

THE CAGED BIRD

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INT. DIVE BAR - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT - FLASHBACK - 2017

The room hums with anxious energy. AJ ETIENNE, soon to be 18, a rising musician with an intense edge, peeks through the stage curtain. A half empty flask hangs loosely in her grip.

ANGLE

Behind her is her ALL GIRL BAND (Black, late teens) talking in hushed voices as they steal glances at Aj.

BANDMATE 1

(whispering)

That's her third time with that flask this week.

BANDMATE 2

She hasn't even mentioned her mom's memorial tomorrow. Not one word.

BANDMATE 3

So you shouldn't either. Tomorrow's the 10 year anniversary. That's gotta be hard. If she wants to talk about it with us, she will.

BANDMATE 2

Oh wake up, Tamara. No one said it'd be easy but this isn't healthy. She's not acting like herself.

TAMARA

Of course she's not herself; her fucking mom is dead!

BANDMATE 1

Shhh!

BANDMATE 2

(pauses, voice softer)

I KNOW. And I'm not tryna be insensitive. I'm just saying, she's...

AJ

(overhears)

I'm what?

The bandmates jump. They hesitate, glancing at each other. Bandmate 2: JADE, guitar player, too honest for her own good, says what's on everyone's mind.

JADE
You still haven't...I mean: isn't
there something you'd rather be
doing than...this?

AJ
(curt)
There's nothing else I need to do
right now.

JADE
But your dad--

TAMARA
For fucks sake Jade-- DROP IT.

AJ
(sharp)
Enough, alright? Let's just do what
we came here for.

Jade seems like she has more to say, but the club promoter
barges in.

CLUB PROMOTER
Save the gossiping for brunch,
ladies. It's showtime!

He dramatically gestures them onstage. The girls step through
the curtain. One by one.

Aj pauses... taking a deep breath to steady herself.

Jade steps within earshot. And, in passing, says:

JADE
He needs you.

INT. DIVE BAR - STAGE - SAME TIME

BEYOND THE CURTAIN: The rows of barstools and rented metal
chairs are half-filled with a MIXED AND TIPSY CROWD.

Beneath the low, moody lighting, instruments scatter a small
stage. A faint hum of feedback fills the room. The crowd
looks on, annoyed. Their muffled chatter quiets as Aj tests
the mic, her face focused yet masked.

AJ
One-two-three-four.

The beat drops in sync with the stage lights. On stage, Aj
comes ALIVE.

She grips the mic with two hands as she sings--absorbed in the moment. For these few minutes, it's just her and the music. This is HER WORLD. Her safe space.

The song reaches a diminuendo. Aj hits the last note.

The small crowd of drunken patrons ERUPTS in CHEERS and WHISTLING. AJ BEAMS. BREATHLESS. TAKES IT IN LIKE OXYGEN. MESMERIZED BY THE APPLAUSE.

...But then reality bleeds through.

The overhead stage lights are replaced by the bright white lightbulbs of her classroom and the cacophony of applause is actually the dull bravado of her torts professor cold calling her as his first victim of the day.

RIPPLE DISSOLVE
TO:

INT. FAMU LAW CLASSROOM - DAY

PROFESSOR REISLING, 50s, abrasive, impatiently waits across the front of the room with an I-clicker in his hand. His sharp eyes narrowed at Aj.

PROFESSOR REISLING
Care to enlighten us, Ms. Etienne?
Or do you intend to keep us waiting
all day?

There's a stifled cough in the back.

AJ
(disoriented)
Huh? Oh sorry professor,
just...daydreaming about a world
where police reform actually means
police reform, and not just...you
know, more police.

Professor Reisling sharply exhales then resumes his pace around the classroom. He cold calls victim number two.

PROFESSOR REISLING
Who can list all the elements of
battery? Mr...
(peers at the class list)
DUPONT?

DUPONT, 26, tall, smug, dressed especially studiously, stands and answers in minute detail.

BERLIN

Battery is the intentional
infliction of harmful contact with
another person without consent. The
elements include, of course,
intent, harmful or offensive
contact, and causation. For example-

PROFESSOR REISLING

That's quite enough, Mr. DuPont.
Save some oxygen for the rest of
us.

Professor Reisling clicks his I-clicker, resuming the
presentation. DuPont sits down, quickly cutting eyes to Aj
with a smug smile.

AJ

(under her breath)
Kiss ass.

Before long, Aj tunes the professor out. Her gaze falling on
her notebook. She picks up her pen. Lyrics seem to jump off
the page.

AJ (CONT'D)

*These days I need something to put
my mind at ease.
Constantly spinning round can't
tell my west from east.
Turn it down some more
Or my heart will overflow.*

MATCH CUT TO:

ACT 1

INT. - AJ'S APARTMENT - LIVING ROOM - DAY

Soft melodies swirl through the screen. The sun's rays cast an inviting aura inside an eclectic mess of an apartment.

As we pan towards the SOURCE of the MUSIC, we catch brief glimpses of the surroundings: an easel and painting station occupy a corner adjacent to the window.

Another glimpse; showcasing chord dictionaries in different instruments and law books by the dozen.

We move closer. The music swells. Finally, we land on the SOURCE of the music. Her back is to us.

MAIN TITLE CARD - THE CAGED BIRD

AJ, 24, musician, focused, sits at her piano, practicing a new melody; a mix of acoustic R&B and jazz. As Aj's fingers glide over the keys, she sings to herself, briefly pausing to scribble down lyrics.

AJ

*These days I spend way more time
with myself.
Surrounded by noise, need more time
spent with self.
It's getting hard to see
Just exactly where I'm sposed to
be.*

She smiles. That was good. She writes it down. Satisfied, her fingers return to the keys. Before she can continue, the front door swings open.

In walks MONICA, 25, artistic, believes rules were meant to be broken. She's dressed casually, with paint smudges on her clothes.

Monica's arms are full of mail and PAINTING SUPPLIES from Michaels. She smiles at Aj, tossing the mail onto the counter and sifts through them.

MONICA

*Heyyy, that's coming along! Forgot
to grab this earlier--oh, law
school's sending you love letters
again.*

Monica waves an official envelope from FAMU Law and hands it to Aj, wasting no time tearing away at her new art goodies. The sound of her RIPPING into the cardboard resounds in the background.

On the top in bold print says: URGENT: ACADEMIC STANDING REVIEW.

Aj turns her back to Monica to read the letter. Her eyes quickly scan it.

The letter is a warning -- she's at risk of being placed on academic probation and is required to attend a meeting with the dean to discuss her "declining academic performance."

There's a framed photo of her father, FRANTZ, in a black suit, looking stern and dignified in front of the church. Aj glances at it briefly with a complex expression.

MONICA (CONT'D)

(more to herself)

Ahhh - Dropping outta art school was the best thing I could've done. I learned all the fundamentals. Have more time to create. And spend less time studying. Win-win!

(to Aj)

Not that you're wasting your time studying or anything. Hey, what did your school say?

A beat. We can see the weight hanging over Aj.

AJ

Nothing worth mentioning.

Monica puts down a bottle of acrylic paint she's holding and steps closer to get a better look at her best friend.

MONICA

I know that look. What's wrong?

(beat)

Who I gotta fight?

AJ

(small smile)

Save your strength, Ali. I'm running late. I'll see you after class.

Aj shoves her law books in her bag and heads out the door.

EXT. FAMU LAW CAMPUS - MORNING

Aj walks briskly across campus, passing by DOZENS of students. Her earbuds are softly replaying the melody she was composing earlier. A notification pings. She glances at her phone.

A text from her father appears:

FRANTZ (V.O.)

"Are you studying? You need to be prepared for the exams this semester. Remember this is your future. Your life is a blessing, and it's up to you to honor it."

He ends the text with an old Haitian proverb that she's heard 100 times.

AJ

Piti piti, zwazo fè nich.
(in English subtitles)
Little by little, the bird builds its nest.

Although meant to be encouraging, Aj feels suffocated. She rolls her eyes, pockets her phone, and heads inside her class.

INT. FAMU LAW - LECTURE HALL - MOMENTS LATER

The lecture hall is spacious, filled with endless rows of seats and tiny desks. Small groups scattered throughout the classroom engage in competitive jargon.

She catches snippets of conversation between two classmates closest to the door, a woman and a man named BERLIN. (The student we met previously referred to by his last name--DUPONT).

BERLIN

I just got an offer from Greenberg Traurig in Miami. They're only hiring five interns this summer.

STUDENT 1

No way! As expected from Law Review's president! Everyone's gunning for state attorney firms this year -- it's insane.

STUDENT 2

Yeah but only the top students get
to intern at the state attorney's.
The rest take public defender *if*
they're lucky.

Berlin spots Aj and deliberately raises his voice.

BERLIN

Hey, Aj! Heard anything back from
the firms yet? You know, summer's
right around the corner.

The scattered chatter transforms into quiet whispers. He's
just put her on the spot.

Aj's briefly thrown off, but she doesn't give him the
satisfaction of seeing her squirm.

AJ

Not yet, but I'm holding out for
something better than Greenberg
Traurig.

A few students chuckle but Berlin doesn't buy it. Aj finds a
seat a few rows down. Once she's out of sight, her light-
hearted bravado starts to CRACK.

INT. EVANGEL CHURCH INTERNATIONAL - PULPIT - DAY

FRANTZ ETIENNE, 57, dressed sharply in a suit and tie, stands
before a congregation of Haitian-Americans dressed in their
Sunday's best-- on a Thursday.

At the podium, Frantz checks his message thread with Aj.
Still nothing. Frustrated, he reaches over to take a sip of
water but instead knocks over the glass, spilling its
contents all over his notes.

Frantz snatches his pocket square to damp at the puddle.

Clearing his throat, he continues, speaking clearly into the
mic:

FRANTZ

The bible says in Proverbs 22:6,
"Train up a child in the way they
should go, and even when they are
old, they will not depart from it."
You see, *discipline*, is what keeps
our children on the righteous path.

(MORE)

FRANTZ (CONT'D)

But the world and its distractions
will call and offer shortcuts to
them. Empty promises of fame,
riches, and success. Am I preaching
to anyone this morning? Turn to
your neighbor and say *don't be
easily led astray. Trust in God
always.*

The congregation repeats after Frantz as he closes his semi-soaked folder and passes it off to PASTOR HUNDY.

INT. EVANGEL CHURCH INTERNATIONAL - SANCTUARY - CONTINUOUS

Following his sermon, Pastor Frantz breezes past several congregation members thanking him for the word. He passively thanks them and shakes a few hands, wading through the crowd until he finds who he's looking for-- JEAN (late 40s, family friend, prominent lawyer in the Haitian community).

FRANTZ

Jean. Como ye? (How are you) my
favorite attorney?

JEAN

M tre bien (I'm blessed and highly
favored) thank you. I don't know
how you've managed to preach
amazing sermon after sermon all
these years but you've done it
again, Frantz.

FRANTZ

I just preach what God puts on my
heart. In any case, I'd like to ask
for a favor.

JEAN

What can I do for you?

FRANTZ

Are there any internships still up
for grabs with you at the public
defender's office?

JEAN

Aj still doesn't have her summer
internship?

(beat)

(MORE)

JEAN (CONT'D)

Tell you what, I won't make any promises, but if there's an open spot, I'll send you the application form. All you gotta do is punch the ticket.

FRANTZ

Good man.

INT. FAMU LAW - ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICE - WAITING ROOM - AFTERNOON

The waiting room at FAMU Law's administrative office is quiet, sprinkled with students waiting for their appointment.

Aj sits in one of the chairs, rhythmically tapping her foot, her mind somewhere else. The dean's door finally opens. A girl exits with wet eyes.

The dean's assistant, RONDA, 40s, calls Aj inside. Aj tightens the grip on her bag and walks in.

INT. FAMU LAW - DEAN ROBERTSON'S OFFICE

DEAN ROBERTSON, brilliant, a middle-aged icon with sharp eyes and a firm demeanor reviews Aj's academic file in silence.

The air is tense. She breaks it. Reading the details on her case file like a script.

DEAN ROBERTSON

(monotone)

Amèlie-Jasmine Etienne. Age: 24.
Graduated from Florida
International University *Summa Cum*
Laude with a Bachelor's in Criminal
Justice.

(approving)

Admitted last fall with a Bright
Futures Scholarship. Top of your
class. Very impressive.

(sidetracked)

Says here you tied for first with
Berlin DuPont. We don't see cases
like that too often.

(back on track)

Your academic career shows promise.
But this semester...

Aj cuts her off.

AJ
I've had some... distractions, I'll
admit, but I'm confident I can
bring my grades up before the end
of the semester.

DEAN ROBERTSON
(hesitates)
I'm afraid we're beyond that.

AJ
Ma'am?

Dean Robertson flips to another page, plucks a file out of
the pile, and slides it across the desk.

Aj reads it, her eyes catch something new—a line that wasn't
mentioned in the letter:

"Scholarship Revoked."

END OF ACT 1

ACT 2

INT. HALLWAY - AJ'S APARTMENT - EVENING

The sound of an elevator approaches.

ANGLE ON THE NUMBERS

1. 2. 3. Ding.

The doors slide open, revealing a single, visibly drained occupant inside: Aj.

She steps into the hall. The hallway is dim with week old stains in the carpet. Overhead, a flickering light casts the scene in varying shades between light and dark. She stops at Apartment 303, making an attempt to pull herself together.

AJ
(over it)
Fuck it.

Aj enters the apartment --

INT. LIVING ROOM - AJ'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

-- and is almost blinded. Every light in the living room seems to be turned on. Aj surveys a hurricane of opened boxes and plastic wrap containing various art supplies from this morning still scattered on the floor. Standing at the heart of it all, with her back turned, is Monica.

Aj can see *and* hear her headphones blaring music so loud you could hear it in Pennsylvania.

Pencil in hand, Monica lightly sketches on her canvas, a reference photo clipped on the top right corner. She pulls back to examine her work. Aj can't help but to admire her.

Aj's internal world starkly contrasts the colorful and vibrant external that exists because of Monica.

With a sad smile, Aj shuffles into the kitchen. From the living room, Monica finally spots her and uncovers her right ear.

MONICA
About time! Class was over hours ago, where have you been?
(mixes paint)
I need your help. Which color palette speaks to you more?

INT. KITCHEN - AJ'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Aj disappears into the fridge. She calls back.

AJ

You're the artist. You choose.

She shuts the fridge door and emerges with a BOTTLE OF MOSCATO. Aj finds a bottle opener and with sharp precision pops the cork with a satisfying "POP".

A cabinet full of wine glasses opens. Aj plucks one, pours for a beat, then knocks it back. Monica watches her repeat the same motion, eyebrows raised.

MONICA

Uh... Long day?

AJ

Not at all. I'm drinking to celebrate--

(she pours herself another
glass, raising it in the
air)

-- my funeral.

MONICA

I'm detecting some sarcasm here.

AJ

You're detecting a lot of sarcasm
so do me a favor and let me drink
in peace tonight. OK?

Without waiting for a response, Aj bends into...

INT. HALL - AJ'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

...the hall. Two doors face each other. She turns to the one on the left.

A black and pink "WELL DON'T JUST STAND THERE, COME ON IN" sign adorns her door. She flips it to "I'M IN HERE. YOU'RE OUT THERE. LET'S KEEP IT THAT WAY" and closes the door shut.

Monica follows Aj.

MONICA

(re: sign)

Hmmm. Seems like a challenge.

(grins)

I love a challenge.

Monica enters Aj's bedroom.

INT. AJ'S BEDROOM - APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

The walls are coated with different album cover arts. *Rose in the Dark*, *the Miseducation of Lauryn Hill*, *College Dropout*, the list goes on.

Over by the record player, Aj drinks straight from the bottle. A light trail of Moscato streams down her chin. She wipes at it with the back of her hand, plucking out an album titled "Alligator Bites Never Heal" from her vinyl collection.

Aj turns to place the record in the record player but is thunderstruck when she spots Monica standing INSIDE her room.

AJ
(annoyed)
The fuck? Respect the sign!

MONICA
Girl bye. Fuck the sign. Tell me what's going on? You've been on an alcohol cleanse for MONTHS. What gives?
(beat)
Did you forget to wear a condom?

AJ
What?! No!

MONICA
Whew, thank God. I'm too young to be an auntie.

AJ
(sucks her teeth)
Y'know what...

MONICA
Then what is it?
(then)
It's about that letter from this morning, isn't it? I'm right, right?

The reminder is like a gutshot. Aj sits on the bed, taking another swig. Monica sits next to her, gently taking the bottle from her hands.

MONICA (CONT'D)

(soft)

Talk to me.

AJ

(finding her words)

Have you ever felt like no matter what you do, it's never enough? Like...there's this flag at the finish line, and every time you reach for it, it moves?

MONICA

I think that's just called being in your twenties.

Aj looks at her.

AJ

I'm serious. I feel like I'm living two different lives. On some Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde shit... you know, minus the serial killing.

Monica isn't following, Aj rephrases.

AJ (CONT'D)

There's the top of her class, law student version of "me", who my dad loves, and the messy, musician version who *I* love. And the more I try to make them both fit, the more I lose both.

(stands, pacing)

Y'know I got a D on my last civil procedure exam? Me! A D! My grades are tanking. I'm on academic probation. And now I lost my scholarship and need to come up with \$12K before the end of the semester. If my dad finds out -- I can already hear him.

(in an annoyed Haitian father voice)

Amélie! How could you let this happen? Do you know how much it costs for you to get a decent education in this country? When I was your age, I had to walk TEN MILES to go to school! Do you want to be like those people down at McDonald's flipping burgers for the rest of your life!?

For the first time, Monica doesn't have a comeback. She simply returns the bottle to Aj who takes it gratefully.

MONICA

Good point. Your dad is crazy. Remember that time he scheduled a "cleansing" for you at the church when he caught you smoking weed?

Aj laughs weakly at the memory. But it's only for a moment.

AJ

Don't remind me. I just... thought he'd see me for who I am by now.

MONICA

...There's a chance he never will.

AJ

Jesus Christ, is this your idea of a pep talk?

MONICA

Sorry! I know it's not what you wanna hear but...

(trying to cheer her up)

Look at it this way: if he can't see you for who you really are, so what? As long as you stay true to yourself, isn't that all that matters?

Aj's silence speaks volumes.

MONICA (CONT'D)

...Okayyyy. Maybe I'm out of my depth here. You know I'm not too keen on family. My sperm donor left me and my mom for another woman when I was 7 and it's been a shit show ever since. The point is, parents are selfish. Just because they made you, doesn't mean they own you. Feel me?

AJ

Yea, but that doesn't change the fact that he's my *father*. Not to mention he pays for all our shit.

MONICA

Who's shit? He don't pay my bills.

AJ
Oh, so we wasn't just relying on
his checks to pay the rent?

MONICA
...Maybe once or twice.
(proudly)
But my art pays for my half now.

Monica's got Aj there.

AJ
Fineeeeeee. He pays for all *my* shit.

MONICA
Exactly. Lemme put you on game.
Rule number one: stop financially
depending on other people. Rule
number two: get a job that pays.

AJ
(matter-of-factly)
I *have* a job. Remember?

MONICA
Like I said, that **pays**.

AJ
Hey, a gig is a gig.

MONICA
How much is this gig at Dous paying
you anyway?

Aj sheepishly mumbles her reply.

AJ
A hundred a night.

MONICA
(leaning in)
Huh?

AJ
A hundred-
(clears her throat)
They pay me a hundred a night to
perform.

Monica looks disgusted.

MONICA
100 DOLLARS? IN THIS ECONOMY???

Aj hates to admit it.

AJ

Fuuuuuuuck you're right! I can't cover my tuition with that kinda cash!

MONICA

Well, how much is in your savings?

AJ

Savings? I'm in law school, Mo, I ain't got no savings.

(stressed)

I'm ASS OUT! I'm so broke, I might start selling feet pics on Only Fans.

MONICA

(briefly considers)

Let's come back to that.

A notification goes off. Aj checks it.

AJ

Crap! I have to be at Dous in an hour.

(in the mirror)

I'm a wreck.

MONICA

Leave it to me.

A small smile forms on Aj's lips.

AJ

What would I do without you?

She reaches to engulf Monica in a hug. Monica resists. HATES physical touch. Aj keeps trying to hug her anyway, belting the "Girlfriends" theme song.

AJ (CONT'D)

(singing)

My girlllllfrienddd-

MONICA

(grossed out)

Let go. Let me go!

The girls love fest is interrupted by Aj's phone RINGING. She checks the caller ID: DAD.

The girls cut eyes to each other. Aj declines; sending him to voicemail.

EXT. FRANTZ'S DRIVEWAY - NIGHT

The hum of Frantz's car fades as he pulls into the driveway. He sits behind the wheel for a moment then dials a number.

AJ (V.O.)
 "It's Aj. Sorry I can't come to the
 phone right now. Please leave your
 name and number and I'll get back
 to you."

BEEP. Frantz's jaw tightens. He hangs up in frustration. Frantz parks the car, opens the door, and steps out, collecting a stack of mail from the mail box. Without a second glance, he enters his home.

INT. FRANTZ'S FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - SAME TIME

Frantz takes off his coat and sets it on the coat rack. He loosens his tie, stepping further inside. The walls are lined with various framed LAW, PSYCHOLOGY, AND THEOLOGY DEGREES.

Deeper into the living room there's one wall dedicated with FAMILY PHOTOS. He slows as he reaches a picture of himself, beaming in a graduation cap, a much younger Aj by his side, and his wife, MADELINE.

His eyes linger over the photo for a beat. He studies it.

ZOOM IN ON:

Her sunkissed skin.

The crinkles near her eyes.

Her full lips curved in a smile.

Her coily hair.

Finally, Frantz's eyes land on Madeline's OBITUARY.

The ticking of a clock in the background punctuates the silence.

Frantz turns to diverts his focus. He sorts through the mail instead: bills, bills, and a letter addressed to Aj.

FRANTZ
 (to himself)
 She must have forgotten to update
 her address.

He opens it. Inside, there's an official notice from the financial aid office. Frantz puts his reading glasses on.

In seconds, his face changes from intrigue to HORROR.

Frantz snatches his phone, opening the "Find My App." A blue dot appears. Aj's location is on display. Frantz grabs his coat and his car keys, moving with the quickness of a man half his age.

INT. DOWNTOWN ORLANDO - DOUS - EVENING

The overhead lights glitter an iridescent sheen across the landscape. Tables of couples and friends engage in soft laughter and conversation. Groups of people stand along the walls and surround the bar. A small, slightly elevated stage stands at the other end of the lounge.

In one corner, Monica stands, her gaze flitting to the stage. She's changed out of her paint-smeared clothing and is now wearing a fitted black top with jeans and bombshell curls.

Finally, the DJ for the evening steps up to the mic.

DJ

Alright, alright it's time for some live music! Tonight, we've got a real treat for y'all. She's a rising talent here in the O. Give it up for Ajjj!

Monica fervently claps her hands together. The rest follow suit with half-hearted applause. After a beat...Aj steps beyond the curtain.

ANGLE ON STAGE

Aj is STUNNING, dressed in a wine red fish eye corset, oversized Roberto Cavalli jeans, and pointed toe kitten heels.

Her eyes scan the audience for Monica, who gives her an encouraging smile.

AJ

Wassup y'all. I'm Aj. Tonight I'll be playing my latest song live for the first time. I call it-- "The Caged Bird."

She nods to the DJ who begins playing a mix of the song we saw Aj composing earlier. An enchanting RIFF fills the room.

The instrumentals play, slow and soulful at first, then Aj sings in the mic.

AJ (CONT'D)
*Feeling lost but holding tight
 To the dream that's on my mind
 Reaching to the skies
 Wish I could fly away...*

Each lyric is sung with the rawness of an intimate R&B confession, like pages from her diary set to melody.

IN THE CROWD: Some audience members continue in conversation while others exchange impressed glances, caught off guard.

Among the latter, is a woman, late twenties, sitting at a low-lit table with company. She glances at her two companions--both sharply dressed men.

CLASSMATE 1
 Hey, isn't that Aj?

One of the men looks up with sudden interest. It's BERLIN.

He watches, half-intrigue, half-calculating, a shadow of something competitive lurking behind his eyes.

He reaches for his phone, fixing the camera directly on Aj.

AJ
*From here.
 I can't open up my heart here.
 But my time is near.*

Aj's voice fills the room. Each note measured, each lyric pouring out like she's offering a piece of herself to the crowd. She holds the last note, letting it drift through the room, and as it fades, the silence is quickly filled.

MONICA
 (cheering)
 That's my friend!!!

Monica's on her feet, giving Aj a standing ovation. More patrons clap with her same enthusiasm, others not so much, but all their eyes remain fixed on Aj, drawn to something, or someone, they hadn't expected.

CUT TO:

INT. DOUS - MOMENTS LATER

Aj and Monica search for each other in the crowd. Monica finds her first and envelops Aj in a hug.

MONICA

You killed it up there. That's how you show up and show out!

AJ

Thanks girl, I think that was my best set yet!

MONICA

For sure. Did you hear the crowd? They loved you!
(a light bulb goes off)
Hey, I have an idea!

AJ

YES! I should perform an encore!

MONICA

No! I mean, maybe later, but you should go and sweet talk the owner! See if he'll give you a raise or renegotiate your contract!

AJ

(skeptical)
I dunno. You don't know this guy like I do, Mo. He's real...stiff.

MONICA

Oh come ON. It's worth a try. How bad can he be?

AJ

(considers)
True. Ok be right back.

Aj slips backstage to start her search. She passes several employees, all focused on their individual tasks before she finds *him*. A short man by the name of LOUIS, clean-shaven, middle-aged, Frenchman, holding a clipboard directing a stage hand.

LOUIS

What's the hold up? La Vie En Rose should've been playing as soon as the girl's feet hit the stairs!

AJ
(interrupts)
Louis! Glad I found you. Is now a
good time?

LOUIS
Oui. Why not?
(to the stage hand,
exasperated)
This will only take all night!
(to Aj)
What do you need?

Louis crosses something out on his clipboard and is on the
move. Aj talks and walks.

AJ
Did you hear my set?

LOUIS
Course I heard it. Everyone heard
it. They love you.

AJ
I'm glad you think so! I'd like to
talk about my contract.

LOUIS
What about it?
(to another stagehand)
Hey, watch it, that cost more than
you're worth!

AJ
I'd like to renegotiate our terms.

LOUIS
(laughing)
Funny. But I have no time for
jokes. As you can see, I'm a little
busy here.

AJ
It's not a joke. I've been
performing here every weekend for
the past four months. I always show
up on time. Never complain. And I
pour my heart out on that stage
every night. Plus you said it
yourself-- the crowd loves me!

LOUIS

Ah, *la foule*. They cheer when they're drunk, or when the air conditioning works. Today was both.

AJ

Stop bullshitting me, Louis.

LOUIS

(turns to face Aj)

Listen, you were good but you weren't *great*. If we're being honest you're lucky I'm not charging you for using my stage.

(places a hand on her shoulder)

We got a good thing going here. Don't mess this up, *vous comprenez*?

Just as he begins to walk away, Aj steps in front of him.

AJ

Louis, you and I both know I'm better than good and I'll only get better with time. You can either capitalize on it by increasing my pay or I take my talents to the speakeasy on Parramore. What's it gonna be?

LOUIS

(amused)

Did you just threaten me?

AJ

(sensing the conversation take a turn)

I-

(clears her throat)

I'm just laying it on the table.

Louis smiles -- the kind of insincere smile a person who's just received a toothbrush for Christmas would plaster on.

LOUIS

There's a million other girls waiting for their big break that'll perform on that stage FOR FREE. Should I call one of them to replace you?

Aj starts to challenge him but bites her tongue.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

Glad we have an understanding. Be
back here same time next week.

Reaching into his pocket, Louis pulls out a roll of hundreds. Licking his thumb, he makes a show of plucking only one, one-hundred dollar bill, to hand to Aj. Begrudgingly, she reaches for it. Just as her fingers graze the bill, Louis pulls it back.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

And this time, if the pay's not up
to your standards
(leans in)
don't come back.

Enough is enough.

AJ

Happy to. Because I quit!

Aj snatches it from him.

LOUIS

GOOD. Get the fuck out before I
have security throw you out.
Ungrateful little girl. Security!

A burly guard emerges from the scaffolding.

LOUIS (CONT'D)

(to security)
Make sure you see her out.
(to another stage hand)
ALLEN! Where are we at with the
music?

Louis is already off on the next task leaving Aj behind like she was never there. In her palm, she glances at the money she's just earned, swallowing back the emotions welling up inside.

GUARD

Don't make this difficult. Let's
go.

Aj clenches her fists, crumpling the bill in the process.

AJ

(biting)
Don't touch me. I'm going.

The chaos of the bustling backstage fades to a dull hum as we focus on Aj heading for the exit.

With each step, she begins to unravel more and more. By the time she steps beyond the curtain, she can't hold it in anymore.

A bar cart sits to the right. In one smooth motion, Aj marches towards it, grabs hold of the first bottle in her path, a large bottle of MOET, and HURLS it at the adjacent wall.

AJ (CONT'D)
FUCKKKKKKK!!!

The glass SHATTERS on impact. The people nearby JUMP, GASPS fill the air. Its liquid contents drip down the wall. Before Aj can react, the security guard GRABS her and HOISTS her over his shoulder. Aj kicks and screams in protest but he's unfazed, making a beeline for the exit.

MONICA
(quick in tow)
PUT HER DOWN!

As the camera pans, we see Berlin SECRETLY RECORDING AJ GETTING THROWN OUT. The camera lingering on her longer than necessary.

CAMERA PANS TO BERLIN'S TABLE

MALE CLASSMATE
Holy shit. Did you get all of that?

BERLIN
(smug)
Naturally.

FEMALE CLASSMATE
(sarcastically to Berlin)
That's not creepy at all.

BERLIN
Shut up. It's for insurance.

FEMALE CLASSMATE
You sure about that?

BERLIN
Obviously. What are you implying?

FEMALE CLASSMATE
You've been recording her since she got on stage. Looks to me like you've got a crush.

Berlin, scoffs. Idiots. Both of them. He puts his phone down.

BERLIN

See this is what you guys don't
get. *This* --

(he gestures to the video
of Aj)

is how you win.

END OF ACT 2

ACT 3

EXT. CLUB - SIDEWALK - LATER

SECURITY
AND DON'T COME BACK.

The security guard all but hurls Aj outside. Monica rushes from behind him to steady her. Before the girls can get their insults off, the burly guard SLAMS the door shut.

Embarrassed. Mortified. Humiliated. Aj takes off.

ANGLE

The neon glow from the Dous' club sign reflects off the rain-soaked pavement. Bits and pieces of a distant conversation becomes clear.

MONICA
(chasing after AJ)
You what? Aj, slow down!

AJ
(speed walking, ranting)
I said I QUIT. I'm FUCKING DONE.
After all the late nights I spent
pouring into this shithole? All the
hours I spent here instead of
studying? Those muh'fuckas better
be lucky I don't know where they
stay at...

The girls turn into the parking lot.

AJ (CONT'D)
(epiphany)
but I do know what kind of car the
imp drives.
(pep in her step)
Come on. We're keying his shit.

MONICA
I feel like this is the part where
I say don't do anything stupid but-

AJ SPRINTS TO A PRIUS.

With her head on a swivel to make sure no one's watching, Aj slips out her keys, getting to work on Louis' passenger door. Monica quickly, but inconspicuously, closes the distance.

MONICA (CONT'D)
Just hurry up. I'll keep an eye
out.

AJ
Hand me yours. Mine aren't sharp
enough.

Monica sighs. She fishes in her purse and tosses Aj her set
of keys. Aj gets back to work, a slow smile beginning to
creep on her face.

AJ (CONT'D)
Yea, that's more like it.

There's a SCREECH of tires. The girls heads spin. A SPEEDING
CAR whips into the parking lot. BRIGHT headlights cut through
the dark night, semi-blinding them. Aj squints against the
beams, focusing on the license plate.

MONICA
It's 12! RUN!

Recognition washes over and hits Aj like a freight train.

AJ
No... it's my father.

She knows what's coming and she's not ready. But this time,
she can't ignore it.

MONICA
What? But how did he know you were
here? No time. Here he comes. I'll
wait for you by the car.
(beat)
Be strong. Blood isn't always
thicker than water.

And with that Monica retreats to safety.

Frantz gets out, SLAMMING the car door. He takes slow,
threatening steps forward. A FOLDER lies tucked beneath his
armpit.

FRANTZ
Amélie. Is there something you'd
like to tell me?

AJ
Uh, your tie looks... good like
that?

Frantz glances down at his loosened tie then back up at her.

FRANTZ
Are you on drugs?

AJ
No...?

FRANTZ
Tell me the truth. METH? COCAINE?
WHICH IS IT?

AJ
Dad, keep your voice down! What are
you doing here? You're embarrassing
me.

FRANTZ
What are YOU doing here? And what
in God's name are you wearing?

AJ
Cavalli. Not that you know anything
about designer fashion, Mr.
Salvation Army. God, you always
have something to say about my
outfits!

FRANTZ You're a reflection of me and should be dressed appropriately. Not hanging out at dumps like this, during the Devils' hour, when you're supposed to be studying!	AJ (CONT'D) I'm a PERFORMER here. I was just blowing off steam! (rolls eyes. re: Devil's hour) Oh SPARE me. I'm an adult I can be out as late as I want!
--	---

FRANTZ (CONT'D)
Ha! An adult has responsibilities!
What are yours? To go to school and
get a degree. Answer this: how do
you expect to graduate with no
scholarship?

AJ
(beat, stunned)
You know about that?

FRANTZ
Of course I do. You know what else
I know? This little phase of yours
is over. This is your focus now.

Frantz roughly hands the folder he's been holding to Aj. She
opens it. Inside is an internship application to the 9th
judicial circuit.

AJ

An internship for the public defender's office? Thanks, but I don't need any handouts. I've sent in my own applications for the summer.

FRANTZ

And have any of them reached back out to you? I'm extending an olive branch. Take it before you're all out of options.

Frantz is trying to help but Aj sees it as yet another cage.

AJ

God forbid I handle my own problems. Would it kill you to have a little faith in me?

FRANTZ

(incredulous)

Faith? You talk to *me* about faith? I won't stand by while you throw away EVERYTHING we've worked for.

AJ

(fuming)

WE? No, dad. This was always about you. *YOUR* plan. *YOUR* dreams.

Frantz looks away like he's heard this all before.

AJ (CONT'D)

(softer but still
passionate)

Did you ever think for one second what I wanted? What I NEEDED?

(beat)

I want to be a musician.

FRANTZ

Amélie. This dream of yours...is a fantasy. You can't survive off of a fairytale. Getting your Juris Degree --

(Aj turns away in
frustration. Frantz
raises his voice)

-- will open up doors for you. You can make a lot of money to build a life for yourself!

AJ
It's not all about the money! Why
won't you listen to me?

FRANTZ
Enough! Fill out the application
and drop these ridiculous
performances... or I won't lift a
finger to help you. You'll be on
your own.

AJ
(beat)
Then I guess I'm on my own.

Frantz looks like the wind was just knocked out of him. For the first time, his stern exterior has been stripped away.

Frantz reaches for Aj but she withdraws from him. Without a second glance, she runs to the car.

INT./EXT. MONICA'S CAR - SAME TIME

Inside, we see Aj turn off her location.

MONICA
You ok?

AJ
Just drive.

The car sputters alive and pulls out of the parking lot. In the rear view mirror, we see a fleeting glance of a lonely Frantz.

INT. EVANGEL CHURCH INTERNATIONAL - FRANTZ'S OFFICE - MORNING

Frantz sits at his neatly organized desk, his laptop open to a video of last week's sermon. On the screen, Frantz (on video) stands at the pulpit, gesturing passionately to the congregation.

FRANTZ
Proverbs 3:5-6 "Trust in the LORD
with all your heart and lean not on
your own understanding; in all your
ways submit to Him, and He will
make your paths straight."
...Nonbelievers, you *can* belong
before you believe... Here is your
sign. We're walking through Matthew
Chapter 12 verses 38-45...

Frantz scribbles notes onto a piece of notebook paper titled "Bible Study: Sign of Jonah."

His pen runs out of ink. He shakes it but it's no use, "Jonah" is barely decipherable. Frantz opens his desk drawer for a new one when he stumbles across an OLD PHOTO OF MADELINE singing in the church choir. The photo triggers a flood of memories, Frantz leans back in his chair gazing at it, lost in thought.

EXT. MARKETPLACE - PORT AU PRINCE, HAITI - 1994 - FLASHBACK

A vibrant market street hums with life. Vendors shout prices over the chatter of customers, children chase chickens, and the distant rhythm of konpa music adds texture to the atmosphere.

FRANTZ, late 20s, browses a table piled high with books. His interest catches a worn geometry textbook. He reaches for it, the book tumbles off the table. A hand retrieves it.

MADELINE, mid 20s, poised and striking, holds it up.

MADELINE

You dropped this.

FRANTZ

(startled)

Oh, thank you.

Madeline is holding her own book, Frantz glances at the title, raising an eyebrow.

FRANTZ (CONT'D)

"Music theory." You're a musician?

MADELINE

(chuckling)

Not quite but I'd like to be someday.

There's a warmth to her demeanor that catches Frantz off guard.

MADELINE (CONT'D)

And you? Judging by your book selection you're a student?

FRANTZ

Close. I teach math at the university.

MADELINE
Ahhh so you're a professor.
Explains the serious get up.

Frantz smiles.

FRANTZ
What's wrong with slacks?

MADELINE
(playfully)
Nothing, monsieur.

FRANTZ
Call me Frantz.

MADELINE
(extends her hand)
Madeline.

MONTAGE

EXT. STREET VENDOR - DAY

Frantz and Madeline share laughter over a plate of griot and plantains.

INT. SAINTE ANNE CHURCH - MORNING

Madeline sings "Roule roch la" to an animated congregation who echoes the Chants d'Esperance with joy. They sing and dance out of the pews. Some sing with tambourines. Others stomp their feet and clap their hands. In the audience, we zoom in on Frantz, looking visibly ENTRANCED. He sings along. EYES FIXED ON MADELINE.

INT. FRANTZ'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Frantz listens intently as Madeline shares a story.

MADELINE
For as long as I can remember I've dreamed of attending Ecole Sainte Trinite. It's Haiti's oldest music school in *history*. If only I could study there...maybe I'd make history too.
(beat)
I sound silly, don't I?

FRANTZ

Not at all. I'll do whatever it takes to help you. Just focus on your audition and let me take care of the rest.

Madeline kisses Frantz. Once. Twice. He meets her lips with hunger and intensity. They descend onto the bed and begin to make love.

EXT. BEACH - SUNSET - WEEKS LATER

The couple walks barefoot along the shore, waves lapping at their feet.

FRANTZ

I've got something for you.

Frantz hands her a crisp envelope. She eyes it and him suspiciously before taking it. Madeline flips the envelope over. The sender's address reads: École Normale Supérieure.

Her eyes inflate like saucers. Frantz chuckles at her expression then beckons her to open it. With shaky hands, she breaks the seal and begins reading.

FRANTZ (CONT'D)

(beat)

Well? Don't keep me in suspense.

MADELINE

(shocked)

I got in?

FRANTZ

You got in?!

MADELINE

I GOT IN!!!

Frantz scoops her up and spins her around. Madeline squeals in pure delight.

INT. ÉCOLE NORMALE SUPÉRIEURE - 2 WEEKS LATER

VIOLINS, GUITARS, PIANOS and DRUMS all play with varying degrees of energy. It's a cacophony that somehow resolves into a vibrant rhythm.

In the midst of this musical maelstrom is Madeline, a serene figure in a sea of sound.

A GUITAR rests gently in her lap. She strums a melody in front of her MAESTRO. At the end, the maestro nods her head in approval.

INT. FRANTZ'S APARTMENT - AFTERNOON

Frantz helps a very pregnant Madeline inside.

INT. HOSPITAL - DUSK

The sounds of a baby crying fill an operating room. Doctors in blue scrubs and face masks circle a newborn. With steady hands, they perform various tests to check the baby's health. Once all tests have been cleared, they clean, wrap, then hand the baby to a visibly drained Madeline.

Madeline cradles her baby gently, completely enraptured the moment she lays eyes on her bundle.

DOCTOR
Congratulations. It's a girl.

The baby girl begins to coo. Madeline smiles at Frantz, who looks between both of his two girls, admiration in his eyes.

CUT TO:

INT. APARTMENT - MIAMI - 8 YEARS LATER

MADELINE
(packing her suitcase)
This is an opportunity of a lifetime I can't let it pass me by.

FRANTZ
And what of our child? She needs a MOTHER, Madeline.

MADELINE
Don't you dare. Amélie will always have a mother. She's eight years old now, she doesn't need me every second of the day.

FRANTZ
And what about me? I need you. This tour is for four months! Who's gonna take care of the house?

MADELINE

I've been here for BOTH OF YOU,
everyday, breaking my back to cook,
clean, and nurture this family.
It's time I nurture me. I'm going
Frantz. End of discussion.

Madeline closes her suitcase and exits the room swiftly.
Frantz looks like he's stuck between a rock and a hard place.
Frustrated, Frantz chases after her.

FRANTZ

(pleading)

Madeline wait! You can't leave like
this.

MADELINE

Frantz, I love you, but this is my
dream. Please. Don't try and change
my mind.

FRANTZ

I know. And I know there's nothing
I can say to stop you. Go. Just
promise me one thing.

MADELINE

What is it?

FRANTZ

Once the tour is over; come home.

MADELINE

(cups Frantz's cheek)

...I promise.

EXT. TOUR BUS - HIGHWAY - DAY

The band piles onto a bus. Madeline leans her head against
the window, gazing at the billboards pass her by, a faraway
expression on her face.

Suddenly, a tire BLOWS. The driver WHIPS the wheel to
overcompensate. The musicians SCREAM. The tour bus SPINS
WIDE, crashing into several vehicles, before flipping and
skidding to a halt. A trail of chaos and sirens left in its
wake.

INT. FRANTZ'S OFFICE - AFTERNOON

Frantz, NOW LATE 30s, types cautiously on an old computer.
The buzzing of his vibrating flip phone interrupts.

FRANTZ
(to himself)
What now?

He answers, holding the phone to his ear with one hand, still trying to type with the other.

FRANTZ (CONT'D)
Oui, alo?

VOICE (O.S.)
Mr. Etienne? This is Jackson
Memorial Hospital. We're calling
about your wife, Madeline.

Frantz freezes.

FRANTZ
(frantic)
Is she okay?

VOICE (O.S.)
Your wife was involved in a car
accident... I'm afraid she didn't
make it.

We ZOOM OUT to see Frantz clutching the phone in his hand.
His head hanging low.

INT. EVANGEL CHURCH INTERNATIONAL - FRANTZ'S OFFICE - PRESENT
DAY

Frantz stares at the old photograph. The glow of Madeline's
smile haunts him. He starts to put the picture back in the
drawer but is distracted by a KNOCK on the door.

FRANTZ
(collects himself)
Come in!

SISTER CLAIRE, 50s, wise, walks in.

SISTER CLAIRE
Pastor Etienne? Everyone's waiting
for you in the conference room.

FRANTZ
Give me a minute, I'll be right
out.

SISTER CLAIRE
(studying him)
You've been in here a while. Is
something troubling you?

FRANTZ
I'm fine.

Her eyes drift to the photograph on the desk.

SISTER CLAIRE
It's been a long time since I've
seen that face. Aj certainly is the
spitting image of her.

Frantz clenches his jaw.

SISTER CLAIRE (CONT'D)
I heard her play once, years ago,
at one of your revivals. She has
her mother's gift.

FRANTZ
Madeline was...different. Gifted,
but...reckless.

SISTER CLAIRE
And Aj?

FRANTZ
Amélie is just reckless. She has no
concept of responsibility. No plans
for the future. She thinks the
world revolves around her.

SISTER CLAIRE
Should she think it revolves around
you?

FRANTZ
(warning)
What was that?

SISTER CLAIRE
Aj's young, yes, but she's not a
little girl. You raised her to be
capable. Yet you carry this fear, I
see it every time you speak of her.

FRANTZ
(amused)
Fear?

SISTER CLAIRE
Of losing her. Like you lost
Madeline.

FRANTZ
(matter-of-fact)
I lost Madeline because I foolishly
let her chase a fantasy. She chose
a life on the road that ended her
life with her family. I'll make
sure Amélie doesn't make that same
mistake.

SISTER CLAIRE
Not giving her the freedom of
choice *is* the mistake.

Frantz looks at her sharply. Sister Claire gestures toward
the photo.

SISTER CLAIRE (CONT'D)
Madeline was free to choose, wasn't
she? She forged her own path
without others imposition.

FRANTZ
(snarling)
And look where that got her.

Sister Claire takes a seat.

SISTER CLAIRE
What happened to Madeline was a
terrible accident. You couldn't
have stopped it, Pastor. It wasn't
your fault.

FRANTZ
(regretful)
You're wrong. I could have stopped
her. Could've saved her. But...I
let her go.

SISTER CLAIRE
Grief has a way of planting roots
if we let it. Have faith.

FRANTZ
(dry chuckle)
Funny. Amélie said the same thing.
(deep exhale)
I can't lose her too, Claire. I
only want what's best for her.

Sister Claire places a hand on top of Frantz's.

SISTER CLAIRE
Sometimes, the greatest act of love
is letting go.

EXT. FAMU LAW CAMPUS QUAD - SAME TIME

Aj strides across the courtyard, focused on the path ahead. The buzz of campus life surrounds her but she notices something is off. Aj catches faint bursts of laughter aimed in her direction. People STARE at her then quickly avert their eyes back to their phone.

INT. LECTURE HALL - MOMENTS LATER

STUDENT 1
(whispering)
That's her.

STUDENT 2
(whispering, not subtle)
Man, that video is wild. Hard to
believe she ranked top of the class
last semester.

Aj brushes past *another* group engrossed in a video. She glances over an unsuspecting girl's shoulder. The video is shaky but Aj manages to catch snippets of screaming voices, glass shattering, snickering laughter as someone gets chucked over a shoulder. The camera ZOOMS in. A figure comes into focus...

AJ
(incredulous)
...That's me.

The girl jumps, now noticing Aj. Aj can't believe what she's seeing. Then, like a magnetic pull, her gaze snaps to BERLIN. His phone is out. He's laughing as if enjoying a private joke. Suddenly, it all clicks.

AJ (CONT'D)
(storming over)
You are unbelievable.

BERLIN
Excuse m-

AJ
(interrupts)
What, couldn't handle me
outperforming you in exams so you
stoop to humiliating me online?

BERLIN
What are you babbling about?

AJ
CUT THE SHIT Berlin. I know it was
you.

More classmates continue to pour in. Their heads fixing in Aj
and Berlin's direction. Aj's too upset to care but Berlin
notices, a slight grin forming at the attention.

BERLIN
(provokingly)
I have no idea what you're talking
about. You really are spiraling
aren't you?

Aj takes a threatening step closer.

AJ
(dropping her voice an
octave)
You really wanna play this game
with me?

BERLIN
Life's a game.
(calm, deliberate)
If this is about your video... it
looks to me like plenty of people
in the audience were there. Any one
of them could have taken it. Why
accuse me?

Nosy students begin closing in, all vying to get the best
view between the AJ vs. BERLIN showdown.

AJ
Because you're the only one who's
held a grudge against me for being
your equal since day one. As
classmates we compete against each
other for top rank but I'm not your
enemy!

BERLIN
(offended)
Don't be ridiculous.
(MORE)

BERLIN (CONT'D)

Of course you are. Besides, what's
the big deal? You were the one
center stage, putting on a show.
You clearly want the attention.
(pulling out his phone.
re: the crowd)
What do you say to an encore?

Berlin presses a button. Like a domino effect, phones
everywhere start ping-pong, Aj's included. She pulls it out to
see a new airdrop notification:

VIDEO: "SPOTTED: FAMU LAW STUDENT, AJ ETIENNE'S RISE AND
FALL"

BERLIN (CONT'D)

Let's be real Aj. You were never my
competition. You're just...
entertainment.

A video loads. She sees it was worse than she'd realized. In
the caption, Berlin's exposed her identity AND tagged major
law firms in Orlando. Her breath catches in her throat as she
realizes the full weight of what he's done.

BERLIN (CONT'D)

Good luck getting an internship
now.

END OF ACT 3

ACT 4

INT. LECTURE HALL - FAMU LAW - SAME

Aj and Berlin stand unmoving, their eyes locked in a duel. If looks could kill Berlin would be dead where he stands.

Despite feeling like the floor has just collapsed beneath her, Aj channels her anger and stands her ground.

AJ
(biting)
You don't get to decide who I am or
what I can do. Whether I'm a lawyer
or a performer, I'll still BE
somebody-

The door swings opens. PROFESSOR ELBA enters. The crowd of students scatter.

PROFESSOR ELBA	AJ (CONT'D)
QUIET DOWN CLASS. Today we'll-	-And you'll still be a miserable lowlife who will do whatever it takes to be on top.

BERLIN
At least I'll BE on top.

PROFESSOR ELBA
Ms. Etienne! Mr. DuPont! Take.
Your. Seats.

All of the students once surrounding Aj and Berlin are all seated, staring back at them.

BERLIN
(to Aj)
This isn't over.

Berlin finds a seat. Aj looks around, now the only one still standing. All EYES ARE ON HER. Professor Elba is quickly running out of patience.

Aj takes a deep breath and casts one final cool glance at Berlin and her calculating classmates.

AJ
Yes it is.

She turns and takes long, confident strides towards the exit.

PROFESSOR ELBA
Ms. Etienne? Ms. Etienne!

CLOSE ON: AJ WALKING OUT OF THE LECTURE HALL

INT. AJ'S APARTMENT - AFTERNOON - LATER

The setting sun casts red-orange rays of light inside Aj and Monica's mess of an apartment. Monica is away at the gallery, her half-finished canvas sitting on the easel in the corner. Empty canned cocktails litter the floor by Aj's feet.

Aj, wearing sweats and a faded polo hoodie, gazes at Monica's easel, recognizing the sketched lines and smeared paint to be an abstract take of a caged phoenix. She studies it while strumming the guitar. Aj hits a few wrong notes before setting it down.

She picks up her lighter and hits a bowl of weed, coughing slightly. The smoke swirls above her head dancing in the beam of the light. She takes another hit then casts a glance at her phone. A decision hanging thick in the air.

CUT TO:

INT. BATHROOM - AJ'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

AJ PACING IN THE BATHROOM. HER REFLECTION STARING BACK AT HER IN THE MIRROR. HER PHONE RESTS ON THE SINK.

MIRROR AJ
Just watch the video. It may not be that bad.

AJ
Not that bad? I'm going viral for screaming like a banshee.

MIRROR AJ
Who cares what people think? Half of them can't even spell "banshee" without using autocorrect.

AJ
(chuckles)
Good one.

MIRROR AJ
Thank you. Besides, maybe your SINGING went viral. You ever thought of that?

AJ
What is this, American Idol?

MIRROR AJ
I'm just saying.

AJ
People love drama and I crashed out
ON CAMERA. Doesn't take a rocket
scientist to figure out why.

MIRROR AJ
Fine, so, what are you gonna do?

AJ
What can I do?

MIRROR AJ
You need to ACT. Hear me out. WHAT
IF you posted a video addressing it
while it's still trending? Worst
case scenario, we ride the wave and
pivot to entertainment law.

AJ
(sarcastic)
Living the dream.

MIRROR AJ
OK, smart ass. I don't see you
coming up with any bright ideas.

AJ
How's smoke more weed and crawl
under a rock sound?

MIRROR AJ
Rock's taken. I checked.
(beat. serious.)
You can't keep running from your
problems.

AJ
I already made up my mind. I can.
And I will.

MIRROR AJ
(rushed)
That's not --

Aj flicks off the light, casting the room in darkness and
Mirror Aj into the abyss.

After a beat...the lights flick back on.

AJ
One peek won't hurt.

Aj TURNS ON HER PHONE. First, opening TikTok. Notifications are still flooding in. She clicks on one comment and begins curiously reading.

TIKTOK COMMENT A
Singing like an angel one minute.
Throwing glass like a devil the
next = women.

Aj rolls her eyes. Next.

TIKTOK COMMENT B
That Moët had more stage presence
than her.

Ouch. Aj winces at that one. She reads another.

TIKTOK COMMENT C
OMG I love her voice!

TIKTOK COMMENT D
Is this an original or a cover? I
can't find it anywhere!

TIKTOK COMMENT E
I NEED this on Apple Music.

TIKTOK COMMENT F
Who is she?

Aj smiles, surprised by the positive feedback.

AJ
(to herself)
What should I say?

She clicks reply. The cursor blinks as she mulls over her response. We see a surge of emotions wash over her at once: excitement, doubt, hope and the strongest of them all...fear. With a frown, Aj swipes out.

Now on Instagram. There's a new DM from an account with a blue check mark: @ANDREtheDON.

Aj examines his page, there's reels upon reels of him in different cities as a tour manager. Most, if not all, of his recent posts focus on a female R&B artist by the name of DREEZY.

Aj sits up, clicking play on his voice note:

ANDRE

Yo Aj! I checked you out online.
You've got the voice and the fire
now let's channel it. Dreezy's
looking for a backup singer for the
Orlando show next week. You ready
to sing on a real stage? Hit me up
at (786)...

Aj rereads the message over and over in disbelief.

The faint sound of keys followed by the front door opening
snaps Aj out of her trance. A TIRED Monica enters.

Aj runs up, practically bouncing with excitement, showing her
the message.

CUT TO:

INT. HALL - AJ'S APARTMENT - EVENING

DING.

Elevator doors slide open. Frantz exits, stepping into the
dim hall of Aj's apartment. He takes his time passing door
after door. Peering at the drab art work hanging. A lopsided
portrait catches his attention. Frantz pauses, straightens
it, then resumes until his feet come to a full stop.
Apartment 303. He's here.

INT. FRONT DOOR - AJ'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Frantz digs into his pocket and retrieves a key. He goes to
unlock it, pockets it, then decides to knock instead.

The seconds feel painfully slow. Frantz adjusts his weight
from one foot to the other.

Aj opens the door a slit. Her eyes roll to the back of her
skull then back around again once she sees her father.

AJ

If this is about the internship--

FRANTZ

(interrupts)

It's not. May I come in?

AJ

Depends. What do you want?

FRANTZ

To talk.

AJ

Talked plenty at Dous, don't 'cha think? I have nothing more to say to you.

FRANTZ

You're angry.

AJ

(a dry laugh)

No kidding. Now, if you'll excuse me.

Aj starts to close the door, but Frantz places his hand on it.

FRANTZ

Don't. Let's talk. Please.

AJ

Typical. Still can't take no for an answer.

FRANTZ

Can you blame me? Do you have any idea what's it's like to watch someone you love slip away because you couldn't hold them close enough?

AJ

This isn't about Mom. I'm not her.

FRANTZ

No, and I wouldn't want you to be. Your mother was extraordinary but you're one of a kind. Please, can we talk inside?

A long beat. The air between them is heavy. Aj is suspicious but steps aside, opening the door wider.

INT. LIVING ROOM - AJ'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Frantz scans the apartment--piles of mixed drinks, law books, and an empty takeout container immediately catch his eye. Frantz stiffly takes off his coat and sets it on the coat rack.

FRANTZ
You always keep it this...messy?

AJ
(arms crossed)
Did you come here to critique my
housekeeping or talk?

FRANTZ
You're right.
(sighs)
About your mother...I never told
her how proud I was of her.

Aj is caught off guard.

FRANTZ (CONT'D)
I was angry when she left, you
know? Angry that she chose her
career over us.

AJ
...That's why you've been on my
back? This whole time, you've been
trying to fix with me, what you
couldn't with her?

FRANTZ
What I've been *trying* to do is save
you from making her same mistakes.

AJ
(antsy)
What mistakes? Chasing my dreams?
Living life on my own terms?

FRANTZ
(insecure, lashing out)
From leaving the people who love
you behind.
(gathers himself)
I let my anger swallow me whole.
I've been holding it in for years.
And...I realized I've been taking
it out on you. I'm sorry.

AJ
That's uh...the first time you've
apologized to me.

FRANTZ
It is?

AJ
(dead serious)
Yes.

FRANTZ
Bon, moving on.

Frantz's gaze lands on a guitar, leaning against the couch.
He sits next to it.

FRANTZ (CONT'D)
Madeleine used to be a beautiful
singer. You share her voice you
know.

Aj sits beside him, listening quietly.

AJ
How come you never talked about
mom. Do you still hold a grudge
against her?

Frantz chooses his words carefully.

FRANTZ
Even though I'm lonely without her
I trust in God's plan and I'm
thankful to have met her.
(beat)
Because Madeline gave me you.

Aj's eyes well with tears. She's not used to hearing her
father speak this way. In this moment, she YEARNs for comfort
-- but pushes it away.

AJ
(jumps to her feet,
venting)
You made me feel like I wasn't
enough. Like I was failing her.
Failing you.

FRANTZ
(stands, stepping closer)
You're not failing anyone, Amèlie.
You're smarter than I ever gave you
credit for. I know I have a lot to
fix. But I'll start with this-- I'm
proud of you.

AJ

Why should I believe you? You're only proud now because I'm still playing lawyer.

FRANTZ

You're right. And it's time you forged your own path.

AJ

(can't believe her ears)
...What?

FRANTZ

Amèlie-Jasmine you are my only daughter. I want you to be happy. If that means pursuing music, then wherever it takes you, I will support you.

AJ

Even if it takes me on tour?

Frantz struggles with the thought but ultimately gives in.

FRANTZ

Even if it takes you on tour.

Aj bites her lip.

AJ

I have something to show you.

She grabs her phone, showing her dad Andre's message.

AJ (CONT'D)

He invited me on tour with Dreezy! I know you dunno who that is but in a year or two she'll be huge. I think it'd be a good opportunity. I mean I'd only be singing backup but it's a start, right?

Aj turns to her dad, noticing his silence. Her spirits drop.

AJ (CONT'D)

What do you think dad?

Frantz masks his true emotion. He glances at Amèlie's hopeful gaze, and all that comes out is:

FRANTZ

I think you should do what you believe in your heart is best.

Aj breaks into a smile. The two EMBRACE, the distance between them finally bridged.

INT. AJ'S APARTMENT - LATER

Aj sits at her desk, her law school textbooks are scattered across the table. The message from Andre is still open. Meanwhile, Monica puts the finishing touches on her painting. She steps back, smiling in paint splattered clothes.

The phoenix has broken free from its cage.

MONICA

Well, what do you think?

AJ

Piti piti, zwazo fè nich.

(English subtitles)

(Little by little, the bird builds its nest).

It's perfect.

Monica smiles, retreating to get the varnish for the painting. Aj turns back to Andre's message. She dials a number, standing in front of the painting.

AJ (CONT'D)

Hey. Still need that backup singer?

END OF ACT 4