

THE PROMISE

Written by
Alex Gordon

Screenplay adaptation of the memoir
"The Promise"

FADE IN:

ANIMATED SEQUENCE -- ANIME STYLE. (In the manner of the O-Ren Ishii sequence in KILL BILL: VOL. 1 -- a hand-drawn, fully animated interlude, distinct from the live-action film that follows. This style returns once more, and only once, at the very end of the film.)

INT. AN OLD NEW YORK BAR - DAY

A MAN, late 30s, sits alone at a corner table in one of those old-school New York bars that still smells like 1975 -- dark wood, a brass rail, a bartender who's seen everything. Papers cover every inch of the table: handwritten pages, crossed-out lines, a mess of a life being sorted into order. A red beret rests on the table beside a half-drunk coffee. We don't see his face -- shot from behind, or lost in shadow, hunched low over the pages.

White index cards are scattered among the papers, one name in his own block handwriting on each: DAFNA. HALEB. SEXYHEEB. URI. COMPO BEACH. They lift off the table on their own, turning slowly in the air above him like they're alive, glowing faint at the edges before settling back down into the pile.

ALEX (V.O.)

When I got back to the States, I enrolled in a writing course at Columbia. I used everything -- the notes, the journals, the memories -- and started writing "Lone Soldier."

(beat)

Then I got a job. Got busy. Put it away.

Years fold past in the wear on his hands, the changing light through the window.

ALEX (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Years later, I got fired from a
job on Wall Street. Had a lot of
time on my hands. Took it back out.

INT. STARBUCKS, UPPER WEST SIDE - NIGHT

The man, hunched over a battered binder crammed with loose handwritten pages -- his whole life, hundreds of pages deep. Above the counter, a muted television runs a rolling news chyron: BREAKING: ISRAEL UNDER ATTACK -- HOSTAGES TAKEN. A NEWS ANCHOR, somber, stands before a map dotted red.

He doesn't look up right away. Then he does, and can't look away.

ALEX (V.O.)
October 7th. I hadn't opened that
binder in years. That night, I
couldn't close it.

His phone buzzes. A friend, inviting him out.

He stuffs the binder into a black knapsack, slings it over one shoulder, and heads out into the night -- unsteady already, and not from anything he's had to drink yet.

EXT. STREET, UPPER WEST SIDE - LATE NIGHT

Hours later. The man, drunk, stumbling, happy, flags a cab.

INT. TAXI - CONTINUOUS

He climbs into the front seat instead of the back, chatty, warm, telling the DRIVER about his mother, how much he misses her, how he was always a mama's boy.

DRIVER
(warming to him)

I understand. I have a great love
for my mother too.

ALEX
(patting the knapsack on his lap)
I'm writing a book about her.
About my time as an Israeli
Paratrooper.

The mood in the cab changes instantly.

DRIVER
My name is Muhammad. I am
Palestinian.

A white card flickers into frame for half a second --
MUHAMMAD, in his own handwriting -- then dissolves back
into the cab.

The next twenty blocks are pure combustion -- two men
shouting decades of grievance at each other at the top of
their lungs, ugly, raw, neither backing down an inch.

EXT. ALEX'S BROWNSTONE - CONTINUOUS

The cab stops. Both men spit the same words at each other
and slam doors.

DRIVER / ALEX
Go fuck yourself.

The cab pulls away. He watches it go -- and then goes cold
with panic. His knapsack. His notebooks. The only copy of
his entire life.

ALEX
*(running after the cab,
screaming)*
Dafna!! DAFNA!!

Through the cab's rear window, for one impossible second,
we see them all -- SexyHeeb, Dafna, Do-Dee, Avichi, Aaron,

Uri, Haleb, Sammy, Sherma, the Kitchen Sergeant, Dani Luv -- pressed against the glass, reaching back for him as the cab turns the corner and is gone.

EXT. ALEX'S STOOP - NIGHT

Rain now, of course. 2:30 in the morning. The man, soaked through, past drunk, past hope, lies down on the cold stone steps and, for lack of any better idea, prays. We still haven't seen his face.

SMASH CUT TO LIVE ACTION:

EXT. MOUNTAINS OF LEBANON - DAY

Scrub brush and rock, baked white by the sun. A radio crackles somewhere far off, then nothing.

ALEX GORDON, 19, lies flat on his back in the dirt. Blood at the corner of his mouth. Tears cut clean lines through the dust on his face.

ALEX (V.O.)

I'm flat on my back staring up at the sky. How did this happen. How did I get here.

He coughs. Blood sprays.

ALEX (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Hell -- I could be dying. No. Don't go there. Think of something good. Something bright.

The blue sky above him ripples like water.

ALEX (V.O.) (CONT'D)

Compo Beach.

SMASH CUT TO:

MAIN TITLES OVER:

EXT. COMPO BEACH - THE JETTY - SUNSET

A white card flickers into frame -- COMPO BEACH -- before dissolving into the scene.

A string of summer light on Long Island Sound. Fairfield, Connecticut, decades earlier.

A small boy -- ALEX, age 8, sun-browned and skinny -- sits at the end of a stone jetty, his head in his mother's lap.

Another card flickers by -- ELIZABETH -- gone before it fully forms.

ELIZABETH GORDON ("PEPPY"), 30s, radiant, runs her fingers through his hair. They don't talk. They don't need to. The sun goes down into the water in front of them.

A butterfly drifts past them, low over the water, gone before either of them thinks to notice it.

ALEX (V.O.)
Growing up, I thought I found
heaven. My summers on Compo Beach.
Endless summers -- filled with
laughter, adventures, and time
with my mother. Nothing could hurt
me. Of that I was sure.

EXT. COMPO BEACH - NIGHT

The tide has turned ugly. Waves crash white against the rocks.

Alex, alone now, naked, climbs the jetty rock by rock until he reaches the last one. He looks out at a small buoy bobbing a hundred yards out, lit by moonlight.

ALEX (V.O.)

I always knew my buoy was out
there. I just didn't know where.
So I'd keep on swimming till I saw
it. I never turned back. Not once.

He dives.

We're with him now, small arms cutting through black water,
the shoreline shrinking behind him. He reaches the buoy,
wraps his arms and legs around it, and holds on.

ALEX (V.O.) (CONT'D)
She was my anchor. My mother.
Nothing could harm me as long as I
held her.

A wave lifts boy and buoy high into the air -- and slams
them under.

He surfaces. Gasping. Laughing. Under again.

Then the biggest wave of all catches him in its crest and
rolls him, over and over, and he can't fight it, can't
breathe, can only be thrown.

CUT TO BLACK.

EXT. COMPO BEACH - SHORE - CONTINUOUS

Alex lies in the sand, gasping, spitting up salt water,
staring up into a night sky that looks exactly like the sky
over Lebanon.

A gust of wind blows dirt across his face.

He is small. He is scared. He is alone.

EXT. COMPO BEACH - FAIRFIELD AVENUE - DAY (TWO DAYS LATER)

A small yellow bus idles at the curb. Alex's mother, in a
housecoat, wrestles her son -- kicking, howling -- onto it.

ALEX
No! NO! I cherish my freedom!

ELIZABETH
It's beach school, sugar plum, or
it's locked in your room for the
whole summer. Choose.

She shuts the door on him. The bus pulls away. Alex presses his face to the glass, betrayed.

EXT. COMPO BEACH - "BEACH SCHOOL" - CONTINUOUS

A line of children, hand in hand, wade into ankle-deep water inside a human fence of counselors. Alex stands at the back of the line, staring past all of them, out at the horizon. His buoy. Waiting.

Two counselors, a boy and a girl, lock eyes. Lost in each other.

Alex doesn't hesitate. He dives, swims underwater between their legs, and comes up running.

EXT. FAIRFIELD AVENUE - CONTINUOUS

Alex runs flat out, elated, terrified, free -- and has absolutely no plan.

INT. GORDON HOUSE - BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

He climbs into the empty tub and yanks the shower curtain shut. We hear, muffled through the walls: a phone, ringing and ringing. Then silence. Then it rings again.

Hours pass in a single held breath.

INT. GORDON HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - LATER

The front door bangs open.

MAN (O.S.)

Try not to worry, ma'am. It's best
to stay here -- we'll call the
second we find him.

The door shuts. Then -- a sound worse than any siren:
Elizabeth, alone, sobbing, moving room to room like she
doesn't know what a room is for anymore.

INT. GORDON HOUSE - BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Elizabeth sits down hard on the closed toilet lid and
breaks down.

A small voice, from inside the tub.

ALEX (O.S.)

Yoo-hoo.

She rips the curtain back. For one second she is purely,
violently furious -- then she's crushing him against her so
hard he can't breathe, then she's hitting him, then she's
crying, then she's holding him again.

ELIZABETH

Yours are the sweetest eyes I've
ever seen.

She sings it, half a line of "Your Song." He melts into
her.

EXT. COMPO BEACH - LIFEGUARD STAND - DAY

Alex, triumphant, strutting the beach past the caged
children of beach school -- until he reaches a swing set.
Hanging from it: a dead shark, jaws full of teeth, eyes
like dull coins.

ALEX
Where'd you get it from?

A LIFEGUARD points, silent, out at the water. At his buoy.
Alex's whole face changes.

EXT. COMPO BEACH - JETTY - LATER

Alex stands at the end of the jetty, staring out at the dark water, shaking. His buoy bobs, small and far away.
He doesn't dive in.

ALEX (V.O.)
I never swam out to that buoy
again.

The waves hit the rocks and spray his small body, alone.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL CORRIDOR - DAY

Years later. ALEX, 15, skinny, sharp-eyed, walks a crowded hallway. Three BULLIES peel off a locker bank and box him in.

BULLY #1
Hey, Jew boy. Hey, Heeb.

BULLY #2
How you doin', bagel-head?

BULLY #3
We heard you're trying out for the
football team. Rabbi!

Laughter. Alex straightens his shirt, unbothered.

ALEX

Well. My name's not Jew boy, not Rabbi, and -- though very funny -- not bagel-head either. If you've got a problem with that, let's discuss it after class. Cafeteria.

The bullies look at each other, delighted.

BULLY #1

We'll see you after school.

He thumps Alex's shoulder walking past. Alex's head drops.

ALEX

We'll. Oh, crap.

A SCRAPPY FRIEND sidles up.

SCRAPPY FRIEND

Just tell 'em you're not Jewish.
Works for me.

ALEX

I should be hitting you. For being stupid. And a coward.

INT. SCHOOL CAFETERIA - LATER

Eight boys now, not three, waiting in a loose ring. A crowd's gathered. Alex clocks his scrappy friend at the edge of it, already looking ashamed.

ALEX

Looks like I have my work cut out for me, boys. Let's make a nice line, so I can take care of you one at a time. Only fair.

He closes his eyes. A breath.

MATCH CUT TO:

**EXT./INT. CONCENTRATION CAMP BOXING RING - DAY (FLASH --
STYLIZED, MONOCHROME)**

A boxing ring inside a death camp. Drunk SS GUARDS ring it, shouting bets. Two starved JEWISH PRISONERS embrace at center ring, praying, before the bell.

One of them lifts his head.

He shouldn't be able to stand, let alone fight -- starved to sinew, weeks from a grave somebody else already dug. And yet he moves like the ring belongs to him: unhurried, certain, weight rolling easy off the balls of his feet, built like he was carved rather than born. Tattoo on his forearm, in Hebrew: NEVER AGAIN. Tattoo on his chest, over a Star of David: MENSCH.

This is SEXYHEEB. Alex's private myth made flesh.

A white card flickers into frame -- SEXYHEEB -- then dissolves back into the ring.

He doesn't enter a room. He arrives in it. Even here -- starved, surrounded by men who'd love nothing more than to watch him die for their entertainment -- something in him gives off light, the kind people lean toward before they've decided to. He leans over and murmurs something to the fighter waiting his turn, low, out of the guards' earshot, and for one impossible second, the man laughs.

Strength that doesn't need to prove itself. Warmth that doesn't ask permission. A spirit built to survive anything and still make the man standing next to him smile. That's the whole of him, underneath everything else.

SEXYHEEB
(to camera, to Alex, to us)

They bet on us to the death. I
fought. I never once let them see
me kneel.

(a wink)

And I never once stopped being
funny about it either. A mensch
finds a way. Even here.

BACK TO:

INT. SCHOOL CAFETERIA - CONTINUOUS

Alex's eyes snap open. Something's different in them now --
SexyHeeb, riding shotgun behind his own face. His shoulders
drop. His weight settles, easy, certain. For one afternoon
in a Manhattan cafeteria, something ancient and unbreakable
is looking out through a fifteen-year-old's eyes.

ALEX

Ready, fellas?

He steps forward.

INT. GORDON HOUSE - KITCHEN - LATER

Alex struts in, shirt torn, black eye blooming, blood on
his lip, grinning like he won the lottery. Elizabeth,
stirring matzo ball soup, turns, gasps, inspects him, and
can only shake her head.

ELIZABETH

Oy gevalt. What now?

He beams. Those boys never bother him again.

INT. GORDON HOUSE - BATHROOM - NIGHT

Alone now, Alex leans toward the mirror over the sink, turning his bruised face side to side, almost proud of the black eye forming.

He leans in closer -- and stops.

Staring back at him is not his own reflection. It's SEXYHEEB. Whole. Full-grown. Filling the glass where a skinny fifteen-year-old should be -- the tattoos, the eyes that have already seen too much, looking back at him with total calm.

Alex doesn't flinch. Doesn't call out. He just looks, a long beat, the way you look at someone you've known your whole life but are only now being properly introduced to.

ALEX (V.O.)

Every skinny kid who ever went looking for a single hair on his own chest has a version of this guy somewhere in him. Mine just happened to survive Auschwitz and still find something to laugh about.

(beat)

He was who I wanted to be when I grew up. Not rich. Not famous. Just unbreakable. Kind. A mensch.

(beat)

A man.

Then he blinks. It's just his own bruised, teenage face again. He turns off the light.

INT. RIVERDALE COUNTRY DAY SCHOOL - ART ROOM - DAY

SATISH, 40s, warm, unbothered by chaos, hands Alex a paintbrush. Alex is already talking with his whole body.

ALEX

I want to build a huge vagina. On campus. Students walk through it.

SATISH
(*not blinking*)
Why.

ALEX
My mother has ovarian cancer. I
want people to actually feel what
that means. Not read it in a book.
You walk in, you hear a heartbeat
get louder and louder, and at the
end -- a baby. Because that's what
a vagina does, Satish. It gives
life. And it can take it away.

Satish studies him a long moment. Nods, genuinely moved.

SATISH
Start with an eleven-by-fourteen
canvas. See where it takes you.

A painting -- undeniably, joyfully, a vagina -- ends up
framed on the wall of the HEADMASTER'S OFFICE. Alex,
passing in the hall, glimpses it through the door and grins
like a proud father.

INT. O'NEAL'S RESTAURANT - BAR - DAY (YEARS EARLIER, FLASH)

A much younger Alex, eight, feeds quarters into a pinball
machine, hip-checking it like a pro. Beside him, an OLDER
BLACK WOMAN plays her own machine, fierce concentration. He
beats her. Again.

ALEX (V.O.)
She was very good. I always beat
her. She hated that.

BACK TO:

INT. RIVERDALE COUNTRY DAY SCHOOL - FACULTY TENT - DAY

Music Appreciation Day. A "FACULTY ONLY" tent, white tablecloths. ROXY "SLOW-BURN" VALENTINE -- platinum-selling soul singer, sultry voice known the world over from her two-year chart-topping single "Love Ya, Hug Ya, Miss Ya, Kiss Ya" -- sits with the HEADMASTER and faculty, mid-lunch.

Alex slips past a rope line like it isn't there.

ALEX
Hello, Roxy. I'm Alex.

She's startled, then charmed.

ROXY
Well hello there, baby. How are you?

The Headmaster is on his feet.

HEADMASTER
Mr. Gordon! Detention. Now.

ALEX
One question. Then I'll go.

ROXY
(waving him off, easy)
That's okay. He's okay.
(to Alex)
What is it, baby?

ALEX
You like pinball, girl?

Dead silence at the faculty table. Then Roxy throws her head back and laughs.

ROXY
Ohhh, I love pinball, baby.

(a beat, remembering)
Wait. You a little boy who used to
always play pinball at O'Neal's,
and always beat me?

Alex's face splits into a grin.

ROXY (CONT'D)
Ohhh, I hated that boy.

She pulls him into a hug. The Headmaster, dumbfounded, sits back down. Even Satish, at the edge of the tent, is laughing.

Later -- Alex and Roxy share coffee and a Danish. She studies him.

ROXY
Baby, you are just a beautiful
open book.

She starts to hum, low. Then sings, soft, right to him:
"Love ya, hug ya, miss ya, kiss ya..." Alex, motionless,
transported. He never serves one Saturday detention.

ALEX (V.O.)
My mother was in the hospital that
whole afternoon. I didn't think
about it once, sitting there with
Roxy. That was the whole point of
her.

INT. GORDON HOUSE - ALEX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

A phone rings. Teenage Alex answers, sprawled on his bed,
waiting on a pizza.

**INTERCUT WITH: INT. KNICKS CITY DANCER'S APARTMENT -
CONTINUOUS**

His girlfriend, 18, gorgeous, a Knicks City Dancer, cradles the phone, giddy.

DANCER

Michael Jordan just called. He wants us to come hang at his hotel with Ahmad Rashad.

ALEX

What? Who? Bullshit.

DANCER

He said he'd give you a front row seat to tomorrow's game. And Air Jordans. With his signature.

Alex's face runs through an entire emotional decathlon in three seconds.

DAYDREAM -- INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN - COURTSIDE - CONTINUOUS

Alex, front row, head to toe in Bulls gear, hat sideways, feet on the hardwood. Two WALL STREET GUYS flank him, baffled at his seat.

ALEX

Michael Jordan is fucking my girlfriend!

The Wall Street guys roar and high-five over his head. Alex stares dead ahead, gutted.

BACK TO:

INT. GORDON HOUSE - ALEX'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

ALEX

Listen. I don't want the tickets.
What kinda guy wants sneakers with
some other guy's name on 'em? But
if you wanna go -- go. Just know
our relationship's about to change
dramatically.

DANCER

How on earth would it change?

ALEX

Honey child, you're dating a
Jewish guy seriously pondering
what to do with his life, and
you're talking about fucking the
greatest athlete of our time.
Things are gonna change.

He hangs up. Slams the toilet seat down in the next room
and sits on it, staring at the wall, replaying the winter
he waited outside her building a hundred days in a row with
a Polaroid camera to win her from another guy. Day 1. Day
3. She was his.

The doorbell rings. He shuffles to the door, head down,
digging for cash, assuming pizza.

He looks up. It's her. In full Knicks City Dancer uniform,
pom-poms in hand.

DANCER

I would never go. I'm with the
home team.

She shakes the pom-poms. He roars like he just dunked on
Jordan himself and pulls her into a hug.

ALEX (V.O.)

I never took my sweet dancer to
meet my mother, who was fervently
praying I'd meet a nice Jewish
girl. None of my New York girls
belonged to the tribe. Far from

it. And none was farther than the
Admiral's daughter.

INT. ADMIRAL STEELE'S APARTMENT - HALLWAY - NIGHT

4 A.M. Alex, drunk, tiptoes down a dark hallway with the exaggerated care of a cartoon burglar.

INT. GIRLFRIEND'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

He slips into bed beside his GIRLFRIEND, mid-teens, and they start moving under the sheets.

ALEX (V.O.)
Admiral Hercules Steele. Rhodes
scholar. Joint Chiefs of Staff.
I'd been thrown out of thirteen
schools. Kind of a well-rounded
education, but it paled in
comparison.

A clock reads 6 A.M. Alex's head pops up.

ALEX
Your folks going somewhere?

GIRLFRIEND
(*half-asleep*)
Washington. Both of them.

Satisfied, his head goes back down -- then pops up again.

ALEX
Your mother's never used your
bathroom before? Ever?

GIRLFRIEND
Never.

A light switches on under the door. Both of them freeze, mouth the same word:

ALEX / GIRLFRIEND

Shit.

She shoves him toward the bathroom. He argues for under the bed. She's adamant. He goes.

INT. GIRLFRIEND'S BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

A tiny, turn-of-the-century tub-toilet-sink combo. Alex, stark naked, hands cupped over himself, steps into the tub and yanks the curtain shut just as the door opens.

ALEX (V.O.)

(a whisper, pure prayer)

Please don't open the curtain.

Please. Just go in peace.

The toilet flushes. Footsteps. A pause that lasts several ice ages.

The curtain rips open.

MRS. STEELE, demure, mid-50s, headmistress of a very proper all-girls school, stares directly at a naked teenage boy in her bathtub.

MRS. STEELE

Oh my God.

ALEX

(slow, solemn, hands still cupped)

Ohhh myyy Goddd... is rightttttt.

She leaves. He gathers his clothes in a ball and flees down the back stairs, naked, dropping and re-collecting his underwear along the way.

INT. GORDON HOUSE - ALEX'S DESK - LATER (MONTAGE)

Alex, in a bathrobe, hunched over paper, writing with genuine remorse.

ALEX (V.O.)
(*writing*)

Dear Headmaster -- Words can't express how deeply sorry I am to have startled you like that. My only request is that this doesn't interfere with the relationship you have with your daughter. It was my fault. Sincerely, Alex.

He never saw her again. And he never hid in another bathtub. Twice was enough. The first time was Compo Beach.

ALEX (V.O.)
I filled my nights with anything that wasn't a hospital room. Some nights it even worked.

EXT. WALL STREET - SIDEWALK - DAY

Alex, 16, in his one ill-fitting suit, is swallowed by the crowd outside a brokerage. He looks like a kid dressed as his father for Halloween.

INT. TRADING FLOOR - CONTINUOUS

FITZPATRICK MCSORLEY, huge, red-faced, magnificently Irish, crushes Alex's hand in his.

FITZPATRICK
(*booze on every syllable*)
Fitzpatrick. Not "Fitzy." Not "Patty Boy." You haven't earned it.

He surveys his desk -- a dozen men, all hungover, all discussing lunch reservations, none of them working.

ALEX (V.O.)

In the time I spent there, I never actually saw anyone do any work. I could see having a career on Wall Street.

INT. P.J. CLARKE'S - BATHROOM - DAY

A vast, cathedral-white porcelain shrine of a men's room. Fitzpatrick gestures at it with the reverence of a man showing off the Sistine Chapel.

FITZPATRICK

Isn't it beautiful?

He's asked this every day, forgetting he asked it yesterday. Alex nods, sincerely impressed.

INT. FITZPATRICK'S HOUSE, STATEN ISLAND - HOLIDAY PARTY - NIGHT

A buffet table. Alex piles his plate high with a suspicious-looking dish labeled, on a little card, SHAMROCK SURPRISE. He inhales two full plates.

Cut to: Alex, sweating, cross-legged and desperate, waddling through the party in visible crisis, headed for the bathroom line.

INT. FITZPATRICK'S HOME BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

An exact replica of the P.J. Clarke's bathroom -- his pride and joy, recreated at home. Alex bolts the door, and immediately, catastrophically, loses the battle.

ALEX (V.O.)

It came out of me like lava.

He inspects the wreckage of his underwear, opens the small window above the toilet -- snow blowing in -- and with great ceremony, hurls the ruined underwear out into the blizzard.

INT. TRADING FLOOR - MONDAY

Fitzpatrick, uncharacteristically sober, uncharacteristically quiet, stares at a blank screen.

FITZPATRICK
Someone disrespected my home.

ALEX
(genuinely sympathetic)
How.

FITZPATRICK
(a vein rising in his neck)
Someone took a shit. In my beautiful white porcelain marble bathroom.

ALEX
Isn't that a good place for someone to take a dump?

FITZPATRICK
(standing, looming)
Not on my fucking sink.

MONTHS LATER -- INT. P.J. CLARKE'S - NIGHT

Alex, his FATHER, and Fitzpatrick at a table. Fitzpatrick, sober now for good, leans in close to Alex.

FITZPATRICK
The disrespect continues.

He tells it like a ghost story: driving home, a pair of small soiled underwear hanging from the tree outside his house. He thought it was Alex -- until he saw the initials sewn into the waistband.

FITZPATRICK (CONT'D)
Who the fuck puts their initials
in their own underwear!

Alex keeps his face a perfect, innocent blank. We know exactly whose initials -- A.J. Gordon -- his mother sewed into every piece of clothing he owns, a Jewish-mother tradition that has, this once, saved his life.

ALEX (V.O.)
My guardian angel had come to the
rescue. Again.

ALEX (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Looking back, I think humor was
the shield I hid behind -- a way
to camouflage the pain so the rest
of the world never had to see it.
Every joke, every girl, every
stupid stunt was just a welcome
distraction from a broken heart.

Under his words, faint at first, a Yiddish lullaby begins to play -- the same one, always, that soothed him to sleep every night of his life before she got sick.

ELIZABETH (V.O.)
(singing, distant, soft)
Sweet dreams, sugar plum. Sweet
dreams.

ALEX (V.O.) (CONT'D)
Junior year, my mother took a turn
for the worse. I was spending
every day I could at her bedside.

Which meant I forgot one small detail -- I wasn't enrolled in school anymore.

INT. MCBURNEY SCHOOL - HEADMASTER'S OFFICE - DAY

October. A month into the school year. Alex, dressed like he means business, sits across from a WEARY HEADMASTER.

ALEX
My mother's sick. I've been at the hospital instead of in school. I need to be enrolled. Today.

HEADMASTER
The school year started a month ago, son. I appreciate the plight, but there's nothing I can do.

Alex pulls a blank check from his pocket -- lifted, unasked, from his parents' bedroom -- and slides it across the desk.

ALEX
Make it out to you. Personally. Whatever it takes.

A long, uncomfortable silence. The Headmaster looks at the check. Looks at Alex.

HEADMASTER
...That would be fine.

Ten minutes later, Alex walks out with a stack of textbooks under one arm, already late for first period.

INT. MCBURNEY SCHOOL - HALLWAY - THREE WEEKS LATER

The Headmaster pulls Alex out of class, into the hall.

HEADMASTER
That check you wrote me. For
tuition. It bounced.

ALEX
(genuine disbelief)
You mean the check I gave you
personally, for the whole school's
tuition, bounced?

A beat. The absurdity lands on both of them at once. Alex
starts to grin.

HEADMASTER
You little shit.

ALEX
I'm gonna get back to class.

HEADMASTER
(a last, empty threat)
This isn't over.

ALEX
Actually, it really is.

He opens the classroom door and takes his seat, the
Headmaster still glaring through the glass. Alex can't stop
smiling.

**INT. MCBURNEY SCHOOL - HALLWAY, OUTSIDE "AMERICAN
EXCEPTIONALISM" - DAY (MONTAGE)**

A different door, further down the hall. Alex sits cross-
legged on the floor outside a classroom, ear close to the
gap, listening to a TEACHER'S voice inside drone on about
hope, hard work, the entrepreneurial spirit.

An ENGLISH TEACHER passes, sees him sitting there, doesn't
break stride.

ENGLISH TEACHER
In trouble again, Alex?

Alex doesn't answer. Doesn't move. Just keeps listening through the door.

This happens again. And again. Two weeks of it.

INT. MCBURNEY SCHOOL - HALLWAY - DAY

The English Teacher finally stops.

ENGLISH TEACHER
Why are you always getting thrown out of this class? What's your problem?

ALEX
I'm not in the class. This is my lunch period.

The teacher stares at him -- genuinely thrown.

ENGLISH TEACHER
You've been giving up your lunch. To sit outside a class you're not even enrolled in.

ALEX
It's a good class.

The teacher doesn't say anything else. Just looks at him a long moment, something shifting in his face.

INT. "AMERICAN EXCEPTIONALISM" CLASSROOM - DAY

The door opens. The teacher from inside steps out, takes Alex by the hand, and walks him into the room in front of the whole class.

CLASSROOM TEACHER
This is your seat. Going forward.

Alex sits. Doesn't say a word. Doesn't have to.

ALEX (V.O.)
Nobody had ever called me a good
student in my life. Turns out I
just hadn't found the right
subject yet.

INT. HOSPITAL - ELIZABETH'S ROOM - DAY

Elizabeth, weaker now, tubes threading in and out of her,
still finds the strength to squeeze his hand.

ELIZABETH
*(quiet, like she needs to say it
while she still can)*
Alex. Look at me. I don't care if
you're rich. I don't care if
you're famous. I only want one
thing from you, in this whole life.

ALEX
Anything. Name it.

ELIZABETH
Be a mensch. That's the whole
request. Whatever else you do,
wherever you end up -- be a mensch.

Alex nods, unable to speak past the lump in his throat.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)
I need you to promise me.

He pauses. Takes her hand. Leans in slow and kisses her
forehead, then whispers into her ear, soft, like it's just
between the two of them.

ALEX
(*a whisper*)
I promise.

She closes her eyes, spent, satisfied, like she's finally heard the only thing she needed to hear.

ALEX (V.O.)
I didn't know how to fix her. But
I knew how to answer her.

EXT. FIRST AVENUE, NYC MARATHON ROUTE - DAY

Alex, 17, exhausted, glorious, runs the last mile of the New York City Marathon. His shirt, hand-lettered: MENSCH.

He crosses the finish line at 3:35, foiled in a silver blanket, a medal placed around his neck.

INT. HOSPITAL - ELIZABETH'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

He walks straight from the finish line to his mother's bedside, still wrapped in foil, and drapes the marathon medal around her neck instead.

ALEX
You're always number one with me.

He rests his head on her chest, listening to her heartbeat under the thin hospital blanket. A tape recorder plays a scratchy Yiddish lullaby.

ELIZABETH
(*weak, but there*)
Sweet dreams, sugar plum.

EXT. FIFTH AVENUE - DAY

Alex, head down, leaving the hospital, replaying the day.
He doesn't see her coming.

MAGDALENA, 14, built like she could bench-press him, steps
directly into his path and decks him. He goes down hard.

ALEX (V.O.)
Magdalena had already beaten me up
five times that month. This made
an even six.

He gets up, rubbing his jaw. She's still standing there,
fists loose, waiting to see if he'll come back for more.

MAGDALENA
We're dating now.

ALEX
(rubbing his jaw)
...Okay.

MAGDALENA
Good. Walk me home.

She grabs his hand -- not gently -- and starts walking.
Baffled, bruised, Alex has no choice but to follow.

EXT. NEIGHBORHOOD STREETS - CONTINUOUS (MONTAGE)

Day after day: the same six blocks, hand in hand, saying
almost nothing. She swings their arms like a kid. Despite
himself, he starts looking forward to it.

ALEX (V.O.)
Turned out all she ever wanted,
the whole time, was someone to
hold hands with. Took six beatings
to get there. Still the cheapest,
most honest relationship I ever
had.

At his stoop, she squeezes his hand once, hard, and lets go.

MAGDALENA

Same time tomorrow.

She walks off without waiting for an answer. Alex watches her go, smiling despite the bruise blooming on his jaw.

INT. HOSPITAL - COUNSELOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Alex sits, head down, arms crossed, across from a HOSPITAL COUNSELOR.

COUNSELOR

You know your mother's going to die, Alex.

Something ignites behind Alex's eyes. SexyHeeb rises up behind him like a shadow gaining mass.

ALEX

(standing, very quiet, very lethal)

I'm not going to talk about my mother's death in here. While she's still out there. Fighting for her life.

COUNSELOR

I'll see you soon, Alex.

Alex turns in the doorway.

ALEX

I can see you outside right now if you want, motherfucker.

SexyHeeb's hand lands on his shoulder, cooling him. Alex walks out.

INT. HOSPITAL - ELIZABETH'S ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Alex leans over his sleeping mother, kisses her forehead.

ALEX
I love you with all my heart.
Please be strong.

EXT. SAMMY'S ROMANIAN STEAK HOUSE - NIGHT

Neon over a Brooklyn basement restaurant that looks like the world's loudest Bar Mitzvah. Inside: SAMMY, tiny, drenched in gold jewelry, works the room like a Jewish Mr. T. An organ player, DANI LUV -- unshaven, balding, beaming -- pounds out Yiddish rock and roll.

Sammy spots two clueless tourists.

SAMMY
What have we here! Mother Teresa
and a shiksa with big titsas! We
don't discriminate -- we're Jewish!

He stamps the younger woman's hand: SAMMY - 917 - JEW LOVE.

Alex, at a back table with his FATHER'S FRIENDS, does shots of frozen Absolut, arm in arm, swaying to Dani Luv.

FATHER'S FRIEND
Don't worry. He'll be here. Your
family's always late. You know
this.

Sammy, drunk, hits on SHERMA -- huge, leather jacket that reads MAZEL TUFF across the back, unmistakably a biker.

SAMMY
This is the only Jewish Hells
Angel I know.
(squeezing her arm)

Your parents feed you yeast
growing up?

Sherma gives him a look that could strip paint. Sammy backs away fast.

The door opens. Alex's FATHER stands in it, soaked from rain, wearing a trench coat, his face a landscape of grief.

The whole restaurant seems to go quiet at once.

ALEX
Papa. Is everything okay? Is
Mother --

His father takes Alex's face in both hands.

FATHER
My poor Alex. My poor Alex.
(he can't look at him)
Your mother died.

The sound that comes out of Alex is not a word. It comes from somewhere underneath language. He collapses against his father's wet shoulder and doesn't feel the rain at all.

FATHER (CONT'D)
Come meet me tomorrow. At the
deli. We have things to discuss.

Around them, one by one, his father's friends rise from their table and circle the two of them in a single, wordless embrace. Dani Luv, without being asked, begins to play something achingly gentle in Yiddish.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR (NIGHTMARE) - NIGHT

Elizabeth, weak, drags an IV stand down an endless white corridor. Two NURSES enter her room, begin to draw a sheet over her face.

Her eyes snap open at the last second.

ELIZABETH
Help me, Alex. Help me.

The sheet covers her. Alex fights toward her, held back by hands that multiply the harder he struggles.

ALEX
She's alive! Dammit, she's alive!

SMASH CUT TO:

A COFFIN. Alex in a black suit, shovel in hand, watching himself from inside the grave as dirt rains down on the casket like black snow.

Now he's inside the coffin. The dirt falls on him. Everything goes black.

INT. GORDON HOUSE - ALEX'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Alex bolts upright, drenched, gasping. He stumbles to the bathroom, runs the cold tap, and buries his face in the sink.

INT. GORDON HOUSE - GYM/STORAGE ROOM - MORNING

Alex laces up gloves. Starts working a heavy bag. Each punch cracks the air like a whip.

A MONTAGE, memory braided into the rhythm of the bag:

-- Young Alex at the dining table, talking with his whole body, his mother watching, delighted, just to watch him talk.

CRACK.

-- Alex, seven, bursting into his parents' bedroom, faking illness with total conviction. "I am a very sick little boy." His mother, skeptical, taking his temperature the old-fashioned way -- and a small domestic disaster

involving a lost thermometer, ending in the two of them laughing so hard they can't breathe.

CRACK.

-- Alex twirling his mother around the kitchen. "I'll take you to Paris. Rome. Venice." She laughs, radiant, a woman made of light.

CRACK. The bag flies backward on its chain.

-- Elizabeth in a hospital bed, not moving. Alex pulls back the blanket. Blood, impossibly, pours from her stomach, and he's pushing at it with both hands, screaming for help that doesn't come.

He stops. Chest heaving. Staring at his own fists. For a moment we see him -- and SexyHeeb, standing where he stands, wearing his face.

INT. KATZ'S DELICATESSEN - BOOTH - DAY

Neon glows even in daylight through the window: KATZ'S. Alex's father sits across from him, a plate of untouched pastrami between them.

A WAITRESS, ancient, kind, an enormous wig slightly askew.

WAITRESS

Hello, bubala. I heard. I'm so sorry, boychick.

FATHER

Listen, Avrum.

(using Alex's Hebrew name)

Your mother and I always wanted the best for you. But we also wanted you to be a mensch. It was very important to her.

He reaches into his coat, produces an envelope. Alex snatches it before he can finish the sentence.

ALEX (V.O.)
(reading, in his mother's voice)
My dearest son. I hope you won't
have to read this letter for a
long time, but I feel tired. Very
tired. By the time you're reading
this, I will have died.

He looks up at his father. His father nods: keep going.

ALEX (V.O.) (CONT'D)
I don't want you to be mad, Alex.
I want you to remember me when I
was healthy, happy, full of life
-- not with all these phcockta
tubes in me. I want you to be a
mensch. And I have one request for
my final resting place. I want to
be buried in Israel. With people I
know. People I understand.

He puts the letter down. Stares at his father. His father
slides a plane ticket across the table.

FATHER
I've made all the arrangements.
They'll pick up the coffin when
you land. You leave tomorrow.

Alex wipes mustard off his lips he doesn't remember putting
on. He's lost his appetite entirely.

INT. EL AL 747 - NIGHT

Alex, window seat, watching the sunset burn out over the
wing. In the aisle, Hasidic men sway in prayer. Beside him,
an OLD WOMAN chatters away about her family, about a nice
girl she wants to introduce him to. He barely hears her.

He closes the window shade. Shuts his eyes.

ALEX (V.O.)

My mother comes into my room, and
tucks me in, and sings me a
Yiddish lullaby.

ELIZABETH (V.O.)
Sweet dreams, sugar plum.

FADE OUT.

EXT. BEN GURION AIRPORT - NIGHT

Alex steps off the jet bridge into a wall of noise -- families screaming with joy, reuniting, weeping. He watches the old woman from the plane vanish into a crowd of relatives. She turns back, waves at him, warm. He feels, for a second, sorry he didn't listen to her.

EXT. BEN GURION AIRPORT - CURB - CONTINUOUS

A gleaming white four-door convertible waits at the curb, hand-painted -- unmistakably, beautifully -- like the Israeli flag: two blue stripes, a Star of David centered on the door. Alex stops dead.

SEXYHEEB leans against the hood, arms crossed, grinning like he's been waiting his whole life for exactly this moment.

SEXYHEEB
Get in. Let me show you my country.

ALEX
(staring at the car)
What is that?

SEXYHEEB
Home. Get in.

Alex gets in.

EXT. TEL AVIV STREETS - CONTINUOUS (MONTAGE)

SexyHeeb drives with the top down, one hand loose on the wheel, the whole city alive around them: couples dancing in a square to music spilling out of a bar, old men playing backgammon at a sidewalk cafe over Turkish coffee, teenagers racing each other into the surf at midnight, a wedding procession stopping traffic, everyone honking and cheering instead of complaining.

SEXYHEEB

(over the wind, the music, the noise)

Everybody thinks they know this place before they've ever been here. Sad, angry, only the news. They never show you this part.

Alex tips his head back, eyes closed, and something in the smell of the air -- dust, jasmine, diesel, orange blossom -- hits him like a fist.

ALEX (V.O.)

I've been in this country only a few minutes, and it's already filled my whole body with memories of my mother.

SexyHeeb glances over, catches something in his face, and doesn't say a word -- just reaches over and turns the music up instead of asking him about it.

EXT. URI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

The Cadillac pulls up outside. SexyHeeb doesn't get out.

SEXYHEEB

This is you.

ALEX
You're not coming in?

SEXYHEEB
Not tonight.

Alex climbs out, watches the Cadillac -- Israel itself,
somehow, wrapped around a car -- pull away into the dark.

Alex rings the bell.

Alex rings the bell. The door opens on URI, 50s, big,
husky, grey now threading through what was once jet black
hair.

A white card flickers into frame -- URI -- then dissolves.

URI
Alex?

He pulls Alex into a crushing hug.

URI (CONT'D)
Shalom, shalom, my old friend.
What a fine young man you've
turned into.
(reading his face)
I'm so sorry, Alex. She was a very
special woman.

ALEX
Is there a flight out tomorrow
night?

URI
(taken aback)
Alex. You just got here.

ALEX
I have to get home.

Uri studies him -- there's more going on behind those eyes than jet lag -- and lets it go for now.

URI
I'll look into it.

He leads Alex through the house. Past the couch where, once, a family of three sat rapt while Uri told war stories. Past the kitchen, where through the screen door, a young man works in the garden -- HALEB, early 20s, olive-skinned, handsome, with eyes that carry more history than his face should.

A white card flickers into frame -- HALEB -- then dissolves.

Haleb looks up. He and Alex regard each other a long beat. Then Haleb goes back to work.

URI
That's Haleb. Works for me
sometimes. From a village near
Hebron. Very good gardener.

At the door to the guest room, Uri pauses.

URI (CONT'D)
I'm really so sorry about your
mother, Alex. G'night.

He shuts the door gently. Alex hears him linger there a moment before his footsteps recede.

EXT. THE JEWISH CEMETERY, MOUNT OF OLIVES - DAY

Rows upon rows of pale stone, Hebrew script, Stars of David, stretching down the hillside toward the golden walls of the Old City. Three thousand years of the dead, resting in the same dirt.

A RABBI in black waits beside the open grave. SexyHeeb stands just behind Alex, closer than a shadow, one hand

resting on his shoulder -- quieter now than we've ever seen him.

The rabbi recites the Mourner's Kaddish in Hebrew. Alex repeats it, haltingly, in a language that isn't quite his.

He kneels, finds a small stone, and sets it by where she'll rest.

RABBI

Would you like to say something?

Alex says nothing. He's somewhere else -- back at the end of a jetty, his mother's arm around him, watching a sun go down over Compo Beach.

RABBI (CONT'D)

Would you like to say something?

He kneels at the open grave. Reaches his hand in, touches the white shroud.

ALEX

(a whisper)

I'm the last one to touch you. And
you're the last one to touch me.

He stands. Turns to the rabbi.

ALEX (CONT'D)

I don't have anything to say. But
I have a song.

Across the cemetery, unbelievably, impossibly, DANI LUV sits behind a full-sized organ that has no business being here, waiting for his cue. Alex nods. Dani Luv begins the intro to "Your Song."

Alex closes his eyes. His mother's voice rises inside him, and he lets it carry the words out into the air over her grave.

ALEX (CONT'D)

(singing, quiet, cracking)
Anyway, the thing is, what I
really mean... yours are the
sweetest eyes I've ever seen...

INT. URI'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - DAY

Alex sits alone with a cup of Turkish coffee, hollowed out.
Haleb enters, quiet.

HALEB
I heard of your mother's death.
I'm sorry for your loss.

Alex motions to the chair across from him.

ALEX
Turkish coffee?

Haleb sits, visibly surprised to be served rather than
serving.

HALEB
How long do you plan on staying?

ALEX
(surprising himself)
A few weeks, I think. I've decided
to see the country.

He asks Haleb to the beach tomorrow. Haleb, politely,
declines -- work to do -- and Alex, exhausted past words,
heads to bed.

EXT. TEL AVIV BEACH - DAY

A beach so packed it looks like the whole country came out
at once. The tick-tock of matkot paddles fills the air like
crickets.

Alex, picking his way toward an empty patch of sand, stops dead. A woman rises from her towel nearby, brushing sand from long legs, dark curls catching the light.

This is DAFNA, 19, striking, unmistakably Israeli, unmistakably not interested in being stared at.

A white card flickers into frame -- DAFNA -- then dissolves.

Time seems to slow. The matkot balls seem to slow with it.

A ball smacks Alex directly in the back of the head. Reality resumes at full speed. Dafna is already swimming toward a jetty a few yards out. Alex, undeterred, sets his blanket beside hers and follows, climbing out onto the rocks to sit next to her.

ALEX

Hi. I saw you in the water -- was worried about you. Sharks out here.

She looks at him, half-amused, half-unimpressed.

DAFNA

I understand you.

ALEX

You do? All right. I'm Alex.

DAFNA

Dafna.

He extends a hand, absurdly formal. She shakes it, smiling despite herself.

They talk. She's from a kibbutz outside Tel Aviv. He's from New York, "on vacation." He spots a cluster of soldiers walking the sand in full fatigues and, fatally, can't resist a joke.

ALEX

Look at those guys. It's eighty degrees, everyone's in a Speedo, and they're walking around in fatigues.

The temperature between them drops forty degrees.

DAFNA

(cold)

They're protecting the country.
Protecting us.

ALEX

(digging deeper)

Here? On the beach?

DAFNA

I'm in the army too.

ALEX

You just don't seem the type.

DAFNA

Type? Type!

(standing now, furious)

If you're Jewish and healthy, you go. We don't get the luxury of college first. We serve. Three years. To stay alive. When have you ever had to fight for anything in your life?

ALEX

(overconfident, underprepared)

I'm from New York City, Manhattan.
I fight every day.

DAFNA

All you care about is your resume.
Have you ever seen one with
"service" on it? Not just

military. Any kind. To your country, your neighborhood, your people. At the end, it's not what you gave that matters most -- it's what you learned. That's how you become somebody.

ALEX

Listen, I didn't mean --

DAFNA

I'd rather take my chances with the sharks than with you.

She dives in and swims for shore, gone. All that's left on the rocks: a pair of hand tambourines, half-buried in sand.

ALEX (V.O.)

She's one of the great ones.

Another ball hits him in the back of the head.

INT. URI'S HOUSE - KITCHEN - NIGHT

Uri, Haleb, and Alex share Israeli salad, hummus, warm pita -- from Haleb's own garden. Alex, several shots of Ouzo deep, is telling the whole sorry story of Dafna.

Uri and Haleb look at each other and burst out laughing.

URI

Alex, you've met your first Israeli cactus.

ALEX

My first Israeli what?

URI

Israeli cactus. Israeli women. Strong, smart, gorgeous, and not

afraid to say exactly what they think. Hard on the outside, like a cactus. But once they trust you -- let you in -- sweet as maple syrup underneath.

(a beat)

The women run the army, Alex.
Without them, it doesn't function.
Without them, we don't exist.

Alex rises, raises his glass, a little unsteady.

ALEX

To the Israeli cactuses.

He stumbles off to bed, muttering her name into the dark like a spell.

EXT. HALEB'S GARDEN - MORNING

Alex wanders out, coffee in hand, and finds Haleb finishing his prayers, facing Mecca. When he rises, his face is transformed -- open, warm, lit from inside, a total stranger to the guarded man Alex met at the door.

Butterflies -- yellow, blue, orange -- drift everywhere through a riot of color Haleb clearly built with his own two hands. A tiny, walled Eden.

ALEX (V.O.)

Everything here seems connected.
And with all the hate and
divisiveness surrounding us just
outside these walls -- this garden
feels like an oasis.

Alex watches, thinking of a caterpillar pressing against the walls of its own cocoon, wanting to change into something it can't yet picture. He hugs Haleb, unprompted. From the screen door, Uri watches the two of them, quietly moved.

EXT. TEL AVIV CENTRAL BUS STATION - DAY

A shopping-mall-sized terminal, soldiers everywhere, total organized chaos -- Alex, a fish entirely out of water, gawks at it like Times Square.

He spots a line of female soldiers. Dafna. In uniform, hair pulled back, unmistakable.

ALEX
(*too loud, too eager*)
Dafna!

He jogs over. Her friends give him a look that could curdle milk. Dafna herself keeps her eyes forward.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Hey -- so, you're a soldier.
Listen, I didn't mean to offend
you. But with all this chaos
around us, I think there's a
reason we found each other again.

Nothing. The line moves. She boards the bus without a word, takes a window seat, and looks straight through him as the bus pulls away.

He watches it go, oddly, stupidly upbeat.

ALEX (V.O.)
That didn't go how I hoped. But
wow. Did she look amazing.

EXT./INT. TEL AVIV MUSEUM - DAY

Alex trails behind a tour group in oversized red beanies through a hall of black-and-white photographs: Jews beaten, driven, murdered in the pogroms of the Russian Empire.

TOUR GUIDE (O.S.)
The Jews were forbidden to move to
other parts of the Empire, unless
they converted...

His voice fades under a sound Alex recognizes instantly -- a Yiddish lullaby, playing softly through hidden speakers, the same one mothers once sang to drown out the sound of horror on the other side of a door.

Alex stops walking. The tour group moves on without him. He stands alone in front of the wall of photographs, eyes closed, and for a moment he's a small boy again, tucked in, his mother's voice close to his ear.

ELIZABETH (V.O.)
Sweet dreams, sugar plum. Sweet
dreams.

He opens his eyes. The atrocities are still there. So is the song.

EXT. IDF ARMY BASE - GATE - DAY

Alex, standing at a guard shack, asks his way to a small office. Inside: a row of desks, soldiers facing each other doing paperwork. Dafna, at one of them.

He knocks, leans against the doorframe with false confidence.

ALEX
Hello, Dafna.

She's on her feet and has him by the arm and out into the hallway before anyone else can react.

DAFNA
(furious, mortified)
What are you doing here? This is
where I work!
(shoving a hand near his face)
You come and chase me and think
you're impressing someone?

ALEX

I just wanted to talk.

DAFNA

Talk? I know what you want, Alex.
Go back to America. Play your
silly games there. You believe in
nothing.

*(walking away, turning back one
more time)*

Go home, Alex. Just go home.

The office door shuts. Alex stands alone in the hallway,
thoroughly gutted.

ALEX (V.O.)

The inside of a cactus is like
maple syrup. Yeah. Right.

EXT. YAD VASHEM - HOLOCAUST MUSEUM - DAY

Alex moves alone through the museum, past a photograph that
stops him cold: a wall of children's shoes. A recording
plays names and ages on a loop, over and over, more than a
million and a half of them.

He sits down hard on the nearest bench and closes his eyes,
sick.

When he opens them, a sign points him toward a small side
exhibit: "THE HOPE." A WOMAN at the door explains --
everyone he'll meet inside is an actor. The idea is to
feel, for one hour, what it was to be a Jew in Europe in
the 1930s and '40s.

Alex, being Alex, walks in.

INT. "THE HOPE" - IMMERSIVE EXHIBIT - CONTINUOUS

He's handed rags to wear, a yellow star stitched over the
heart. A door blinks ENTER in three languages. He steps
through.

A cobblestone German street, flags snapping, storefronts marked JUDE, glass already broken. A young boy points at him.

BOY (ACTOR)

Mother, look. It's a dirty, filthy Jew.

The mother spits at his feet and pulls her son away. Young men in lederhosen shove Alex against a wall. A huge SS OFFICER (ACTOR) pushes through, demands papers, slaps him -- and pulls an old passport from Alex's own pocket that Alex never remembers being given.

SS OFFICER (ACTOR)

Alex Gordon. Is that you? Where are you from!

ALEX

(genuinely rattled)

New York City. Manhattan.

A shopkeeper (ACTOR) grabs his hand, hisses at him to run, points to a door blinking ENTER across the street. Alex runs, soldiers screaming "HALT!" behind him, and gets through just as a shot cracks the air.

He's caught immediately by a BLONDE GIRL (ACTOR) carrying an armful of books, who kisses him hello like they're old sweethearts.

BLONDE GIRL (ACTOR)

Alex! There you are. Help me with these, silly.

A procession marches past in brown shirts and swastika armbands, jovial, singing. She pulls him along. He looks down at the book in his own arms: Heinrich Heine. May 10, 1937. The book burnings.

A banner over the bonfire: WHERE THEY BURN BOOKS, THEY WILL ULTIMATELY BURN PEOPLE.

He grips the book instead of throwing it in.

BLONDE GIRL (ACTOR) (CONT'D)
Why aren't you throwing yours in?
What's wrong with you today?

ALEX
(*quiet, furious*)
Don't you ever kiss me again. You
anti-Semitic bitch.

He finds the next ENTER, this time walking, not running,
through it.

INT. "THE HOPE" - UNDER THE FLOORBOARDS - CONTINUOUS

Total dark. An OLD MAN (ACTOR) presses a finger to his
lips. His WIFE and DAUGHTER (ACTORS) huddle close. Sawdust
rains down as boots pace directly overhead.

GERMAN VOICE (O.S.)
If you are harboring Jews, you are
also an enemy of Germany. Your
family will be killed.

The hatch is ripped open. Rough hands pull the family up
and out, screaming. The little girl grips Alex's hand.

GIRL (ACTOR)
Don't be afraid, Alex. I'm here
with you.

Her hand is torn from his as she's dragged up and away.
Alex crawls, ashamed, to the next glowing door.

INT. "THE HOPE" - THE TRAIN / THE CAMP - CONTINUOUS

A wooden boxcar, packed with bodies, no air, the stink of
human desperation. A whistle. Motion. When the door finally
slides open, blinding sunlight, barking dogs, an SS OFFICER

(ACTOR) with a bullhorn: "MEN ONE LINE, WOMEN AND CHILDREN THE OTHER. MACH SCHNELL."

An old man is shot in the head for stumbling. Alex, exhausted, sees one last door, red letters this time: EXIT. He runs the gauntlet toward it, a whip and a gunshot missing him by inches, and falls through.

INT. "THE HOPE" - THE SHOWER ROOM - CONTINUOUS

A long, single-file line through a field of impossible beauty -- flowers, dandelion seed drifting on a breeze -- toward a long cement building with two chimneys. An old woman ahead of him smiles, relieved to finally get a hot shower and a bowl of soup.

Alex looks around: the greenery has gone black and dead without him noticing when it happened.

They funnel into a cold, windowless room. No showerheads. Scratch marks score every wall.

The same little girl from beneath the floor finds his hand again.

GIRL (ACTOR)
Hello, Alex.

He picks her up, holds her tight. The lights die. Fog fills the room. Screaming, then silence, then nothing.

The lights snap back on. The girl in his arms opens her eyes.

GIRL (ACTOR) (CONT'D)
Are you okay, Alex?

He's crying and can't stop. Loudspeakers, hidden somewhere, begin to play "Hatikvah" -- the actors, one by one, joining in, quiet and solemn.

INT. "THE HOPE" - RECEPTION - CONTINUOUS

The cast, out of character now, greet participants. The little girl explains her grandmother died in the Holocaust; she volunteers once a month, unpaid, in her honor.

The SS officer -- actually UZI, a retired paratroop general -- shakes Alex's hand.

UZI

It's important the next generation doesn't forget. That they learn to serve.

ALEX

Was the slapping really necessary?

UZI

(dead serious)

Was it?

Alex meets ESTER, the old woman from the "shower," who lost her parents, both brothers, and a twin sister in the camps. She volunteers to honor them. To teach the world to say Never Again.

ALEX (V.O.)

Serve. They all felt it was an honor to serve. I thought of what Dafna said, on the beach. To really add value. To be part of something.

A final poster on his way out: NEVER AGAIN, in bold black letters.

EXT. MOUNT HERZL, ISRAEL'S MILITARY CEMETERY - DAY

Rows and rows of graves stretch to the horizon. Alex reads the ages carved into the stone: nineteen. Eighteen. Seventeen. His age. His friends' age, back home, worrying about finals and prom dates.

He passes a TEENAGE GIRL hugging a headstone, sobbing, inconsolable.

ALEX
(*quiet*)
I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

He walks on, faster now, wind picking up, storm clouds rolling in.

ALEX (V.O.)
She died too young. Only forty-two. And she was more pissed off about it than anyone.
(*beat*)
Being a Jew makes me stand fucking tall. SexyHeeb in me will never bend, or kneel.
(*beat*)
This land is my mother now. And I need to protect her.

INT. ALEX'S ROOM, URI'S HOUSE - NIGHT (DREAM)

Alex stands alone at the end of the Compo Beach jetty, moonlight hard on black water, the wood slick under his bare feet. He stares down at it, working up the nerve, afraid.

Below, in the water: young Alex, tiny, arms wrapped tight around the buoy, cheek pressed to it like it's his mother's shoulder. Safe. At peace.

Back on the jetty, older Alex starts to lower himself toward the water --

-- and the water goes wrong. Dark. Furious. It rises and curls and takes on a shape too large, too deliberate, to be weather -- something ancient and enraged, towering over the rocks.

ALEX
(*a whisper*)

What the hell is happening.

The wave breaks toward the jetty. Alex turns and runs, bare feet slapping rock, the whole ocean roaring up behind him, swallowing the jetty plank by plank as he goes.

He doesn't make it. The water closes over him completely.

Total black. Total silence.

SEXYHEEB (V.O.)
*(a voice we have not heard
narrate before -- calm, older,
certain of itself)*
You don't run from this. Not
anymore.

INT. ALEX'S ROOM, URI'S HOUSE - NIGHT

Alex bolts upright in bed, soaked in sweat, gasping. And underneath his own breathing -- real sound, not dream sound -- sirens. Something heavy going off, close, again and again.

He stumbles to the window. Down the street, smoke over the rooftops, emergency lights strobing red and blue.

INT. URI'S HOUSE - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Uri stands frozen in front of the television, hand over his mouth. Onscreen, a NEWS ANCHOR speaks over footage of a cordoned-off street, stretchers, sheets.

NEWS ANCHOR (V.O.)
(on TV)
...confirming multiple casualties
in tonight's attack. Emergency
services remain on scene...

Only Alex turns -- toward something no one else in the room reacts to. In the doorway, visible to him and no one else, SEXYHEEB staggers into frame -- shirt torn, one eye already

swelling shut, blood at his hairline -- and goes down, though nothing in the room actually moves, nothing actually falls.

ALEX
(*horrified*)
SexyHeeb!

Uri doesn't flinch. Doesn't turn. His eyes stay locked on the television, entirely undisturbed -- there is nothing there for him to see.

Alex drops to his knees anyway, hands hovering over something no one else believes is on the floor.

SEXYHEEB
(*almost nothing, under his
breath*)
I tried to save them.

Alex looks up. Uri still hasn't moved from the television, its light flickering across his face, utterly unaware anything has happened at all.

Alex crosses the room and shuts the television off himself.

ALEX
I want to join the Israeli Army. I
want to be a soldier.

Uri stands, crosses to him, hand on his shoulder.

URI
Calm down. You've just watched
something terrible happen.

ALEX
I don't want to calm down. I've
changed. I need this.

Uri turns to leave. Alex catches his arm, spins him back around.

ALEX (CONT'D)

Don't give me that shit, Uri. You don't remember? When I was a boy -- right here, on that couch -- you'd finish your stories and turn to me and ask, "So, young Alex, when are you going to fulfill your obligation as a Jew and come fight for Israel?"

(beat)

That time is now. I'm ready now. I've screwed up a lot in my life. This is my chance to do something good. My mother always wanted me to be a mensch. I've got to be part of it. I've got to serve. This is the only way I know how.

Uri studies him for a long moment.

URI

What about finishing school?

ALEX

School and I were finished a long time ago.

URI

You need to tell your father.

ALEX

I will. But I need you on my side. I know you can get me through the red tape.

URI

(a long beat)

Are you really sure you want this?

Alex doesn't blink. Doesn't answer. Just stares back at him.

URI (CONT'D)
Okay, Alex. Okay. It will be done.

EXT. URI'S HOUSE - MORNING

SexyHeeb leans against the Cadillac, favoring one side, still scarred up from that night -- a fading bruise under one eye, a butterfly bandage at his hairline. He tosses Alex the keys.

SEXYHEEB
You drive.

ALEX
I don't know this car.

SEXYHEEB
Now's a good time to learn.

Alex catches the keys. SexyHeeb lowers himself into the passenger seat, stubborn, waving off Alex's hand before it even gets to him.

EXT. SEXYHEEB'S CADILLAC - RECRUITMENT CENTER - DAY

Alex pulls up outside a grim government building, the white Cadillac absurdly bright against the concrete. Beside him, SexyHeeb rides shotgun, quiet, watching the building with him. Alex, visibly nervous, pats his pockets.

ALEX
I can't find my underwear.

SEXYHEEB
Go without.

Passing the garden, Alex calls out to Haleb, who doesn't turn around, doesn't answer -- pretends not to hear. Alex, confused, late, lets it go.

Back in the car, SexyHeeb looks over, uncharacteristically solemn.

SEXYHEEB

You'll have to do more than survive. You're going to be different than the others, Alex. More will be expected of you.

He leans across and slaps Alex across the face -- affectionately, a ritual, wincing with the effort of it.

SEXYHEEB (CONT'D)

Make us proud, boychik.

ALEX

(rubbing his cheek)

Why does everyone in this country slap me in the face?

INT. RECRUITMENT CENTER - MEDICAL WING - DAY

Alex and a handful of other RECRUITS are herded into a small room lined with coat hooks. A DOCTOR rattles off instructions in Hebrew and leaves. The other recruits start undressing calmly. Alex, wanting to be first, wanting to impress somebody, strips at lightning speed and marches proudly through the nearest door --

INT. RECRUITMENT CENTER - GENERAL OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

-- which turns out to be a regular administrative office. Doctors, nurses, secretaries. All of them turn and stare at a naked American teenager, hands cupped, dead center of the room.

DOCTOR

You don't speak Hebrew?

ALEX
No.

DOCTOR
Go put on your underwear.

ALEX
I don't have any underwear.

DOCTOR
Go put on your pants.

Humiliated, delighted, Alex retreats to a chorus of laughter from the other recruits.

INT. RECRUITMENT CENTER - EXAM CURTAIN - LATER

A line of nervous boys in underwear. A huge, unsmiling NURSE calls names one at a time behind a curtain. Each recruit yelps and reappears, adjusting himself.

One BRASH RECRUIT ahead of Alex winks his way behind the curtain -- comes out holding his own slapped cheek, grinning through tears.

BRASH RECRUIT
She loved it.

NURSE (O.S.)
Gordon! Gordon!

Alex steps behind the curtain, drops his pants. The nurse looks down, then up, unimpressed but startled.

NURSE (CONT'D)
Oy gevalt.

ALEX
Be gentle.

A scream loud enough to be heard in Jerusalem.

EXT. RECRUITMENT CENTER - COURTYARD - DAY

Alex sweeps outside a barrack, sitting beside AVICHI, a small, wiry Ethiopian recruit with long dreadlocks and a permanent, unimpressed cool.

A white card flickers into frame -- AVICHI -- then dissolves.

AVICHI
Hey, enough of that shit, mon.
Come have a drag.

ALEX
You speak English?

AVICHI
What's it sound like, Japanese,
mon?

They introduce themselves. Avichi tells his story plainly, without self-pity: Gondar, Ethiopia. Forbidden to farm, forbidden to worship, starving. Operation Solomon -- 14,000 Ethiopian Jews airlifted to Israel in thirty-six hours, planes stripped of seats to fit more bodies. Avichi came disguised as a night diver, ferried out by the Mossad, met by Israeli Navy Seals.

AVICHI (CONT'D)
You have any family?

ALEX
No. I'm by myself.

AVICHI
Ah. Chail Boded. Lone soldier.
(a beat, sizing him up)

We're both here for something,
mon. I'm here to find a home.
You're here to find yourself.

Alex likes that. A friendship, instantly, without ceremony.

INT. RECRUITMENT TENT - DAY

Alex stands at attention before four decorated OFFICERS.
The one in the center, exhausted eyes, studies him a long
moment.

OFFICER
American?

ALEX
New York City. Manhattan.

OFFICER
What can I do for you?

ALEX
I want to be part of it. The
Paratroopers.

OFFICER
Sanchaneem. Fighting unit.
Commando unit.

ALEX
I know.

OFFICER
You know.
(writing)
First, three months of Hebrew
school.

ALEX

No.

The officer stops writing.

OFFICER

No?

ALEX

This is a one-time deal. I don't
have time for classrooms. I'll
learn it as I go.

OFFICER

*(to the ceiling, to God, to no
one)*

He'll learn it as he goes.

(to Alex)

Listen, Gordon -- I own you. We
own you. You will do as you're
told. Understand?

Alex doesn't move an inch.

OFFICER (CONT'D)

What is it, the red beret? The
boots?

ALEX

It's never been about how I look.
I'm from New York. I wear black
all the time. It's what we do.

*(a beat, and something more
honest slips through)*

I've been dreaming about this
since I was a boy. That dream
never had me sitting in a
classroom.

OFFICER

It will be very difficult. You
will only be with Israelis. These
men are tough.

ALEX
I'm from New York City. I'm very
tough.

A long beat. The officer almost smiles.

OFFICER
Okay, okay. I'll be watching you.
(as Alex turns to go)
Gordon. First you have to pass the
test.

EXT. DESERT TRAINING GROUND - DAY - "THE TEST" MONTAGE

Eight brutal hours. Three SERGEANTS scream commands in a
language Alex doesn't speak.

SERGEANT
Zooz! Zooz! Zooz!

ALEX
(to Avichi, hauling a stretcher)
What the hell does that mean?!

AVICHI
To move, mon! Zooz means move your
bomboclat!

Recruits drag hundred-pound sandbags through mud under
barbed wire. Alex, exhausted, helps a struggling soldier
finish his own pass. Across the field, one recruit stands
out -- fast, focused, dark-haired, entirely alone even in a
crowd. This is AARON.

A white card flickers into frame -- AARON -- then
dissolves.

He and Alex trade a wary look mid-sprint. Neither likes what he sees.

A recruit lies about how many passes he completed under the wire. He's cut on the spot, walking off in tears -- no favors here, not even for the son of the base commander.

Sit-ups in the surf, backs to the sea, waves crashing down without warning, dragging under. Recruit after recruit taps out, choking. Alex closes his eyes and thinks of a buoy. Thinks of holding on. Keeps counting.

By sunset, seventy percent have dropped. The survivors shower and are handed new uniforms.

ALEX (V.O.)
It's one of the proudest days of
my life. They didn't win. We did.

ELIZABETH (V.O.)
With me, you're always number one.

EXT. ARMY BASE - BARRACKS - DAY

Heads get shaved in a row. Aaron's long hair falls away to reveal something harder underneath. Avichi's dreadlocks go too.

ALEX
(*terrible Jamaican accent*)
Ya, mon, what a handsome guy!

Avichi, freshly bald, is not amused.

INT. BARRACKS - NIGHT

Under a bedsheet, flashlight on, Alex scribbles in a journal by hand.

ALEX (V.O.)

It's the Hebrew. I'm lost. I know
a few words: zooz, to move. Stoke,
to shut up.

(beat)

I've always looked for love and
light, even in darkness, even
under the worst circumstances.
This is right up there as far as
the worst is concerned.

INT. MESS HALL - DAY

The unit sits at rigid attention, waiting for permission to eat. A brutal KITCHEN SERGEANT paces the room, smacking a stick on the tables.

Alex, unable to resist, mutters under his breath.

ALEX

(sotto)

Please sir, may I have some more.

The soldier beside him elbows him -- too late. The Kitchen Sergeant is already bearing down.

They stand through the entire meal. Alex is on dish duty until well past midnight. He collapses onto his cot, and is shaken awake within minutes.

SOLDIER

Smira. Smira.

Guard duty. He drags himself back outside, dead on his feet, asking himself, yet again, what the hell he's doing here.

EXT. FIRING RANGE - DAY

Alex hits his marks clean, three for three. Nearby, a young recruit, DO-DEE -- Orthodox, curled sidelocks, skinny, earnest.

A white card flickers into frame -- DO-DEE -- then dissolves.

He fumbles the disassembly of his rifle in front of an officer, drops every piece, and has to sprint circles around the barracks for the rest of the night as punishment. He passes Alex mid-lap, breathless, and manages a small, mortified smile. Alex smiles back.

ALEX (V.O.)
Religious guys are exempt from
service. He volunteered anyway.
And chose the Paratroopers. I
respect the hell out of that.

INT. MESS HALL - SHABBAT - NIGHT

Do-Dee, wobbling with exhaustion, stands at the center of the room lighting Shabbat candles, saying the blessings over bread and wine. The unit -- Ashkenazi, Sephardic, Mizrahi, Ethiopian -- watches, arm in arm, swaying, humming along, one enormous, mismatched family.

ALEX (V.O.)
We look like one big Swatch watch,
bursting with different colors.
We're all different. But we're
fighting for the same thing.

EXT. FENCE LINE - DAY

Alex, alone on patrol, hears rustling in the brush. He shoulders his rifle in one fluid motion -- muscle memory now -- and finds an ARAB SHEPHERD half-tangled in the barbed wire, a stick in his hand.

ALEX
Don't move!

The man freezes, terrified, then slowly raises a hand and points behind Alex. A single sheep, grazing, oblivious.

ALEX (CONT'D)
(lowering the gun, disbelieving)
A sheep. A sheep!

For the next twenty minutes, an Israeli paratrooper and a Palestinian shepherd chase one wayward sheep across a field together, laughing, until they corner it and hand it back through the wire.

ALEX (V.O.)
Jesus. I was going to shoot that
guy.

INT. BARRACKS - NIGHT

Alex, under the sheets again, journal open. He thinks of Dafna -- imagines her dancing toward him in the dark, tambourines clicking -- and shakes it off.

ALEX (V.O.)
Something was happening to me.
These weren't just stories to tell
the guys over a beer anymore. This
was my reality. Who I am. Who I'm
becoming.
(beat)
I'd been in mourning for a long
time. I thought if I stopped, I'd
lose her. Forget her. But maybe
the best way to love her is to
become the mensch she always
wanted. To let go of little Alex,
and let SexyHeeb in.

EXT. STEEP MOUNTAIN TRAIL - NIGHT

The unit's first long march, straight up. Alex, hunched under the weight of a machine gun nearly his own size, follows the boots of the man in front of him. His shoulders scream, then, mercifully, go numb.

Do-Dee, riding a stretcher he's carrying wounded on,
catches Alex's eye and gives him a pained half-smile.

At the summit, wind howling, stars close enough to touch,
even the most exhausted soldiers stop to take it in.

Do-Dee finds Alex, helps straighten his aching back.

DO-DEE

Come to my house next Shabbat. My
family would love to meet you.

ALEX

What would we do?

DO-DEE

Sleep late. Pray. Eat. Walk. Talk
about God and life. Sleep again.

Alex pictures himself at a long table of singing Hasidim in
a black t-shirt, wildly out of place, and can't help but
grin.

ALEX

My beloved Do-Dee. I'm going to
Tel Aviv, eat some hummus, get
drunk, and like any other red-
blooded American boy, try to get
laid. Some other time.

FAMILY DAY - EXT. ARMY BASE - PICNIC GROUNDS - DAY

Families everywhere, barbecues, music, kids dancing. Alex,
with no family in the country, drifts through it feeling
like a tourist at someone else's wedding, declining every
invitation to join in.

ALEX (V.O.)

I don't have family here. But
neither did any of us, when it was

just us on the base. We were a family. I just really miss my mom today.

He spots Aaron with his own family. A GIRL sets a plate down in front of Aaron and looks up.

It's Dafna.

Both of them freeze. Alex turns and walks fast back toward the barracks.

INT. BARRACKS - CONTINUOUS

Alex sits on his cot, head down. He looks up. Dafna's in the doorway.

DAFNA

Alex? What are you doing here?

ALEX

Asking myself the same question.

(beat)

So -- you're here to see Aaron?

DAFNA

He's my brother.

Alex laughs, despite everything, at the sheer size of the coincidence. She sits beside him.

DAFNA (CONT'D)

Why are you here, Alex? Really.

ALEX

My mother died of ovarian cancer. She wanted to be buried here. That's what brought me. When I was young she used to bring me to Israel, and now, in her death, she brought me back. She was a huge

Zionist. She loved this country.
When she died I felt so lost. But
I feel her here.

(quiet)

It's funny. Sometimes I feel like
Israel is my mother.

Dafna's eyes fill. She reaches for his hand.

DAFNA

I can't figure you out, Alexander.

They walk the base for hours, hand in hand, talking. It's
the best day he's had in longer than he can remember.

EXT./INT. BARRACKS - "WHITE NIGHT" - NIGHT

A brutal all-night drill. Alex, back from carrying Avichi's
water tank on top of his own gear, collapses on his cot for
approximately four seconds before the Sergeant appears in
the doorway.

SERGEANT

Five minutes to inspection!
Tonight is a White Night. No sleep
if you want to go home tomorrow.

Do-Dee and Avichi help load Alex back into his gear as he
sprints out into a night of twenty-second drills around the
barracks, over and over, the sergeant timing every lap.

ALEX (V.O.)

One more time around and I can be
with her. That's my motivation.
And it's a strong one.

At sunrise, buses idle at the gate. Do-Dee leans out a
window as it pulls away.

DO-DEE

Shabbat Shalom, Alex!

AVICHI
(*shoving past him*)
Soweto, Saturday night! Eireeee,
Alex!

INT. SOWETO REGGAE BAR, TEL AVIV - NIGHT

A packed, sweaty, joyous room, reggae pulsing from the speakers. Avichi at the bar, already dancing before Alex reaches him.

ALEX (V.O.)
Who are these Jewish Israeli
creatures? Surrounded by people
who want to drown them in the sea,
and they always find time to dance.

Dafna appears behind Alex, pulls his hands around her waist, and they dance, tequila shots deep, until Alex leans in.

ALEX
You wanna go somewhere quieter?

She nods.

EXT. TEL AVIV BEACH - NIGHT

Moonlight on black water. They walk the sand where they first met.

DAFNA
So what are your plans, Alexander?

ALEX
Finish the army. Go back to New
York City. She's my lady. I'd
never leave her.

DAFNA
Maybe you'd want to stay.

ALEX
No way. Native New Yorker. There
are rules.
(a beat, more honest)
I'm sorry. For what I said, when
we first met. I didn't know.

DAFNA
I know. I'm sorry too. I didn't
really give you a chance.

He looks around -- the same stretch of sand, the same
jetty.

ALEX
This is where I first met you.
(a beat)
Let's start all over again, okay?

They swim naked out to the jetty rocks, climb up, sit side
by side, moonlight on the water.

In the distance, a small wooden ROWBOAT drifts into view,
impossible and unhurried. SEXYHEEB is at the oars, singing
something low and unplaceable. DANI LUV sits across from
him, working a small electric piano balanced on his knees,
following the melody.

Neither of them turns to look. The boat isn't for them to
notice -- just for us.

ALEX (CONT'D)
Hello, Dafna.

DAFNA
Hello, Alexander.

He offers his hand again, formal, joking. She shakes it,
laughing -- then they're kissing, and the rowboat drifts on
empty, Dani Luv playing alone now. SexyHeeb is right there
with them instead, easy and warm, unmistakably the reason

she leaned in in the first place. He looks at Alex, satisfied, and fades away, unneeded. Alex doesn't need him for this part.

EXT. URI'S HOUSE - GARDEN - EARLY MORNING

Alex, in full uniform, coffee in hand, finds Haleb working, back turned, refusing to acknowledge him.

ALEX

Haleb?

Nothing.

ALEX (CONT'D)

Fine. Fuck you.

Haleb spins around, furious.

HALEB

Fuck you, Alex! What's with that uniform?

ALEX

(quiet, steady)

You have to understand. I'm Jewish. That means something to me now.

HALEB

All that means is you and I are enemies now.

ALEX

Why? Our friendship has nothing to do with what's happening outside these walls. This garden -- it's a seed of peace. It can grow.

HALEB

No. It's a mirage. It doesn't exist. Not while my people are suffering.

ALEX

(twisting his rifle off his shoulder, cocking it, holding it out)

What about my people, Haleb? So we're enemies. I kill you, you kill me -- is that it? You want to kill me?

(pointing to his own chest)

Go ahead. Come on.

Haleb takes the gun, holds it, head down. A long, terrible silence. Then he hands it back.

ALEX (CONT'D)

(softer now)

Maybe our friendship can't help but be affected by what's outside these walls. But wouldn't it be better if we were friends, not enemies? Wouldn't that be a beginning?

HALEB

(quiet, hollowed out)

I thought you were my friend.

He turns and walks away. Through the kitchen door, Uri watches the entire thing, shaken.

EXT. ARMY BASE - TRENCH DRILLS - DAY

Soldiers move through live drills with precision -- grenades, cover, coordinated fire. A jeep pulls up. A hurried exchange. The sergeant addresses the unit.

SERGEANT

Report back to base! Full gear, on
the bus, now!

INT. ARMY BUS - MOVING - DAY

Windows shut, heads down, gear stacked in the aisle. An officer stands, addressing the unit.

OFFICER

We're heading to Hebron. There's
been an uprising.

They roll through the narrow streets of a Palestinian village, weaving around burning tires. Women lean from windows, letting out a high, eerie warning cry meant to send wanted men running for the hills.

EXT. HILLSIDE OVERLOOKING A VILLAGE HOUSE - DAWN

A small boy with fiery red hair watches, frozen, from a doorway, until someone yanks him inside. Alex clocks him.

The unit surrounds a house below. Alex is among the five soldiers, led by an OFFICER, who bang on the front door.

A man answers, half-asleep -- ABDUL HAMESH.

OFFICER

Are you Abdul Hamesh? The brother
of Radwan Hamesh?

ABDUL

(after a pause)

Yes.

The officer shows him a photo of him and his brother, taken the day before, right here. Abdul denies seeing him in years. The officer presses -- Radwan is a known terrorist, wanted for running his car into Israeli children.

ABDUL
(*defiant*)
I wish he had killed more.

The officer's face goes flat. He produces an official document.

OFFICER
You have one hour to collect your family and your belongings. We are destroying your house.

ISABELLA, Abdul's wife, screams and runs inside. He chases after her, calling her name.

EXT./INT. THE HOUSE - THE NEXT HOUR

Soldiers, Alex among them, carry furniture and boxes out into the yard. Isabella sits in the bathroom packing a small bag of cosmetics, collapses, sobbing.

In a child's bedroom, Alex reaches for a box and a doll tumbles off the top -- one eye missing, as if torn out. A LITTLE GIRL stands in the doorway, watching him.

He kneels, offers the doll back gently.

ALEX
One of its eyes is missing.

He looks up at her. One of her eyes is missing too.

She crosses the room, snatches the doll from his hands, cradles it like a mother would a child -- then looks him dead in the eye, spits at his feet, and runs.

EXT. HILLTOP OVERLOOKING THE HOUSE - MOMENTS LATER

The unit watches from above. A crack in the air. The house detonates in a column of fire and smoke. A white dove, caught mid-flight above the roof, drops from the sky, torn open.

Through the drifting smoke, undisturbed, a single butterfly weaves its way across the wreckage and disappears over the wall.

The high, eerie cry rises from the village below -- the same sound as before, now for a different reason.

Some soldiers cheer. Alex separates himself, looking down at the family clinging to each other in the wreckage of their own front yard.

ALEX

(turning on the others)

Stop it! Stop it! This isn't a time to be happy! What we did was wrong!

AARON

(stepping forward, furious)

Then go back to America! Go back if you don't like it!

ALEX

You don't think this is wrong, Aaron? You don't think this is fucked-up?

AARON

No! They're not civilians -- they're not! Tell it to the families who lost people in Israel, waiting at a bus stop, buying bread, when a bomb goes off! This man let a known terrorist into his home! Broke bread with him! He's made himself and his family an enemy of Israel! It's a war, Alex! It just wears a different face! It's not easy -- it's painful for everyone! Go back to America if you can't understand that.

They stare at each other, breathing hard. Alex walks to the back of the bus and sits down alone.

ALEX (V.O.)

That's the first thing that guy
ever said to me. And I agree with
him. I understand why we had to do
it.

(beat)

I just don't see anything worth
cheering about.

The bus swerves around burning tires. Alex stares out the window at a country the color of ash and grey compromise, and thinks of his own high school sweetheart, prom night, condoms and Connecticut and none of it mattering here, where these children are fed despair for breakfast.

Suddenly -- glass shatters across half the bus. Everyone drops. A soldier beside Alex comes up bleeding from the scalp. On a rooftop above, two men in scarves light Molotov cocktails and drop them onto the burning bus.

OFFICER

Count off and take cover!

Soldiers spill off the bus into the street, calling numbers.

SOLDIERS (V.O., OVERLAPPING, MORPHING)

One! Two! Three! Four...

The soldiers' voices bleed, impossibly, into the voices of children counting off as they leave the ocean at Compo Beach. For a disorienting beat we're back there -- until the vision resolves: Israeli and Palestinian children pour off the burning bus instead of soldiers, water guns instead of rifles, and the men on the rooftop are throwing water balloons, laughing.

EXT. VILLAGE STREET - SURREAL - CONTINUOUS

Dani Luv, impossibly, sits behind his organ in the middle of the road, playing something bright and unplaceably sweet. Arab and Israeli children run and shriek and soak each other, delighted -- until one balloon bursts red across a small boy's face, and he starts to cry, and the water running down the cobblestones turns the color of blood and disappears down a drain.

EXT. LEMON GROVE - DAY

Back to reality with a jolt: gunfire rips through the trees. Alex, Aaron, Do-Dee, and Avichi hit the dirt. An officer sights three men running through the grove and directs fire. One man falls.

OFFICER

Yalla! Yalla! Move in!

They surround the fallen man. Alex looks down -- olive skin, dark bitter eyes, aching familiar.

ALEX

Haleb!

He drops to his knees, tries to stop the bleeding with his bare hands, screaming for a medic. CPR. Too late. The man is dead.

Alex leans in close, and only then sees it isn't Haleb at all -- just a young man who could have been him. Could have been his friend.

OFFICER

Alex! Get on the bus!

He doesn't move until SexyHeeb, quiet as grief, puts a hand on his shoulder.

SEXYHEEB

Get on the bus.

INT. BUS - NIGHT (MOVING)

Every soldier asleep except Alex, staring at his own hands, dried blood cracking across the knuckles.

EXT. ARMY BASE - LATER

The Kitchen Sergeant, sensing weakness, corners him for three straight hours of scrubbing the latrine floor by hand. Wasted, broken, Alex spots an idling bus about to leave the base -- checks that no one's watching -- and climbs on.

EXT. DESERT HIGHWAY - NIGHT

Alex, in the back of a stranger's pickup truck, watches a sky exploding with stars, thinking about the boy he killed, about Haleb, about the sheer relief of being nowhere near the Kitchen Sergeant.

EXT. THE DEAD SEA - MUD PIT - DAY

Alex floats, arms out, on water so dense it holds him like a hand.

There's nothing to hold onto out here. No buoy. He isn't reaching for one. For the first time in his life, he's just floating -- and staying up anyway.

Later, caked in mineral mud with a crowd of tourists, he notices someone settling in beside him -- easy, unhurried, entirely at home, like he owns whatever patch of ground he happens to be standing on.

It's SexyHeeb. Grinning. Impossibly comfortable in a mud pit full of sunburned tourists who don't so much as glance his way -- to them, there's no one sitting there at all.

SEXYHEEB

Hello, Alex.

ALEX
How did you find me?

SEXYHEEB
When someone runs, they always run
toward Eilat. You know exactly why
I'm here.

ALEX
Maybe I made a mistake joining the
army.

SEXYHEEB
*(sitting closer, no judgment in
it at all)*
If that's your answer, I won't
waste any more time on you. But I
don't believe that's your answer.
I think you can make a very good
soldier.

ALEX
I'm so confused by what happened.
I killed a young man. He looked
like Haleb. He could have been
Haleb!

SEXYHEEB
*(gentle now, a hand steady on the
back of Alex's neck)*
I know what you're feeling. No one
said this would be easy. He was a
soldier too, for his cause. He
shot at you first. I don't have
the answers for you, Alex -- some
of this you have to carry
yourself. That's the part nobody
tells you about becoming a man. It
was never about the strength. It's
what you're willing to carry after.
(standing, offering a hand up)

If you go back, you'll be punished
for running. Jail. After that --
it's up to you.

(a last beat, almost tender)

Make a real effort to learn
Hebrew. Then you'll stop feeling
like an outsider.

*(at the last second, turning
back)*

And Alex -- I'm proud of you.
Don't you ever think I'm not.

Alex turns -- SexyHeeb is gone. In his place, on the ledge,
a book: Hebrew for Dummies.

ALEX

(picking it up, wry)

For dummies. Appropriate.

He crouches at the edge of the water to rinse the mud from
his hands. The surface stills.

Looking back up at him from the water is SexyHeeb -- whole,
steady, entirely at home in that face.

This time, Alex doesn't blink it away. He holds the
reflection's gaze a long moment, almost like agreeing to
something. Then he stands, and walks back toward the road.

INT. ISRAELI MILITARY PRISON - CELL BLOCK - NIGHT

Rain leaks through a cracked ceiling directly onto Alex's
cot. Around him: the worst the army produces -- thieves,
cowards, the mentally unwell. He flicks a lighter and
starts, doggedly, to read Hebrew for Dummies by its flame.

INT. PRISON MESS HALL - DAY

Alex pushes a lopsided food cart between tables of hostile
inmates. A big PRISONER, self-appointed king of his table,
curses him out in broken English.

PRISONER

Hey, American! Fuck you, bitch!
Fuck you, mother!

Alex leans in, quiet.

ALEX

You have a problem?

PRISONER

(dead flat)

Fuck you, American.

PRISONER (CONT'D)

Be careful. I kill a man. That's
why I here.

SexyHeeb leans in, lips nearly touching the man's ear.

SEXYHEEB

*(a whisper, though it's Alex's
own mouth moving)*

You know why I'm here? I killed my
whole fucking platoon. You be
careful.

Alex slams the man's face into his own plate. Cottage
cheese everywhere. The table erupts in laughter at the
bully's expense.

Later, three of them ambush Alex alone outside the mess
hall. It doesn't go well for them. Cottage-cheese-boy ends
up on the ground, fetal, moaning, his makeshift shiv kicked
well out of reach.

That night, at dinner, Alex slaps a loaf of bread across
the same man's face in front of the entire hall --
SexyHeeb's calm settled over his own, though nobody in the
room sees anyone but a scrawny American who's stopped being
afraid. Nobody says a word about it again.

INT. PRISON VISITING ROOM - DAY

Behind a gate, a familiar voice.

DAFNA (O.S.)
Alexoxoxo!!!

She's there, waving with both hands, radiant even here.
They sit across from each other, unable to stop touching hands.

ALEX
Ani ohev otach.

DAFNA
(*delighted*)
I love you too. Alex -- you're
learning Hebrew!

They laugh, and hold on to each other like it matters.

EXT. PRISON GATE - DAY

Three days later, Alex walks out through the barbed wire,
free. Cottage-cheese-boy calls after him.

PRISONER
Take care, Alex! Take care!

ALEX (V.O.)
In the normal world, the pen is
mightier than the sword. Here in
this badass zip code, the sword
still wins.

INT. BARRACKS - DAY

Alex drops his bag by the door. His unit looks up, and one
by one, as they file past for the firing range, each of
them hits him gently in the chest, over the heart. Do-Dee

hugs him. Avichi winks. Aaron slows, meets his eyes, keeps walking -- but it isn't unkind.

ALEX (V.O.)
I feel completely humbled. All I want is to regain their trust. And I'm not going to let them down again. That includes Aaron.

EXT. FIRING RANGE - DAY

Do-Dee, beside Alex, is rattled -- one shot went wide, and a bad review means missing Shabbat with his mother again. Alex switches targets with him mid-line without a word.

An officer inspects Do-Dee's (Alex's) target.

OFFICER
Excellent! Very good, Do-Dee!

Do-Dee's face lights up like a kid on a bike with no training wheels for the first time.

At his own new target, Alex spots a fly, swats it dead, and -- with total, deranged commitment to the bit -- presses half of it into his one stray bullet hole.

The head officer arrives to inspect, furious at the miss.

OFFICER (CONT'D)
You're not back twenty minutes and you're already messing up! What were you thinking about? The good times in jail?

ALEX
(*deadpan*)
I was just going for the fly, sir.

OFFICER
The what?

ALEX

The fly.

The officer leans in, inspects the hole -- and finds, unmistakably, half a fly. A beat of stunned silence, then he can't help himself: he laughs. So does Aaron. So, eventually, does everyone.

OFFICER (CONT'D)

Very good, Alex. Very good.

(to Do-Dee, a wink)

Shabbat on base.

INT. GYMNASIUM - DAY

Two hundred soldiers ring an open floor. Bare-knuckle sparring, no ref, no gear -- and something honestly beautiful in its brutality. The BOXING INSTRUCTOR, huge, hairy, feral, calls Aaron into the ring.

Alex rises and steps in -- and for one flash, mid-stride, it's SexyHeeb's weight in his shoulders, SexyHeeb's calm in his eyes, there and gone before anyone could swear to what they saw.

INSTRUCTOR

What have we here! I'm going to enjoy this. Fight!

They tear into each other -- real blows, real blood. Each time Alex lands one clean, another flash: SexyHeeb's fist where his was, gone again the instant after, too fast for two hundred soldiers to register as anything but a trick of the light -- until the instructor calls it, satisfied, both of them swelling and bleeding and, unmistakably, respecting each other more than they did five minutes ago.

It's only Alex standing there when it's over. Chest heaving, alone in his own skin, two hundred soldiers cheering a fight only one of them actually threw.

INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)
Seems the two of you like each
other a lot.
(pushing Aaron back to the crowd)
You. Stay.

He calls Do-Dee in next. Alex, matched against his own
friend, barely moves, pulling every punch.

INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)
Stop it! Stop it!
(smacking Alex)
What's your problem?

ALEX
It's unfair. I'm much bigger than
him.

INSTRUCTOR
You're the same size! I don't
care! Fight! He's your enemy, kick
the shit out of him!

ALEX
I won't.

The instructor turns Do-Dee away and comes for Alex
himself. It is not a fair fight. Alex takes blow after
blow, refuses to stay down, refuses again, until he's
standing on will alone, hands too heavy to lift, motioning
for more. Aaron moves to step in -- another soldier grips
his shoulder, shakes his head: don't.

Finally the instructor stops.

INSTRUCTOR (CONT'D)
Class dismissed.
(to Alex)
Good job, Alex.

Alex picks his Yankees cap up off the mat, sets it
carefully on his head, and lets Avichi and Do-Dee walk him
home.

EXT. LATRINE - LATER

The Kitchen Sergeant has Alex on his knees, mid-push-up, when a voice cuts across the yard.

AARON (O.S.)
Why must you keep bothering him?

The Kitchen Sergeant turns, genuinely surprised.

KITCHEN SERGEANT
Get out of my sight, Aaron. Mind
your own business.

AARON
No. What lesson is learned here?
You're picking on him because he's
different. You're intimidated by
him.

KITCHEN SERGEANT
(*furious*)
Fine. The two of you can do it
together.

INT. LATRINE - LATER

Aaron and Alex on their knees, scrubbing, sweat and old
blood on both their uniforms.

AARON
This is awful.

Alex pulls out his one surviving Baby Ruth -- his father's
care package, hoarded for weeks -- unwraps it, catches
himself about to eat it in front of the Kitchen Sergeant
walking in for inspection, and panics, tossing it toward a
drain. It lands, cruelly, right on the edge, in full view.

KITCHEN SERGEANT
What the fuck is this? Does
someone want to tell me what this
is?

Alex kneels beside it. Inspects it with total, straight-faced ceremony -- picks it up, sniffs it, takes a giant bite.

ALEX
It looks like shit, sir. It feels
like shit, sir.
(chewing)
Mmm. Ya. It's shit, sir.

Behind the sergeant, Aaron is shaking, silently dying laughing. The Kitchen Sergeant, stunned into total surrender, just nods them both out.

They walk back to the barracks, arms around each other's shoulders, laughing like a couple of kids, to the open-mouthed shock of the entire unit.

AARON
I don't think he'll be bothering
you again.

INT. TRANSPORT PLANE - DAY

Rows of soldiers face each other. The jump light goes green. The rear door opens on ten thousand feet of nothing. Avichi, ashen, grips the strap beside Alex.

AVICHI
I'm going to die, mon. This is
very uncool.

ALEX
Relax. It's just like training.
Just a lot higher up.

Neither of them believes it. One by one, soldiers step forward and vanish through the door.

EXT. SKY - CONTINUOUS

Alex jumps. For one weightless moment, the world goes silent and enormous and entirely, strangely peaceful -- he thinks of his mother, of how proud she'd be, of butterflies drifting in Haleb's garden.

ALEX (V.O.)
Roll, baby, roll.

EXT. LANDING FIELD - CONTINUOUS

He rolls clean. Avichi lands beside him, and they throw their arms around each other, giddy with survival. Dafna is waiting; he kisses her, tells her how incredible it was, how he can't wait to tell his friends back in New York --

and doesn't notice, or won't let himself notice, her arm slip quietly off his waist.

EXT. DESERT ROAD - NIGHT - "MASA KUMTA" MONTAGE

The final test: 120 kilometers, full gear, through the night, ending in Jerusalem. Alex, hunched under the machine gun, waits for the numbness that means the pain has nowhere left to go.

An officer barks past him -- "TO STOP IS TO DIE" -- and Alex, unable to hold it, urinates in his own pants rather than break stride, hissing through his teeth, turning the burn into fuel.

By dawn they're jogging through the Old City toward the Western Wall, crowds cheering from the sidewalks, car horns blaring encouragement. Soldiers collapse at the wall in tears, in prayer, lifting a Torah to dance.

Alex reaches the Kotel, sets down his gear, rests his forehead against three thousand years of stone, closes his eyes, and shares one quiet moment with his mother.

EXT. WESTERN WALL PLAZA - DAWN

The platoon forms a semicircle. Officers move soldier to soldier, placing a red beret on each head, a hand on each shoulder.

OFFICER

Kol hakavod.

Alex receives his. Nothing showy. No fanfare. Just the words, and the weight of the beret, and the sense, for the first time in years, of belonging completely to something.

EXT. DAFNA'S KIBBUTZ - DAY

A week's leave before the next deployment. Aaron works the fields on a tractor, proud, sunburned. Alex spends the week entirely wrapped around Dafna -- healing, laughing, waking up with her every morning like it's the only thing he's ever wanted.

INT. DAFNA'S ROOM - NIGHT (DREAM)

Alex, asleep, hears knocking. He answers a door that shouldn't be there.

REALITY POLICE (V.O.)

It's the reality police, Alex. You know why we're here.

He turns back once -- Dafna, asleep, arms wrapped around a pillow she thinks is him -- and leaves with them without a fight.

EXT. OPEN HIGHWAY (DREAM) - CONTINUOUS

A white '65 Cadillac convertible, top down, SexyHeeb riding shotgun, the road endless in every direction.

ALEX (V.O.)

This is the true meaning of life for me. I'm safe as long as I keep moving. Getting off at some exit and living with someone forever -- SexyHeeb wouldn't be found there. Just little Alex again, looking for hair on his chest. Life already left me hurt once. I wasn't about to let it happen again.

INT. DAFNA'S ROOM - MORNING

He wakes with her still in his arms. Watches her sleep. Kisses her head, careful not to wake her, and slips out to the next room to write.

ALEX (V.O.)

(writing)

Why am I here? Zionism, I guess. But it's not enough to say that. If you believe in something, you have to give to it. My way of giving was joining this army -- to honor my mother, and to defend Israel, my spiritual mother. But the highest form is Aliyah -- moving here, staying. And I'm not ready for that. I have a life back home. I'm a true native New Yorker. I have to finish my service and go back.

INT. DAFNA'S ROOM - NIGHT (LATER)

The last night before he ships out. Alex tells her: after his service, he's going back to America.

She's on her feet, robe pulled around her, at the door.

DAFNA

How can you walk away from all
this? From me?

(turning back)

How can you leave your mother,
Alex?

ALEX

That's not fair.

DAFNA

I know you've been deeply hurt by
losing her. But you don't trust
what you love most. You question
it, always. You build walls so no
one can reach you.

(crying now, not stopping)

I love you with all my heart,
Alex. I've seen the man you've
become. Your mother would want you
happy. Loved. Loving someone back.
You're capable of so much love. If
you end up old and alone -- what
honor is there in that?

She takes a breath, steadies herself.

DAFNA (CONT'D)

You say she lives inside you. That
she's your heartbeat. I believe
that. I feel like I know her now,
too. And if you truly want to
honor her -- honor her by being
happy. By being brave enough to be
loved.

(at the door)

Stop running, Alex.

She leaves. He doesn't sleep. He searches the whole kibbutz
for her and can't find her.

EXT. KIBBUTZ - DAWN

An army jeep idles, waiting. Aaron is already inside. Alex climbs in, head down. Aaron puts an arm around him without a word as they drive off toward the Lebanese border.

INT. UNDERGROUND BUNKER, SOUTH LEBANON - DAY

Four flights down into a corridor of rusted bunk beds. Boots never come off. Showers are a memory.

ALEX (V.O.)
It's been three months. No weekends. High alert, every hour. I'm the moron who volunteered for this.

Each dawn: a slow sweep down a narrow dirt road, checking for IEDs planted overnight by Hezbollah, with a scout out front and a tank as escort and absolutely no training in what an IED even looks like.

OFFICER (V.O.)
Don't worry, Alex. You'll know it when you see it.

EXT. THE BUFFER ZONE - A DITCH - DAY

Alex, alone, ten miles into the buffer zone, dropped into a ditch with a shovel, three days of ancient canned rations, and orders that anything that moves in front of him gets shot.

ALEX (V.O.)
What kills me most is being alone. As a native New Yorker, I'm addicted to the hustle. It's a drug. And now, here, this ditch feels like a death sentence.

He talks to himself. Sings to himself. Thinks about Dafna, endlessly, and about their last, terrible fight, with no way to call her, no way to know if she'd even answer.

ALEX (CONT'D)
(to Aaron, later, at base)
Have you heard from your sister?

AARON
(gently)
She's protecting herself. She
knows your plans. Sorry, man.

EXT. SLA GENERAL'S RESIDENCE - NIGHT

Alex and other soldiers guard the home of the GENERAL of the South Lebanon Army, Israel's Christian militia ally, huddled around a fire in a metal drum against the cold. The general's WIFE steps out most nights with a slice of homemade cake for "the American" -- the small kindness of it lands harder than it should.

Tonight, no cake. She and her daughter are in Paris. It's the coldest night yet.

A gunshot cracks from inside the house.

INT. GENERAL'S HOUSE - CONTINUOUS

Soldiers pour room to room. A locked door, light underneath. Alex throws his shoulder into it.

The GENERAL sits up in bed, shot in the shoulder, blood on the sheets. Standing over him: a girl, maybe fifteen, naked, a pistol shaking in both hands, aimed at his head.

Her hands steady. She takes aim to finish it.

Gunfire -- Alex's, the others' -- and she's thrown back against the wall.

Alex looks down at her. Recognizes her. The general's daughter's best friend.

GENERAL
(*sobbing, holding his shoulder*)
You're supposed to protect me!

Alex crosses the room and backhands him across the face.

ALEX
Who said it was okay to fuck your daughter's best friend! She was just a kid!

ALEX (V.O.)
She was Palestinian. From the Dbayeh camp. Recruited by Hezbollah to get close to his daughter, seduce him, and kill him. That was my last night on that detail.

INT. JEEP - ISRAEL-LEBANON BORDER FENCE - NIGHT

Alex and Do-Dee patrol, mounted guns on both sides, a fog rolling in low over the wire. A board back at base lights up red -- multiple breach points at once.

RADIO (V.O.)
Code red! Numbers 58 to 63!
Proceed with caution!

DO-DEE
(*into radio*)
We hear you, moving in.

Through the fog: three men, already through the fence, already in Israeli territory, scattering in three directions.

DO-DEE (CONT'D)

(radio)

This is not a drill! Three
terrorists have breached, in
Israeli territory!

They open up with the mounted guns. One man goes down at the fence line. Alex jumps out, chases a second on foot, firing -- and his weapon jams mid-stride.

ALEX

There's still one more out here!

The fog thickens to nothing. A shape emerges from behind a rock, ten feet away, gun already leveled at Alex's chest.

Do-Dee steps between them and opens fire.

The terrorist fires back at the same instant.

Do-Dee drops.

FLASH -- young Alex, reaching, straining for the buoy in black water. His fingers graze it. Miss.

Alex finally clears his jam and empties his rifle into the last man, killing him instantly. Then he's on his knees beside Do-Dee, hands pressed uselessly to the wound.

Do-Dee is dead. He saved Alex's life.

EXT. URI'S HOUSE - GARDEN - DAY (LATER)

Alex, back from the field, hollowed out, finds Haleb kneeling in the dirt, planting something new where the butterflies used to gather thickest. Haleb doesn't stop working. Doesn't look up.

HALEB

I heard about your friend. The one
who died.

ALEX

Do-Dee. Yeah.

A long silence. Haleb keeps planting.

HALEB

I am sorry. For your friend. And
sorry for what I said to you.

ALEX

You didn't say anything that
wasn't true.

HALEB

(finally looking up)

Maybe. But I said it wanting to
hurt you. And I didn't mean that.
Not really.

Alex crouches down across from him, in the dirt, uniform
and all.

ALEX

Doesn't fix anything. Out there.

HALEB

No. It doesn't.

*(beat, gesturing at the walled
garden around them)*

But in here, it can. It always
could. That's why I built it.

Haleb holds out a second trowel, wordless. Alex takes it.
They plant together in silence, side by side, as the light
goes gold.

ALEX (V.O.)

We never once solved anything that
mattered outside those walls. But
inside them, for one afternoon, we
were just two men in the dirt,
planting something neither of us
would live to see grow all the way.

EXT. DAFNA'S KIBBUTZ - NIGHT

A bus drops Alex at the dark edge of the kibbutz. He hasn't slept in days. He walks the long road up alone, duffel bag over one shoulder, barely upright.

INT. DAFNA'S HOUSE - HER ROOM - CONTINUOUS

He opens her door. She's up instantly, across the room, and he falls into her before he can even say hello.

ALEX
Do-Dee is dead.

She holds him tighter. He takes her face in both hands.

ALEX (CONT'D)
I love you, Dafna. I love you and
I need you. I won't leave. I won't
ever leave you.

DAFNA
I love you so much, Alex. You are
my world.

They cry together, for Do-Dee, for everything.

INT. DAFNA'S HOUSE - TWO DAYS LATER

Alex has slept, on and off, wrapped in her arms. Waking once to find her gone, he opens his journal to the last page he wrote, on the bus, the night Do-Dee died -- a poem, "A Warm Breeze," about his mother visiting him in a dream, SexyHeeb trying to send her away, his father's voice reminding him, gently, that she is gone.

We hear fragments of it in ALEX'S VOICE, over images of Dafna sleeping, of the kibbutz fields at dawn, of a red beret hung carefully on a bedpost:

ALEX (V.O.)

(reading, quiet)

I turned back to my mother, her arms opened wide... I came a bit closer, then fell deep, deep inside... my body turned warm, my mind was at ease...

(beat)

I woke in a deep sweat, not knowing where I was... but I know in my heart, my mother came to me that night.

He closes the journal, lies down beside Dafna, and holds her.

EXT. THE MOUNTAINS OF LEBANON - DAY

We are back exactly where we started. The hillside outside an Arab town, quiet, brutally hot. Alex, alone on patrol, reaches for his canteen.

A single crack in the air.

Time slows to nothing. Alex feels it before he understands it -- a hard, impossible impact, high on the left side of his chest.

He's thrown off his feet.

ALEX (V.O.)

The bullet finds its home.

He hits the ground. Distant, muffled, his unit is screaming.

SOLDIERS (O.S.)

Cover! Sniper on the roof! Zooz!
Zooz!

Gunfire answers gunfire. Alex stares straight up into a flawless blue sky, feeling, strangely, nothing at all.

ALEX (V.O.)
I always thought if I got shot,
I'd be in so much pain. I feel
nothing. It's beautiful.

DAFNA and AARON appear above him, looking down, exactly as we've seen them before -- except now we understand this is the moment the whole film has been circling.

DAFNA
You promised me you wouldn't
leave! Do you hear me, Alex? You
promised!

AARON
(holding her)
He was going to stay.

DAFNA
I want him back. Please... you
promised...

They fade.

Israeli and Palestinian children walk toward him hand in hand across the blue nothing, a small Arab boy with fiery red hair kicking a soccer ball, laughter chasing after it as they run off together.

A motorcycle engine, somewhere. SHERMA pulls up in a wedding dress, SAMMY riding behind her, arms wrapped around her waist.

SHERMA
You heard we got married? We owe
it all to you.

SAMMY

I love this woman!

They rev off into nothing, the engine fading to silence.

The KNICKS CITY DANCER appears in full uniform, pom-poms in hand, exactly as she did on his doorstep all those years ago.

DANCER

I told you. I'm with the home team.

She shakes the pom-poms once, and she's gone too.

ROXY appears now, cross-legged beside him in the dirt like it's the most natural thing in the world, a full-sized pinball machine somehow balanced on her knees.

ROXY

Care to play a game?

She doesn't wait for an answer. Lights up the machine, hits the plunger, and grins at him the way she did the first time he ever beat her.

ROXY (CONT'D)

Ohhh, I hated that boy.

She's gone before the ball drains.

HALEB appears, stands over him a long moment.

HALEB

You are my friend.

He's gone. Alex spits blood and dirt.

URI appears, and Alex is eight years old again, cross-legged on a living room floor, listening.

URI

So, young Alex. When are you going to fulfill your obligation as a Jew and come fight for Israel?

Alex, small, puts his head down. Uri laughs, kisses the top of his head. Alex looks up, half-smiling.

ELIZABETH appears now too, exactly as she was before she was sick -- radiant, a woman made of light. She's taking his temperature the old-fashioned way while he protests he's not really sick, and the thermometer slips and falls, and they both dissolve into the same helpless laughter that once shook that whole house.

ELIZABETH
(*twirling him instead, now*)
I'll take you to Paris. Rome.
Venice.

She spins him once, easy, like no time has passed at all, and lets him go.

A warm breeze moves across the hillside. Alex's body is going cold, and then he can't feel it at all. He hears footsteps, doesn't know if they're real, and closes his eyes.

EXT. COMPO BEACH - THE JETTY - NIGHT (VISION)

Young ALEX -- eight years old, small, naked -- stands at the very end of the jetty. The exact image the film opened on. Below him, the ocean is dark and furious.

He steps off the edge --

-- and mid-air, boy becomes man. Skinny shoulders fill out, carved now, certain of themselves. A massive butterfly tattoo blooms across his back, wings spreading as he turns. By the time he breaks the surface, it's SEXYHEEB who comes up swimming -- grown, sure, entirely unafraid, and for just a moment the moonlight on the water seems to come from him as much as from the sky.

He swims, hard, straight, toward a buoy bobbing in the moonlight.

Above the water, unreachable, ELIZABETH hovers, arms open, smiling, waiting.

Real boots hit real dirt, closing in around him, far away.
Voices, close now. Real hands.

SexyHeeb reaches the buoy. Wraps himself around it one last time. Holds it the way he's held it his whole life.

He looks up at Elizabeth. She smiles.

SEXYHEEB

I'm the last one to touch you. And
you were the last one to touch me.

He lets go. Lies back on the surface of the water like it's the softest pillow in the world. Arms out. Face to the stars.

ELIZABETH (V.O.)

(a lullaby, fading)

Sweet dreams, sugar plum. Sweet
dreams.

FADE TO WHITE.

ANIMATED SEQUENCE RESUMES -- ANIME STYLE. (The same hand-drawn visual language from the opening, seen only these two times in the entire film. The audience should recognize it instantly.)

EXT. ALEX'S STOOP - LATER

An hour passes. He's almost given up --

-- when a yellow cab turns onto the block and pulls up in front of him.

The back door swings open. Every one of them climbs out -- his whole invented family, his whole true life -- and pulls him into the biggest hug he's ever known.

Muhammad stands by the open driver's door, watching.

ALEX
(*crossing to him*)
I hate you.

MUHAMMAD
I hate you too.

They embrace like brothers who've been at war for a hundred years and are, for one night, done fighting.

ALEX
Why'd you come back?

MUHAMMAD
Got a new fare, heading to the East Village. Far from here. Saw your bag on the seat. First thing I thought was to roll down the window and throw it out.
(*a beat*)
Turned my off-duty light on instead. Came back.

ALEX
Why?

MUHAMMAD
You asked me about my family. We disagreed on everything else. But we agreed on that. A mother's love. That's everything.

Alex, overwhelmed, pulls the knapsack tight against his chest like it's a person.

ALEX
(*to Muhammad, weeping*)
I promise.

Close on his face -- soaked, undone, radiant -- every one of them wrapped around him at once.

For the first time in this entire film, we finally see his face.

It's SexyHeeb. Whole. Steady. Unafraid. Home. Weeping.

FADE OUT.

THE PROMISE

THE END