



MIKE MOK

BONA FIDE

The epitome of well-behaved
is the eternity of a slave

BONA FIDE

MIKE MOK

First published in Hong Kong SAR, China in 2026
by Red Publish, an imprint of Red Corporation Limited.

Copyright © 2026 by Liu Wai Hin

Liu Wai Hin asserts the moral right to be
identified as the author of this work in accordance with
the Copyright Ordinance (Cap. 528).

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced,
stored in a retrieval system or transmitted in any form or by any means,
electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise,
without the prior written permission of the author,
or as expressly permitted by law, or under terms agreed with
the appropriate reprographic rights organization.

This book is sold subject to the condition that it shall not, by way of trade
or otherwise, be lent, re-sold, hired out or otherwise circulated without the
author's prior consent in a form of binding or cover other than that in
which it is published and without a similar condition including this
condition being imposed on the subsequent purchaser.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction.
The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work
of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons,
living or dead, events or localities, is entirely coincidental.

ISBN: 978-988-8972-10-4

Red Publish
An imprint of Red Corporation Limited
11/E, Times Media Centre
133 Wan Chai Road
Wan Chai
Hong Kong SAR
China

This book is specially dedicated to my grandparents, with love.

*Also for my Mom, Siena, Thomas,
BFFs (You Know Who),
Cousins, Uncles, Aunts,
all my Italian, Swedish and French buddies...*

...and to those who cannot truly be yourself in life.

*I just want to say
YOU ARE NOT ALONE.*

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE	11
1. SUMMER	15
2. BEGINNING	21
3. ADAPTATION	29
4. ENCOUNTER	37
5. TALENT	51
6. INVITATION	61
7. DOWNTOWN	69
8. SHADOW	79
9. CONFRONTATION	83
10. BONDING	89
11. CONFLICT	99
12. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT	107
13. COMPETITION	119
14. COLLABORATION	139
15. HEADLINE	151
16. AFTERMATH	163
17. MASK	171
18. WILLINGNESS	183
19. HOOK	193
20. INTERVENTION	205
21. VERACITY	217
22. DIVULGENCE	231
23. STRUGGLE	241
24. FACE-OFF	259
25. FATE	271
EPILOGUE	293
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	303
ABOUT THE ALBUM	305
TRACKLIST	307
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	328

PROLOGUE

Life has a curious way of testing us. It doesn't always come with loud warnings or flashing signs. Sometimes, the tests are quiet. Subtle. They show up in the form of everyday decisions, uncomfortable conversations, or the moments we spend lying awake at night, wondering if we're really where we belong. Life places us in situations where we're forced to confront the very essence of who we are. And yet, more often than not, we find ourselves second-guessing everything including our instincts, our values, and the shape of our desires. We question whether we have the right to want what we want, to be who we are, and to chase what feels real.

Over the past decade, I've encountered remarkable individuals. Each wrestling with the weight of uncertainty, who question their values, their desires and the truth of their own will. I've seen them stand at the edge of decisions, trembling not from weakness, but from the fear that their own voice might lead them astray. Despite the doubt, the silence of inner conflict, life, which can be mysterious and unrelenting, has a way of gently pushing us forward. Through trials, losses and even unexpected twists and turns, these people I've come to know have emerged into lives that, in retrospect, seemed to be shaped with invisible precision. They are not perfect lives, but they are more vivid, or indeed, authentic. They are ones that reflect their essence, their truth, even if they could not see it at the start. They emerged stronger, more resolute and deeply connected to their true selves.

That's what moves me most: the way people come into their truth, not all at once, but in pieces. Sometimes painfully. Sometimes quietly. And always, always bravely. What looks like fate might just be the result of a thousand tiny choices to keep going, to keep believing, to keep listening to that inner voice even when it feels like no one else hears it.

It's easy to admire people who seem to have it all figured out. But I've learned to admire those who are still in the thick of it, still choosing themselves in a world that often asks us to choose anything. They remind me that authenticity isn't a destination. Instead, it's a series of choices we make every day. Choices to show up, to speak honestly, to let ourselves be seen.

And here's the kicker. I have spent years encouraging others to do just that. To be true to themselves. To trust their gut. To follow their own path, even when it doesn't make sense to anyone else. I have said those words with conviction, and I meant them. But if I am being honest, I want to be honest here. Those words are easier to say than live. I've encouraged others to take the leap while I have stood on the edge, hesitating. I've told people to listen to their hearts while ignoring the voice in my own chest.

Now, I find myself in unfamiliar territory. I am struck by the realization that I'm still learning to take my own advice. I feel like I am standing at a crossroads, staring out at a dozen different paths, each one shrouded in mist. The road behind me is fading, and the roads ahead are unclear. Each path seems to whisper something different. Well, some offer comfort, others promise challenge, and a few are just downright terrifying. Which way is the right way? Which route will lead me closer to the life I truly want? These questions echo endlessly in my mind, and I find myself caught in the loophole. And that's the thing about life. It doesn't always give you certainty. At times, all you get is a nudge, or a pull from somewhere deep inside that says, let's try this way.

Perhaps this book is as much for me as it is for anyone else. It is an exploration of trust. Trust in ourselves, in our instincts and in the mysterious forces that shape our journeys. It is a reminder that uncertainty is not the enemy. It is the proving ground where we find our strength. I wrote it as a way of making sense of the questions that keep me up at night. And though I may not know which road mine is to take, I start to understand that the act of choosing, of walking with purpose and faith, is itself the first step toward becoming who I'm meant to be. And if we listen closely enough, we will hear the same quiet

guidance that led those we admire to where they are now. Perhaps we will find that we are being shaped by something unseen, and that even in this confusion, we are walking toward something true.

This story is not about romance. It is about the kind of attraction, external force, or brutally say, life that pushes us to grow. It is about what happens when you stop running from who you are and start walking toward it instead. It is about how powerful and terrifying and beautiful it is to be seen in your fullness, especially when you have spent years hiding parts of yourself to survive.

For so long, the type of stories depicted in this book have been pushed to the edges of literature, treated as side plots or tragedies. But this tale is different. This one is centered. This one is about how real and vulnerable feelings can be a vehicle for transformation, how it can crack us open and show us the parts of ourselves we forgot were there, how it can teach us to be brave, and how love is the thing that helps us find our way back to our truth.

Writing this book has been a process of peeling back the layers. I have had to confront my own fears, hesitations and the inner critic. I have had to ask myself challenging questions:

What do I really want? What am I afraid of? What parts of myself have I silenced to fit in, to be accepted or to avoid rocking the boat? Am I willing to be fully seen, even if it scares me?

I do not have all the answers. I probably never will. But what I do have is a growing belief that being true to yourself is worth it. Even when it's hard. Even when it costs you. Even when it feels like no one else understands. Living a life that isn't truly yours is far more painful in the long run.

If you have ever felt lost, scared, or unsure of who you are, this book is for you.

If you have ever questioned whether your desires are valid, whether your voice matters, whether your truth is enough, this book is for you.

If you have ever stood at the crossroads and felt paralyzed by choice, fear, or doubt, this book is for you.

And if you, like me, are still stumbling your way forward, still learning how to trust yourself, I want you to know this:

WE ARE ALL THE SAME.

We are all walking each other home, as they say. We are all trying to find our rhythm in a world that often tells us to dance to someone else's tune. But there

is something profoundly powerful in choosing your own steps, even if they are clumsy at first or you trip at a certain point in life.

This book is a letter to that choice. It is to the bravery it takes to be yourself. It is also to the hope that perhaps, we are all being gently guided, even when we cannot see the roadmap.

I am not sure where this journey will take you. I do not even fully know where it is taking me. But I do know this: every step you take toward your truth matters. Every moment you choose to listen to your own heart, even when it's shaking, matters. And every time you dare to believe in the possibility of a life that feels like yours. It truly matters more than you know.

Anyways, welcome to the story. I'd say it is complicated as life. It is full of excitement like a roller coaster ride. And at its core, it is about the power of bonding between humans...I mean not just the kind that binds two people together, but the kind that brings you closer to yourself. You have the gut to be brave enough to choose yourself even when it is challenging.

Let's begin, shall we?

1

SUMMER

The August sun hung low, casting a warm, amber glow over the sprawling estate that belonged to the Wexler family. From his window on the third floor, Ethan Wexler sat on the edge of his bed, staring at the manicured lawns and distant fountains. The symmetrical perfection of the scene felt suffocating, as if even nature had been forced to conform to the Wexler brand. As the only son of one of the world's wealthiest supermarket magnates, the pressure of living up to his family name weighed heavily on his shoulders.

Tomorrow marked the beginning of a new school year at St. Ignatius Academy, a prestigious private school where the elite mingled with the elite. For most students, the first day was a chance to flaunt new clothes and reconnect with friends. For Ethan, it was just another day to mask his true self beneath layers of perfection.

He ran his fingers through his tousled light brown hair and sighed, glancing around his room. A Danish rosewood desk held an array of textbooks, neatly stacked but largely untouched. The walls adorned with pop stars' posters including Lady Gaga and Billie Eilish, and academic awards felt like a façade, a carefully curated image that he was expected to uphold. But deep down, Ethan was tired. Tired of pretending to be someone he was not. Tired of hiding the truth about himself.

Before the weight of the school year settled in, Ethan decided to escape for a

few hours. He turned away, grabbed his favorite leather backpack from a chair, and slung it over his shoulder. Inside were his notebook, a few pens, and his earbuds. These were his essentials for a day of solitude. His mother, Victoria, was in her study on a video call, and his father, Jackson, was likely in some boardroom halfway across the globe. No one would notice him leaving, and even if they did, no one would care.

The afternoon sun wrapped around him like a comforting blanket. Ethan walked out the back gate and into the quiet streets of the affluent neighborhood surrounding the estate. The tall hedges and wrought-iron fences seemed to separate him from the rest of the world, but he knew exactly where he wanted to go.

The walk was familiar, lined with vibrant storefronts and the scent of fresh coffee wafting through the air. He strolled past his favorite music shop, *Max's Woodwind Wonders*, the sound of vibrant chords spilling out onto the sidewalk.

This spacious, music shop was tucked between a bookstore and a café. Pushing the door open, the tiny bell overhead chimed, and he was instantly enveloped by the warmth of the shop. The scent of aged wood and vinyl greeted him like an old friend. Shelves overflowed with records and vintage instruments, a treasure trove for any music lover. Ethan wandered through the aisles, running his fingers over the spines of albums, his heart racing at the thought of the melodies contained within. He could almost hear the notes playing in his mind. That was an echo of summer sounds.

Music had been his escape for as long as he could remember. Over the summer, he had spent hours in this shop, playing until his fingers ached. It was here he had bought his first loop pedal and learned to layer melodies that felt like pieces of himself.

"Hey, Ethan," said the shop owner, a graying man named Max who always wore flannel shirts and spoke with a raspy voice. "Back again?"

"Yeah," Ethan said, his lips curving into a small smile. "Just wanted to look around."

Max chuckled. "You say that every time, and then you end up playing something that makes the whole shop stop and listen. You should come to the monthly open mic night again, kid."

"Not for me, Max. I just like how the guitars feel." Ethan shrugged, embarrassed.

"Well, you've got real talent," Max said. "Don't waste it."

Ethan nodded, though the words sat uncomfortably in his chest. Sometimes he wondered if his music was the only thing about him that felt real. It was the only thing something that was not tied to his family name or his father's empire.

He picked up a dark blue electric guitar, plugged it into an amp, and strummed a few chords. The tones filled the whole shop, vibrant and resonant. For a moment, he lost himself in the sound, letting his fingers dance across the frets, singing a few lines of a popular song by Sabrina Carpenter.

Please please please

Don't prove I am right

And please please please

Don't bring me to tears when I just did my makeup so nice

It was not until he noticed a couple of customers watching him that he stopped, his face flushing.

"Don't mind them," Max said, grinning. "They're just fans."

Ethan put the guitar back on its stand and muttered a quick goodbye before heading out the door. He was not in the mood to be the center of attention. Well, at least not today.

The summer heat pressed down on him, but Ethan did not mind. He walked to *Brewbeats* next door and made his way to the counter, where the barista smiled knowingly.

"How are you today, Ethan? The usual?" she asked, already reaching for the cup.

"Yeah, Loretta," he replied, excitement bubbling within him.

As he waited, he glanced around the cozy space. The café had a quirky charm, with mismatched furniture and walls covered in Polaroid photos of customers. Ethan had been coming here for years, and his own photo was somewhere in the collage.

Moments later, he cradled a steaming cup of iced marshmallow whipped cream chocolate, the sweet scent comforting him. He took it to a corner table by the window and sipped slowly, savoring the sweetness. His thoughts drifted to the summer that was now coming to an end. He would have spent most of it playing and composing music, trying to push the boundaries of what he could create. He had even done some busking in the Madison Garden, setting up his amp and playing for strangers.

At first, he had been terrified. *What if no one stopped to listen?* But to his surprise, people had gathered, clapping and tossing bills into his open guitar case. The experience had been freeing, a reminder that he could connect with people through his music in a way that words often failed him.

But now, as he stared out at the bustling street, the familiar weight of dread settled over him. Tomorrow he would be back at the Academy, where every interaction felt like a performance, and every move was scrutinized. It was not just the pressure of being a Wexler. It was the pressure of being himself. Or rather, the version of himself he let the world see.

Ethan finished his drink and stood, tossing the empty cup into the trash. Walking along the street, he recalled that he had performed at open mic nights, his heart racing as he took the stage, sharing original compositions that poured out of him. Each note was a piece of his soul, a glimpse into the boy hidden beneath the surface. His friends had cheered him on, their encouraging voices blending with the melodies, reminding him of the joy that came from being authentic.

As the sun began to set, painting the sky in shades of pink and orange over the town, Ethan stuffed his hands into his pockets and walked home, the sounds of the city fading behind him.

The moment he returned home, Victoria said, "Ethan, you need to come help with dinner!"

With a reluctant sigh, he trudged into the kitchen, the familiar scent of simmering spices filling the air. The Wexler celebrated their wealth with an expansive home, but Ethan often felt like a ghost wandering through its halls. He glanced at the polished granite countertops and the gleaming silverware, feeling the weight of expectation settle on his shoulders. As he stirred the pot, his mind drifted to the life outside these walls, wondering if he had ever truly belong anywhere.

"Are you excited for tomorrow?" Victoria asked as he entered the kitchen.

"Sure," he replied, forcing a smile. "Just the usual stuff, I guess."

"Just the usual?" she chuckled, stirring a pot on the stove. "You're heading back to school with all your friends! And I heard there's a new student this year."

Ethan's heart stumbled at the mention of a new student. "Really? Who?" he asked, trying to sound casual.

"Some boy named *Caleb Thorne*. His father is running for president next

year. I hear he's quite the catch!" She winked, oblivious to the turmoil brewing inside her son.

"Sounds...interesting," Ethan managed, his voice barely above a whisper.

Dinner was a parade of small talk and laughter, but Ethan felt disconnected from the conversation. His mind drifted to thoughts of Caleb. Ethan has been stalking following his Instagram for a few weeks. He envied his confidence, the way he stood tall among his peers while Ethan often felt like he was shrinking into the background.

After dinner, Ethan retreated to his room, the walls closing in as he sat in silence. He glanced at his phone, scrolling through social media. Pictures of friends sharing their end-of-summer adventures flooded his feed. Each snapshot served as a reminder of the life he felt he was missing out on, a life filled with authenticity and freedom.

As the night deepened, Ethan's thoughts turned to his father, a man driven by ambition and success. The pressure to meet his father's expectations loomed over him like a dark cloud. "Be the best, Ethan," his father would say with a firm hand on his shoulder. "You have a legacy to uphold."

But what legacy? Was it one of wealth and status, or was it something else that he could not realize so far?

The clock ticked steadily, each second echoing in the silence of his room. He lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. He thought about picking up the guitar to play one last song before bed, but his phone buzzed on the nightstand, pulling his attention.

The screen lit up with their group chat, the one with Mason Russell and a few of his buddies, Theo Owens and Ryan Chapman from school.

Theo: summer went by way too fast

Mason: fr school starts tmrw...who's ready to suffer?

Ryan: not me lol i still haven't even started that summer reading

Mason: dude u had three months

Ryan: and i spent all of them doing literally anything else

Theo: lets make senior year epic. we gotta plan something for first weekend

Ethan smiled, feeling a sense of camaraderie wash over him. "*it's our final year. we got this. let's gooo.*"

Mason: easy for u to say top of the class

Ethan: doesn't mean i wanna be there lol

Ryan: fair. so E, u singing at the talent show this year?

Ethan hesitated, his fingers hovering over the keyboard. He hadn't decided yet.

Mason: translation: he's definitely doing it but won't tell us until the last second

Ryan: LMAO

Theo: do it man

Ethan laughed softly, shaking his head. Mason was not wrong.

As the conversation flowed, they exchanged jokes and shared their hopes for the year ahead. Ethan felt his anxiety dissipate, if only for a moment.

Ryan: hey did u guys hear about the new kid? caleb something?

Ethan's heart skipped a beat. "yeah i heard of him", he typed, trying to sound nonchalant.

Mason: i heard hes actually cool tho. lowkey hyped to meet him

Ethan's fingers hovered over the screen. "Interesting, dude."

Theo: we should all link for lunch tmrw. need to catch up before classes get mid

Ethan: sounds good

As the chat continued, he felt a sense of belonging that had eluded him for so long. But as the laughter faded and the conversation slowed, the reality of the next day loomed large.

Ethan then sent a quick goodnight message and set his phone down. He turned off the lamp on his nightstand, plunging the room into darkness. He stared at the ceiling, his mind racing, listening to the faint hum of the air conditioning. Tomorrow would mark the start of something new. It would be a chance to navigate the complexities of high school life while grappling with his true self.

The echoes of summer resonated in the quiet corners of his mind, a reminder of the boy who had found solace in music. He would need to find that boy again.

2

BEGINNING

Ethan sat in the back seat of the family car, fingers drumming nervously against his knees. His driver, Harry Ramos, navigated the familiar route to St. Ignatius Academy, the towering gates of the private school just visible in the distance. Ethan stared out the window, watching the morning light filter through the trees that lined the streets of the upper-class neighborhood. His stomach churned with both excitement and trepidation, the same feeling he always got at the start of a new school year.

Final year. The last stretch. This was supposed to be the year when everything came together. It was the year he made memories that would stay with him forever. At least, that's what people kept telling him. But as the car pulled up to the front of the school, Ethan could not shake the nagging sense of unease that had been following him since the summer.

"Good luck, Mr. Wexler," Harry said as Ethan stepped out of the car.

"Thanks," Ethan replied, slinging his backpack over his shoulder. He adjusted his blazer, the emblem of St. Ignatius stitched neatly over the pocket, and made his way through the bustling courtyard.

The sprawling campus, with its well-groomed lawns and historic buildings, felt both inviting and intimidating. It was alive with chatter and laughter as students reunited after the break. Ethan spotted his closest friend near the fountain. She waved him over, grinning.

“Ethan! Over here!” Jenna Watson called out, waving enthusiastically. Her bright smile was contagious, and he felt a rush of relief wash over him.

“So lovely to see you, my love,” he replied, making his way through the crowd.

The two embraced, and Ethan felt the warmth of friendship wrap around him like a cozy blanket. “Are you ready for today?” Jenna asked, her eyes widening with excitement.

“As ready as I’ll ever be,” he said, forcing a smile.

As he entered the main campus, memories of last year, the highs and lows, flooded his mind. He had spent countless hours with his friends, enjoying spontaneous adventures and late-night chats. They were his lifeline, a group of misfits who found solace in each other. But as he stepped into the bustling hallway, he felt that familiar knot of anxiety tightened in his stomach. He then saw his buddies, who were already gathered near the lockers.

“Ethan! There you are,” Mason said as they approached. “I was starting to think you’d skipped out on us.”

“Not a chance,” Ethan said, forcing a smile.

Mason clapped him on the back. “Final year, man. Can you believe it?”

Ethan nodded, though his mind was elsewhere. He scanned the crowd, his eyes skimming over familiar faces. Most of the students gave him polite nods or quick waves, but a few held his gaze, their expressions unreadable. He could feel their eyes on him, and he knew exactly what they were thinking.

Yet, his mind was racing. He could not shake the worry about how the year would unfold and how he would navigate the complexities of high school life, especially with the specter of last year’s talent show still looming over him.

As the bell rang, signaling the start of class, Ethan felt a rush of nerves.

“Hey guys, shall we go?” Jenna asked.

The first day of classes passed in a blur. As usual, Ethan took his seat in English, the familiar classroom filled with bright posters and the scent of dry-erase markers. His teacher, Ms. Reese, greeted them with her usual warmth.

“Welcome back, everyone! I hope you all had a fantastic summer,” she began, her enthusiasm infectious. “This year, we’ll dive into some incredible literature and work on our creative writing skills. I can’t wait to see what you all create as a group!”

Ethan was excited as English had always been his favorite subject. The power of words thrilled him. He was eager to share his ideas, to express himself

through writing.

As the class progressed, he found himself engrossed in the discussion. He contributed eagerly, sharing insights that earned him nods of approval from Ms. Reese. It felt good to be recognized, to know that his passion for literature resonated with someone. Later, he received the essay he had written over the summer with a glowing note in the margin: “Exceptional work as always, Ethan.”

After English, he moved on to math, where his teacher, Mr. Anderson, praised him for his keen understanding of complex concepts. “Ethan, you make this look easy! Keep it up!” he said, and Ethan could not help but beam with pride.

Indeed, Ethan slipped into his usual routine the whole day, excelling in his coursework and earning the quiet admiration of his teachers.

But it was not just his academic achievements that set him apart. Ethan had a way of carrying himself that drew people in, which was a quiet confidence, or one could say, a knack for making people feel seen and heard. Teachers loved him for his curiosity and politeness, and a few of his classmates respected him, while some did not always understand him.

Not everyone saw Ethan in such a positive light.

As he walked to the cafeteria with his friends, a group of students near the lockers fell silent, their conversation cutting off abruptly when Ethan passed. He caught snippets of their murmurs. The words *weirdo* and *freak* stood out like sharp edges. Ethan noticed the glances from some of his classmates, who had looked at him with skepticism after the talent show, but he kept his head down, pretending not to notice, but Jenna bristled.

“Seriously? It’s been a year,” Jenna muttered under his breath.

“They’d better shut their mouth,” Mason mumbled.

Ethan shrugged. “Let it go.”

“Let it go?” Mason said, his voice rising slightly. “They’re still talking about that stupid talent show? It was one performance.”

“They’re just bored,” Ethan said now, trying to sound indifferent. “Let them talk.”

Mason shook his head, clearly frustrated. “You’re too nice, you know that? If it were me, I’d...”

Ethan cut him off with a laugh. “If it were you, they wouldn’t dare. You’d scare them off with one of your rants.”

Both Theo and Ryan laughed. Mason grinned, his mood lightening. “Damn right I would.”

They found a table near the back of the cafeteria, joining a couple of other friends from their class. The conversation shifted to summer vacations, upcoming school events and the usual gossip. Ethan chimed in occasionally, but his mind kept wandering. He could not shake the feeling that this year would be different that something was about to change.

In physics class, he overheard a couple of students snickering as they discussed the upcoming dance. “I heard Wexler is going to show up dressed like a freak again,” one said, and Ethan felt a pang of hurt.

He tried to brush it off, focusing instead in the afternoon lesson, but the words trailed him like a persistent shadow. He had hoped that time would heal some wounds, that people would forget, but the suffocating weight of judgment was hard to shake off.

After school, Ethan decided to stop by the library before heading home. It was one of his favorite places in the city where he could lose himself in books or music whenever the chaos of his life felt overwhelming. It was nearly empty when Ethan stepped inside, the late afternoon sunlight streaming through the tall windows and pooling onto the polished wood floors. The faint hum of the air conditioning mingled with the quiet rustle of pages being turned, creating the kind of stillness that Ethan craved after the chaos of the first school day.

He slipped in unnoticed, his bag slung over his shoulder, and made his way toward the music section at the back of the library. His usual spot, a small nook tucked between shelves filled with music theory books and sheet music, was empty, just as he had hoped. Ethan let out a breath he did not realize he had been holding and ran his fingers along the spines of the books, their titles familiar and comforting: *Harmony for the Modern Composer*, *Counterpoint in Practice*, *The Art of Arranging*. He pulled one off the shelf and flipped through the pages, the scent of aged paper filling his nose.

Without any doubts, this was a space where he could lose himself in the technicalities of music, where the pressures of being Ethan Wexler, heir to the WexMart empire, top of the class, and reluctant *star* of the school, faded into the background. Here, he was not the guy everyone whispered about. He was not the guy who had walked onto the talent show stage last year, dressed in glitter and confidence, and belted out the song as if he were performing at Madison

Garden.

Ethan swallowed hard at the memory. He sat down on the worn leather armchair in the corner of the music section, the book resting on his lap. He tried to focus on the text, on the intricacies of chord progressions and melodic structure, but his mind kept drifting. The library was not completely silent; there were faint sounds of footsteps, the occasional murmur of voices from the main reading area.

And then there was him.

Ethan had noticed someone when he first walked in. There was a boy sitting at one of the long tables near the history section, scribbling in a notebook. His gorgeous face, but there was something familiar about the way he sat, the messy tumble of dark hair, the casual way he held himself as if he belonged anywhere and everywhere.

It could not be the *Caleb Thorne*, could it?

Ethan had heard whispers about the new kid in class, the one with the senator father and the easy charm that seemed to draw people in without effort. He had seen him in homeroom earlier that day. Caleb was...noticeable. He had that kind of charisma that made people stop and pay attention, even if he was not trying to.

Ethan shook his head, frustrated with himself. Why was he even thinking about Caleb? He did not know him, hadn't spoken to him, and yet his mind kept circling back to that brief moment in homeroom when their eyes had almost met. Almost.

He glanced toward the history section, but the boy was gone now. He was not sure if it hadn't been Caleb at all. It could be someone else entirely. Either way, it did not matter. Ethan had more important things to think about. It was the fact that half the school still thought he was a weirdo because of a performance he had done over a year ago.

He flipped the pages of the book in his lap, the diagrams and annotations blurring together. No matter how much he told himself he did not care what people thought, the truth was harder to ignore. The whispers and stares still bothered him. They made him second-guess himself, made him wonder if he should've just played it safe that night instead of letting his love for music and theater take over.

But then he remembered the feeling of standing on that stage, the rush of

adrenaline as he hit the final note, the way the music had made him feel alive. That moment had been real, and no amount of judgment could take it away from him.

Ethan closed the book and leaned back in the chair, staring up at the rows of shelves that stretched high above him. For now, he had stay here in his little corner of the library, where the world could not touch him.

It was a late night after dinner. Ethan sat cross-legged on his bed, his notebook open in front of him. His room was dimly lit. The faint hum of his guitar amp sat in the background, a reminder of the half-finished song he had been working on earlier. But his focus was not on the music right now. It was on the boy he had seen or thought he had seen, in the library.

Caleb Thorne.

Ethan had never been the type to obsess over someone he barely knew, but there was something about Caleb that anchored itself in his mind. Could it be the way he carried himself, so effortlessly confident. It was the way people seemed drawn to him, like he had some kind of magnetic pull. Perhaps it was a façade that the media created in front of the public.

In fact, Ethan frowned, tapping his pen against the edge of the notebook. He was not even sure if the boy in the library had been Caleb. Maybe he was just projecting, turning a random stranger into someone he wanted to notice. But why? Why did it matter so much?

He thought back to homeroom, to the brief moment when Caleb had walked in with his classmates. Ethan had been sitting near the window, pretending to read over his schedule, but he had seen Caleb out of the corner of his eye. He had felt the shift in the room, the way people turned to look at him, the way the air seemed to hum with energy.

Ethan had quickly looked away, his heart beating faster than it should have. He did not know why. Caleb was just another student, another face in the crowd. He shouldn't have stood out, but somehow, he did.

Ethan sighed and closed his notebook, leaning back against the pillows. He told himself it was nothing and don't overthink it. But deep down, he could not shake the feeling that Caleb was different, and that difference made Ethan feel things he was not sure he was ready to admit.

As he stared up at the ceiling, the faint strains of a melody began to form in his mind. It was soft and uncertain. For now, he let it play in his head, a quiet

soundtrack to the questions he did not yet have answers to.

Tryna find my feelings once in a blue moon

Buried deep beneath this suffocating room

Choked by silence, couldn't make any sound

At times, I'm feeling the time I spent

I'm feeling the life I had

ADAPTATION

Just a week prior, he had been a nameless face in a different city, but now he was here, ready to make his mark in a new school.

His father's decision to relocate for the upcoming presidential campaign had thrown Caleb into a maelstrom of change. While he understood the importance of his father's role in the election, the move had been jarring. Leaving behind his old friends and familiar surroundings felt daunting, but Caleb was determined to embrace this new chapter.

Caleb's morning routine was a reflection of his family's hardworking nature. He woke up in their modest two-story house, which was filled with the warm colors of home. The walls were adorned with family photos, showcasing milestones and memories including birthdays, graduations, and candid moments that captured the essence of their lives. The living room, with its cozy couch and well-worn carpet, felt inviting, but it was the kitchen that truly came alive in the mornings.

His mother was always the first to rise, preparing breakfast before heading out to her job as a nurse. The smell of fresh coffee and sizzling bacon filled the air, mingling with the sound of pots clanging and the morning news playing softly in the background. Caleb loved the mornings when his father would join them before heading out to strategize for the election.

Caleb stood in front of his mirror, adjusting the collar of his blazer for what

felt like the hundredth time. The St. Ignatius Academy crest, a blue and golden shield, sat stitched onto his chest, practically daring him to fit in.

He stepped back and let out a breath, taking in his reflection. The blazer was crisp, his tie perfectly knotted, and his dark hair was tousled just enough to look effortless. Outwardly, Caleb looked ready. But inside, his nerves churned. First days were never easy, and this one felt heavier than most.

“Caleb! Breakfast!” his mom, Eliza, called from downstairs.

“Coming!” he yelled back, grabbing his backpack and tossing his basketball into it before heading down.

The kitchen smelled like home. It was the symphony of bacon, maple syrup, and something faintly herbal from the tea his mom always drank. She stood by the stove, her sleeves rolled up and hair tied back, flipping pancakes onto a platter. Across the table, his dad sat with his usual cup of black coffee, a newspaper folded neatly beside him.

“Morning, champ!” his father greeted, a strong cup of coffee in hand and a slight stubble on his chin. His eyes sparkled with a fierce determination tempered by a weary exhaustion. “Big day ahead. I’ve got meetings lined up, but I’m excited to hear how your first day goes. And by the way, you look sharp.”

Caleb shrugged, tugging at his blazer. “Feel like I’m going to a job interview.”

His mom laughed. “Well, first impressions matter. Just be yourself. You’ve got this.”

His dad nodded, his expression warm but measured. “Remember, St. Ignatius is a fresh start. Just focus on being Caleb.”

“Thanks, Dad! I’ll do my best,” Caleb replied, trying to match his father’s enthusiasm. He admired his father’s work ethic, the way he juggled responsibilities with passion. It inspired him to push through his own fears about starting at a new school.

Caleb sat down and grabbed a pancake, rolling it into a makeshift taco with bacon inside. His dad’s words hung in the air. He knew they were true. This move was not just about better academics or a fancier campus. It was about pulling him out of the spotlight that came with being the son of Senator Jonathan Thorne, now a frontrunner in the presidential race.

“Do you think they’ll like me?” Caleb asked, half-joking.

“Of course they will,” his mom said, placing a hand on his shoulder. “You’re you.”

Caleb smiled, the knot in his stomach loosening slightly. His parents always had a way of making things seem manageable, even when they weren’t. He scarfed down the rest of his breakfast, grabbed his bag, and headed for the door.

“Good luck, son,” his dad called after him. “Make it a good day.”

With his backpack hooked over one shoulder, he stepped outside into the crisp morning air. The route to St. Ignatius Academy was a ten-minute walk, but as he strolled, he could not shake the feeling of butterflies in his stomach. Today marked a new beginning, and he was ready to embrace it.

The gates of the school were even more imposing in person. They were a blend of wrought iron and stone, with the school’s motto etched in Latin across the archway. Caleb adjusted his bag and stepped through, his sneakers crunching on the gravel path.

The campus was pristine. The red-brick buildings looked like they belonged in a college brochure, with ivy climbing their walls and tall windows catching the morning light. Students milled about in neatly pressed uniforms, their chatter filling the air. Caleb could feel their eyes on him, some curious, others indifferent. Being the new kid was not a new experience for him, but it was never easy.

He spotted a group of guys near the fountain, laughing and tossing a football back and forth. It reminded him of his old school. Moments like this were universal, no matter where you went. As he debated where to go, a voice called out behind him.

“Hey, you’re new, right?”

Caleb turned to see a tall, broad-shouldered guy with sandy blond hair striding toward him. He had an easy smile and carried himself with the confidence of someone who probably ran the place.

“Yeah,” Caleb said, nodding. “First day. I’m Caleb.”

“Henry Hayes,” the guy said, extending a hand. “Welcome to St. Ignatius. You in Mr. Cartwright’s homeroom?”

“Uh, yeah,” Caleb said, surprised. “How’d you know?”

Henry grinned. “I’ve got a sixth sense for these things. C’mon, I’ll show you the way.”

Caleb followed Henry through the courtyard and into the main building, where the halls were already buzzing with activity. As they walked, Henry pointed out the key landmarks such as the cafeteria, the gym, and tossed in bits

of commentary about the teachers and students.

By the time they reached homeroom, Caleb already felt like he had a better lay of the land. Henry led him to a seat near the back, where another guy was leaning back in his chair, balancing a pencil on his upper lip. He had auburn hair, sharp eyes, and the kind of grin that suggested he was always up to something.

“Isaac, meet Caleb,” Henry said. “He’s new.”

“New guy, huh?” Isaac glanced up, letting the pencil clatter to the desk. “Isaac Conner. You play sports?”

“Nice to meet you, Isaac,” Caleb said. “Basketball.”

Isaac’s grin widened. “Terrific. You’d better show up at the tryouts.”

Caleb chuckled, already liking Isaac’s straightforwardness. “Wouldn’t miss it.”

As the teacher walked in and called the class to order, Caleb settled into his seat, glancing around the room. Most of the students seemed friendly enough, but there were a few who eyed him with mild suspicion, like they were trying to figure out if he was worth their time. Caleb had seen it before. Being the new kid meant proving yourself, and he was fine with that.

The day passed in a blur of introductions, classes, and half-awkward conversations. By the time the final bell rang, Caleb was ready to blow off some steam. Henry and Isaac had mentioned an informal scrimmage at the gym, so he grabbed his bag and headed over.

The gym was alive with the sound of sneakers squeaking on the polished floor and the rhythmic thud of basketballs. A group of guys was already playing a fast-paced game, their movements fluid and practiced. Caleb watched for a moment, sizing them up, before Henry spotted him.

“Yo, Caleb!” Henry called, waving him over. “You play, or are you just here to watch?”

Caleb grinned, dropping his bag by the bleachers. “Let’s find out.”

Henry tossed him a ball, and Caleb dribbled it a few times, feeling the familiar weight in his hands. He took a shot from the three-point line, the ball arcing perfectly before swishing through the net. A few of the guys let out impressed whistles, and Caleb felt satisfied.

“Alright, new guy,” Isaac said, clapping him on the back. “You’ve got skills. Let’s see if you can keep up.”

The game was fast and intense, but Caleb loved every second of it. The court

had always been his safe area, a place where everything else faded away. By the time the scrimmage ended, he was drenched in sweat but grinning from ear to ear.

“You’re in,” Henry said as they walked off the court, clapping Caleb on the back. “Coach Davis is gonna love you.”

“You’re gonna be great during tryouts,” Henry said.

As they chatted, Caleb noticed the way Henry and Isaac interacted. Their playful banter reminded him of his old friends, and he felt a deepening bond with them. The laughter and camaraderie made him feel like he belonged, easing some of the anxiety that had accompanied him on this first day.

“Thanks, man! I just want to give it my all,” Caleb replied, feeling a surge of encouragement from his friends.

Isaac chimed in, slinging his towel over his shoulder. “We’re hitting the café after this. You in?”

Caleb hesitated. As much as he liked these new friends, he felt like he needed a moment to himself after the game. “Rain check?” he said. “I want to check out the library before I head home.”

Isaac gave him a curious look. “The library? On the first day? Man, you really are an overachiever.”

Henry laughed. “Don’t let him fool you, Caleb. He’s just mad because he hasn’t set foot in there since freshman year.”

“Hey!” Isaac protested, but Caleb just waved them off with a grin. He grabbed his bag and headed out of the gym, the cool evening air hitting his face as he made his way across campus.

The library was quiet, its tall windows glowing softly with the light of the setting sun. Caleb stepped inside and let the stillness wash over him, a stark contrast to the buzz of the gym. He was not sure what he was looking for. At that moment, he was not interested in reading books. A moment of *me time* to breathe was what he needed. He then found himself wandering through the aisles, his sneakers barely making a sound on the polished floors.

Caleb turned a corner into one section and stopped in his tracks. Someone was sitting in a worn leather armchair near the back of the aisle, hunched over a book with their head slightly tilted, as if they were completely absorbed in whatever they were reading.

Caleb recognized him immediately. He had seen him in the hallways earlier

the day, and Henry had mentioned him at lunch. Ethan Wexler, the son of the WexMart supermarket chain billionaire, one of the smartest guys in school, and apparently *different* in ways Caleb had not quite figured out yet.

Ethan's light brown hair fell slightly into his eyes as he flipped a page, his expression focused and a little intense. He wore the school uniform like everyone else, but somehow it looked more casual on him, like he did not care if his tie was perfectly straight or his blazer was perfectly tailored. Caleb was not sure why, but the sight of him sitting there, so lost in his own world, made something twist in his chest.

It was not like Caleb to hesitate. He was the kind of guy who could strike up a conversation with anyone, anywhere, without a second thought. But as he stood there, watching Ethan from a distance, he felt his confidence falter. They weren't in the same class, and he did not really know him. *What could he even say?*

Hey, I saw you sitting here and thought I'd introduce myself? No, that sounded weird. *You're Ethan, right?* That sounded even worse.

Caleb shook his head and forced himself to keep walking, ducking into another aisle before Ethan could notice him. His heart was beating faster than it should have been, and he was not sure why. Something about Ethan intrigued him, but he could not quite put his finger on it. Whatever it was, it seemed that he could not shake the feeling that Ethan was someone worth knowing.

As the sun began to set, Caleb walked home with a sense of fulfillment. He opened the front door to the sound of his mom humming in the kitchen and the faint clatter of dishes. The aroma of roasted chicken and garlic made his stomach growl.

"How was your first day, son?" Jonathan asked, setting down his briefcase, a hint of tiredness in his eyes from the hustle of campaign work.

"Pretty good," Caleb said, dropping his bag by the door. "Made a couple of friends. Isaac and Henry. They're on the basketball team."

"I knew you'd fit right in," Eliza asked as he walked in, wiping her hands on a towel. "We're so proud of you."

The three of them sat down to dinner, the conversation flowing easily. Caleb told them about his classes, the scrimmage, and the guys he had met. His mom asked questions about the teachers, while his dad nodded along, occasionally chiming in with advice.

As the meal wound down, Caleb felt a sense of contentment settle over him.

The day had gone better than he had expected, and he felt like he could see a path forward. His parents' unwavering support and the values they instilled in him shaped who he was becoming. He cherished these moments, sharing stories about his day, his friends, and his excitement for the future, all while his father recounted his day of strategizing and planning for the campaign.

Later that night, Caleb lay sprawled on his bed, his phone resting on his chest as the faint hum of crickets drifted through his open window. The day had been long, but it had gone better than he had expected. But as he stared up at the ceiling, his mind kept drifting back to the library, and to the guy he saw.

Curiosity gnawed at him. He grabbed his phone and opened Instagram, typing "Ethan Wexler" into the search bar. It took a moment, but he found the profile which is relatively simple, with a black-and-white profile picture and a bio that just said:

Musician | Dreamer | Libra

Caleb scrolled through his account. There weren't many posts. Only a few photos of books, guitars, and the occasional sunset were there. But one post published a year ago caught his eye: a video of Ethan sitting on his bed, a guitar resting in his lap. The caption read:

Lonely Ones by LOVA. Just a little something for the quiet night.

Caleb tapped on the video, and the sound of Ethan's voice filled the room.

This is for the lonely ones

The ones who go to bed and think they got no one

The shy kid at the playground

The runaways on greyhounds

This is for the lonely ones

The ones who always wonder where their friends have gone

The boy who can't stop crying

The girl who gave up trying

This is for the lonely ones, the lonely ones

It was soft and soulful, with a raw vulnerability that made Caleb's chest tighten. Ethan's fingers moved effortlessly over the guitar strings, the melody wrapping around the lyrics like a warm embrace. His eyes were half-closed as he sang, his expression distant, like he was somewhere far away. There was something magnetic about the way he performed. It was unpolished but deeply honest, every note carrying a piece of him.

*I know the voice inside your head saying you're never good enough
The times you stay in bed because it's too hard to get up
The friends who disappear when things just get a bit too rough
Time to make it stop*

Caleb watched the video twice, then a third time, unable to look away. He had always admired good singers, but this was different. Ethan was not just good. That was a captivating performance. The way his voice cracked slightly on the high notes, the way his fingers danced across the fretboard, the way his eyes seemed to hold a quiet sadness. It was all so real.

Caleb did not know Ethan, not really, but he wanted to. He wanted to know what made him tick, what made him smile, what made him sing like that. He wanted to know what it was about the *Ethan Wexler* that made him feel this strange, aching pull in his chest.

He set his phone down, glancing at the photo frame on his nightstand. Inside was a candid shot of him and his previous lover, laughing under twinkling lights. The joy captured in that moment felt distant now, a reminder of a connection that had been lost. Caleb sighed, pushing the thoughts aside. He was ready to embrace his new life, but that lingering sadness was a shadow he could not quite shake.

With a deep breath, he turned off the lights and lay back on his bed, the day's experiences swirling in his mind. He drifted off to sleep, dreaming of the possibilities that awaited him.

4

ENCOUNTER

The third day of school began with the usual shuffle of students reluctantly taking their seats in history class. Ethan slid into his usual spot near the window, setting his notebook on the desk. Outside, the late summer sunlight filtered through the trees. Jenna plopped down beside him, her blue eyes scanning the room with their usual sharpness, while Mason, Theo, and Ryan settled into the row behind them, already whispering about something that made Ryan snicker.

"Did you finish the reading?" Jenna whispered, leaning toward Ethan as she pulled out her textbook.

"Mostly," Ethan replied, flipping through his notebook. "But I kind of zoned out halfway through. Too many dates, not enough drama."

Jenna smirked. "You mean you didn't appreciate the riveting economic policies of 18th-century Europe?"

"I'll survive," Ethan said, rolling his eyes. He tapped his pen against the edge of his desk, glancing at the clock as Ms. Callahan strode into the room. She was a tall woman with sharp features and an air of authority that made even the rowdiest students sit up straighter.

"Good morning, everyone," she began, her voice clear and steady. "Today, we're talking about someone you've all heard of, the one and only, Leonardo da Vinci. But I want to go beyond the usual facts you've been taught about him."

At the mention of da Vinci, Ethan perked up slightly. He had always been drawn to stories about people who pushed boundaries, who refused to fit into the molds society tried to force them into. He admired how da Vinci forged his own path, unafraid to explore new ideas and challenge societal norms. Next to him, Jenna was equally engaged.

“Can you imagine what it must have been like for him?” she whispered, glancing over at Ethan. “To challenge the expectations of his time?”

“Yeah,” Ethan replied, feeling a sense of camaraderie with the historical figure. “It takes a lot of courage to be yourself, especially when others don’t understand your vision.”

“For Leonardo da Vinci,” Ms. Callahan continued, pacing the front of the room, “he wasn’t just a painter. He was an inventor, a scientist, an architect, and a dreamer. In his time, people did not fully understand him. His ideas were too bold, too ahead of their time. He was seen as eccentric, even strange. But today, we remember him as one of the greatest minds in history.”

She paused, letting her words sink in. “Now, here’s a question for you all: What do you think drove him to create? Was it ambition? Curiosity? Or something else?”

For a moment, the room was silent. Then Mason raised his hand, his grin as confident as ever. “Probably ambition. I mean, the guy wanted to be remembered, right? Why else would he try to do so much?”

“Interesting perspective,” Ms. Callahan said, nodding. “Da Vinci’s legacy reminds us that self-expression can lead to greatness, even when faced with adversity. Who can think of a time when they expressed themselves, despite the challenges?”

Jenna raised her hand. “I reckon it was more about curiosity than ambition. He wanted to understand the world, to figure out how things worked. That’s why he studied anatomy and invented machines. It wasn’t about fame. It was about discovery.”

Theo chimed in from behind her. “Yeah, but being curious doesn’t make you great. Plenty of curious people never do anything with it. He had to have some ambition to actually accomplish all that stuff.”

The class murmured in agreement, and Ms. Callahan gestured for more input. Ethan hesitated, then raised his hand.

“Was it about being true to himself?” he said, his voice quieter than the others

but steady. “He was good at so many things, and he didn’t want to limit himself. He created because he had to...because it was who he was. Like da Vinci, we should embrace our passions, no matter what others think.”

There was a pause as the class digested his words. Jenna gave him a small smile, but Mia Moore leaned forward in her seat, clearly ready to argue.

She seated a few rows back and rolled her eyes. “But isn’t it also important to consider how our actions affect those around us? I mean, not everyone can be a genius like him.”

“True, but that shouldn’t stop us from trying,” Ethan countered, feeling a spark of defiance. “If we always cater to what others expect, we’d never innovate or create anything new.”

“But there’s a difference between being bold and being reckless,” Mia shot back. “People need to understand their limits.”

“Limits can be pushed,” Jenna chimed in, backing Ethan. “If we never pushed boundaries, we’d still be living in the dark ages.”

The discussion grew heated, with students chiming in from various sides. “But isn’t there a risk of failure?” argued Marcus Devine, a tall boy with a skeptical expression. “What if da Vinci had failed? Wouldn’t that have just made him a laughingstock?”

“Failure is part of the journey,” Ethan replied, feeling more passionate. “Da Vinci didn’t become great by playing it safe. He took risks, and that’s what made him a visionary.”

Before Ethan could respond, Ms. Callahan stepped in, sensing the rising tension. “Great points, everyone! This is exactly what I want you to think about. Leonardo da Vinci’s life raises important questions about the balance between individuality and responsibility. The balance between self-expression and social responsibility is delicate but essential. Remember, history is full of those who dared to be different.”

Ethan relaxed slightly, grateful for the teacher’s support. As the discussion continued, he could not help but feel a flicker of connection to da Vinci’s story. The idea of being misunderstood, of defying expectations to stay true to oneself, resonated deeply with him. By the time the bell rang, the lesson had left an impression that lingered as he headed to his next class.

As the bell rang, signaling the end of class, Ethan felt that the conversation had stirred something within him, igniting a fire of determination. He glanced

at Jenna, who smiled encouragingly.

“You really held your ground,” she said, her voice warm.

“It’s great to see you so passionate,” Mason added.

“Thanks. I just feel like we need to be true to ourselves, even if it’s uncomfortable,” Ethan replied, feeling a sense of relieve with them.

After history, they moved to the gym for physical education class, a class Ethan usually approached with mild dread. It was not that he hated sports. He just was not particularly good at them. Today, however, there was a twist. Their class was combining with another for a football match, and while the idea of playing in front of an audience made Ethan uneasy, he figured he could stick to defense and avoid embarrassing himself.

The changing room was already buzzing with energy when Ethan walked in, his bag shouldered with a tired sigh.

The atmosphere was charged with energy as students chatted and changed into their athletic gear. Ethan’s friends clustered around him, joking and laughing, but his attention was drawn to Caleb, who was chatting with Ryan nearby. Caleb had quickly become a topic of interest after their brief encounter in the library, and Ethan could not help but steal glances at him. He was the new kid with the easy smile and sharp green eyes. Caleb’s presence was magnetic, even in the crowded room, and Ethan found himself glancing over more than once as Caleb joked with his teammates.

At the same time, Mason and Theo were debating strategy as they pulled on their jerseys, while Ryan was busy tying his cleats.

“Do you even know the rules of football, Ethan?” Mason teased as Ethan sat down on the bench.

“Kick the ball, don’t use your hands, and try not to die,” Ethan replied dryly, pulling his socks.

“Solid plan,” Ryan said with a laugh. “Just stay out of the way, and you’ll be fine.”

“Hey, are you ready for this?” Theo asked, pulling Ethan from his thoughts.

“Yeah,” Ethan said quickly, shaking himself. “Just...mentally preparing.”

“Sure,” Theo said, smirking. “Or you’re distracted by the *new* guy.”

Ethan rolled his eyes, but before he could respond, the coach’s whistle blared from outside, signaling the start of the game.

“Let’s go,” Ethan replied, trying to sound confident.

Once everyone was dressed, the two classes made their way to the field, where the coach was already setting up for a match. Coach Davis explained the rules and divided the teams. “Alright, let’s keep it friendly but competitive! Remember, this is about teamwork!”

The teams were divided, with Ethan and Caleb ending up on opposite sides. Caleb’s team was quick to organize, their players shouting strategies as they took their positions. Ethan hung back on defense, hoping to avoid too much attention.

The game started with a burst of energy, the ball flying across the field as players jockeyed for control. Caleb was quick on his feet, weaving through defenders with impressive agility. Ethan could not help but notice how natural he looked, his movements fluid and precise. The other players seemed to gravitate toward him, trusting him to make the plays.

For the first half of the match, Ethan managed to stay out of trouble, sticking to his position and avoiding any major confrontations.

Right, the match was intense. Ethan sprinted down the field, his heart racing as he chased the ball. He felt the thrill of the game, the sportsmanship among his teammates, and the excitement of competition. The sounds of laughter and shouts echoed around him, and he felt entirely in the moment, forgetting about any worries.

Caleb showcased impressive skill as he maneuvered the ball with ease. His presence impossible to ignore. Ethan watched him dart past defenders, his athleticism on full display. The back-and-forth of the game was exhilarating, with both teams eager to score. Caleb scored twice, each goal met with cheers from his teammates, and Ethan found himself grudgingly impressed.

“Come on, Ethan! Get in there!” Jenna shouted from the sidelines, her enthusiasm infectious.

But midway through the second half, everything changed.

Ethan pushed himself harder, determined to make a play. He felt the adrenaline coursing through him as he intercepted a pass, dribbling the ball toward the goal. As he approached the net, he could see Caleb closing in on him, but Ethan was focused, ready to take the shot.

Just as he prepared to kick the ball, Caleb charged forward and was right behind him, and in a split second, their feet collided. As Ethan lunged for the ball, Caleb swung his leg in a powerful kick, landing squarely on Ethan’s ankle.

Pain shot through Ethan's leg, sharp and immediate. He stumbled, clutching his ankle as he sank to the ground.

"I am sorry," Caleb said, rushing over. "You okay?"

Ethan winced, trying to wave him off. "Just...give me a second."

But when he tried to stand, his ankle gave out, and he nearly fell again. Caleb caught him, his grip strong but careful.

"Okay, you're definitely not fine," Caleb said. "Coach, they need a sub!"

With the help of Caleb and Mason, Ethan hobbled off the field and onto the sidelines. The coach examined his ankle and declared it a mild sprain, but Ethan was done for the day. He sat on the bench, feeling pain and embarrassment as the game continued without him.

After the whistle blew to signal the end of the football match, the field buzzed with players exchanging high-fives, laughing, and talking about the game. Caleb stood at the edge of the field, his hands on his hips as he caught his breath. He was not thinking about much, just enjoying the rush from the match, when he remembered what had happened earlier in the game. His stomach sank.

As the other students began gathering their bags and heading toward the locker rooms, Caleb jogged over to Ethan. His green eyes were wide with concern, and he crouched down beside him.

"Hi," Caleb said, his voice soft and apologetic. "How's your ankle? Does it still hurt?"

Ethan glanced up from where he was rubbing his temple, his dark eyes meeting Caleb's. "I'm good," he muttered, though his wince betrayed him. "Nothing I can't handle."

"I still feel terrible," Caleb said, running a hand through his messy hair. "I'm new here, and the last thing I wanted to do was mess things up on my third day."

"It's okay," Ethan admitted, leaning back on his hands. "But I've had worse. It's just a sprain. The coach checked it earlier. And, you made an impression, that's for sure."

"Not the kind I was going for," Caleb let out a soft laugh, shaking his head. "I saw you trying to walk earlier, and you almost fell over. Look, let me call a taxi or something. I'll go with you to make sure you get home."

Ethan stiffened slightly, taken aback by the offer. "You don't have to do that. I can handle it."

"Please," Caleb insisted, his tone firm.

Ethan hesitated, his pride warring with the throbbing pain in his ankle. Finally, he let out a sigh. "I don't need a taxi. I have a driver."

Caleb blinked, surprised. "A driver?"

"Yeah," Ethan said casually, pulling out his phone. "He's already on standby. I'll text him to come here."

Caleb shifted awkwardly, his hands fidgeting with the hem of his jersey. "Okay, but...can I still come with you? Just to make sure you're good?"

Ethan stiffened slightly, taken aback by the offer. "You don't have to do that. I can handle it."

"I want to," Caleb insisted, his tone firm. "It's my fault you got hurt. The least I can do is make sure you get home safely."

Ethan raised an eyebrow, studying Caleb for a moment. He could see the genuine guilt written all over his face, and something about Caleb's sincerity softened him.

"Fine," he said at last, tapping out a quick message to his driver. "My driver will take us both."

"Fair enough," Caleb said, managing a small smile. "Thanks."

They sat in silence for a few moments, watching as the other students dispersed.

"I'm Caleb, by the way," Caleb said. "I don't think we've met officially."

"Just call me Ethan," Ethan replied. "Shall we go to the school entrance now?"

Once they slowly arrive at the entrance, a sleek black car pulled up to the curb, its headlights cutting through the fading sunlight. Ethan's driver stepped out and opened the passenger door.

"Mr. Wexler," Harry said with a polite nod. "Are you ready?"

Ethan gestured toward Caleb as he started to stand, wincing slightly as he put weight on his good leg. "He's coming with me," Ethan said. "Help him in first."

Caleb blinked in surprise but did not argue as the driver nodded and held the door open for him. Once Caleb was settled in the back seat, Ethan eased himself into the car, careful not to jostle his injured ankle. The driver shut the door and returned to the front, pulling away from the curb with smooth precision.

For a moment, the car was filled with silence, broken only by the faint hum of the engine. Caleb glanced around at the luxurious interior, feeling slightly out of place.

"So," Ethan said, breaking the quiet. "You're new here, right? I don't think I've

seen you around before.”

“Yeah,” Caleb said, turning to him. “Just moved here a few weeks ago. My dad’s job got transferred, so...here I am.”

“Welcome to St. Ignatius,” Ethan said, his tone neutral but not unkind. “How are you liking it so far?”

“It’s...different,” Caleb admitted, shrugging. “I mean, the school’s nice, and everyone’s been pretty friendly. But it’s still a lot to take in.”

Ethan nodded, understanding the sentiment more than he let on. “

“Though I’m probably not off to a great start, considering I just injured one of my classmates,” Caleb said, smiling back. “I’m a newbie here, and now I’m the one who injured someone during a football match.”

Ethan smirked faintly. “Well, that’s why you are a *newbie*, that’s for sure.”

Caleb let out a soft laugh, shaking his head. “Not the *new* I was going for.”

Ethan chuckled softly, shaking his head. “No worries. If anything, it’s kind of funny. You’ll get used to the whole *St. Ignatius thing* soon enough.”

“What’s the *St. Ignatius thing*?” Caleb asked, raising an eyebrow.

“You’ll see,” Ethan said cryptically, a glimmer of amusement in his eyes.

The conversation drifted into easier territory after that. Caleb talked a little about his family and his love for basketball, while Ethan shared a few anecdotes about the school and its quirks. By the time they pulled up to Ethan’s house, the tension between them had eased considerably.

The driver stepped out to open the door for Ethan, but Caleb was already moving to help him. “I’ve got it,” Caleb said, offering his hand as Ethan carefully climbed out of the car.

“Thank you,” Ethan said, leaning on Caleb slightly as they made their way to the front door. As they stood there, the tension between them eased slightly.

“Here,” Caleb said, pulling out his phone. “Let me give you my number. In case you need anything.”

Ethan was a bit surprised, then pulled out his own phone. They exchanged numbers and even added each other on Instagram, the moment oddly intimate despite its simplicity.

As Caleb looked a bit hesitant. “You know, I’m new to the neighborhood and don’t really know anyone yet. If you’re free this weekend, maybe we could hang out? I could use a guide around here.”

Is it a dream? Ethan stood still, the idea of spending more time with Caleb

both exciting and intimidating. “I’ll have to check my schedule,” he said, trying to sound casual, though a part of him was thrilled by the invitation.

“Of course! Just let me know,” Caleb replied, his smile genuine. “I guess we can know each other better.” He then looked around the impressive property. “Well, I guess I should head back now,” he said, stepping back.

Ethan frowned. “You’re walking?”

“Yeah,” Caleb said, scratching the back of his neck. “It’s not too far. I’ll be fine.”

“You’re not walking,” Ethan said firmly. He turned to the driver. “Henry, please take him home.”

“Oh, no, that’s not necessary.” Caleb began, but Ethan cut him off.

“Seriously. It’s late. Just get in the car.”

“Alright. Thanks,” Caleb hesitated, then sighed, a small smile tugging at his lips. “Still. I owe you one.”

Ethan nodded, watching as Caleb climbed back into the car. Their eyes met briefly, and for a moment, neither of them spoke.

“See you tomorrow?” Caleb asked.

“Yeah,” Ethan said, his voice softer now. “See you.”

“Have a good evening.”

As the car pulled away, Ethan stood at the door, watching until the taillights disappeared down the street. The day had started with history and ended with a new friendship forming in unexpected circumstances. Despite the pain in his ankle, he felt a sense of hope rising within him.

Caleb was *interesting*. Ethan felt like something new, and maybe even good, was starting to unfold. With a smile on his face, he hobbled inside, ready to embrace whatever lay ahead.

When Ethan stepped into the house, the quiet hit him like a wall. The faint hum of the air conditioning was the only sound in the vast, open space of the Wexler family home. He limped slightly as he made his way to the dining room, his injured ankle throbbing with each step.

Patricia, the family maid, was already waiting for him. She was a woman in her mid-50s with kind eyes and a no-nonsense demeanor. She had worked for the Wexlers since Ethan was in kindergarten, and over the years, she had become more like family to him than anyone else in the house. Unlike the others who orbited the Wexler family, Patricia had no ulterior motives. She did not care

about the wealth or the prestige, but only Ethan.

“Sit,” Patricia said firmly, pulling out a chair for him. “I don’t want you hobbling around more than you have to.”

Ethan smirked faintly, lowering himself into the chair. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t ma’am me,” Patricia said, setting a plate of roasted chicken and vegetables in front of him. “You know I don’t like that.”

“Sorry,” Ethan said, his tone light but affectionate. “Force of habit.”

Patricia placed a glass of water and a small cup of tea beside his plate before sitting down across from him. “How’s the ankle?”

“It’s fine,” Ethan said, though the wince that followed betrayed him. “I’ll survive.”

Patricia gave him a pointed look, folding her hands on the table. “You should’ve gone to the hospital right after it happened. What were you thinking, waiting this long?”

“I didn’t want to make a big deal out of it,” Ethan admitted, poking at his food with his fork. “Plus, Caleb, this new kid at school, he wanted to help, and I didn’t want to make it awkward.”

Patricia raised an eyebrow. “Caleb, huh? Sounds like someone made an impression.”

Ethan gave her an unimpressed look, though a faint blush crept up his neck. “It’s not like that. He’s just...nice. Apologetic. A little too apologetic, honestly.”

Patricia chuckled. “Well, it’s good to know there are still nice people in the world. But don’t let him distract you from taking care of yourself. After dinner, we’re going to the hospital. I’ll have the driver take us.”

“Patricia, really, it’s fine.”

“No arguments,” she said, her tone brooking no opposition. “You’re going.”

Ethan sighed but did not protest further. He knew better than to argue with Patricia when she used that voice. Instead, he turned his attention to his dinner, eating in silence for a while as Patricia watched him with a careful eye.

“How was school today?” she asked after a moment.

Ethan shrugged. “It was fine. Normal, I guess. Except for the whole getting-injured thing.”

“Any interesting classes?”

“History,” Ethan said, his tone softening slightly. “We talked about Leonardo da Vinci. How he was misunderstood in his time, but he kept creating anyway. I

don’t know...something about it stuck with me.”

Patricia smiled, her expression warm. “Sounds like you found yourself in that story.”

“Well,” Ethan admitted, stabbing a piece of chicken with his fork. “It’s just... nice to know I’m not the only one who feels that way. Like, not fitting into what people expect.”

Patricia reached across the table and placed a hand over his. “You don’t have to fit into anyone’s expectations, Ethan. Not your father’s, not the school’s, not anyone’s. Just be yourself. That’s enough.”

Ethan looked down at their hands, his throat tightening slightly. “Thanks,” he said quietly.

Patricia picked up the phone and arranged for Harry to take them to the private hospital. A few minutes later, they were on their way, the car gliding smoothly through the quiet streets.

The hospital visit was quick. The doctor examined Ethan’s ankle, confirmed it was a sprain, and recommended rest and ice. Patricia stayed by his side, her presence comforting. As they left, she turned to him, her expression serious. “Make sure to take care of yourself, Ethan. You’re IMPORTANT to a lot of people.”

“Thanks, Patricia. Truly. That means a lot,” he replied, feeling a swell of appreciation for her unwavering support.

When they returned home, the house was still eerily quiet. Ethan settled onto the couch in the living room, propping his ankle up on a pillow. Patricia made him a cup of tea and sat down across from him, her eyes warm and reassuring.

“Do you want to talk about anything?” she asked, sensing the weight on his shoulders.

“I don’t know,” he said, feeling the familiar ache of loneliness creep in. “Sometimes it feels like I’m just...here. My parents are so busy with their lives, and it’s hard to connect.”

Patricia nodded, understanding. “It’s natural to feel that way, especially in a house filled with expectations and demands. But you have a voice, and it matters. Don’t forget that.”

As the night wore on, the house remained quiet. Ethan glanced at the clock, realizing his parents wouldn’t be home until late. He knew they were attending an event filled with influential people, likely discussing business deals and

socializing over lavish dinners. The thought only deepened his sense of isolation.

Eventually, around midnight, he heard the sound of the front door opening. His parents stepped inside, their laughter echoing through the foyer. They were clearly in high spirits, animated from the evening's events.

"Did you have a good time?" his mother called out, glancing in Ethan's direction.

"Yeah, it was alright," he replied, trying to sound upbeat despite his pain.

Jackson paused, furrowing his brow as he noticed Ethan's bandaged ankle. "What happened?" he asked, concern briefly flashing across his face.

"Just a sprain from football," Ethan said, waving a hand dismissively.

Victoria stepped closer, her expression softening. "Were you playing too rough?"

"It's okay," Ethan reassured them. "Patricia took care of me."

Jackson nodded, but Ethan could sense the underlying tension. "Make sure you avoid any activities that could lead to injuries."

Ethan nodded, feeling the familiar sting of disappointment. Their concern felt more like obligation than genuine care. They were always busy, always preoccupied with their lives, and it left him feeling like an afterthought.

"Goodnight, Ethan," Victoria said, offering a brief smile before heading upstairs with his father.

The house was quiet, yet again, but the loneliness felt heavier now. Ethan turned onto his side, careful not to jostle his ankle, and stared out the window at the city lights twinkling in the distance. For all his family's wealth and status, he often felt like he lived in a gilded cage, which is beautiful on the outside but empty within.

Ethan slowly walked upstairs to his bedroom. As the soft glow of the bedside lamp illuminated his room, he sat on the edge of his bed, the weight of the day lifting from his shoulders. He reached for his phone, swiping through Spotify until he stumbled upon a calming track that beckoned him. With a tap, the soothing sound from Britney Spears filled the room, creating a serene atmosphere.

*I don't wanna dream about
All the things that never were
And maybe I can live without
When I'm out from under*

*I don't wanna feel the pain
What good would it do me now?
I'll get it all figured out
When I'm out from under*

Ethan hobbled into bed and sank into his pillows, letting the music wash over him, each note easing the tension in his mind. With a sigh, he closed his eyes, allowing himself to drift into thoughts of the day. His thoughts wandered to Caleb. Despite the pain and exhaustion, Ethan could not help but smile faintly. Caleb had been kind and genuinely concerned. And it was something Ethan was not used to experiencing from people in his life except his maid.

TALENT

The St. Ignatius Talent Show was more than just an event; it was a tradition that carried an almost mythic reputation at the school. It was also a grand spectacle that marked the end of the school year before summer began. Every spring, the halls buzzed with talk of who would sign up, who might win, and which performances would be remembered for years to come. Posters with bold fonts and glittering designs were plastered on every bulletin board, proclaiming *Do You Have What It Takes*. Announcements echoed through the intercom, urging students to submit their names before the deadline. Even the social media account of the school joined the frenzy, teasing past highlights and hyping up the upcoming performances.

Students brought their best: bands, solo singers, magicians, dancers, even the occasional stand-up comedian. The winner not only earned bragging rights but also a coveted spot on the school's honor wall. It was a stage for the bold and the talented, a place to shine in front of teachers, peers, and even local media outlets, which occasionally covered the show.

For Ethan, the talent show represented something far more personal. He deemed it was not just a chance to perform or an opportunity to display his musicality. It was an opportunity to break free, to express the part of himself that he otherwise kept hidden behind the weight of his family name. Being the son of the billionaire founder had always placed him under a relentless spotlight.

He could not walk through the halls unnoticed. Teachers expected perfection. Students either idolized or envied him. And the occasional news article would casually mention him as “*the heir to one of the largest retail empires in the country*”.

But Ethan was not a businessman. He was not a CEO-in-the-making. He was a boy, who spent hours in his room strumming his guitar, writing lyrics, and losing himself in melodies that felt far more real than boardroom meetings or financial forecasts. The talent show, with its packed auditorium and cheering crowd, was his chance to show the world who he really was, even if only for a few minutes. A chance to show the school, and maybe the person he was so often afraid to be.

His decision to sign up hadn't come easily. For weeks, he wrestled with doubt, wondering if he could handle the attention and the potential backlash. It was Jenna who finally pushed him to do it. She had always been his fiercest supporter, the kind of friend who saw the best in him even when he could not see it himself.

“You've got this,” she had said one afternoon as they sat in the music room after school. “You're going to blow everyone away.”

His male buddies, however, were more cautious. “You know how this school is,” Mason had warned. “People talk. A LOT.”

“Are you sure you're ready for that?” Theo added.

Ethan had nodded, his jaw set with quiet determination. “I'm just doing this for me.”

Once he made the decision, there was no turning back. He threw himself into preparations with a fervor that surprised even his friends. In fact, Ethan's decision to perform a medley did not come easily. It was the result of weeks of restless nights, pages of scribbled song titles in his notebook, and countless hours of internal debate. The talent show had been announced in early spring, and while most students immediately began brainstorming their performances, Ethan hesitated. He knew he wanted to participate. He had spent too many years blending into the background, letting the expectations of being a Wexler drown out his voice, but the question of how he wanted to express himself loomed over him like a weight he could not shake.

At first, he considered playing it safe. A simple acoustic guitar cover of a country song would earn polite applause, maybe some admiration for his

technical skill. It would be respectable, uncontroversial, and, most importantly, easy to explain to his father. But every time Ethan picked up his guitar and tried to play something like *Love Story* or *Million Reasons*, it felt hollow. It was not him. It felt like he was playing a part in someone else's story. It was a version of himself that was palatable but false.

Late one night, as he sat cross-legged on his bedroom floor with his guitar resting against his knee, Ethan stared at the open pages of his notebook. The words *WHO AM I?* were scrawled across the top, underlined three times. Beneath it was a messy list of ideas, including song titles, themes, even costume sketches, but none of it felt right. He closed his eyes, strumming absentmindedly, and let his mind wander.

What did he want to say? What was the message he wanted to leave on that stage?

The answer hit him suddenly, almost like a whisper in the back of his mind: I want to be seen. Really seen.

Ethan opened his eyes, the clarity of the thought sending a jolt through him. For so much of his life, he had felt invisible, his teachers saw him as a model student. His classmates saw him as *the WexMart kid*. And the talent show was his chance to change that.

It was that clarity of purpose that led him to his role model, the one and only, *Lady Gaga*.

She had always been one of Ethan's idols. Her music was not just catchy. It was fearless. She sang about identity, self-expression, and defying societal norms. She was unapologetically herself, and that unapologetic spirit was something Ethan had always admired, even envied. Her songs were anthems for the outcasts and the dreamers, the people who refused to conform. And Ethan realized that was exactly what he needed for his performance: a medley.

The first song that came to mind was *Born This Way*. The lyrics were bold, affirming, and deeply personal.

I'm beautiful in my way

'Cause God makes no mistakes

I'm on the right track, baby

I was born this way

Those words resonated with Ethan on a level he hadn't fully acknowledged before. They weren't just about self-love. They were about rejecting the world's

expectations and embracing who you truly are.

But as powerful as the song was, Ethan knew it was not enough on its own. He wanted to create something dynamic, something that would capture not only his truth but also the energy and theatricality that had always been a part of him, even if he rarely let it show. That's when *Abracadabra* came to mind.

He remembered the first time he had heard the song, with its driving beat and hypnotic rhythm.

Don't waste time on a feelin'

Use your passion, no return

The lyrics had seemed to pulse through his veins, which are electrifying and magnetic. It was bold and brimming with confidence. That was everything he wanted to project on stage. It was the perfect complement to the raw vulnerability of *Born This Way*. Together, these songs told a complete story: self-discovery and empowerment.

Once the idea clicked, Ethan spent hours mapping out the medley in his notebook, carefully blending the transition between the two songs so that the shift felt seamless. The medley would start with the uplifting power, drawing the audience in with its message of self-acceptance. Then, as the beat began to build, the performance would explode into the electrifying energy, leaving the audience breathless by the end.

It was not just about the music, though. Ethan wanted the entire performance to feel like a statement, a declaration of who he was. That's when he began sketching ideas for the costume. He did not want to just sing the songs; he wanted to embody them, to bring the music to life in every sense of the word. In this case, Ethan had been sketching designs for weeks. He wanted the costume to reflect the boldness of the songs, something that screamed defiance and individuality. After countless revisions, he finalized a design: a glittering silver jacket with sharp, angular spikes on the shoulders, paired with sleek, fitted leather pants and metallic platform boots. It was completely unlike anything anyone in the school would expect.

But there was one problem. He could not exactly waltz into a tailor or designer's studio without word getting out. His father had made his disapproval of his musical ambitions clear on more than one occasion. Performing at a school talent show was risky enough, but a costume this dramatic? It would be impossible to keep under wraps if anyone outside of his closest circle got

involved.

So, Ethan turned to the one person he trusted most: Jenna.

The following weekend, he invited her over to his house under the pretense of *hanging out*, but when she walked into his bedroom, her jaw dropped. His usually neat space was a chaotic mess of fabric swatches, spools of thread, and sewing supplies scattered across the bed and floor. The silver fabric for the jacket lay draped over his desk chair, shimmering under the light from his bedside lamp.

"Ethan," Jenna said, blinking in disbelief. "What is all this?"

"I need your help," he said quickly, motioning for her to close the door behind her. "I'm making my costume for the talent show."

"Wait, you're making it? Like, by yourself?" She stepped closer, running her fingers over the fabric. "This is...insane. And kind of amazing."

He grinned, his excitement barely contained. "I've been working on the design for weeks. I just need someone to help me stitch it together. You're the only person I trust with this."

Jenna raised an eyebrow, crossing her arms. "No way...we're all together"

"You know," Ethan said, his voice dropping, "my dad can't know about it. He already hates that I'm performing. If he finds out I'm going all out with something like this, it'll just make things worse."

Her expression softened. "Ethan, are you sure about this? I mean, I'm all for you doing your thing, but your dad's not exactly chill about this stuff."

"That's why it has to stay between us," he said, his voice firm. "I'm doing this for me, Jenna. For once, I want to show the world who I really am. If he can't see that...well, that's his problem."

Jenna sighed, then rolled up the sleeves of her hoodie. "Alright, hand me a needle. But if I stab myself, you're buying me coffee for a week."

For the next several hours, they worked side by side, hunched over the fabric as they carefully stitched the pieces together. Ethan's hands trembled slightly as he sewed the first few spikes onto the jacket, but Jenna's steady sarcasm kept him grounded.

"My love," she said at one point, holding the jacket up to inspect their progress, "this is either going to blow everyone's minds or make you the talk of the school for the next five years."

Ethan smiled faintly, his eyes focused on a stubborn seam. "No way."

By the time they finished, it was well past midnight. The jacket sparkled under the dim light, its sharp edges and bold lines demanding attention. Ethan slipped it on, standing in front of the mirror as Jenna adjusted the shoulders.

“You’re going to kill it,” she said, her voice softer now. “They’re not ready for you.”

“Thanks,” Ethan murmured, meeting her gaze in the mirror. “For everything.”

“Just promise me one thing,” Jenna said, smirking. “If you become famous, I get to say I made your first costume.”

Ethan laughed, the sound light but tinged with nerves. “Sure thing.”

For weeks, he rehearsed after school, perfecting his vocals, practicing his choreography, foreseeing every possible incident to be avoided, and envisioning every detail of the performance.

The night before the show, Ethan stayed up late in his room, running through the medley one last time. By the time he finally collapsed into bed, his heart was pounding, not just with nerves but with excitement. He felt alive at that moment.

When the night of the talent show arrived, the auditorium was packed. The lights dimmed, and the emcee took the stage, introducing each act with a flourish. The performances ranged from charming to forgettable, an acoustic cover of Taylor Swift, a comedy routine that earned polite chuckles, a dance troupe that brought the house down with their energy. Backstage, Ethan waited for his turn, his heart pounding in his chest. He could feel the weight of their expectations pressing down on him, but he took a deep breath, reminding himself of the support he had from his friends.

“You’ve got this,” Jenna confided as she squeezed his arm. “Just remember why you’re doing this.”

“Yeah, man! You’ve got this,” Ryan added, clapping Ethan on the back.

As his turn approached, Ethan adjusted his flamboyant costume. It was vibrant and eye-catching, complete with sequins and bold colors that sparkled under the stage lights. He knew it was a departure from the norm, but that was precisely the point. He was ready to challenge the status quo and express himself authentically.

When the emcee finally called his name, Ethan stepped onto the stage, his boots clicking against the polished wood floor. The spotlight hit him, blinding him to the sea of faces in the audience. For a brief moment, he froze, his nerves

threatening to consume him. Then the music began.

The opening notes of *Born This Way* filled the auditorium, and Ethan launched into the performance with everything he had. His voice rang out clear and strong, his movements precise and confident. He owned the stage, spinning and strutting in his glittering jacket, his platform boots giving him an almost otherworldly presence. When the medley transitioned into *Abracadabra, amor-ooh-na-na*, the energy in the room shifted. The music swelled, the lights flashed, and Ethan poured every ounce of himself into the final chorus.

As the last note faded, he stood in the spotlight, chest heaving, his arms outstretched. The room exploded into cheers, but it was not unanimous. While some students cheered and clapped, others whispered behind their hands, their expressions unreadable. Ethan bowed and walked offstage, his heart still racing. He had done it. He had laid himself bare in front of the entire school. But as he stepped backstage, a knot of unease settled in his stomach.

Ethan won the talent show that night. The judges could not deny his talent or stage presence. But victory was bittersweet.

Once Ethan arrived home after the talent show, the house was quiet, but he could feel the tension before he even stepped through the door. He kicked off his boots by the entryway and froze when he saw the faint glow of the living room lights. Jackson was sitting on the couch, his back straight, a tablet balanced in his lap. The screen was lit with an online article, the headline bold and unmissable: *WexMart Heir Shocks Talent Show Audience with Gaga-Inspired Performance Tonight*.

“Dad,” Ethan started cautiously, but his father cut him off with a sharp glance.

“What were you thinking?” Jackson’s voice was low but laced with anger, the kind of tone that made the hairs on the back of Ethan’s neck stand up. “Do you have any idea how this looks?”

Ethan hesitated, his pulse quickening. “It was just a performance,” he said, his voice defensive. “It’s not a big deal.”

“NOT A BIG DEAL?” he asked, his tone sharp but not angry, in a disappointed tone, holding the tablet up as if it were evidence in a courtroom. “Do you know how many calls I’ve gotten just now? From board members, from shareholders? They’re all asking me why my *dearest* son, my heir, was parading around in some ridiculous costume, singing Lady Gaga’s songs like he’s auditioning for a circus.”

Ethan's stomach tightened, but he forced himself to hold his ground. "It wasn't ridiculous," he said quietly. "It was *me*. That performance was about self-expression, showing people who I really am."

Jackson let out a harsh laugh, shaking his head. "Who you are? Ethan, you're *not* just some kid who can do whatever he wants. You're a Wexler. People are watching you, watching US. Do you have any idea what kind of damage this could do to the company's image?"

Ethan's hands curled into fists at his sides. "Why does everything have to be about the company? Why can't it just be about me, for once? I'm not a brand, Dad. I'm a *person*."

"A person who's going to inherit an empire one day," Jackson shot back. "You think this is just about you? It's not. It's about responsibility. About thinking beyond yourself."

Ethan's expression darkened, and for a moment, the two of them stood in silence, the tension between them thick and suffocating.

Finally, Jackson set the tablet down on the coffee table and took a step closer.

"You don't have the luxury of being just *you*, Ethan," he said, his voice quieter now but no less firm. "Soon, people are going to depend on you. Your choices will matter, for everyone connected to this family. You need to start acting like it."

Ethan felt a lump rise in his throat, but he swallowed it down. He wanted to yell and to make his father understand that he could not live his life under the weight of everyone else's expectations. But instead, he turned and walked toward the stairs, his footsteps heavy on the hardwood floor.

"Ethan," his father called after him, but he did not stop or look back. By the time he reached his room and closed the door behind him, his hands were shaking.

He sank onto his bed, the glittering jacket still draped across his desk chair. For the first time since the performance, the weight of everything hit him all at once. The whispers at school, the headlines online, his father's disappointment. It all felt like too much. He buried his face in his hands, choking back the tears that threatened to spill over.

In that moment, the triumph he had felt on stage seemed like a distant memory, overshadowed by the crushing reality of what it meant to be a Wexler.

Is it a curse? Is there a choice?

The songs that had once brought him so much joy now felt meaningless.

The summer that followed was one of isolation and introspection. He retreated into his bedroom, feeling like a ghost in his own home, avoiding calls and texts from friends. The walls that had once felt like a sanctuary now closed in on him, amplifying his loneliness. The joy he had felt on stage had been replaced by a heavy, gnawing sense of regret.

Jenna was the first to visit. She knocked on his door one afternoon, a bag of takeout in hand and a determined look on her face. "Come on, Ethan! We need you," Jenna would say, her voice filled with warmth and determination. "You can't just hide away. People suck sometimes, but you were amazing, Ethan. Don't let them take that away from you."

Mason, Theo, and Ryan came a few days later, dragging him out of bed and forcing him to go to the park with them.

"We're going to the Madison Garden," Mason declared, his confidence unwavering. "You're coming with us, whether you like it or not."

Ethan hesitated, torn between the comfort of his solitude and the warmth of his friends' love. But the sight of their eager faces, the genuine concern in their eyes, made his heart swell. He finally relented, a small smile breaking through the cloud of sadness that had enveloped him.

As they sat on the piece of grassy area, surrounded by the laughter of children and the warmth of the sun, Ethan felt a flicker of hope reignite within him. His friends shared stories and jokes.

"You know, that performance took a lot of guts," Ryan said, nudging him playfully. "Not everyone could do that, even if they don't get it."

Ethan listened, absorbing their words. He realized that while the world outside might not understand him, he had a support system that believed in him.

That night, as he lay in bed, he thought about the talent show, the heat of the spotlight, and the weight of expectations. He still felt the sting of disappointment, but he also felt a newfound resolve.

The summer wore on, and while the shadow of the talent show lingered, Ethan began to reclaim parts of himself. He picked up his guitar again, strumming chords that resonated with the emotions he had buried. Music became his solace, a way to express the complexities of his feelings.

Jenna and the others continued to rally around him, their unwavering

support helping him to navigate the rocky terrain of his self-identity. “You’re more than just a name, Ethan,” Theo reminded him one evening as they gathered for a movie night. “You have a voice that deserves to be heard, and you know it.”

And Ethan began to believe it, slowly but surely. The talent show had been a turning point, a moment of vulnerability that revealed both the harshness of judgment and the beauty of true friendship. He felt a determination brewing within him. That was a desire to embrace his identity unapologetically and to let his voice shine through the noise.

With the support of his friends, he was ready to face whatever challenges lay ahead, no matter how daunting. And as he prepared for the new school year, he knew he would carry the lessons of that summer with him, a reminder that authenticity was worth fighting for.

6

INVITATION

With towering shelves of books, cozy reading nooks, and tall windows, the library was one of the few places where Ethan could find a sense of peace. It was a typical reading class, but today his mind was elsewhere, lost in thoughts of Caleb. Ever since their short ride home after the football incident, Ethan had been replaying the moment in his head. The way Caleb had smiled at him, the ease of their conversation. It all felt so new and exciting.

Ethan sat with Jenna and Mason at one of the round tables near the back of the library. Their books and notebooks were spread across the polished wood surface, but the three of them were doing different things. Jenna was flipping through her notes, while Mason, as always, was in the middle of recounting one of his dramatic tales.

“She smiled at me,” Mason mumbled, his voice low but excited as he leaned closer to Jenna and Ethan. “I’m telling you, Tiffany totally smiled at me in the hallway this morning.”

“You mean Tiffany White?” Jenna questioned, twirling her pen between her fingers. “Well, she probably smiles at everyone. She’s just *nice*.”

“That wasn’t a nice smile,” Mason insisted, thumping his finger on the table for emphasis. “It was a special smile. It had layers.”

“Sure it was *special*,” Jenna said, her tone dripping with sarcasm. She glanced at Ethan, her lips twitching. “What do you think? Did Mason’s ‘imaginary’

girlfriend give him a magical smile?”

Ethan smirked, flipping a page in his notebook. “I think Mason should actually talk to her before he starts planning their wedding.”

“Ha, ha, very funny,” Mason said, leaning back in his chair. “You’ll see. I’ll ask her out, and she’ll say yes. Then I’ll have a date, and you two will still be here, single and bitter.”

“Speak for yourself,” Jenna quipped. “I’m thriving.”

Mason snorted. “Right. And what about you, Ethan?”

Jenna looked up, her interest piqued. “Not since the last time you mentioned him. What’s up?”

Ethan froze for a moment, his pen hovering above his notebook. He debated brushing it off, but then he glanced at Jenna, who gave him a subtle encouraging nod. Taking a deep breath, he decided to just say it.

“Um...” Ethan began, keeping his voice low, “Caleb kind of...asked me out.”

Both Jenna and Mason stared at him, their expressions shifting in completely different directions.

“Wait, what?” Jenna whispered, leaning closer. “Caleb? As in new guy Caleb?”

“Yeah,” Ethan admitted, his cheeks warming. “It wasn’t, like, super direct or anything. He just asked if I wanted to hang out downtown as he is new here.”

Jenna’s face lit up with delight, her enthusiasm infectious, “That’s exciting! You should totally go for it.”

Mason, however, raised an eyebrow, skepticism etched on his face. “Are you sure about him, though? I mean, isn’t his dad is running for president, right? What if he’s just using you for his dad’s campaign or something?”

Ethan hesitated, his mind flashing back to the past few days. After Caleb had helped him home, they’d exchanged numbers. What started as polite thanks and casual banter had quickly turned into longer conversations about everything from music to their favorite movies to what they wanted to do after high school. Caleb was easy to talk to. He seemed to be thoughtful and surprisingly open for someone who had just transferred to a new school.

“I don’t know, Ethan,” Mason leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table. “Your family’s name carries a lot of weight.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Jenna said, shooting Mason a glare and rolling her eyes. “Not everyone is out to use people, Mason. Caleb just moved here. He’s probably looking for friends, like a normal person.”

Ethan felt a pang of defensiveness. “I don’t think that’s the case. We’ve been texting since the day I got hurt.”

“Texting, huh?” Mason said, crossing his arms. “That doesn’t mean he’s not playing you.”

“What’s he like?” Jenna said, grinning.

“He’s cool,” Ethan said finally. “We’ve been texting a lot. He’s into basketball, obviously, but he’s also into other stuff, which I didn’t expect. And he’s...kind of funny. In a good way.”

Jenna clapped her hands together softly. “You should give it a try.”

Ethan appreciated Jenna’s support, feeling the warmth of her belief in him. “I guess I just need to trust myself,” he replied, trying to sound more confident than he felt.

“Exactly,” Jenna said, giving him an encouraging nod. “You’ve got this!”

“Yep,” Mason conceded, though his expression remained skeptical. He turned to Ethan. “I’m just saying, be careful, okay? You don’t know him that well yet.”

Ethan nodded, though Mason’s words left a faint seed of doubt in the back of his mind. He wanted to believe Caleb’s intentions were genuine, but the thought of being used was a fear he could not entirely shake.

After school, Ethan’s thoughts were still swirling as he made his way through the basketball court. The basketball court was alive with the sound of sneakers squeaking against polished wood and the rhythmic thud of the ball bouncing across the floor. Caleb and his teammates were already warming up, stretching and joking with one another.

As practice began, Ethan watched Caleb and his teammates play, the energy in the gym contagious. The ball zipped from player to player, each pass fluid and precise. Caleb was in his element, darting across the court with an agility that made Ethan’s heart race. He felt a sense of pride knowing they were becoming friends.

“Henry, cut left!” Caleb shouted, passing the ball with a sharp flick of his wrist. Henry caught it mid-stride, dodging a defender before sinking a clean layup.

“Nice!” Caleb called, clapping his hands as the team reset for another drill. Practice was intense, but Caleb thrived on the energy. Basketball was the place where he could shut out the noise of the world and just focus on the game.

Ethan felt a flutter of admiration as he watched Caleb move, the muscles in

his arms flexing with each stretch. He could not help but be captivated by the way Caleb carried himself, exuding confidence and charm.

After an hour of drills, the coach blew the whistle, signaling the end of practice. Caleb jogged off the court, grabbing a towel from the bench and wiping the sweat from his face. His teammates were already joking around, their voices echoing in the gym as they headed for the changing room.

“Did you see that last shot I made?” Isaac grinned, flexing his muscles playfully. “I’m telling you, I’m unstoppable!”

“Unstoppable?” Henry rolled his eyes, chuckling. “Please, I’ve seen better shots from my grandma. But hey, at least you’re consistent...consistently missing the point!”

The room erupted in laughter as Isaac feigned offense. “Hey now, I’ll have you know my grandma has a mean jump shot!”

Caleb, still catching his breath, chimed in. “Next time, we should just let her play instead of you, Isaac. At least she’d bring some experience.”

“Very funny, Thorne,” Isaac shot back, shaking his head. “Just wait until I dunk on you in the next game!”

Caleb smirked, “Yeah, right. The only thing you’re dunking is a donut.”

Their playful exchanges continued after a quick shower. Caleb emerged wearing a fitted black vest over his white T-shirt, his damp hair curling slightly at the edges. He slung his gym bag over his shoulder, his muscles still faintly aching from practice. Caleb noticed Henry glancing at his phone and raised an eyebrow.

“What’s got you so distracted?” Caleb asked, pulling on a fresh shirt.

“Just checking on my girlfriend’s messages,” Henry replied, a hint of worry in his voice. “She’s been acting a little distant lately.”

Isaac clapped him on the shoulder. “Don’t sweat it, man. Relationships can be tricky. Just keep your head in the game. Both on and off the court.”

“Yeah, and if you need help, just ask,” Caleb added, genuinely concerned.

“I appreciate it, guys. I just don’t want to mess things up,” Henry said, running a hand through his hair. “I mean, it’s tough balancing everything.”

“Totally get that,” Isaac said. “Girls can be tricky sometimes.”

“Right, and if things get too overwhelming, just focus on what you can control,” Caleb encouraged. “We’ve got your back, always.”

“Got it, man,” Henry said, visibly relaxing. “By the way, did you guys see

Ethan was on the court just now when we were practising?”

“Oh right, man,” Isaac added, catching his attention. “Did you make a formal apology to the kid, Caleb? He’s the billionaire’s Wexler son.”

“Of course I did,” Caleb replied casually, though excitement bubbled beneath the surface.

“Just make sure you don’t embarrass yourself in front of him,” Henry teased, nudging Caleb with his elbow. “You know how *super* rich kids are.”

“Shut up dude,” Caleb laughed, shaking his head.

“Alright, alright. As long as you don’t take him to the same places you be with us,” Henry joked. “I don’t want him thinking we’re a bunch of stinky boys.”

“Too late for that, buddy,” Isaac chimed in, grinning. “But seriously, just have fun.”

Caleb felt a renewed sense of confidence as he headed out. As he walked toward the school entrance, he spotted Ethan standing there, wearing headphones and scrolling through his phone. He hesitated for a moment, then approached him.

“Hey,” Caleb said, his voice cutting through the quiet.

Ethan looked up, pulling off his headphones. His eyes widened slightly when he saw Caleb, his gaze flickering briefly to the vest before meeting Caleb’s eyes. “Oh, hey. Done with practice?”

“Yeah,” Caleb said, smiling. “What about you? Just hanging out?”

“Waiting for my driver,” Ethan said, slipping his phone into his pocket. “But, uh...actually, I was wondering if you’re free this weekend. I thought we could check out downtown.”

“Lovely,” Caleb replied, his eyes brightening. “I’ve been wanting to explore more of the area.”

“Cool,” Ethan said, his shoulders relaxing.

As they chatted, time seemed to fly. Caleb’s presence was magnetic, and Ethan found himself drawn to the warmth in his smile. Before they could say more, Ethan’s car pulled up to the curb. Caleb hesitated, glancing at Ethan. “You heading home now?”

“Yeah,” Ethan said. “Want a ride? I can drop you off.”

Caleb grinned. “Thanks. I’d appreciate that.”

The ride was quiet but comfortable, the two of them chatting about school and basketball as the city blurred past the windows. When the car stopped in

front of Caleb's house, he hovered in the passenger seat for a long beat, clearly loath to break the comfortable silence they had built.

"Thanks for the ride," Caleb said, his hand on the door handle. "I'll text you about this weekend?"

"Yeah," Ethan said, smiling faintly. "Text me."

As Caleb stepped out and waved goodbye, Ethan watched him disappear into the house, with a strange sense of warmth after the car pulled away.

Ethan returned home, still buzzing from the day's events. He had a sense of anticipation about the weekend, wondering what adventures awaited him and Caleb.

Meanwhile, at Caleb's house, the atmosphere was warm and inviting. Eliza was home for the evening, having just finished her shift at the hospital. She was still in her scrubs, her hair pulled back into a loose bun, but her face was soft with warmth as she served them both plates of spaghetti.

"How was school today?" she asked, sitting down across from him.

"It was good," Caleb said, twirling his fork in the pasta. "Practice was tough, but I think we're getting better as a team."

"That's good to hear, son," Eliza replied, grabbing a glass of lemon tea.

"Yeah," Caleb said, glancing at her. "I'm actually going out with a new friend this weekend."

"Oh? Who's this friend?" she asked, her interest piqued as she set the table.

"Actually, there's this guy, Ethan." Caleb added, drinking a sip of water. "We've been getting to know each other these days."

"Oh, are you saying the *Ethan Wexler*?" Eliza asked. "How is he like? And you know his father is quite aggressive on the market."

"He's...different," Caleb said thoughtfully. "And kind of quiet, but... interesting. I don't know. I like talking to him."

Eliza reached across the table and squeezed his hand. "I'm happy for you, sweetheart. You deserve good friends in your life."

As they ate, Eliza asked about Caleb's day, his teammates, and school life. Caleb felt grateful for these moments, the way his mother cared about his experiences. They shared laughter and stories, and for a while, the pressures of his father's campaign faded into the background.

After dinner, Caleb scrolled through his phone. He hadn't posted on Instagram in a while, but something about the day. The school days, the practice,

the ride with Ethan, and the upcoming weekend made him want to share something.

With a burst of inspiration, he opened the app and began crafting a post. He uploaded a candid photo of him on the basketball court, sweat glistening on his forehead, a genuine smile on his face. He typed out a simple yet meaningful caption, echoing with the previous post of Ethan.

This is not for the only one, but for us.

Hitting post, Caleb set his phone down and stared at the ceiling, a small smile tugging at his lips. He knew that this was just the beginning of something special, and he could not wait to see where it would lead.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mike Mok (also known as Hoi Hin Mok) is a language lecturer with over a decade of experience in vocational and professional education in Hong Kong. He teaches at the Hong Kong Design Institute and the Institute of Vocational Education (Lee Wai Lee) under the Vocational Training Council, and also serves as a part-time lecturer at the Institute of Professional Education And Knowledge. Over the years, he has worked with and guided thousands of students from diverse backgrounds.

An award-winning author, editor, and translator, Mike's publications include *Discovering Your True Self: A Journey of Self-Exploration* (2024) and *V Music Magazine* (2025, 2026). He has also served as a language trainer and interpreter for major local and international competitions, including the WorldSkills Competition (2019, 2022, 2024 & 2026).

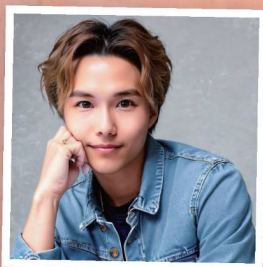
A polyglot who believes in the transformative power of language, Mike views communication as a bridge which connects people across cultures and opens doors to growth and opportunity. In his free time, he enjoys immersing himself in diverse cultural experiences, from literature and music to culinary arts and travel, cultivating his curiosity and enriching his teaching and writing.

MAYHEM IS JUST THE BEGINNING.

High school senior Ethan Wexler is at a crossroads. Pulled between his family's wealthy legacy and his own uncertain dreams, he must decide who he is before the world decides for him.

In this vivid exploration of life's disorienting beauty, *BONA FIDE* reminds us that the courage to follow your own path is the only way to truly be free. Even if that makes you the stubborn one.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Mike Mok is an award-winning author, translator, and language lecturer based in Hong Kong. With over a decade of experience in vocational education, his work explores the power of communication to bridge cultures. Mike is also a polyglot and has served as a language specialist for numerous competitions. A passionate traveler and music lover, he believes language is a transformative gateway to connecting with people from all walks of life.



9 789888 972104 >

HKD 150

All net proceeds from this sale will be donated to local charitable organizations.