

Made in Chicago

INT. THE LAUGH FACTORY - NIGHT

Charlie Brooks paces backstage, clutching a crumpled notebook. The muffled laughter from the main room makes him sweat more than the broken AC.

MIKE
(whispering)
You got this, man. Just picture
everyone naked.

CHARLIE
That's your advice? Naked
Chicagoans?
I'd rather picture my student loans.

Mike shrugs, hands Charlie a water bottle that's clearly refilled from the tap.

MIKE
Liquid courage. Or at least liquid
hydration.

Diane Martinez appears, clipboard in hand, looking like she owns the place because she does.

DIANE
Brooks. You're up after Thompson.
Don't bomb like last week.

CHARLIE
Last week was a creative experiment.

DIANE
Experiment failed. This is comedy,
not a science fair.

Onstage, Rex Thompson works the crowd like a maestro. The audience eats up his observational humor about dating apps.

REX (O.S.)
...and her profile said "fluent in
sarcasm."
Turns out that meant "won't stop
texting her ex."

The crowd erupts. Charlie peeks through the curtain, watching Rex bask in the applause.

CHARLIE
(under his breath)
Show pony.

DIANE
What was that?

CHARLIE

Nothing. Just... psyching myself up.

DIANE

Good. Because you've got five
minutes
to prove you're not wasting my stage
time.
Thompson's got the crowd hot. Don't
freeze up.

Mike pats Charlie's shoulder, nearly spilling the water.

MIKE

Remember: timing is everything.
And if you forget your jokes, just
fall down.
People love pratfalls.

CHARLIE

I'm not falling down on purpose.

MIKE

Then don't forget your jokes.

Rex's set ends to thunderous applause. He strides past
Charlie, smirking.

REX

Try not to kill the room, Brooks.
These people actually want to laugh.

Charlie watches Rex head to the bar like he owns the place.
The emcee's voice booms.

EMCEE (O.S.)

Give it up one more time for Rex
Thompson!
Next up, a local favorite... Charlie
Brooks!

Charlie's notebook trembles slightly. Diane notices.

DIANE

You gonna puke? Because if you're
gonna puke,
do it in the alley, not on my stage.

CHARLIE

Not puking. Just... transforming
nervous energy into comedic gold.

DIANE

Less transforming, more funny.
You're on.

Charlie straightens his shoulders, takes a deep breath, and steps into the spotlight as the applause dies down.

INT. THE LAUGH FACTORY - STAGE - NIGHT

Charlie stands in the spotlight, blinded for a moment. The silence stretches. Someone coughs. A chair scrapes.

CHARLIE

So... I'm from Chicago.

(beat)

Which means I automatically know
thirty-seven different ways to get
to any destination, and they're all
under construction.

A few chuckles. Charlie relaxes slightly, gripping the mic.

CHARLIE

My GPS just gave up. It was like,
"You know what? You figure it out.
I'm going to Milwaukee."

More laughter this time. Charlie finds his rhythm.

CHARLIE

And have you seen the rent prices?
I pay twelve hundred a month for
what Realtors call "cozy."
That's not cozy, that's a hallway
with delusions of grandeur.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Preach it!

CHARLIE

My apartment's so small, I have to
step outside to change my mind.
And the neighbors! I have this guy
next door who practices drums at 3
AM.
Not even drums. Just one drum.
He's working on a solo album called
"Why I Got Evicted."

The crowd's warming up. Charlie flips a page in his notebook, but it falls. He bends to grab it, knocking the mic stand.

CHARLIE

This is going great.
(playing it up)
I'm not clumsy, I'm just...
performing physical comedy.
It's very avant-garde.

Laughter, genuine now. Charlie rights the stand.

CHARLIE

Dating in Chicago's interesting.
Women here are like the weather.
If you don't like the current
situation, wait fifteen minutes
and it'll get worse.

AUDIENCE MEMBER

Tell us about Rex!

CHARLIE

(freezing)

Rex? Who's Rex? I don't know any
Rex.
There's no Rex here. Definitely not
a successful comedian named Rex who
makes more money than me and dates
models. Nope.

The audience laughs harder. Charlie's sweating again.

CHARLIE

You know what? Let's talk about
something else. Deep dish pizza.
It's not pizza, it's a casserole
having an identity crisis.
"Am I Italian? Am I a pie?
Nobody knows!"

From the back, Diane watches, arms crossed. Charlie catches
her eye. She taps her watch. Three minutes left.

CHARLIE

Anyway, thanks for being here
tonight.
Remember: if you can make it in
Chicago,
you can make it anywhere... because
everywhere else has functional
public
transportation and reasonable rent.

He raises the mic in salute. Polite applause. Charlie exits
quickly, nearly tripping over the curtain.

EXT. THE LAUGH FACTORY - ALLEY - NIGHT

Charlie bursts through the back door, gulping cold Chicago
air. The alley smells like stale beer and broken dreams.

CHARLIE

I didn't bomb. I didn't bomb!

MIKE
You didn't bomb!

CHARLIE
I mean, I didn't kill, but I didn't
bomb!

MIKE
That's what I keep telling you!
"Didn't bomb" is the new "crushed
it!"

Charlie paces in tight circles, adrenaline still pumping.

CHARLIE
Did you hear them laugh at the GPS
joke?
And the apartment bit? They got it!
They actually got it!

MIKE
They got it! You were like...
(he mimes Charlie's mic drop)
And they were like...
(he mimes audience applause)

Rex emerges from the club's side entrance, lighting a
cigarette.

REX
Cute set, Brooks. Real cute.
Like watching a puppy learn to walk.

CHARLIE
Thanks, Rex. Means a lot coming from
someone who peaked in 2019.

REX
Peaked? I'm headlining this weekend.
You're... what was that? Amateur
hour?

MIKE
That was art, man. Raw, unfiltered—

REX
Raw is right. Like sushi that might
kill you. See you around, Charlie.
Don't quit your day job.

Rex saunters off. Charlie's high starts to deflate.

CHARLIE
Do I need a day job?

MIKE

No! You're a comedian! This is your job!

CHARLIE

That pays negative twelve dollars after gas and parking.

Diane appears in the doorway, silhouetted like a comedy godfather.

DIANE

Brooks. My office. Now.

CHARLIE

Is this about the mic stand?
Because that was physical comedy.
Very avant-garde.

DIANE

Just get in here.

She disappears inside. Charlie looks at Mike.

CHARLIE

This is it. She's gonna ban me.
I'm gonna be blacklisted from
comedy.
I'll have to move to Milwaukee and
start a podcast about cheese.

MIKE

That's not happening. You were good!
Okay, you were... not terrible.
That's something, right?

CHARLIE

Not terrible. The dream.

Charlie straightens his shoulders, heads back inside. Mike follows, still holding the empty water bottle like a talisman.

MIKE

If she kills you, can I have your
Netflix password?

CHARLIE

I don't have Netflix.

MIKE

Exactly. Nothing to lose!

INT. THE LAUGH FACTORY - DIANE'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Diane's office feels like a comedy museum that got mugged. Posters of famous comics line the walls, all autographed. Her desk is a battlefield of contracts and coffee rings.

CHARLIE

Before you say anything, I want you to know that mic stand incident was intentional. Very Buster Keaton. Very physical comedy.

DIANE

Sit down, Brooks.

CHARLIE

Standing's fine. Really. Great for the posture. My chiropractor says—

DIANE

Sit. Down.

Charlie sits. The chair squeaks like it's been tortured.

DIANE

You want to know what I saw out there tonight?

CHARLIE

A man who accidentally knocked over professional audio equipment?

DIANE

I saw potential.

CHARLIE

Potential for what? Lawsuits?

DIANE

Potential for someone who might actually be funny if he stopped trying so hard to be perfect.

Charlie blinks. Mike hovers in the doorway like a nervous moth.

MIKE

That's good, right? Potential's good?

DIANE

Potential's dangerous. It means I might waste time and money on someone who could either become the next big thing or end up managing a Subway in Schaumburg.

CHARLIE

I make a mean Italian BMT.

DIANE

Here's the deal. I'm starting a new showcase. Local comics, every Thursday. You want in?

CHARLIE

Yes! Absolutely! What's the catch?

DIANE

The catch is you have to be funny. Consistently. And you have to bring people. Butts in seats, Brooks. This isn't charity.

CHARLIE

I can be funny. I have a whole notebook of funny. Some of it's even legible.

DIANE

And you have to stop comparing yourself to Rex Thompson. He's been doing this for eight years. You've been doing this for... what? Eight months?

CHARLIE

Technically six, but I watched a lot of Comedy Central growing up.

DIANE

That doesn't count.

CHARLIE

Not even "Premium Blend?"

DIANE

Especially not "Premium Blend."

Look, Brooks. You had moments out there.
The GPS bit? Solid. The apartment stuff?
Relatable. But you froze when they mentioned Rex. That's amateur hour.

CHARLIE
I'm working on it.

DIANE
Work harder. This city's full of funny people who never made it because they couldn't handle the pressure. Don't be one of them.

She slides a contract across the desk. Charlie stares at it like it might explode.

CHARLIE
This is real? You're not punking me?

DIANE
Do I look like someone who punk's people?
This is business, Brooks. Don't make me regret it. Sign or don't. But decide now.
I've got three other comics waiting.

Charlie picks up the pen. His hand trembles slightly.

CHARLIE
What about money?

DIANE
You get a cut of the door. Bring people, you eat. Don't bring people, you starve.
Welcome to show business.

Mike leans in, whispering.

MIKE
Sign it! Before she changes her mind!

CHARLIE
I don't have a lawyer.

DIANE

It's one page, Brooks. Even you can read it.

Charlie signs. Diane takes the contract, examines it.

DIANE

Congratulations. You just bought yourself
thirty days to prove you're not a waste
of everyone's time. Don't screw it up.

She stands, extending her hand. Charlie shakes it.

DIANE

First showcase is next Thursday.
Be funny. Be professional.
And for God's sake, learn to use
a mic stand properly.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Charlie and Mike stumble into Charlie's apartment, still riding the contract high. The place looks like a tornado hit a thrift store—clothes draped over furniture, notebooks scattered like confetti, a single sad plant gasping for life on the windowsill.

CHARLIE

She said yes! I mean, she said
"don't screw it up,"
but that's basically yes in
Diane-speak!

MIKE

Dude, you're officially a
professional comedian!
Do you get a badge? Or like, a
secret handshake?

CHARLIE

I get thirty days to prove I'm not a waste
of oxygen and bring butts to seats.
Same thing.

Mike picks up a notebook from the floor, flips through it.

MIKE

We need to workshop your material.
The GPS bit killed, but the Rex
thing?
We need a better deflection.

CHARLIE
I know, I know. I just... I wasn't
expecting
hecklers to bring up my nemesis.

MIKE
He's not your nemesis, he's just...
more successful and better looking
and gets more laughs.

CHARLIE
Thanks, really helping my confidence
here.

Charlie grabs two beers from a fridge that's mostly empty
except for condiments and regret.

CHARLIE
To Thursday showcases and not
bombing!

MIKE
To not managing a Subway in
Schaumburg!

They clink bottles. Charlie's phone buzzes. He checks it,
face falling.

CHARLIE
Speak of the devil. Rex just posted
his headliner poster for this
weekend.
"Rex Thompson: Chicago's Comedy
King."

MIKE
Unfollow him. Social media detox.
Focus on your own journey, man.

CHARLIE
My journey currently involves
performing for seven people
and my mom on FaceTime.

MIKE
Your mom's a tough crowd though.
Remember when she didn't laugh
at your graduation speech?

CHARLIE
She said humor wasn't appropriate
for a community college
commencement.

MIKE

She's not wrong. But Thursday's different.
This is your shot. We need to pack the house.

CHARLIE

How? I know like twelve people and half of them hate me.

MIKE

Social media! We'll make a viral campaign!
"Support Local Comedy" and stuff.

CHARLIE

Viral? Mike, your last tweet got three likes. Two were from bots.

MIKE

Those bots have feelings too.
Look, we start small. Friends, family,
that barista who always laughs at your latte jokes.

CHARLIE

She laughs because I mispronounce "cortado" every single time.

MIKE

Laughter is laughter, bro.

Charlie collapses onto the couch, sending a pile of laundry airborne.

CHARLIE

What if I can't do it? What if Thursday comes and I freeze up again?

MIKE

Then you keep going. That's the job. You bomb, you learn, you get better. Besides, you've got me in your corner.

CHARLIE

You're my corner? You're barely my acquaintance.

MIKE

I'm your best friend and writing partner.

Don't diminish our artistic collaboration.

CHARLIE
Artistic collaboration? You suggested
I fall down on purpose!

MIKE
Which you refused, showing excellent judgment. That's what partners do. Challenge each other.

Charlie stares at the ceiling, where a water stain vaguely resembles the state of Illinois.

CHARLIE
Thirty days. Thirty chances to prove I'm not wasting everyone's time.

MIKE
Thirty chances to become Chicago's next comedy superstar.

CHARLIE
Or thirty chances to publicly fail and end up managing that Subway.

MIKE
Either way, free sandwiches.

CHARLIE
You're really not helping.

MIKE
I'm helping in my own way. Now let's write some killer material. What's funny about Thursday?

CHARLIE
The fact that I'm performing on one?

MIKE
Perfect! Self-deprecating humor. The audience eats that up.

Charlie sits up, grabs a notebook, starts scribbling.

CHARLIE
Okay, okay. I can do this. It's just comedy. How hard can it be?

The sad plant chooses that moment to drop a leaf. They both stare at it.

MIKE

That's probably not an omen.

INT. COFFEE SHOP - MORNING

The next morning, Charlie and Mike huddle in the corner of a hipster coffee shop, surrounded by laptops and rejected latte art. Charlie's phone sits between them, recording their "brainstorm session."

CHARLIE

Okay, "Support Local Comedy" is too generic.
We need something that pops.

MIKE

"Charlie Brooks: He's Not Terrible!"

CHARLIE

That's your bar for success? Not terrible?

MIKE

"Charlie Brooks: Better Than Rex!"

CHARLIE

That's legally actionable.

MIKE

"Charlie Brooks: The Everyman's Comedian!"

CHARLIE

The everyman who can't afford rent?
That's just depressing.

The BARISTA, a tattooed twenty-something with purple hair, delivers their drinks.

BARISTA

One cortado for... Char-lie?

CHARLIE

That's me! Thanks for butchering it with such enthusiasm.

BARISTA

(laughing)
It's the little things. You guys working on something funny?

MIKE

Charlie's got a comedy showcase
Thursday!
We're promoting it. Viral marketing!

BARISTA

Nice! What's your handle?
I'll follow and share.

CHARLIE

@CharlieJokes... but it's mostly
retweets of other people's cats.

BARISTA

Gotta start somewhere. What's the
show?

CHARLIE

"Thursday Laughs at the Laugh
Factory."
Very original, I know.

BARISTA

I'm off Thursdays! Maybe I'll come.
If the coffee doesn't kill me first.

She walks away. Mike leans in excitedly.

MIKE

See? That's one! She laughed at
the cortado thing.

CHARLIE

She laughs at everything. It's her
job.
She probably laughs at tax forms.

MIKE

That's the spirit! Self-deprecating
but observational. Write that down.

Charlie scribbles in his notebook while Mike types furiously
on his phone.

MIKE

Okay, new campaign: "Charlie Brooks:
He Mispronounces Coffee But Nails
Comedy!"

CHARLIE

That's... actually not terrible.

MIKE

Not terrible! We're back to not
terrible!

That's our brand now.

CHARLIE
Our brand is mediocrity?

MIKE
Our brand is authenticity!
The everyman comedian who...
who can't pronounce fancy coffee
but tells it like it is!

CHARLIE
I can't afford fancy coffee.
That's why I mispronounce it.

MIKE
Even better! "Relatable Comedy
for the Financially Challenged!"

Charlie's phone buzzes. He checks it, groans.

CHARLIE
Rex just posted his ticket sales.
Sold out the weekend. Again.

MIKE
Stop checking his feed! It's poison!
Social media detox, remember?

CHARLIE
How does he do it? Same city,
same crowds, same everything.

MIKE
Different hair. That probably helps.

CHARLIE
You think I need better hair?

MIKE
I think you need better material.
Less Rex, more Charlie.

Charlie sips his cortado, makes a face.

CHARLIE
This tastes like someone described
coffee to someone who never tasted
it.

MIKE
Write that down! That's funny!
"Charlie Brooks: He Knows Bad
Coffee!"

CHARLIE
We're really leaning into failure
here.

MIKE
Failure's relatable! Everyone fails!
Except Rex, but he's not human.

BARISTA
(from counter)
Hey, Charlie! You should do jokes
about dating apps! Everyone hates
those!

CHARLIE
I don't use dating apps!

BARISTA
Exactly! That's the angle!
"The Comedian Too Broke for Love!"

MIKE
She's good. Hire her as your
manager.

CHARLIE
She works here. She can't manage me.

BARISTA
I manage three roommates and a
ferret.
I can handle one comedian.

MIKE
See? You're building a team!
This is how movements start!

CHARLIE
This is how embarrassment starts.

MIKE
Same thing in comedy. Now let's
make some content. Film me
pretending
to be your angry neighbor.

CHARLIE
You're not my neighbor.

MIKE
Artistic license! Action!

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - EVENING

Charlie's apartment has transformed into a war room. String connects photos and joke ideas across the wall like a conspiracy theorist's fever dream. Empty coffee cups form a skyline on the windowsill.

CHARLIE

(reading from notebook)

"Dating apps are like Chicago construction—promising shortcuts that take twice as long and cost you your sanity."

MIKE

Solid! What else you got?

CHARLIE

"My apartment's so small, I have to step outside to change my mind. My neighbors think I'm having a midlife crisis on the balcony."

MIKE

That's gold! The balcony crisis bit! Write that down!

CHARLIE

It is written down. You watched me write it down. We're in my apartment.

Mike's filming Charlie on his phone, doing that vertical video thing that makes Charlie's eye twitch.

MIKE

Trust the process. We need content. Behind-the-scenes footage. "The Making of a Comedy Superstar!"

CHARLIE

More like "The Making of a Comedy Guy Who Still Can't Afford Groceries."

A loud BANG from the wall. Charlie's NEIGHBOR is not enjoying the creative process.

NEIGHBOR (O.S.)

KEEP IT DOWN! SOME OF US WORK NIGHTS!

CHARLIE
(shouting back)
SORRY! WE'RE CREATING ART!

NEIGHBOR (O.S.)
ART DOESN'T NEED TO BE LOUD!

CHARLIE
TELL THAT TO MICHAEL BAY!

MIKE
Write that down! The neighbor
material!
"My neighbor thinks art should be
quiet.
That's why he's never heard of me!"

CHARLIE
That's actually not terrible.

MIKE
We're finding your voice! It's
like...
self-deprecating but hopeful!

CHARLIE
Like a puppy that knows it's getting
returned to the shelter.

MIKE
Exactly! That's your brand!
"Charlie Brooks: Comedy's Lovable
Loser!"

CHARLIE
I hate that so much.

MIKE
But it works! People love an
underdog!
Look at Rocky! Look at the Cubs!

CHARLIE
The Cubs won a World Series.
I can't even win at Tinder.

MIKE
Because you're not on Tinder!
That's the problem!

CHARLIE
That's not the problem.

MIKE
It could be material though!

"I'm so bad at dating, I can't even get rejected by robots!"

Charlie stares at his notebook, overwhelmed.

CHARLIE

What if I'm not good enough?
What if Thursday comes and I
can't make anyone laugh?

MIKE

Then you try again next Thursday.
That's the job, man.

CHARLIE

Easy for you to say. You're not
the one facing public humiliation.

MIKE

I've been humiliated plenty!
Remember my podcast about
cryptocurrency?

CHARLIE

That was just bad timing.

MIKE

It was educational!

CHARLIE

It was twelve episodes of you
saying "buy the dip" right before
everything crashed.

MIKE

Educational failure! That's my
brand!

Another BANG from the wall.

NEIGHBOR (O.S.)

I'M CALLING THE LANDLORD!

CHARLIE

HE'S IN FLORIDA! HE DOESN'T CARE!

MIKE

(to Charlie)

See? Conflict! Comedy gold!
"My neighbor wants me evicted.
My landlord's in Florida.
I'm living in a sitcom written
by someone who hates me!"

CHARLIE
That's... that's actually funny.

MIKE
You're getting it! Now let's film
a TikTok. You do sixty seconds
of neighbor material.

CHARLIE
I don't do TikTok.

MIKE
That's why it'll go viral!
"Comedian Too Old for TikTok
Tries TikTok Anyway!"

CHARLIE
I'm thirty-one.

MIKE
Exactly! Ancient in internet years!

Charlie reluctantly takes the phone, starts recording.

CHARLIE
(into phone)
My neighbor thinks I'm too loud.
I think he's too quiet.
We're both right. I'm annoying.
He's boring. Together, we make
one functional adult.

MIKE
That's it! That's the stuff!
Post it! Let's go viral!

CHARLIE
What if nobody watches?

MIKE
Then we make another one.
And another. Until they do.

Charlie hits post, immediately regrets it.

CHARLIE
I feel sick.

MIKE
That's how you know it's good art.
Or food poisoning. Could be either.

The phone buzzes. They've got their first like.

MIKE
One like! We're trending!

CHARLIE
That's probably my mom.

MIKE
Moms count! All success starts
with mom support!

INT. THE LAUGH FACTORY - NIGHT

The club's empty except for the ghosts of last night's laughs. Charlie stands on stage, gripping the mic like it's a life preserver. Diane watches from a front table, arms crossed, coffee steaming.

CHARLIE
Thanks for coming. I know it's late.
And it's empty. And I'm not being
paid.

DIANE
Stop stalling. Show me what you've
got.

CHARLIE
Right. Okay. So... dating apps.
They're like Chicago potholes...

DIANE
You've done potholes. Move on.

Charlie's notebook trembles slightly.

CHARLIE
My neighbor threatened to call
the landlord on me last night.
I told him our landlord's in
Florida.
He said "I know. I called him
there."

DIANE
That's better. Keep going.

CHARLIE
My landlord's so checked out,
he screens calls from his own
tenants.
I left a voicemail saying the heat's
broken.
He texted back "thoughts and
prayers."

A small smile from Diane. Charlie gains momentum.

CHARLIE

That's Chicago landlords for you.
They treat broken heat like it's
a character-building exercise.
"What doesn't kill you makes you
stronger and significantly colder."

Mike watches from the sound booth, giving enthusiastic thumbs up.

CHARLIE

I tried fixing the heat myself.
YouTube university. Six hours later,
I had three extra screws and
a newfound respect for tradespeople.

DIANE

Now you're cooking. What else?

CHARLIE

My dating life's like my heating
bill—
expensive, unpredictable, and
mostly disappointing.

DIANE

Relatable but safe. Dig deeper.

Charlie paces, thinking. Rex appears from backstage, sipping something expensive.

REX

Working late, Diane? That's
dedication.

DIANE

Brooks is rehearsing. You need
something?

REX

Just getting my jacket. Don't let me
interrupt.

He leans against the bar, watching. Charlie's rhythm breaks.

CHARLIE

I, uh... I've been working on...

REX

The heat bit's solid. Very...
domestic.

CHARLIE
Thanks? I think?

REX
You should try something edgier.
More current. Less... maintenance
issues.

DIANE
Rex. Not helpful.

REX
Just offering constructive
criticism.
From someone who's been where he is.

CHARLIE
Where's that? The unemployment line?

REX
The learning curve. It gets easier.
Or you get better at pretending it
does.

He exits with that smug smile. Charlie deflates.

CHARLIE
He's right. This is all safe.
Predictable. Boring.

DIANE
He's not right. He's Rex.
Different styles, different
audiences.

CHARLIE
His audience buys tickets.
Mine buys... what? Pity?

DIANE
Your audience is still finding you.
Keep working. Find your truth.

CHARLIE
My truth is I'm scared I'll bomb
Thursday and end up managing
a Subway in Schaumburg.

DIANE
That's funny. Use that.

CHARLIE
It's not funny, it's terrifying.

DIANE

Comedy's just terror with better timing.

Charlie thinks about this, flips to a new page.

CHARLIE

I'm so scared of failing at comedy,
I've started practicing my
sandwich artistry skills.
I can make a foot-long in under
thirty seconds. That's not a joke,
that's a backup plan.

DIANE

Now you're being honest. Keep going.

CHARLIE

My mom keeps asking when I'm getting
a real job. I told her I'm in
entertainment.
She said "So is the guy who cleans
the movie theater. At least he gets
free popcorn."

DIANE

Family material. Always gold.

CHARLIE

She's not wrong. About any of it.
I'm thirty-one, living in a hallway
with delusions of grandeur,
telling jokes to drunk people
for less than minimum wage.

DIANE

But you're doing it. You're up
there.
Most people just dream about it.

CHARLIE

Most people are smarter than me.

DIANE

Most people aren't funny.
You are. Thursday, Brooks.
Don't overthink it. Just be you.
The scared, broke, delusional you.

CHARLIE

That's all I've got.

DIANE

That's all you need. Now get out
of here before I charge you rent.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Charlie sits on his fire escape, looking out at the Chicago skyline. The city twinkles like it's laughing at him. Mike emerges through the window, holding two beers.

MIKE

Thought you might need this.

CHARLIE

I need a time machine.

MIKE

Those don't exist. Yet.
When they do, I'm going back
to stop myself from buying crypto.

They sit in silence, drinking.

CHARLIE

What if I'm wasting everyone's time?
Diane's taking a chance on me.
What if I blow it?

MIKE

Then you blow it. And you try again.
That's literally the job
description.

CHARLIE

Easy to say when you're not
the one about to publicly fail.

MIKE

I've failed plenty. Remember my
stand-up phase? I bombed so hard,
they gave me a participation trophy.
It said "Thanks for showing up!"

CHARLIE

That was different. You weren't
serious about comedy.

MIKE

Exactly! You are serious. That's
why you'll be fine.

CHARLIE

That makes no sense.

MIKE

It makes perfect sense!
Caring means you'll prepare.
Preparing means you'll improve.
Improving means... something.

I lost the thread.

Charlie laughs despite himself.

CHARLIE
You're terrible at pep talks.

MIKE
I'm excellent at bad pep talks.
Different skill set.

They watch a couple argue on a balcony across the street. The woman's gestures are huge, the man's are defeated.

MIKE
See? Free entertainment.
Relationship drama beats Netflix.

CHARLIE
I should write about that.
"My love life's like that couple's
argument—I don't know what it's
about, but I'm invested anyway."

MIKE
That's good! Write it down!

CHARLIE
I'm tired of writing things down.
I want to be funny now. Today.
Not after six more hours of
analyzing every word.

MIKE
You are funny now. You're just
also... what's the word...

CHARLIE neurotic?

MIKE Neurotic! That's it!
You're funny and neurotic.
Like a Jewish mother but male
and thirty-one and... okay,
the metaphor's falling apart.

CHARLIE
Everything's falling apart.
My career, my apartment,
my metaphorical metaphors.

MIKE
But not you. You're still here.
Still trying. That's something.

CHARLIE
It's not enough.

MIKE
It never feels like enough.
That's being an artist. Or human.
Take your pick.

A siren wails below. An ambulance weaves through traffic like it's choreographed.

CHARLIE
I keep thinking about Rex.
How easy he makes it look.

MIKE
Rex makes it look easy because
he's been doing it eight years.
You've been doing it six months.
Do the math.

CHARLIE
I was never good at math.
That's why I'm in comedy.

MIKE
Exactly! You're exactly where
you should be! Embrace the suck!

CHARLIE
Embrace the suck? That's your
advice?

MIKE
Better than "buy the dip."
Look, Thursday's gonna happen
whether you panic or not. Might
as well panic productively.

CHARLIE
How do you panic productively?

MIKE
Channel it into your set.
Be honest about the fear.
Audiences love vulnerability.

CHARLIE
They love confidence more.

MIKE
Confidence is just fear
wearing better clothes.

Charlie considers this, takes another drink.

CHARLIE
What if they hate me?

MIKE
Then they hate you for five minutes
and you go home and drink beer
on your fire escape. Same as
tonight.

CHARLIE
That's... actually comforting.

MIKE
See? I'm getting better at this.
Now let's go inside before
we freeze to death. I can't afford
hypothermia. My insurance lapsed.

CHARLIE
When did that happen?

MIKE
About the same time my crypto
portfolio became a crypto pamphlet.

They climb back through the window. Charlie pauses, looks
back at the city.

CHARLIE
Tomorrow I become a comedian.
Or a cautionary tale.

MIKE
Why not both? Multi-tasking!

CHARLIE
You're the worst motivational
speaker ever.

MIKE
But I'm your worst motivational
speaker.
That's what matters.

INT. THE LAUGH FACTORY - BACKSTAGE - NIGHT

The grimy backstage mirror reflects Charlie's pale face as he
practices smiles that all look like grimaces. His hands shake
as he adjusts his shirt for the tenth time.

CHARLIE
Why did I wear this shirt?
I hate this shirt. This shirt
is going to ruin my life.

MIKE
You look fine. The shirt's fine.
Everything's fine. Breathe.

CHARLIE
I can't breathe. My lungs forgot
how breathing works. This is it.
This is how I die. Death by shirt.

Mike grabs Charlie's shoulders, forcing eye contact.

MIKE
Listen. You can spiral, or you can
perform. Pick one. Right now.

CHARLIE
What if I pick wrong?

MIKE
Then you bomb, and tomorrow we
try again. But at least you picked.

Charlie nods, but his eyes dart to the curtain. Through a gap, he spots a BURLY MAN in the third row scowling, arms crossed.

CHARLIE
That guy hates me already.
How does he hate me already?

MIKE
Maybe he's constipated.
Maybe his wife left him.
Maybe he loves Rex and resents
new comics. Who cares?

CHARLIE
I care. He's going to ruin
everything.

MIKE
Then make him laugh harder
to prove himself wrong.

Diane appears, clipboard in hand, looking stressed.

DIANE
Five minutes, Brooks. You ready?

CHARLIE
Define ready. If ready means
"questioning every life decision
that led to this moment,"
then absolutely.

DIANE

Good. Stay nervous. Nervous is honest.
Confident comedians are usually terrible. Or Rex.

REX

(from the shadows)
You know I can hear you, right?

Rex steps into the light, blocking Charlie's path to the stage.

REX

Break a leg, Brooks. Or whatever body part helps you remember your material.

CHARLIE

Thanks for the support.

REX

Hey, we're all on the same team here.
Some of us just play different positions.

MIKE

What does that even mean?

REX

It means the starter position's taken.
Benchwarmer's still a job.

Charlie's breathing gets shallower. Rex notices.

REX

You okay, Brooks? You look like you might puke on stage.
That would be memorable, I guess.

CHARLIE

I'm fine.

REX

Sure you are. That's why you're sweating through your shirt.
The one you hate, remember?

DIANE

Rex. Back off.

REX

I'm helping. Reality check.

This isn't group therapy.
It's comedy. Either funny wins
or sad loses. Simple math.

He exits, but stays visible at the bar, watching. Charlie's
hands shake worse.

CHARLIE
He's right. I'm going to bomb.
I should leave. Right now.
Just walk out. Disappear.

MIKE
You leave, Rex wins.
You stay, maybe you win.
Either way, we find out
what you're made of.

CHARLIE
What if I'm made of failure?

MIKE
Then at least we'll know.
Knowledge is power.
Terrible power, but still.

The emcee's voice booms:

EMCEE (O.S.)
Give it up for our next comic,
making his showcase debut...
Charlie Brooks!

The applause starts. Through the curtain, Charlie sees Rex
raise his glass in mock salute.

CHARLIE
That's me. I'm Charlie Brooks.
This is happening.

MIKE
Go prove Rex wrong.
Or prove him right.
But go prove something.

CHARLIE
If I bomb, you still my friend?

MIKE
If you bomb, I'll help you
write better jokes. If you kill,
I'll help you spend the money.
Either way, I'm busy.

Charlie straightens his shoulders, takes a deep breath, and steps toward the light. Rex's smirk follows him as he disappears behind the curtain.

INT. THE LAUGH FACTORY - STAGE - NIGHT

Charlie steps into the light. The fifteen faces blur together. His mouth opens but nothing comes out. The silence stretches. Someone coughs. Rex's smirk burns from the bar.

CHARLIE
So... I'm Charlie Brooks.
And I'm terrified right now.

A few chuckles. Not mean ones. Encouraging ones.

CHARLIE
My friend Mike told me to channel
my anxiety into comedy. So here
goes.
I'm so nervous, I practiced my
sandwich-making skills as a backup
plan.
I can assemble a foot-long in thirty
seconds.
That's not a joke, that's
unemployment insurance.

More laughter this time. Charlie finds his rhythm.

CHARLIE
My mom keeps asking when I'm getting
a real job. I told her I'm in
entertainment.
She said "So is the guy who cleans
the movie theater. At least he gets
free popcorn and doesn't have to
make strangers laugh for
validation."

AUDIENCE MEMBER
Your mom sounds smart!

CHARLIE
She's not wrong. About any of it.
I'm thirty-one, living in a hallway
with delusions of grandeur,
telling jokes to fifteen people
for less than minimum wage.

The audience warms up. Even the burly man uncrosses his arms.

CHARLIE
My dating life's like my heating
bill—

expensive, unpredictable, and
mostly disappointing. My last date
said I was "emotionally
unavailable."
I said "I'm emotionally overdrawn.
There's a difference."

Laughter builds. Charlie moves around the stage, less wooden.

CHARLIE
My neighbor thinks I'm too loud.
I think he's too quiet.
Together we make one functional
adult.
He's got the mortgage, I've got the
dreams.
It's a perfect system.

Rex's smirk falters slightly. Charlie notices but keeps
going.

CHARLIE
You know what I love about Chicago?
The optimism. Every construction
sign
says "Temporary Inconvenience."
Temporary? I've been taking the same
detour for three years. That's not
temporary, that's a lifestyle
choice.

The crowd's fully engaged now. People nudging each other,
pointing at Charlie.

CHARLIE
But here's the thing—and I can't
believe I'm saying this on stage—
I'm exactly where I should be.
Scared, broke, and telling jokes
to strangers who might hate me.
Because the alternative is... what?
Managing a Subway in Schaumburg?
Actually learning how to fix heat?

Big laugh. Charlie's confidence grows.

CHARLIE
My mom was right about one thing.
The movie theater guy does get
free popcorn. But I get this.
This moment. This terror.
This ridiculous, beautiful,
absolutely insane dream of
making people laugh for a living.

He pauses, looks directly at Rex.

CHARLIE

Some people make it look easy.
Some people are born with that
confidence, that charisma.
Some people are Rex Thompson.

The room goes still. Rex straightens up.

CHARLIE

And some of us are just... us.
Scared, imperfect, trying anyway.
But you know what? Tonight,
fifteen people laughed at my jokes.
That's fourteen more than my mom.
Progress, not perfection.

The audience erupts. Not just polite applause—genuine,
enthusiastic approval. Charlie raises the mic in salute.

CHARLIE

I'm Charlie Brooks. I'm a comedian.
Or I'm trying to be. Either way,
I'm not managing a Subway tonight.
Thanks for that.

He exits to genuine applause. Rex's expression is unreadable.
Mike meets him backstage, eyes wide.

MIKE

You killed! You absolutely killed!

CHARLIE

I did, didn't I? I actually did it.

DIANE

(appearing)

Not bad, Brooks. Not bad at all.
Same time next Thursday?

CHARLIE

You're not firing me?

DIANE

I'm giving you another shot.
Don't make me regret it.

Charlie grins, still riding the high. Through the crowd, he
catches Rex's eye. Rex raises his glass—not mocking this
time, just acknowledging. A tiny nod. Respect, grudgingly
given.

CHARLIE
(to Mike)
Did Rex just...?

MIKE
I think he did. You earned it, man.
You actually earned it.

EXT. THE LAUGH FACTORY - ALLEY - NIGHT

The alley's different tonight. Same stale beer smell, same broken dreams, but Charlie breathes it in like it's the freshest air he's ever tasted. He paces in tight circles, hands shaking as he lights a cigarette he doesn't usually smoke.

MIKE
You gonna tell me what it feels
like,
or should I keep guessing?

CHARLIE
I can't feel my legs.
Is that normal?

MIKE
Means you're alive.

Charlie takes a drag, coughs, keeps the cigarette anyway. He touches the brick wall like it might disappear.

CHARLIE
Fifteen people, Mike.
Fifteen actual humans.

MIKE
Sixteen if you count the bartender.

CHARLIE
He was listening?

MIKE
Everybody was listening.

Rex emerges from the club's side door, cigarette already glowing. Charlie's hand twitches, ash falling on his shoes.

REX
You drop something, Brooks?

CHARLIE
Just... ash.

REX
Yeah. Happens to the best of us.

He leans against the wall, studying Charlie's face. The silence stretches uncomfortable.

REX
That bit about pretending?
Hit close to home.

CHARLIE
I wasn't trying to—

REX
I know what you weren't trying to do.
Question is, what are you gonna do now?

CHARLIE
Thursday. Another set.

REX
Thursday's a long way from here.
Lots of ways to lose your nerve
between now and then.

He flicks his cigarette into the darkness.

REX
Keep the ash off your shoes, kid.
Makes you look desperate.

Rex disappears into the night. Charlie stares at the space where he stood.

CHARLIE
Desperate's what I am.

MIKE
Desperate's what we all are.
Difference is, now you got
something to lose.

Charlie crushes his cigarette underfoot, then immediately regrets it, tries to scrape it back together.

CHARLIE
My mom's gonna flip.
She thinks I'm managing
a Subway in Schaumburg.

MIKE
Tell her you're in entertainment.
Same thing, better hours.

CHARLIE
You think Diane's serious?

About bringing more people?

MIKE

Diane's always serious.
Except when she's not.

Diane appears, keys jangling. She stops, watching Charlie's nervous energy.

DIANE

You're still here.

CHARLIE

Leaving now.

DIANE

Good. Places to go, people to impress.

CHARLIE

About Thursday—

DIANE

Bring friends. Bring enemies.
Bring that neighbor who hates noise.
Just bring someone who laughs
louder than they talk.

CHARLIE

What if they don't come?

DIANE

Then you perform for fifteen again.
Or fourteen. Or twelve.
Numbers don't matter.
What matters is you show up
scared and leave anyway.

CHARLIE

I'm good at scared.

DIANE

Stay that way.
Fear keeps you honest.
Honest gets you paid.
Eventually.

She unlocks her car, pauses.

DIANE

And Brooks? Next time,
try the cigarette after the set.
Makes you look like you planned it.

CHARLIE
I didn't plan any of this.

DIANE
Good. Planned comedy's dead comedy.

She drives off. Charlie touches the wall again, solid brick under his fingers.

MIKE
So... one beer? My treat.

CHARLIE
Cheap place.

MIKE
Dirt cheap.

CHARLIE
With sticky tables.

MIKE
And questionable hygiene.

CHARLIE
Perfect.

They walk toward the street. Charlie's gait is different—still nervous energy, but directed now, purposeful. He stops under the streetlight.

CHARLIE
Mike? What if I can't
find sixteen people?

MIKE
Then you perform for fifteen.
Or fourteen. Or twelve.
You heard the woman.

CHARLIE
What if I forget the jokes?

MIKE
You didn't forget them tonight.

CHARLIE
What if I peak too early?

MIKE
Then you get a day job
and tell this story
at parties for twenty years.

CHARLIE
That's your pep talk?

MIKE
That's reality. Better?

Charlie considers this, nods slowly. They continue walking. The city sounds fade behind them—sirens, laughter, possibility carried on the wind like cigarette smoke.

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - MORNING

INT. CHARLIE'S APARTMENT - MORNING

Sunlight streams through the window. Charlie sits surrounded by notebooks, coffee cups, and nervous energy. He's been awake since five.

CHARLIE
(reading aloud)
"Success is like Chicago weather—
temporary, unpredictable, and
usually
followed by something worse."

MIKE
(emerging from bathroom)
That's cheerful. Morning sunshine!

CHARLIE
Couldn't sleep. Too much...
everything.

Charlie's phone buzzes. He stares at it like it might explode.

CHARLIE
It's Diane. What if she's calling
to say it was all a mistake?

MIKE
Answer it. Or I will.

Charlie answers, trying to sound casual.

CHARLIE
Hello?... Yes, this is Charlie...
Really?... No, that's great...
Tomorrow?... Absolutely...
Thank you... Okay, bye.

He hangs up, stares at Mike.

MIKE
Well?

CHARLIE
She wants me to open for Rex
this weekend. Someone cancelled.

MIKE
WHAT?! That's... that's massive!

CHARLIE
It's probably a mistake.

Charlie paces, stepping over notebooks.

CHARLIE
Rex hates me. He's setting me up
to fail in front of a real crowd.

MIKE
Stop. You earned this.

CHARLIE
Remember last month? When he
"accidentally" unplugged my mic?

MIKE
Last night he watched you.
Didn't check his phone once.

CHARLIE
Opening for Rex means fifteen
minutes.
I have eight minutes of material.

MIKE
So write seven more.

CHARLIE
Just like that? Snap my fingers
and create comedy gold?

MIKE
Sit your ass down and work.
Like every other comic.

CHARLIE
I can't write under pressure.
My brain freezes.

MIKE
Then don't write. Talk. Record
yourself.
Tell me about the neighbor fight.

CHARLIE
That's old material.

MIKE

Old material that killed.
Build on it. What's the husband
doing now?

CHARLIE

Probably still hiding in the
bathroom.

MIKE

There. That's funny. Write that.

CHARLIE

It's not enough.

MIKE

Nothing's ever enough with you.
That's your real problem.

CHARLIE

What's that supposed to mean?

MIKE

You'd find something wrong with
a Netflix special. "The lighting
wasn't perfect, the crowd was too
nice."

CHARLIE

That's not fair.

MIKE

When's the last time you were
satisfied with anything?

Charlie stops pacing.

CHARLIE

Never. Okay? Happy?

MIKE

At least it's honest.

CHARLIE

I'm terrified I'll freeze.
Just me and three hundred people
staring at each other.

MIKE

So freeze. Then tell them you're
freezing.
Make it part of the act.

CHARLIE

That's insane.

MIKE

That's comedy. The great ones
bomb and make it work.

CHARLIE

I'm not great. I'm barely adequate.

MIKE

Then be adequately great. Or greatly
adequate. I don't care what you call
it,
just stop making excuses.

Mike grabs Charlie's notebook, shoves it at him.

MIKE

You think you're the first comic
with stage fright? The first one
who thinks they're a fraud?

CHARLIE

I never said fraud.

MIKE

You didn't have to. It's written
all over your face.

CHARLIE

What if I embarrass myself?

MIKE

You will. We all do. The question
is whether you get back up.

Charlie sits, picks up his pen.

CHARLIE

I hate when you're right.

MIKE

I know. It's why I do it.

CHARLIE

Twenty-four hours to become
a real comedian.

MIKE

Twenty-four hours to realize
you already are one.

CHARLIE

That's the worst thing
you've ever said to me.

Mike throws a dish towel at Charlie's head.

MIKE

Write, you neurotic bastard.
Your fear's boring me.

CHARLIE

The bathroom thing. It's good.

MIKE

I know.

CHARLIE

But I need more. Something about
being the opening act. The warm-up
guy
who might not warm anyone up.

MIKE

Now you're thinking. Less whining,
more mining. Your life's a goldmine,
you just keep digging in the wrong
spot.

CHARLIE

You really think I can do this?

MIKE

I think you're gonna find out
tomorrow night. Either way,
you'll have your answer.

Charlie writes faster, the pen scratching
against paper like it's trying to escape.

CHARLIE

Hey Mike? Thanks for not
letting me spiral.

MIKE

Don't thank me yet. Thank me
after you kill tomorrow night.

CHARLIE

And if I bomb?

MIKE

Then you owe me beer for a month.
Either way, I win.

CHARLIE

You're a terrible friend.

MIKE

I'm the best friend. Terrible
friends
let you quit.

Charlie tears out the page, holds it up.

CHARLIE
This might actually work.

MIKE
Of course it will. You wrote it
despite yourself. That's when
you're actually funny.

INT. THE LAUGH FACTORY - STAGE - NIGHT

INT. THE LAUGH FACTORY - STAGE - NIGHT

The room is packed. Real audience. Real money. Real terror.
Three hundred faces blur into one massive judgment machine.
Charlie grips the mic stand like it's keeping him tethered to
earth.

CHARLIE
I'm Charlie Brooks, and I should not
be here right now.

A few chuckles. The energy is different—expectant, expensive.
These people paid to see Rex, not some opener.

CHARLIE
Seriously. Twenty-four hours ago,
I was performing for fifteen people
and my mom on FaceTime. Now I'm
opening for Rex Thompson, which is
like being the warm-up band for
someone who's actually good.

Laughter spreads. Not universal, but genuine. Charlie finds
his rhythm.

CHARLIE
My friend Mike said this is my
moment.
I said "What if I blow it?" He said
"Then you become a cautionary tale."
So... welcome to the cautionary
tale.
Either this works, or you're
witnessing
someone's rock bottom in real time.

More laughter. The room warms up.

CHARLIE
Opening for Rex is like being
the person who announces
the person who announces Beyoncé.
Technically important, definitely

forgettable, and probably getting
fired by the end of the night.

AUDIENCE MEMBER
You're doing great!

CHARLIE
Thanks! That's one person!
Only two hundred ninety-nine more
to convince I'm not a mistake!

The crowd's with him now. Charlie moves around the stage,
less terrified.

CHARLIE
My mom thinks I'm managing
a Subway in Schaumburg. I told her
I'm in entertainment. She said
"The guy who cleans the movie
theater
is in entertainment. At least he
gets free popcorn." Thanks for the
support, Mom. Really feeling it.

Big laugh. Even the back row's engaged.

CHARLIE
But here's the thing—and I can't
believe I'm saying this—I earned
this.
Not in some inspiring movie way.
In the "I bombed, I tried again,
I bombed better" way. The Chicago
way.

The crowd erupts. Chicago pride at its finest.

CHARLIE
Rex Thompson makes this look easy.
Confidence, charisma, hair that
doesn't
look like it lost a fight with a
ceiling fan.
I'm what happens when that doesn't
work out.
I'm Plan B. I'm the guy who proves
Plan A was necessary.

Laughter mixed with knowing nods. Rex watches from backstage,
arms crossed.

CHARLIE
But you know what? Plan B's not
terrible.
Plan B pays rent. Sometimes.

Plan B gets laughs. Tonight.
Plan B is standing here, terrified,
telling jokes to strangers who
might actually remember my name.

The applause builds. Charlie's breathing steadies.

CHARLIE

I'm Charlie Brooks. I'm not Rex
Thompson.
I'm not supposed to be.
I'm the guy who reminds you that
even the opening act had to start
somewhere.
Even the guy before the guy
had to be brave enough to begin.

Solid applause. Charlie raises the mic.

CHARLIE

So thanks for the warm-up.
Thanks for the chance.
Thanks for proving my mom wrong
about the Subway thing.
Enjoy Rex Thompson. He's earned it.
I've just started earning mine.

He exits to genuine applause. Rex blocks his path backstage,
eyes intense.

REX

Fifteen minutes. Not one dead spot.

CHARLIE

I kept waiting for the silence.
The kind that eats you alive.

REX

It never came. You hear that?

Charlie listens. The crowd's still buzzing. Someone shouts
"Bring back the opener!"

REX

That's yours. You earned it.

CHARLIE

I thought you'd be... I don't know.
Pissed I was good?

REX

I was pissed you were scared.
Means you're still real. Don't lose
that.

Charlie processes this. Rex steps closer.

REX
I started where you are. Same
terror.
Same need to prove something.
Difference is, I forgot what I was
proving.
Started faking it. Crowd couldn't
tell,
but I could.

CHARLIE
So what do you do?

REX
You just did it. Stay scared.
Stay hungry. Stay you.

They shake hands. Real respect this time.

DIANE
(appearing)
Not bad, Brooks. Not bad at all.
How'd it feel?

CHARLIE
Like jumping out of a plane
and discovering the parachute
might actually open.

DIANE
Thursday. You're headlining the
showcase.

CHARLIE
Headlining? But I just...

DIANE
You earned it. Don't overthink it.
Just keep being brave enough to
begin.

Charlie grins, still processing. The applause continues as
Rex takes the stage, but something's shifted. Charlie's not
the opening act anymore. He's becoming the main event.

EXT. CHICAGO STREET - NIGHT - NIGHT

EXT. CHICAGO STREET - NIGHT

Charlie stumbles off the curb, almost into traffic. Mike
yanks him back.

MIKE
Watch it!

CHARLIE
Sorry. Can't feel my legs.

MIKE
Adrenaline crash. Normal.

CHARLIE
Nothing about this is normal.

They pass a CLOSED sign on The Laugh Factory door. Charlie stops.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
It's locked.

MIKE
Yeah, it's midnight.

CHARLIE
But I need to get back in.

MIKE
Why?

CHARLIE
Left something onstage.

MIKE
What?

CHARLIE
Don't know. But it's not in my pocket anymore.

Mike studies his friend's face. This isn't euphoria talking.

MIKE
Charlie, you can't—

CHARLIE
I have to. Before it disappears.

He tries the door. Locked. Peers through glass at the empty stage.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
It's still in there. The thing that worked.

REX (O.S.)
Looking for this?

Rex emerges from the alley, holding Charlie's notebook. Charlie's shoulders tense.

CHARLIE
Where'd you find that?

REX
Stage floor. After you bolted like
it was on fire.

Charlie takes it, flips through pages. Same jokes. Nothing magical.

CHARLIE
These aren't special.

REX
They weren't special tonight either.
You were.

CHARLIE
I don't know how to do that again.

REX
Thursday. Headlining showcase. Three
hundred seats. Marcus will be there.

CHARLIE
Who's Marcus?

REX
Guy who decides if you're real or
just lucky.

CHARLIE
What if I'm just lucky?

REX
Then Thursday proves it. Either way,
you find out what you are.

A POLICE CAR cruises past. Rex steps into shadow instinctively.

REX (CONT'D)
Marcus doesn't heckle. He waits.
Lets silence do the work. You die
slow or you fight through it.

CHARLIE
How do I fight through it?

REX
Same way you did tonight. Keep
talking until something sticks.

Charlie's hands start shaking worse.

CHARLIE
I should quit while I'm ahead.

REX
You think you're ahead? You're exactly where you were this morning—nowhere. One good set doesn't make you a comic.

The words hit harder than intended. Charlie steps back.

REX (CONT'D)
But showing up Thursday? After tonight? That's when you start becoming something.

Rex starts walking away, then stops.

REX (CONT'D)
Midnight Thursday. Don't bring safe material. Bring whatever scares you more than Marcus.

CHARLIE
What scares me more than Marcus?

REX
Success. Obviously.

Rex disappears into darkness. Charlie turns to Mike, who's been quiet.

CHARLIE
I need new material.

MIKE
No, you need to stop looking for the exit.

CHARLIE
I'm not—

MIKE
Charlie, you're terrified of being good at this. You've built your whole identity around being the guy who almost made it. Now you're making it, and you're trying to break into a locked building to steal your own momentum.

Charlie has no answer. They start walking.

CHARLIE
I need to write.

MIKE
You need to live until Thursday.
Then write about living.

They reach the alley entrance. DIANE stands there, smoking.
She doesn't see them yet. Her hand trembles slightly.

CHARLIE
Diane?

She startles, drops the cigarette.

DIANE
Jesus. Thought you'd gone home.

CHARLIE
Everything okay?

DIANE
Thursday's showcase. Biggest one
yet.

CHARLIE
You're nervous?

DIANE
I'm terrified. Every time. You think
it gets easier?

CHARLIE
I hoped it did.

DIANE
It doesn't. You just get better at
being terrified.

She lights another cigarette. Her hands shake less now.

DIANE (CONT'D)
Midnight Thursday. Don't be late.

She heads inside. Charlie watches her go, recognizing the
walk. Not confidence—resignation. The same resignation that
got him onstage tonight.

Sarah emerges from the opposite alley, notebook clutched
tight. She paces, rehearsing under her breath.

SARAH
No, that's not... okay, what if I...

She notices Charlie watching.

SARAH
Sorry. First time Thursday. You
looked like you knew what you were
doing tonight.

CHARLIE
That's called panic. Panic looks
like confidence from the audience.

She laughs, relaxes.

SARAH
I'm Sarah. Still figuring out my
something.

CHARLIE
Charlie Brooks. No something. Just
me.

They share a moment of mutual terror.

SARAH
See you Thursday. If we survive.

She heads off. Charlie enters his building. Through the glass door, he watches Mike disappear into the night, then Diane taking a final drag before going back inside.

He heads upstairs. Through his window, he watches the street. A couple argues across the way. A taxi driver curses at double-parked traffic. Sarah paces the corner, still rehearsing.

Charlie opens his notebook. Starts writing. Not jokes—just what he sees. What he felt. What he's still afraid of.

The city keeps talking. He finally starts listening.