

BEFORE

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Setting:

2024 Autumn, Late November, America, Houston

Characters:

MICHAEL: 21 years old, tall bearded muscular man, American, Law Student, goes to the gym and eats healthy, great student, calm person, has a gambling addiction.

ROSA: 20 years old, short black haired white skin, has glasses, Michael's girlfriend of 2 years, Law student, anti-social, very attached to Michael

JOHN: 37 years old, black short long haired, always wears suits, American, Law professor, teaches Rosa and Michael, divorced, mentally ill, on substances, likes to walk, has no friends

SCENE 1

(The stage is set as a quiet, dimly lit law library. Shelves of books surround the characters. Michael and Rosa sit at a wooden table. Rosa is intently studying with her glasses on, while Michael stares distractedly at his phone. Rosa glances at him from time to time.)

Rosa: (softly) You've barely touched your textbook. Is something bothering you?

Michael: (snapping out of it) No, I'm fine. Just... a lot on my mind, that's all.

Rosa: We've got finals in two weeks, Michael. I'm stressed too, but... (pauses, studying his face) you seem... distant.

Michael: (rubbing his temples) I just need a break. I was thinking, maybe I'd head back home for the weekend. Clear my head, see my family.

Rosa: (surprised) Home? This weekend? But we're supposed to review for Professor John's exam...

Michael: (cutting her off) I'll catch up, I promise. You know how I get—I just need a little time.

Rosa: (frowning) Time away from me, you mean?

Michael: No! It's not like that, Rosa. (sighs) I just need space to breathe. Everything's closing in on me lately. School, the future, us...

Rosa: (her voice tightening) "Us"? What do you mean by that? (looking down) Are you... seeing someone else?

Michael: (taken aback) What? No! Rosa, it's nothing like that.

Rosa: Then why do you need to go without me? You've been acting weird for weeks... I feel like you're slipping away.

Michael: (leaning forward, grabbing her hand) Look, I promise you, it's not about us. I just need to go home, alright? I'll be back in a few days, and everything will be fine.

Rosa: (softly) I don't know, Michael. I don't know if I believe that.

(The tension lingers. Rosa pulls her hand away and looks down at her textbook. Michael checks his phone again, nervously.)

SCENE 2

(The scene shifts to Michael's hometown. Two days have passed. A dimly lit room in an underground casino. Michael stands by a poker table, sweaty, nervous, as a stack of chips sits in front of him. A dealer is handing out cards, the chatter of gamblers in the background.)

Dealer: Place your bets, gentlemen.

(Michael hesitates for a moment, staring at his dwindling pile of chips.)

*Michael: (to himself) Just one more win... just one more and I'm back on top.
(places his chips down)*

(The dealer reveals the cards—Michael's face falls as he loses the hand.)

Dealer: Tough luck, buddy. You're cleaned out.

(Michael's face twists in frustration. He stands up from the table, running his hands through his hair.)

Michael: Damn it...

(He pulls out his phone, checks his bank account—there's barely anything left. He scrolls through texts from Rosa, unread messages piling up.)

SCENE 3

(Back in Houston. Rosa is in her apartment, pacing. She's left Michael several messages. Her phone is lying on the bed, silent. She looks at it, anxious.)

Rosa: (to herself) Why isn't he answering?

(There's a knock at the door. Rosa opens it to reveal John, their professor. He looks disheveled, wearing a suit but clearly intoxicated.)

Rosa: Professor John?

John: (slurring slightly) Rosa... Rosa... I was in the neighborhood. Thought I'd check on my star students. (he stumbles inside, glancing around) Michael's not here?

Rosa: (trying to mask her worry) No, he went home for the weekend. Said he needed a break.

John: (chuckling) A break, huh? Funny thing about breaks... they break people. (he laughs at his own joke, then gets serious) He's not... slipping, is he?

Rosa: (frowning) What do you mean?

John: Oh, I just mean... well, you know Michael's a bright kid. But I've seen bright ones burn out fast. The pressure... sometimes they make bad choices.

Rosa: (looking more worried) What kind of bad choices?

John: (leaning in) I don't know if you've noticed, but Michael... he's been hiding something, hasn't he?

Rosa: (defensive) No... well, maybe. He's been distant, but... he said it's just stress.

John: (smirking) Stress, gambling, it's all the same game. You can only bluff for so long before the cards come down.

Rosa: (alarmed) Gambling?

John: (swaying slightly) Oh, I shouldn't have said that. But... Michael's a risk-taker, Rosa. Always has been. You might want to check in on what kind of risks he's taking.

(Rosa stares at him, her suspicion growing as she realizes there might be more to Michael's weekend trip than he let on.)

Rosa: (quietly) What is he doing?

(The scene fades as Rosa clutches her phone, debating what to do next.)

SCENE 4

(Michael returns from his trip, disheveled and clearly tense. He enters Rosa's apartment, where she is waiting for him.)

Rosa: (coldly) How was home?

Michael: (forcing a smile) It was fine. Good to see my parents. I feel... better.

Rosa: (standing) Don't lie to me, Michael. What were you really doing?

Michael: (pauses, caught off guard) What are you talking about?

Rosa: (angry) You weren't with your family. I can feel it. Something's been going on for weeks, and I want to know what it is!

Michael: (defensive) Rosa, I swear, it's not what you think—

Rosa: Then what is it? If you're not cheating, then what are you hiding? You don't answer my calls, you come back like this, and I'm supposed to believe everything's fine?

Michael: (struggling) I'm not... I didn't... I just—

Rosa: (quietly, tears in her eyes) Tell me the truth, Michael. Please.

(Michael stands there, staring at her, torn between confessing the truth about his gambling or continuing to lie. The scene ends at this tense moment.)

SCENE 5

(The scene opens in ROSA's apartment, continuing directly from the previous moment. MICHAEL stands in the doorway, facing ROSA, who is on the verge of tears.)

ROSA: *(pleading)* Tell me the truth, MICHAEL.

MICHAEL: *(avoiding eye contact)* It's... it's complicated, ROSA.

ROSA: *(angry now)* No. It's not complicated. You either tell me the truth, or we're done.

(MICHAEL looks around the room as if searching for an escape, but there isn't one. He sighs heavily and steps closer to her.)

MICHAEL: *(quietly)* I wasn't home with my family.

ROSA: *(sarcastic)* I figured that out. So where were you?

MICHAEL: *(looking ashamed)* I was... gambling.

(There's a long silence. ROSA looks at him, stunned, processing the confession.)

ROSA: *(whispering)* Gambling? You've been gambling?

MICHAEL: *(nodding)* Yeah. I've been... doing it for a while now. I didn't want to tell you because I knew how you'd react. But it's been getting bad, ROSA. Really bad.

ROSA: *(stepping back)* How bad?

MICHAEL: *(softly)* I lost almost everything this weekend.

ROSA: *(shocked)* Everything? What do you mean "everything," MICHAEL?

MICHAEL: *(his voice cracking)* All my savings. I'm in debt... deep debt. I thought I could win it back, but... I only made it worse.

ROSA: *(angrily)* And you lied to me? This whole time? You've been lying while you threw your life away? While we've been planning our future?

MICHAEL: *I didn't want to drag you into this! I thought I could fix it before it got out of control!*

ROSA: *(sarcastic)* Oh, well, good job with that, MICHAEL! You've really fixed everything, haven't you? *(pauses, pacing)* How much do you owe?

MICHAEL: *(quietly)* Around \$20,000.

(ROSA stops dead in her tracks, the number hitting her like a punch to the gut.)

ROSA: *(disbelief)* Twenty... thousand dollars? MICHAEL, how could you let this happen?

MICHAEL: *(defeated)* I don't know... it just got out of control. I thought I could handle it.

ROSA: *(furious)* And now what? You're broke, you're in debt, and you thought you could keep this from me forever? Did you think I wouldn't notice when you started selling things, or when people came after you for the money?

MICHAEL: *(desperate)* I didn't want to hurt you, ROSA. I didn't want you to see me like this.

ROSA: *(coldly)* Well, you succeeded. I'm hurt, and I don't even recognize you anymore.

(There's a long, painful silence. ROSA sits down on the edge of the bed, her head in her hands. MICHAEL stands there, unsure of what to say.)

SCENE 6

(The scene shifts to JOHN's office at the law school. It's cluttered with papers, books, and empty coffee cups. JOHN is sitting behind his desk, looking disheveled as usual. MICHAEL enters, knocking lightly on the door.)

JOHN: *(glancing up)* Well, if it isn't my troubled student. Come in, MICHAEL.

(MICHAEL sits down, fidgeting nervously.)

MICHAEL: I... I need help, JOHN.

JOHN: *(leaning back in his chair, smirking)* Now that's something I never thought I'd hear from you. What's going on? You finally realized law school isn't for everyone?

MICHAEL: No, it's not that. It's... I'm in trouble. I've got debts... big ones. From gambling.

(JOHN raises an eyebrow, clearly intrigued.)

JOHN: Gambling, huh? Now there's a surprise. You always seemed so... stable. But I guess everyone has their demons. How bad are we talking?

MICHAEL: *(defeated)* \$20,000. I can't pay it off. And... I'm afraid of what happens next.

(JOHN whistles low, standing up from his desk and walking to the window. He takes a moment before turning back to MICHAEL, a strange glint in his eyes.)

JOHN: That's... quite a number. Let me guess, you thought you could handle it? That you were smarter than the game?

MICHAEL: *(nodding)* I didn't realize how deep I was in until it was too late.

JOHN: *(grinning coldly)* The thing about gambling is, it doesn't just eat away at your money—it eats away at your mind. But you already know that, don't you?

MICHAEL: *(nervously)* I just need to figure out how to fix this. I was hoping you might have some advice... you've seen students go through tough stuff, right?

JOHN: *(chuckling darkly)* Advice? I'm not exactly the poster boy for sound life decisions, MICHAEL. *(pauses)* But if you're looking for a way out... there's always a way. The question is how far you're willing to go to clean up this mess.

(MICHAEL frowns, sensing the edge in JOHN's tone. He leans forward, unsure of what JOHN is suggesting.)

MICHAEL: What do you mean?

JOHN: *I mean... sometimes you have to get your hands dirty. The system is built on deals, on favors, on knowing when to push and when to fold. You're a law student—figure it out. Leverage what you can, find the weak spots in the people around you. And if you owe someone money... well, maybe there's something else you can offer them.*

MICHAEL: *(disgusted)* I'm not going to do anything illegal, JOHN.

JOHN: *(laughing)* Illegal? You're in law school, kid. Everything's illegal if you look hard enough. The point is, you've got to stop thinking like a victim and start thinking like a survivor.

(JOHN leans against his desk, staring at MICHAEL with a penetrating gaze.)

JOHN: You've got potential, MICHAEL. Don't waste it. But you better start making moves, or you're going to find yourself at the bottom of a pit you can't climb out of.

(MICHAEL stands up abruptly, the tension between them thickening.)

MICHAEL: I'll figure it out. But I'm not going down that road. I'm not you.

JOHN: *(grinning)* Maybe not yet. But you will be. They always say that until they're drowning.

(MICHAEL walks out, shaken but determined. The door closes behind him, leaving JOHN standing in his cluttered office, smiling darkly.)

SCENE 7

(It's late at night. MICHAEL is back in his apartment, pacing nervously. A knock on the door startles him. He opens it to reveal a man in a dark suit — THE DEBT COLLECTOR. He steps inside without waiting for an invitation, his expression cold.)

DEBT COLLECTOR: Michael, right?

MICHAEL: *(nervously)* Yeah... that's me.

DEBT COLLECTOR: We've been patient. But patience runs thin when money's involved. You owe twenty grand, and it's time to pay up.

MICHAEL: *(swallowing hard)* I know. I'm working on it. I don't have the full amount yet, but—

DEBT COLLECTOR: *(cutting him off)* "But" doesn't pay bills. You've got a week. After that, we'll be taking something else. And trust me, you don't want to know what that is.

(MICHAEL's face pales. He stands still as the DEBT COLLECTOR gives him a cold smile and exits, leaving the door slightly ajar.)

(MICHAEL slams the door shut, leaning against it as panic sets in. His phone buzzes — it's ROSA. He hesitates before answering.)

MICHAEL: *(trying to sound normal)* Hey.

ROSA: *(on the other end)* Are you okay? You sound... off.

MICHAEL: *(sighs)* I'm fine. Just tired, that's all.

ROSA: Are you sure? You don't sound like you're fine. Look, we can meet tomorrow if you need to talk...

(MICHAEL is about to respond, but he hears the DEBT COLLECTOR's words echoing in his head: "a week." He tightens his grip on the phone, forcing a smile into his voice.)

MICHAEL: (softly) No, I'll be okay. Thanks, ROSA. I'll see you tomorrow.

(He hangs up, staring at the empty apartment. The weight of his situation presses down on him, and for a moment, he considers calling ROSA back — but he doesn't. He's not ready to tell her how bad it is yet.)

SCENE 8

The following day, MICHAEL goes to see JOHN in his office. JOHN is lounging at his desk, as usual, looking a little more unkempt than usual.)

JOHN: (raising an eyebrow) Back already? I thought you were done with me.

MICHAEL: (sitting down) I need your help.

JOHN: (smirking) That didn't take long. Let me guess — debt collectors breathing down your neck?

MICHAEL: (nodding) They gave me a week. I don't know what else to do. I've been going to therapy, I'm trying to change, but I can't pay them back.

JOHN: And you think I can pull twenty grand out of thin air for you?

MICHAEL: (desperate) No, but I need... options. You said there's always a way. I don't want to break the law, but I don't want to end up broken either.

(JOHN stands up, walking over to a cabinet and pouring himself a drink. He takes a long sip before responding.)

JOHN: There's always a way, MICHAEL. But sometimes, the way out is messy. You might not like it.

MICHAEL: (nervous) I don't care if it's messy, I just need to get these people off my back.

JOHN: *(leaning against the desk)* You've got two options. You either find a way to pay them, or... you disappear for a while. Let things cool off. I've known people who've done it before. A few months, maybe a year, and they come back clean. You'll need to keep a low profile, though. No contact with anyone.

(MICHAEL stares at him, realizing the gravity of what JOHN is suggesting.)

MICHAEL: Disappear? You mean leave ROSA, leave school, and just... vanish?

JOHN: Sometimes a reset is the only option. You said you didn't want to go down the illegal path. This is the cleanest solution I can offer you.

(MICHAEL shakes his head, running his hands through his hair.)

MICHAEL: I can't do that. I can't leave ROSA. I'll figure something else out.

(JOHN shrugs and takes another sip of his drink, clearly unconcerned.)

JOHN: Suit yourself. But remember, kid — you're running out of time.

SCENE 9

(Later that evening. ROSA is waiting at a café. MICHAEL walks in, looking exhausted and defeated. He sits down across from her, and she immediately senses something is wrong.)

ROSA: What's going on, MICHAEL? You've been off since last night.

MICHAEL: *(hesitating)* I... I had a visit from the debt collectors.

ROSA: *(tense)* What? What did they say?

MICHAEL: They gave me a week to pay them back. If I don't... they'll come after me for something else.

ROSA: *(furious)* Why didn't you tell me? You should have called me the second they showed up, MICHAEL! You can't handle this alone!

MICHAEL: *(frustrated)* I didn't want to drag you into it, ROSA. I'm trying to fix this myself!

ROSA: *(standing up)* You can't fix this alone! You're drowning, MICHAEL, and you're pushing me away every time I try to help!

(She pauses, catching her breath as MICHAEL looks at her, torn between guilt and desperation.)

MICHAEL: I don't want you to get hurt because of me. I thought I could shield you from this.

ROSA: *(softly)* I don't need you to shield me, MICHAEL. I need you to let me in. If we're going to get through this, we have to do it together.

(MICHAEL nods slowly, the weight of his situation sinking in. He reaches across the table and takes her hand.)

MICHAEL: I'll tell you everything. No more secrets.

SCENE 10

(The scene shifts to the following week. MICHAEL is standing outside the casino, holding an envelope filled with cash. ROSA stands beside him, tense but supportive. They've scraped together enough to make a partial payment — it's not the full \$20,000, but it's something.)

ROSA: Are you sure about this?

MICHAEL: *(nodding)* Yeah. It's not the full amount, but it's a start. I just need to show them I'm serious about paying it back.

(They walk inside together. The DEBT COLLECTOR is waiting at the far end of the room. MICHAEL hands him the envelope, and the DEBT COLLECTOR counts the cash before looking up with a cold smile.)

DEBT COLLECTOR: This isn't the full amount.

MICHAEL: *It's what I have right now. I'll get the rest, I swear.*

DEBT COLLECTOR: *(smirking) You've got guts, kid. Fine. You've got another month. But don't push your luck. We'll be watching.*

(The DEBT COLLECTOR walks away, leaving MICHAEL and ROSA standing there. MICHAEL exhales, feeling the weight of the moment lift slightly.)

ROSA: *(squeezing his hand) We'll get through this.*

MICHAEL: *(nodding) Together.*

SCENE 11

(Several months later. MICHAEL and ROSA are sitting in their apartment, the atmosphere lighter. MICHAEL has been attending therapy regularly, and though his debt is still a concern, he's been making payments and staying clean from gambling. ROSA is working on a case for law school, her books spread across the table.)

ROSA: *(teasing) You know, for someone who used to be terrible at telling the truth, you're getting pretty good at being an open book.*

MICHAEL: *(smiling) Well, I've had a good influence.*

ROSA: *(grinning) I better have been.*

(They share a light laugh, the tension of the past months finally loosening.)

MICHAEL: *It's not over yet. There's still a lot I have to fix. But... I'm getting there. We're getting there.*

ROSA: *(nodding) One step at a time.*