small town. The grapevine's got Wi-Fi.

NOAH  
You okay?

SARAH

I don't know. Depends which version of him we got. The charming hurricane or the quiet one after.

NOAH

Storm season either way.

SARAH

Thanks for the weather report.

The bell jingles a third time. Both turn.

EVAN (30s), haircut new enough to show effort, clothes older than his pride, stands there with a smile that keeps changing its mind.

EVAN

Hey, sis.

The store hum—fluorescent, fridge, street—gets louder in the silence.

SARAH

You've got some nerve walking in here.

EVAN

Yeah. I thought I'd use it up early before it wears off.

A small laugh catches in his throat, dies there.

NOAH shifts politely.

NOAH

I'll... go alphabetize poetry by bitterness.

SARAH

Try "B" and "forever."

Noah vanishes into the stacks.

Evan moves a step closer, careful like a man approaching a skittish dog that used to be his.

EVAN

You look— you look like you own the room.

SARAH

I bought it so I could lock the door.

EVAN

Fair.

He takes in the worn rug, the crooked shelf, the thrifted lamp with the stubborn pull chain. Home that someone taught themselves to deserve.

EVAN (CONT'D)

(grasping for lightness)

Remember when I stole that Neruda from the library to impress a girl?

SARAH

You returned it three years later with a coffee ring and an apology to the head librarian's ghost. She's still alive, by the way.

EVAN

Right. She just looks... eternal.

A breath that could've been a laugh if it trusted itself.

EVAN (CONT'D)

I, uh— I'm not asking for confetti. I just wanted to see you with my actual eyes.

SARAH

Why now?

EVAN

Because I ran out of later.

That lands. She looks away so he won't see it hit.

SARAH

I'm working.

EVAN

I can see that.

SARAH

Come back when I don't hate you.

EVAN

Give me a time window?

SARAH

Surprise me.

He nods. Starts to turn. Stops.

EVAN  
I'm... sober. Day- seventy-nine.

A muscle jumps in her cheek; the inventory of old numbers doesn't impress her anymore.

SARAH  
Congratulations on the part where  
you're not dying today.

EVAN  
I'll take it.

He goes. The bell tinkles, the kindest noise in a hard room.

From the stacks: Noah leans out, gentle.

NOAH  
You want me to say something  
unhelpful?

SARAH  
Only if it's true.

NOAH  
He looked like a guy trying to be  
smaller than his shadow.

She exhales. That's unhelpful and true.

INT. SARAH'S APARTMENT - LATE NIGHT

A small place over Main Street. A plant that refuses to thrive, sink that refuses to drain; the charm is in the refusal.

CASSIE (16), barefoot, headphones around her neck, sits cross-legged on the floor amidst homework that's pretending to be done. Phone glow paints her blue.

The front door unlocks. Sarah enters with a bag of groceries and a day that's heavier than she cares to admit.

SARAH  
You should be asleep.

CASSIE  
I should be a lot of things.

SARAH  
I'll settle for horizontal with  
your eyes closed.



CASSIE  
Compromise is healthy. That's what  
the posters say.

Sarah sets down the bag, pulls out cereal and a dented can of  
tomatoes because that's what her budget says dinner looks  
like tomorrow.

CASSIE (CONT'D)  
Grandma called me.

SARAH  
Of course she did.

CASSIE  
He's back.

SARAH  
Yeah.

CASSIE  
So we're doing... what? Hugs?  
Intervention? Witness protection?

SARAH  
We're doing boundaries and  
breathing.

CASSIE  
Right. Everyone's favorite party  
games.

Silence. The old refrigerator knocks like a polite ghost.

SARAH  
You okay?

CASSIE  
I'm used to him being gone. Being  
back is the part that feels  
unfamiliar.

SARAH  
That's honest.

CASSIE  
You want me to be angry?

SARAH  
I want you to be whatever you are.

CASSIE  
Mostly... tired.

A beat. She picks at a loose thread in the rug.

CASSIE (CONT'D)  
He gave up on me. Twice. So I  
learned not to wait.

SARAH leans against the counter, hands slack.

SARAH  
Waiting's overrated. Showing up is  
the trick.

CASSIE  
He's bad at tricks.

SARAH  
He's bad at timing.

CASSIE  
Same thing.

A small smile. In this house, humor is a scratched match that still catches.

SARAH  
Try to sleep.

CASSIE  
You going to?

SARAH  
I'll pretend.

They share a look that is love wearing armor.

INT. GRACE'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Sunlight through lace curtains. Steam off the coffee. The kitchen hums like an old hymn.

Grace flips pancakes like hope is muscle memory. EVAN sits at the table, hands wrapped around a mug he hasn't tasted.

GRACE  
You always did like mornings.  
Before.

EVAN  
I liked the part where the light  
forgave me for the night.

GRACE

Forgiveness isn't the light. It's  
the walking toward it.

He nods, stares at the nick in the table he made with a fork  
at ten years old. Grace watches him remember.

GRACE (CONT'D)

You still take it black?

EVAN

I'm trying to. Sometimes I add  
sugar when my hands won't listen.

GRACE

Then add sugar. Sugar's not a sin.

He almost smiles. The almost is progress.

EVAN

Mom... I want to make things right.  
With Sarah. With Cassie.

(beat)

I know "right" isn't a door you can  
kick down.

GRACE

It's the one you knock on every day  
until someone answers. And you  
don't get mad when they don't.

He nods again. The mug rattles slightly against the saucer;  
he steadies it.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Cassie used to draw you all the  
time. Little stick figure with the  
biggest smile. Then one day she  
stopped.

(tiny shrug)

Pencils break. Paper tears. But  
hands remember.

EVAN swallows. His eyes shine and harden at the same time.

EVAN

Then I'll give her something worth  
drawing.

GRACE

Start with being around long enough  
for her to finish the picture.

A beat. He glances out the window. The front steps squeak under nobody; they always squeak.

EVAN  
I'll fix that squeak today.

GRACE  
Maybe let it complain. Some things  
are honest that way.

They laugh, and it warms the room.

EXT. SARAH'S BOOKSTORE - LATE MORNING

Sarah hauls a box of new arrivals to the curb display. EVAN stands across the street pretending to check a parking meter, gathering courage like loose change.

He crosses.

EVAN  
You always work this hard, or just  
when someone's watching?

SARAH  
I like to give the town a show.

EVAN  
You do.

She sets the box down, wipes dust on her jeans.

EVAN (CONT'D)  
Five minutes?

SARAH  
You had five years.

EVAN  
Right.  
(beat)  
I'm not asking for forgiveness.  
Just... a chance to look stupid while  
I try.

She studies him with clinical care.

SARAH  
You're good at looking stupid.  
Always have been.

EVAN  
Practice.

SARAH

Why are you here, right now, in front of my store?

EVAN

Because if I went to mom's and waited, you might not come home. And if I went to Cassie's school, you'd have me arrested.

SARAH

Smart.

EVAN

Panic makes me efficient.

She exhales through her nose. That almost counts as a smile.

SARAH

Say the honest thing and then leave.

EVAN

I missed you. And I can't miss us unless there used to be an us. That counts for something.

She blinks hard, once. His words have the nerve to be simple.

SARAH

Cassie knows you're back.

EVAN

I figured.

SARAH

She says she's fine.

EVAN

Our family's great at synonyms for not fine.

SARAH

If you hurt her again—

EVAN

You won't have to tell me. I'll already know.

Silence. A truck rolls by, rattles the display sign. Sarah steadies it. He steps back, palms up.

EVAN (CONT'D)

There's my five.

SARAH  
(quiet)  
It was seven.

EVAN  
I'm getting better at staying.

He goes, turning the corner before she can decide if that was allowed.

EXT. HIGH SCHOOL - AFTERNOON

End of day spill. CASSIE exits with a knot of friends who laugh too loud because their throats are new to breaking.

Up the block, EVAN waits beneath a mural of the school mascot painted more bravely than kids actually feel.

He steps out, not too close.

EVAN  
Hey.

CASSIE  
Boundary alert.

EVAN  
Copy that. I can enforce from way over here.

She can't help it—a snort escapes before she cages it. She stops, half-turns.

EVAN (CONT'D)  
I thought— if you wanted— I could walk you home. I'll stay on the other side of the street like your embarrassing shadow.

CASSIE  
You're not my shadow.

EVAN  
Fair. I'm a weather system. Unpredictable, dumb hat.

CASSIE  
(mutters)  
At least you know.

He reaches into his pocket, offers a folded photo—CASSIE at five with ice cream on her face, knees muddy, a swing mid-arc behind her.

She hesitates, takes it.

CASSIE (CONT'D)  
You kept this?

EVAN  
It kept me.

Too heavy; it lands and cracks. She tucks the photo into her backpack anyway.

CASSIE  
I've got, stuff.

EVAN  
Right.

His phone buzzes. He ignores it. It buzzes again, insistently, an insect you can't swat.

CASSIE clocks the way his jaw tightens, the way his eyes won't look at the screen.

CASSIE  
New hobby? Not answering calls?

EVAN  
Just spam. Auto warranty. For a heart.

She almost smiles. Almost.

CASSIE  
See ya, weather system.

She goes. Evan watches her until she's on the far side of the crosswalk, small against the sky.

He finally checks the phone.

INSERT – SCREEN: A photo: an abandoned house, sallow siding, boards like scarred teeth. Another photo follows—a bare room, a stained mattress. No text.

Evan's breath leaves him in a small, private sound.

He deletes the photos. Another arrives instantly.

TEXT (ON SCREEN): You left her.

His thumb trembles over DELETE. He doesn't press it. The screen reflects in his eyes like a fire he can't admit he set.

INT. EVAN'S TRUCK - TWILIGHT

Windows fogging as the temperature drops. Evan sits unmoving, engine off, phone in his lap.

Another message THUMPS the lock-screen.

TEXT (ON SCREEN): She wasn't dead when you ran.

His eyes shut. The past arrives not in images but in senses: the damp of a ruined carpet, the metallic breath of a dying night, the— stop.

He yanks the phone cord out like that could unplug memory. He starts the engine too hard.

INT. GRACE'S KITCHEN - EVENING

The room that forgives. EVAN stares at cooling stew; GRACE watches him not eat.

GRACE

Long day?

EVAN

Short and tall. Like a bad coffee.

GRACE

Talk to Sarah?

EVAN

Yeah. She weaponized honesty. I deserved it.

GRACE

Deserving is between you and God.  
Fixing is between you and us.

He nods, managed smile. The phone buzzes on his thigh. He flinches like it bit him.

GRACE clocks it. Sets down her spoon.

GRACE (CONT'D)

You used to flinch at thunder. When you were little. Said the sky was bowling and nobody told you the rules.

EVAN

I wanted a scoreboard so I'd know when it was over.



INT. GRACE'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

The clock ticks between them, louder than it should.

GRACE  
You've got that look again.

EVAN  
What look?

GRACE  
The one you had when you were ten  
and swore you didn't break the  
window.

He forces a smile that doesn't land. She waits. Always  
waits.

EVAN  
You ever wish time would just stop  
long enough for you to breathe?

GRACE  
No. Time stopping means  
something's gone wrong.

He looks down at his hands—calloused, restless.

GRACE (CONT'D)  
(quietly)  
You can tell me what's chasing you,  
or you can keep running from it.  
Either way, it's still in the  
house.

EVAN  
It's nothing, Ma. Just noise.

GRACE  
Noise doesn't hollow a person out  
like that.

EVAN swallows hard, guilt fighting for space behind his ribs.

EVAN  
I'm just... tired. Trying to do  
the right thing without screwing it  
up again.

GRACE  
That's all anyone's ever trying to  
do.  
(small smile)  
(MORE)

GRACE (CONT'D)

The trick is remembering you can't  
do it alone.

He nods but doesn't answer. The phone BUZZES in his pocket.  
He doesn't look at it.

Grace hears the vibration but says nothing. She moves to the  
stove, ladles soup into a bowl, sets it in front of him.

GRACE (CONT'D)

Eat while it's warm.

EVAN

I'm not hungry.

GRACE

Then sit. And let me feed the  
silence for once.

She sits across from him, folding her hands, humming a hymn  
he half-remembers from childhood. The kitchen light flickers  
but doesn't go out.

They stay like that—two people pretending quiet is peace.

EXT. GRACE'S FRONT PORCH - LATER

Night has a wet sheen. EVAN steps out with a cigarette he  
doesn't light. He rolls it between thumb and forefinger like  
rosary beads.

Down the block, a figure in a hood stands by a telephone  
pole, too still to be casual.

EVAN

Hey!

The figure turns the corner, unhurried, gone.

Evan jogs a few steps, stops. He's breathing too hard for  
someone not moving that fast. He looks back at the house—the  
warm rectangle of kitchen light—and chooses it over the dark.

He crushes the unlit cigarette in his fist and goes inside.

INT. SARAH'S BOOKSTORE - SAME NIGHT

The store is quiet except for the hum of the heater and rain  
against the window. SARAH sits behind the counter, coat still  
on, a pastry half-eaten beside her. She's reading a self-help  
book she doesn't believe in.

The bell above the door tinkles. NOAH leans in, holding a paper bag.

NOAH  
Emergency pastries. Technically day-olds. Emotionally right-nows.

SARAH  
You're a terrible influence.

NOAH  
Best kind-sugar-based.

He hands her one. She tears off a bite, gestures at the shelf.

SARAH  
If I alphabetize trauma long enough, maybe it'll stay in order.

NOAH  
"B" for boundaries, "C" for caffeine.

SARAH  
And "D" for denial. My trilogy.

They share a small laugh – the kind that costs less than it's worth.

NOAH  
You gonna see him again?

SARAH  
He's not ready. Neither am I.

NOAH  
Doesn't mean you shouldn't try.

SARAH  
You sound like a therapist.

NOAH  
I sound like someone who never stopped liking your family even when it imploded.

Beat. Sarah softens.

SARAH  
That's a bad habit.

NOAH  
Yeah. But I'm not ready to quit.

He raises his coffee like a toast and leaves. Sarah watches him go, whispers to herself—

SARAH  
"E" for escape routes.

She takes another bite of pastry. The shop hums around her — alive, but lonely.

INT. GRACE'S DINING ROOM - NIGHT

The table glows under one tired bulb.

The casserole steams, ignored. The photo of five-year-old Cassie rests between the salt and the truth no one's naming.

EVAN pokes at his food. SARAH's fork hovers mid-air.

CASSIE sits across from him, studying his face like a test she never studied for.

GRACE keeps pouring tea no one drinks.

GRACE  
Eat before it gets cold.

SARAH  
It already is.

EVAN  
(gentle)  
Still tastes like home.

GRACE  
Remember that the next time you  
feel like running.

Silence. Forks scrape. CASSIE breaks first.

CASSIE  
Why'd you keep the picture?

EVAN  
Because I missed you.

CASSIE  
That's not an answer. It's an  
excuse.

He meets her eyes. No bluff left.

EVAN

Then here's the answer, I didn't  
know what else to hold on to.

She looks away, embarrassed by the honesty she asked for.

GRACE

(softly)

We don't have to solve everything  
over dinner.

SARAH

We don't solve anything, ever,  
period.

GRACE stands, collects plates. The chair legs moan.

SARAH's eyes flash toward her brother.

SARAH (CONT'D)

You were at the school today.

EVAN freezes mid-bite.

EVAN

I was driving by. I didn't stop.

SARAH

People noticed.

EVAN

I'm allowed to drive, Sarah.

SARAH

I didn't say you weren't.

(beat)

I said people noticed.

The words hang like smoke. GRACE returns with coffee,  
setting mugs as if peace could be poured.

GRACE

Enough. If noticing's the worst  
thing that happens, we're lucky.

CASSIE

Lucky's not the word I'd pick.

She stands, gathers dishes that aren't empty and carries them  
to the sink.

We stay on her back as she rinses plates too hard. Her  
reflection ripples in the window – behind her, EVAN's shape,  
watching but not approaching.

CASSIE (CONT'D)  
(without turning)  
You can say what you came to say.

EVAN  
I just wanted... to be here.

CASSIE  
Then be here. Stop apologizing  
with your eyes.

She shuts off the faucet. The silence between them is heavy but alive.

INT. GRACE'S KITCHEN - LATER

Cups and crumbs from dessert linger.

GRACE hums a hymn under her breath as she packs leftovers.

SARAH leans in the doorway, arms folded.

SARAH  
You always hum when you're worried.

GRACE  
Better than shouting.

SARAH  
You think he's really different?

GRACE  
Different enough to keep trying.

SARAH  
That's not the same as better.

GRACE  
I didn't say it was.

Grace closes the fridge, wipes her hands on a towel that's older than Sarah's resentment.

GRACE (CONT'D)  
You carry anger like a keepsake.  
Maybe let someone else hold it a  
while.

SARAH  
He dropped it on me, remember?

Grace sighs. The weight between them is love wearing work clothes.

GRACE  
Just... don't teach Cassie that  
forgiveness is weakness.

SARAH  
I'll teach her that boundaries  
aren't cruelty.

GRACE  
Good. Then we're both right.

They share a fragile smile that doesn't last.

EXT. GRACE'S PORCH - SAME NIGHT

Cold air. Crickets tuned low.

EVAN sits on the top step, cigarette unlit between his  
fingers.

The front door creaks. CASSIE steps out in socks, sits  
beside him, knees hugged tight.

CASSIE  
Grandma says you used to watch  
thunderstorms from here.

EVAN  
Yeah. I thought lightning meant  
the sky was fixing itself.

CASSIE  
Did it?

EVAN  
Not really. Just got louder.

She half-smiles. They sit in companionable almost-silence.

CASSIE  
I don't know if I want you to stay.

EVAN  
That's fair.

CASSIE  
But I don't want you to leave,  
either.

EVAN  
That's also fair.

She looks at him, the man who broke her childhood and came back without instructions.

CASSIE  
Don't mess it up this time.

EVAN  
I already did. I'm just trying not to again.

A beat. She nods, stands, heads inside.

He watches her disappear behind the screen door.

Only then does he check his phone.

INSERT - SCREEN

A single new message: \*"You can't build new bonds on old graves."\*

His thumb trembles. He deletes it. Pockets the phone.

Finally lights the cigarette, inhales smoke that feels like memory.

INT. SARAH'S BEDROOM - SAME TIME

Rain again. Wind through the cracked window.

SARAH sits in bed, journal open, pen poised.

SARAH (V.O.)  
Day one: Try to trust. Day two:  
Remember why that's hard.

She closes the notebook, looks toward Cassie's closed door down the hall.

Light spills under it, a girl still awake.

INT. CASSIE'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Cassie lies on her stomach scrolling her phone.

She stops on an old photo of her and Evan at a carnival.

Same carousel horse. Same grin.

Her thumb hovers, then she swipes away, screen dark.



Thunder rolls far off. She listens, not afraid, just waiting for it to end.

EXT. GRACE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Wide shot. The porch light flickers once, steadies.

Through the windows we see:

GRACE turning off lamps one by one,

SARAH closing her notebook,

CASSIE setting her phone aside,

EVAN smoking alone on the steps, a constellation of separate rooms pretending to be one home.

The night hums - alive, unfinished.

INT. GRACE'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

The clock ticks like it's testing them. GRACE and EVAN sit across from each other, two cups of coffee going cold between them.

EVAN stares at the grain in the table, following the cracks instead of her eyes. GRACE studies him quietly, reading what he won't say.

GRACE

You used to do that when you were a kid.

He looks up.

EVAN

Do what?

GRACE

Trace the table like it might tell you the truth.

He almost smiles, almost laughs. Doesn't.

EVAN

The table's still more honest than I am.

Grace folds her hands, patient.

GRACE  
You can talk to me, Evan.

EVAN  
About what?

GRACE  
About whatever it is that's making  
you disappear while you're sitting  
right there.

The fridge hums. The clock answers. He doesn't.

Grace leans back, voice softer but firm.

GRACE (CONT'D)  
I know you're trying. I can see  
that. But trying doesn't mean  
hiding.

He exhales through his nose, the laugh of someone who doesn't  
trust relief.

EVAN  
I'm fine, Ma.

GRACE  
You always say that when you're  
not.

EVAN  
(quiet)  
Yeah. It saves time.

He rubs his face. The exhaustion isn't physical.

GRACE  
Eat something. You're getting  
thin.

EVAN  
Not hungry.

GRACE  
Then sit. Let me pretend you are.

She ladles soup into a bowl, sets it in front of him. He  
picks up the spoon, stirs but doesn't lift it.

GRACE (CONT'D)  
It's all right to be lost. It's not  
all right to stay there.

He looks up. Their eyes meet – her calm against his panic.

EVAN  
I'm here, aren't I?

GRACE  
Your body is.  
(beat)  
The rest will catch up when you let  
it.

The phone in his pocket buzzes once, a faint vibration  
beneath the table. He doesn't move.

Grace pretends she doesn't hear it. Takes a sip of coffee.

GRACE (CONT'D)  
Tomorrow you fix that porch step.  
Then maybe yourself. One at a  
time.

EVAN nods, grateful for the assignment, the fiction of  
normalcy.

EVAN  
Yeah. One at a time.

She hums an old hymn as she gathers the dishes, the kind he  
hasn't heard since before everything fell apart.

The hum follows him as he stares at the untouched bowl,  
steam fading, patience fading slower.

EXT. GRACE'S PORCH - NIGHT

The world outside is hushed; the kind of silence that hums.

EVAN steps out, jacket half-zipped, coffee mug still in hand.  
The porch light flickers and steadies. He sits on the step,  
exhales steam and regret into the cool air.

The wooden swing creaks behind him. The house settles. A  
distant train horn threads through the valley.

He closes his eyes. For the first time all day, there's no  
one to lie to.

A faint scuff of footsteps, then the screen door opens.

CASSIE (16) slips out in socks, arms crossed against the  
cold. She stands at the rail, studying him before speaking.

CASSIE  
Grandma said you're not sleeping.

He looks over, startled. She shrugs, teenage armor.

EVAN  
Grandma says too much.

CASSIE  
That's her job.

She comes down two steps, sits a cautious distance away.

CASSIE (CONT'D)  
You smoke now?

EVAN  
Used to. Trying not to remember  
how.

CASSIE  
So... rehab fixed that too?

He flinches, smiles anyway.

EVAN  
Rehab fixed exactly nothing.

It just made breaking things take longer.

She lets out a short, surprised laugh, honest for a second.

CASSIE  
That's... weirdly honest.

EVAN  
It's all I've got left that's new.

A long pause. The porch light buzzes again; a moth taps it like Morse code.

CASSIE  
Why'd you come back?

He stares out into the dark yard.

EVAN  
Because I ran out of away.

She considers that, eyes narrowing like she's testing its truth.

CASSIE  
You always say stuff that sounds  
smart but still makes no sense.

EVAN  
That's genetics.

She almost smiles, fights it.

CASSIE  
Aunt Sarah doesn't trust you.

EVAN  
She's earned that right.

CASSIE  
I don't, either.

EVAN  
(nods)  
You've earned it too.

She studies him, the weight in his shoulders, the tired honesty.

CASSIE  
Are you gonna mess up again?

EVAN  
Probably. Just... not the same way,  
I hope.

The wind picks up, a soft rush through dry leaves. She pulls her sleeves over her hands, huddles deeper into herself.

CASSIE  
You shouldn't sit out here. It  
gets cold fast.

EVAN  
I'll come in soon.

She hesitates, then leans forward, kisses his cheek quick and awkward.

CASSIE  
Don't make me regret that.

She slips back inside before he can answer.

Evan watches the screen door close, touched but haunted. He finally looks up at the sky, black, clear, endless.

EVAN (V.O.)  
You screw up enough times, even the  
stars start looking like exit  
signs.

He drains the cold coffee, sets the mug beside him, and stares into the dark yard.

A faint BUZZ from inside his pocket. He doesn't move. Lets it vibrate once... twice... then die.

He leans back against the step post and exhales a thin laugh, part sigh, part surrender.

The porch light flickers again, brighter this time, like the house itself refuses to let him disappear.

INT. GRACE'S KITCHEN - MORNING

Early sunlight filters through the lace curtains, dust motes swirling in gold. The table is cleared but for two mugs and a folded newspaper.

SARAH stands by the counter, pouring coffee. GRACE moves about the kitchen in quiet rhythm – toast, butter, jam, as if routine can still keep the world steady.

SARAH  
You know he didn't sleep, right?

GRACE  
I figured. The boards out front told on him.

SARAH  
He's restless. Jumpy.

Like he's waiting for something bad to happen.

Grace doesn't answer immediately. She stirs sugar into her coffee, once, twice, three times, before speaking.

GRACE  
Maybe he's waiting for something good and doesn't know how to believe it.

SARAH  
You're still giving him too much credit.

GRACE  
You're still giving him too little.

They share a look, an old argument worn down to politeness.

SARAH grabs a mug, leans on the counter.

SARAH  
He was at Cassie's school  
yesterday.

GRACE  
I know. She mentioned it when she  
got home.

SARAH  
And you're fine with that?

GRACE  
I'm fine with her seeing her father  
on his feet for once.

SARAH  
You didn't see her face when she  
said it.

She doesn't know what to feel yet, and he's just standing  
there, stirring it all up again.

Grace takes a slow sip, eyes gentle but sharp.

GRACE  
Maybe stirring it up is better than  
pretending it's gone.

SARAH  
You're impossible.

GRACE  
No. I'm just tired of pretending  
broken things can't be mended.

SARAH opens her mouth, closes it again. The kettle whistles  
faintly, though nobody turned it on. She turns off the stove,  
more for something to do than for heat.

INT. GRACE'S LIVING ROOM - SAME TIME

EVAN stands at the window, tying his shoes. He's showered,  
clean clothes, trying too hard at normal.

CASSIE sits on the couch scrolling through her phone,  
backpack beside her. The light catches her face, half her  
mother, half her father.

CASSIE  
You're up early.

EVAN  
Habit.

CASSIE  
From before rehab or after?

EVAN  
Both. Sleep doesn't trust me yet.

She studies him for a beat.

CASSIE  
Aunt Sarah says you're staying a while.

EVAN  
That the official statement?

CASSIE  
She didn't sound thrilled.

EVAN  
Doesn't need to be. Just honest.

A pause. The tension softens, a fragile normal beginning to grow.

CASSIE  
You working yet?

EVAN  
Not officially. A buddy might have a construction job opening.

CASSIE  
You gonna take it?

EVAN  
If they'll have me.

CASSIE  
They will. You're good at building things. You're just... used to breaking 'em faster.

He chuckles, small and real.

EVAN  
I'm slowing down.

She zips her backpack, heading for the door.

CASSIE  
Good. World's already spinning too fast.



She goes. He watches her walk away, pride, fear, hope tangled tight.

EXT. DRIVEWAY - CONTINUOUS

SARAH's car pulls up, dust puffing from the tires. Cassie climbs in the passenger seat.

SARAH waves to Grace on the porch, but doesn't look toward Evan standing by the window. He catches her reflection in the car's glass - mother and daughter talking, not smiling.

The car backs out, gravel crunching under the wheels.

Grace steps beside him, folds her arms against the cool.

GRACE

You could wave, you know.

EVAN

Not sure she'd see it.

GRACE

Doesn't matter. It's about being seen trying.

He nods, quiet, watching the car disappear down the road.

INT. GRACE'S KITCHEN - LATE MORNING

The dishes from breakfast sit drying in a rack. Evan stands by the sink, towel in hand, staring out the window at the empty road.

Grace sets a pie crust on the counter, dusts it with flour.

GRACE

You don't have to stare holes in the glass. They won't appear just because you want them back.

EVAN

I'm not staring.

GRACE

You're waiting.

He sighs. Sets the towel down.

EVAN

I don't even know what for.

GRACE

That's the hardest kind of waiting.

She works the dough with her hands, the motion calming. Evan watches her, the steadiness, the grace that doesn't need explaining.

EVAN

You ever think about leaving?

GRACE

All the time. Then I remember I wouldn't know where to go.

EVAN

Same.

GRACE

Then maybe stay here until you figure it out.

He nods. Silence stretches, comfortable now. She slides the crust into a pan and finally looks at him.

GRACE (CONT'D)

And while you're at it... fix that porch step before it kills me.

He almost smiles.

EVAN

Yes, ma'am.

EXT. FRONT PORCH - MIDDAY

Evan kneels with a toolbox, prying up the cracked board. Sunlight catches on sweat and dust.

He hums without realizing it – something half-remembered from church.

A breeze stirs the hanging chimes. The sound is sweet, sad, familiar.

From inside, Grace hums along with him, same tune, a few beats behind.

For a moment, it feels like the house itself breathes again.

INT. SARAH'S BOOKSTORE - AFTERNOON

The bell over the door jingles. Warm light filters through front windows.

SARAH restocks a shelf, trying to keep her hands busy.

The quiet feels heavy, too many unsaid things lingering in the air.

NOAH steps in, holding two coffees. He offers one.

NOAH  
Thought you'd need this. You look  
like you're alphabetizing your  
feelings again.

She smirks despite herself.

SARAH  
I prefer my feelings in hardback.

He studies her; his warmth is easy, the kind that sneaks past her walls.

NOAH  
You look tired.

SARAH  
I am tired. Of worrying, of  
pretending, of... being the adult  
all the time.

NOAH  
Try being the adult who forgives  
herself once in a while. I hear  
it's underrated.

She sighs, a soft laugh escaping.

SARAH  
You rehearsed that one, didn't you?

NOAH  
Maybe.

They share a moment. Then her gaze shifts to the window—across the street, EVAN is walking with CASSIE, slow and awkward but... peaceful.

Sarah's face softens before she can stop it.

NOAH (CONT'D)  
He's trying.

SARAH  
He always tries. It's what comes  
next that scares me.

NOAH  
Then don't jump ahead. Let today  
just be... today.

She nods, sipping her coffee, eyes still on them.

EXT. MAIN STREET - CONTINUOUS

EVAN and CASSIE walk side by side, the awkward silence slowly  
melting.

CASSIE  
Grandma says you're fixing stuff  
again.

EVAN  
Yeah. She's running out of things  
to give me a wrench for.

CASSIE  
She'll find more. She likes seeing  
you busy.

EVAN  
Everyone likes seeing me busy.  
Makes it easier to believe I'm  
okay.

She glances at him. He catches it, laughs quietly.

EVAN (CONT'D)  
I'm not, by the way. But I'm  
trying.

CASSIE  
You don't have to tell me that. I  
already know.

They walk past a mural faded by the sun, children holding  
hands under a painted tree.

Evan slows, looking at it. Cassie notices.

CASSIE (CONT'D)  
You used to bring me here after  
school.

EVAN

Yeah. You wanted to be an artist back then. You said you'd paint the whole town if you had enough colors.

CASSIE

Guess I ran out of paint.

EVAN

Or maybe you just need better brushes.

She side-eyes him—corny, but kind.

A gust of wind picks up dust from the street, tangling her hair.

He tucks a loose strand behind her ear before realizing it's too intimate.

EVAN (CONT'D)

Sorry.

CASSIE

It's fine.

A quiet moment. The kind that almost feels normal.

INT. GRACE'S HOUSE - LATE AFTERNOON

Grace kneads dough at the kitchen counter. The TV murmurs a daytime talk show about "second chances."

She isn't watching, but she isn't not listening.

The back door creaks. EVAN enters with Cassie.

They're laughing about something small.

Grace looks up, eyes shining at the sound.

GRACE

You two are a sight I wasn't sure I'd see again.

CASSIE

Don't get used to it. He bribed me with a milkshake.

EVAN

Two milkshakes. Inflation.

Grace chuckles. CASSIE heads to her room.

As soon as she's gone, the lightness fades from Evan's face.

GRACE  
She smiled at you. That's  
something.

EVAN  
Yeah. I keep waiting for it to turn  
back into silence.

Grace wipes her hands, studies him carefully.

GRACE  
Silence isn't punishment, Evan.  
It's people figuring out what words  
are safe again.

He nods, taking that in.

She gestures toward the living room.

GRACE (CONT'D)  
Go sit. I'll make coffee. Pretend  
this is normal.

EVAN  
You're good at pretending.

GRACE  
Years of practice.

INT. GRACE'S LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Evan sits on the couch, staring at framed photos on the wall.

Family frozen in better times. He focuses on one: him, Sarah, Cassie, and Grace at a county fair.

He traces the edge of the frame with his thumb, lost in memory.

GRACE enters with two mugs. Sits beside him.

GRACE  
You still remember the fair that  
year?

EVAN  
The rides broke down halfway  
through.

GRACE

You and Sarah got in a fight over  
the ferris wheel tickets.

EVAN

I tore mine just to make her mad.

GRACE

You both cried all the way home.  
Cassie slept through the whole  
thing.

He chuckles. For a heartbeat, it's like nothing bad ever  
happened.

Then Grace's tone shifts, gentle, but probing.

GRACE (CONT'D)

You're being quiet again.

EVAN

Just tired.

GRACE

You were tired yesterday.

EVAN

I'll be tired tomorrow.

GRACE

That's not the kind of tired I  
meant.

He forces a smile, sets his mug down.

EVAN

I'm fine, Ma.

She watches him, doesn't push further.

Just hums that same hymn again, soft and steady.

EXT. GRACE'S PORCH - SUNSET

The sky glows orange and pink, the light spilling across the  
porch steps Evan fixed earlier.

He stands there alone, gazing at the horizon.

The quiet feels earned, not empty.

Inside, Grace's voice hums faint through the open window.

Sarah's laughter echoes from the driveway as she drops Cassie off.

For a fleeting moment, the house feels whole again.

Then, from Evan's pocket – \*BUZZ\*.

He pulls out the phone, thumb hovering over the screen.

A new message: \*\*"You can't bury what breathes."\*\*

His reflection stares back at him in the glass.

He locks the phone, tucks it away, forcing his shoulders to steady.

SARAH (O.S.)  
You gonna stand there all night?

He turns. She's leaning on the porch railing, casual but wary.

EVAN  
Didn't hear you pull up.

SARAH  
That's because I don't slam into things like you do.

EVAN  
Always good with the compliments.

SARAH  
It's a family trait.

They share a small, reluctant grin.

The air between them isn't warm, but it isn't freezing either.

SARAH (CONT'D)  
Cassie had fun today.

EVAN  
Yeah. Me too.

SARAH  
Don't make me regret letting that happen.

EVAN  
Working on it.

She exhales, half-laughing, half-warning.



SARAH  
One day at a time, right?

EVAN  
That's the plan.

She nods, heads for her car.

He watches her go, the faintest trace of a smile on his face.

Then he turns back to the fading sky—alone again.

INT. GRACE'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

The house is quieter than it should be. A single light over the sink glows warm against the dark outside. SARAH rinses dishes while EVAN stands near the counter, half in shadow, pretending to dry.

The rhythm between them is steady, brittle.

SARAH  
You've been pacing out there for an hour.

EVAN  
Just thinking.

SARAH  
Dangerous habit.

EVAN  
Yeah. Keeps me from sleeping.

She finishes the last plate, sets it in the rack. He stays silent, watching the water drain away.

SARAH  
You remember what Mom used to say about silence?

EVAN  
That it's how people lie without talking.

She looks up at him, water dripping from her hands.

SARAH  
So what are you lying about?

EVAN dries the same plate again, slower this time.

EVAN

Nothing.

SARAH

That's the wrong answer.

EVAN

I'm just trying not to make things worse.

SARAH

For who? Me? Cassie? Or yourself?

He exhales, steady but thin.

EVAN

All of the above.

She leans against the counter, crossing her arms.

SARAH

You think coming back here fixes it?

EVAN

I think it's the first step.

SARAH

You don't get steps. You get chances, and you used most of them.

EVAN

Maybe. But I'm still walking.

The line lands between them, neither flinches first.

SARAH

(quiet)

You left me holding everything.  
Mom, Cassie, the mess. You don't even know what it took.

EVAN

I know exactly what it took. That's why I came back – to take some of it back.

SARAH

You can't. That's not how time works.

EVAN

Then what do I do, Sarah? Stand still until you say I've done enough?

The kettle on the stove starts to rattle as it heats. Their voices rise just enough to echo off the tile.

SARAH

Maybe start by admitting what you really want.

EVAN

I want her to look at me like I'm her father again. I want you to stop looking at me like I'm a warning label.

SARAH

You think that's easy? You think forgiveness is some switch we flip for you?

He slams the towel down, not in anger—just defeat.

EVAN

No. I think it's something you give to people when you remember they're still trying.

Silence again. The kettle WHINES now, shrill and constant.

SARAH kills the burner. The noise dies. Their breathing doesn't.

SARAH

I don't hate you, Evan.

EVAN

You don't have to. I do enough of that for both of us.

He turns to leave, but she stops him.

SARAH

Cassie wants to see you tomorrow. After school. Don't make me regret saying that.

He nods, surprised, almost grateful.

EVAN

I won't.

SARAH

We'll see.

He exits through the back door, the screen creaking like an old sigh.

---

EXT. BACK PORCH - CONTINUOUS

EVAN steps out into the dark. The wind's cooler now, the stars sharp. He sits on the steps, pulls out his phone, staring at the screen's glow.

Another message blinks into view:

"You talk too much for someone who swore silence."

He reads it twice. The sender ID is blank, untraceable. He locks the screen, then unlocks it again, like he's testing the truth.

A small sound from inside - Grace's hum drifting through the wall, the same hymn she always sings when she senses danger but doesn't name it.

Evan pockets the phone, rubs his hands over his face.

EVAN (V.O.)

Some ghosts don't haunt you. They  
just wait for you to stop running.

He leans back against the rail, closes his eyes.

The night settles in, wrapping the house, wrapping him.

---

INT. SARAH'S BEDROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

SARAH sits at her small desk, laptop open, unread emails filling the screen. The glow paints her tired face.

Her cursor hovers over a draft message: "Evan - I'm trying. Don't make me stop."

She stares at it, then deletes the line. Closes the laptop, switches off the lamp.

From outside, the faint sound of footsteps pacing on the porch boards.

---

INT. CASSIE'S ROOM - SAME TIME

Cassie lies awake, earbuds in but no music playing. She scrolls through old photos on her phone – her and Evan at the carnival, her and Sarah on a beach, younger and smiling.

She stops on one of her grandmother's house. Zooms in. Through the reflection in the window, a figure – blurry, behind the camera. Familiar.

She lowers the phone, confused. For a moment, she glances toward the window, where the porch light flickers again.

---

EXT. GRACE'S PORCH - CONTINUOUS

EVAN sits in shadow. He senses movement, looks up toward Cassie's window. The curtain shifts slightly, a brief silhouette behind the glass.

He smiles – small, sad, proud. Then his phone BUZZES again. He checks it.

Another message: "You shouldn't have come home."

His smile fades. He pockets the phone, stands. The boards creak beneath his weight – the same boards he fixed this morning.

He looks at the dark yard, the quiet street,  
and for the first time since returning, he looks afraid.

INT. GRACE'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

The house glows with lamplight. Rain rattles the windows softly.

Grace knits in her armchair, her rhythm steady and calm.

EVAN paces nearby, restless energy tightening his jaw.

GRACE

You'll wear a groove in the rug.

EVAN

I've already worn one in my head.

She smirks gently, not looking up from her knitting.

GRACE

Then maybe stop walking the same circle.

He exhales through his nose, sits finally, elbows on knees.

EVAN

You ever look around and feel like everyone's waiting for you to fall again?

GRACE

No. I look around and see people waiting to help you stand – if you'd let them.

He almost smiles. Almost.

EVAN

I don't know how to let them.

Feels like admitting I can't do it myself.

GRACE

That's exactly what it is.

She sets the needles down, folds her hands in her lap.

GRACE (CONT'D)

You don't have to prove you've changed.

You just have to live like you have.

EVAN

What if I mess that up, too?

GRACE

Then we clean it up again.

That's what families do.

They share a look – not forgiveness, but something close enough to hold.

---

INT. SARAH'S BOOKSTORE – SAME NIGHT

The shop is closed. SARAH sits at the front counter, sorting receipts she's already sorted twice.

Outside, the rain has turned to mist, catching the streetlights in a quiet shimmer.

The bell above the door jingles.

NOAH slips in, soaked, holding an umbrella that's given up on being useful.

NOAH  
I swear, it's biblical out there.

SARAH  
I didn't call for rain or prophets,  
so you're only half right.

He shakes off the umbrella, grinning.

NOAH  
Just checking in.

Thought maybe you could use a coffee and company that doesn't talk back.

He holds up a cup.

She takes it – grateful but guarded.

SARAH  
You ever feel like forgiving  
someone

is the same as saying what they did was okay?

NOAH  
No. It's just saying you're tired  
of being the one bleeding.

She looks at him – the truth landing heavier than she wanted.

SARAH  
You should write greeting cards.

NOAH  
They don't pay for honesty.

SARAH  
Neither does this place.

They share an easy silence.

Sarah looks out the window – the street empty, quiet.

For a second, she thinks she sees movement across the road.

A shadow near Grace's house.

She blinks — it's gone.

---

EXT. GRACE'S STREET - SAME TIME

The rain has stopped. Streetlights hum and flicker.

A \*\*WHITE SEDAN\*\* idles at the curb, engine off but lights on.

From the driver's seat, a PHONE glows — a message thread open.

One new line appears:

"He's getting comfortable. Time to remind him."

The lights go dark.

The car pulls away without a sound.

---

INT. GRACE'S HOUSE - LATE NIGHT

Evan walks the hallway barefoot, restless.

Cassie's door is cracked. He pauses, peers inside.

She's asleep — earbuds in, phone glowing faintly beside her.

He steps in, gently pulls the blanket higher over her shoulder.

She stirs but doesn't wake.

He looks down at her — the kind of look that's part pride, part ache, part prayer.

Then, from his pocket — \*BUZZ.\*

He steps out quickly, down the hall.

---

INT. GRACE'S LAUNDRY ROOM - CONTINUOUS

He shuts the door behind him, flicks on the light.



The phone screen pulses: a new text.

"Still running? Even home isn't safe."

He exhales hard, thumb hovering over reply.

EVAN

Who are you?

No answer.

The three dots appear... vanish... appear again.

"The past you left in that house.

Don't forget her face."

He freezes.

The photo loads: a blurry image of a hand — a woman's hand — limp against a dirty mattress.

His breathing stumbles. He kills the screen. Leans on the washer, shaking.

GRACE (O.S.)

Evan?

He jolts, almost drops the phone. Shoves it in his pocket.

EVAN

Yeah?

Grace appears in the doorway, robe pulled tight.

GRACE

You alright?

EVAN

Couldn't sleep. Thought I'd wash some stuff.

GRACE

(eyebrow raised)

At midnight?

EVAN

Better than thinking.

She studies him, unreadable. Then nods slowly.

GRACE

Don't break the machine. It's older than your promises.

She walks off. The moment breaks.

He exhales, pressing both palms to the washer lid, steadying himself.

The hum of the house fills in what he can't say.

---

EXT. GRACE'S PORCH - DAWN

The world pale and wet with morning.

Birds calling like they don't know better.

Evan steps outside, barefoot, hoodie up.

He sits on the repaired step, cigarette between his fingers but unlit.

Across the yard, SARAH's car slows, stops.

She rolls down the window - CASSIE in the passenger seat, half-asleep.

Evan lifts a hand, small wave.

Cassie waves back - barely, but real.

SARAH watches, unreadable, then nods once.

Drives off down the road.

Evan stays there, alone in the early light, the cigarette still unlit.

EVAN (V.O.)  
Sometimes you fix a broken thing

just to prove it can still hold weight.

He crushes the cigarette, stands, and goes back inside.

INT. GRACE'S HOUSE - EARLY MORNING

The faint light of dawn pushes through thin curtains.

The air carries that mix of old wood, coffee, and something heavier - tension left from the night before.

GRACE stands by the stove, stirring a pot.

SARAH enters quietly, hair damp from the shower, a towel looped around her shoulders.

GRACE  
Morning.

SARAH  
Barely.

GRACE  
Coffee's on.

Sarah pours a cup. Grace doesn't turn – she knows her daughter too well to push before caffeine.

SARAH  
He was up again.

GRACE  
So were you.

SARAH  
I had work.

GRACE  
You always do.

They share a silence that says more than the words ever could.

SARAH  
He's not sleeping. He's... pacing.  
Like he's waiting for the world to  
collapse again.

GRACE  
Maybe he's making sure it doesn't.

Sarah sips her coffee, eyes on the window.

The front yard is gray-blue, still wet from last night's rain.

No cars, no movement. Just quiet.

---

INT. GRACE'S FRONT HALL - SAME TIME

EVAN leans against the wall, half-dressed for work that doesn't exist.

He listens to them – the murmur of two voices he loves and doesn't deserve.

He closes his eyes.

GRACE (O.S.)  
...you think he's different?

SARAH (O.S.)  
I think he wants to be. I just  
don't know if that's enough.

GRACE (O.S.)  
Sometimes wanting is the start of  
everything.

EVAN presses a hand to the wall, grounding himself.

Then he straightens, grabs his jacket, and walks toward the door.

---

EXT. GRACE'S DRIVEWAY – MOMENTS LATER

The air is crisp, clean. The kind of morning that could fool anyone into hope.

EVAN steps onto the porch, toolbox in hand. He kneels by the loose railing, starts tightening bolts.

A truck drives past, splashing through puddles.

He watches it go, eyes narrowing as it disappears around the corner.

Then another car slows – \*\*a white sedan\*\*, unfamiliar, idling just long enough to feel wrong.

He squints. The window tint hides everything.

After a beat, the sedan moves on. No brake lights. No plate.

He exhales, jaw tightening.

GRACE opens the door behind him, holding a mug.

GRACE  
Thought you'd want this before it  
gets cold.

EVAN

Thanks.

She watches him a moment.

GRACE

You're working awful early.

EVAN

Couldn't sleep.

She leans on the doorframe, watching him work for a beat before speaking again.

GRACE

You always did your best thinking before sunrise.

EVAN

Yeah, well, I'm trying not to.

GRACE

(teasing)

That explains the noise.

He laughs quietly, the sound thin but real. The first in a while.

GRACE (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

You're gonna wear that board down before it ever breaks.

EVAN

Just keeping my hands busy.

GRACE

Hands busy, mind racing. You think I don't see it?

He tightens the last bolt, sits back on his heels. The porch creaks beneath them—old wood, old secrets.

EVAN

Sometimes it helps. Fixing something small when the big stuff's a mess.

GRACE

The trick is knowing which is which.

He looks out across the yard, the sky still gray with sleep. Birdsong stirs faintly from the trees.

EVAN

You ever wake up and feel like the world's holding its breath?

GRACE

Every morning since you came home.

That catches him off guard. He turns toward her, half a smile caught in guilt.

EVAN

Didn't mean to bring all that with me.

GRACE

You didn't. It's been here waiting—same as me.

She hands him the mug, warm in both their hands for a moment before he takes it.

GRACE (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Drink before it's cold. Cold coffee's just a bad memory pretending to be breakfast.

He chuckles under his breath, takes a sip, nodding. Steam curls between them, softening the morning.

Grace studies his face, seeing the exhaustion he hides behind work.

GRACE (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

You know, a man can hammer all day and still never build peace.

EVAN

(quiet)

Maybe peace doesn't have nails.

She smiles faintly, shaking her head.

GRACE

You always were better with words than walls.

She turns to go back inside.

GRACE (CONT'D) (CONT'D)

Don't forget to eat something. Fixing things on an empty stomach's bad luck.

EVAN  
I've had worse luck.

GRACE  
That's what worries me.

She steps inside, closing the door softly behind her. Evan watches her go, then looks down at the mug, at the reflection of the gray morning in the coffee's surface.

He sets it on the rail, picks up his hammer again – not because the step needs fixing, but because his hands don't know what else to do.

The faintest roll of thunder murmurs in the distance.

FADE TO:

INT. GRACE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The house sleeps. Floorboards settle. Rain softens against the roof.

EVAN sits at the kitchen table, the same spot he's claimed since coming home.

A single bulb burns above him, yellow and lonely.

On the table – his phone, face-down.

INT. GRACE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The house sleeps. Floorboards settle. Rain softens against the roof.

EVAN sits at the kitchen table, the same spot he's claimed since coming home.

A single bulb burns above him, yellow and lonely.

On the table – his phone, face-down.

He drums his fingers next to it, waiting for something he doesn't want to arrive.

He finally turns it over. Nothing.

For the first time in days, the silence feels worse.

He exhales, stands, crosses to the window.

Outside, the porch glistens wet. The road beyond disappears into fog.

He locks the door anyway.

---

INT. GRACE'S HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

He walks the hallway softly, passing framed photos: a younger Grace, Sarah in braces, Cassie as a baby in his arms – the version of himself that still believed in mornings.

He stops at Cassie's door. Listens.

Her music plays low – muffled, rhythmic, the safe kind of sound.

He almost knocks. Doesn't.

---

INT. GRACE'S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Grace sits half-awake in her chair, a blanket draped over her lap, knitting abandoned.

She looks up when he enters, startled but not surprised.

GRACE  
You pacing again?

EVAN  
Couldn't sleep.

GRACE  
You should try harder.

He sits across from her, rubbing his palms together.

The lamp hums faintly, the quiet too large for both of them.

GRACE (CONT'D)  
You remember that summer you ran away? I found you sleeping under the bridge behind the fairgrounds.

EVAN  
Yeah.



GRACE

You said you were building a new  
life. You had a backpack, five  
dollars, and a sandwich you stole.

EVAN

(smiles)

Ham and mustard. It didn't age  
well.

GRACE

Neither did running.

She meets his eyes – no accusation, just knowing.

GRACE (CONT'D)

You can stop now. No one's chasing  
you anymore.

He swallows, looks away.

Doesn't answer because it isn't true.

---

INT. SARAH'S BEDROOM – SAME TIME

Sarah sits at her desk, the glow of her laptop painting her  
face blue.

She types a few words – deletes them.

Types again. Stops.

On the desk: a mug, half-empty.

A small family photo from years ago.

She turns it face-down.

Cassie's footsteps pad down the hall, hesitant.

Sarah straightens, trying to look calm.

The door opens a crack.

CASSIE

You awake?

SARAH

Yeah. You okay?

Cassie steps inside, hoodie over pajamas, eyes tired.

CASSIE  
Can't sleep.

SARAH  
That seems to run in the family.

Cassie sits on the edge of the bed. For once, she's not trying to hide how lost she feels.

CASSIE  
Do you think people change?

Sarah takes a breath. Careful with her answer.

SARAH  
I think they try. Sometimes that's enough.

CASSIE  
What if it's not?

SARAH  
Then we keep trying anyway.

Cassie nods – not convinced, but comforted.

She leans her head on Sarah's shoulder.

Sarah hesitates, then wraps an arm around her.

They sit like that – the closest they've been in years.

---

EXT. GRACE'S PORCH - LATE NIGHT

Evan steps outside again, wrapped in his jacket.

The night is cold, mist pooling low across the yard.

He sits on the top step. The boards creak softly – the same ones he fixed.

He pulls out his phone, hesitates, then opens it.

One unread message blinks.

He opens it slowly.

"Nice house. Shame if she found out."

His hand tightens around the phone. He looks toward the window –

Grace's silhouette faint behind the curtain.

EVAN (V.O.)  
Some sins don't fade. They just  
change their address.

He locks the phone, slides it into his pocket, and stares out into the fog.

The faint outline of a \*\*white sedan\*\* sits parked down the road, lights off, windows dark.

He freezes. Watches. The car doesn't move.

His breath fogs the air. Every sound feels amplified – insects, the hum of a distant transformer, his own heartbeat.

He stands, slow, watching that patch of darkness that shouldn't be there.

The car's headlights flick on – too bright, sudden.

He shields his eyes.

Then – the engine turns over, and the sedan drives off into the fog.

He stays there, motionless, until the taillights vanish.

Finally, he exhales – a sound that's almost a sob, almost relief.

---

INT. GRACE'S LIVING ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Grace stands behind the curtain, unseen.

She's been watching, too.

The porch light flickers once, then steadies.

She whispers to no one in particular–

GRACE  
Lord, give him the strength... or  
give me the truth.

The light hums on. The house breathes.

EXT. GRACE'S HOUSE - NIGHT

A storm presses close again. Wind scatters leaves across the yard. The porch light burns steady, the only bright thing for miles.

EVAN stands just beyond it, soaked in the glow and shadow. He's barefoot, jacket half-zipped, phone clutched in his hand.

He checks it—nothing new. Just the echo of every message before.

He breathes, pockets it, and turns toward the yard— then stops.

A single HEADLIGHT beam cuts across the trees at the far end of the road. The rest of the car stays hidden in the dark.

He watches, waiting for it to pass. It doesn't.

A cold knot builds in his chest. He takes one careful step off the porch.

Thunder rolls.

GRACE (O.S.)

Evan?

He spins—Grace stands in the doorway, robe tied, concern in her eyes.

EVAN

Go inside, Ma.

GRACE

What is it?

EVAN

Just—please. Lock the door.

She hesitates, fear creeping in around the edges.

GRACE

You're scaring me.

He looks back toward the road— The headlight vanishes. Just like that. No sound. No trace.

EVAN

(quiet)

I'm scaring me too.

He forces a smile he doesn't feel. Grace lingers another second, then steps back inside, closing the door. The lock clicks. The porch light flickers once, then steadies.

Evan exhales, staring at the spot where the light had been.

He reaches into his pocket. The phone vibrates in his hand.

A new message.

"You can't save them twice."

He freezes, the rain beginning to fall harder now. Drops hiss against the porch light, the world tightening around him.

From somewhere beyond the dark yard— A CAMERA FLASH. Quick. Bright. Gone.

Evan flinches, staring into the trees.

Thunder follows like laughter.

He steps back onto the porch, soaked and shaking, gripping the phone.

EVAN (CONT'D)  
(under breath)  
What do you want from me?

The phone vibrates again.

A photo appears on screen — A grainy shot of \*\*Grace, Sarah, and Cassie at the kitchen table\*\* earlier that day. The caption beneath it reads:

"You brought this home."

His face goes pale. He looks toward the window — their silhouettes still moving inside. His breath catches.

He backs into the corner of the porch, chest heaving. Then the screen goes black.

Only the rain and the hum of the light remain.

FADE OUT

TITLE CARD: \*BROKEN BONDS\*

61.

FADE TO BLACK.