

COLORS OF SILENCE

Written by

Benjamin Wilner

© 2025 Benjamin Wilner

Benjamin Wilner
806 Eves Drive, Unit 2M,
Hillsborough, NJ 08844
Email: benzwilner@gmail.com
Phone: 856-994-3151

FADE IN:

INT. COHEN FAMILY HOME - BACKYARD - LATE AFTERNOON (1999)

Golden light bathes a modest suburban yard. A plastic slide, scattered toy dinosaurs, soft breeze through grass. BENJAMIN COHEN (5), small for his age, lines up toys in rainbow order. He doesn't play—he arranges, examines. His eyes scan for symmetry.

His father, DANIEL COHEN (35), Jewish, tightly wound even in leisure, adjusts a lawn chair nearby. Watching. But distant.

His mother, ELIZABETH COHEN (32), warm and present, reads a book titled *Raising the Highly Sensitive Child*.

A DOG BARKS three houses down.

Benjamin stiffens.

A LAWNMOWER starts. Then, a FIRETRUCK SIREN in the distance.

Benjamin freezes. His hands clamp to his ears.

Elizabeth notices immediately. Her smile fades into concern.

ELIZABETH
Sweetheart? Benjamin?

Benjamin's small hands lift to cover his ears. The world for him amplifies—the lawnmower's drone, the siren's wail, the rustling of every leaf. His breathing quickens.

Daniel steps forward slowly. He kneels down to Benjamin's level.

DANIEL
(gently)
It's okay, buddy. It's just noise.
You're safe.

He doesn't respond. He bolts—past the swing set, through the gate, straight toward the street.

Daniel jumps up.

EXT. FRONT YARD/STREET - CONTINUOUS

Benjamin runs directly into the road.

HONK!

A car screeches to a stop.

Daniel snatches Benjamin at the last second--tackles him onto the grass.

The driver shouts something muffled and drives off.

Elizabeth runs over. She drops to her knees, scoops Benjamin up.

ELIZABETH

(shaken)

Oh my God--my baby, are you hurt?

Benjamin doesn't cry. He stares blankly ahead. Rocking slightly.

Daniel stares too--at his son, at the silence.

CUT TO:

INT. NEUROLOGIST'S OFFICE - DAY

Little Benjamin sits on an exam table, fidgeting with the hem of his shirt. A MOBILE of plastic butterflies hangs above. He watches it spin in silence.

Elizabeth stands at Benjamin's side, holding his small hand. Daniel paces nearby, arms crossed tightly.

DR. HENDERSON (46, warm-eyed, and professional)- enters the room, reviewing a clipboard. She greets them with a reassuring smile.

DR. HENDERSON

Hello Benjamin, I'm Dr. Henderson. How are you feeling today?

Benjamin doesn't look at her, eyes still tracking the mobile's gentle spin. Elizabeth squeezes his hand.

ELIZABETH

(softly)

He's a little nervous.

DR. HENDERSON

That's okay. We'll take our time.

Dr. Henderson addresses Elizabeth and Daniel softly.

DR. HENDERSON (CONT'D)
So, what brings you in today?

Elizabeth shares a worried glance with Daniel, then plucks up courage.

ELIZABETH
Well... we're concerned about
Benjamin. He's a very quiet child.
Sometimes, he gets so upset by sounds
or lights. He lines up his toys for
hours. And he barely speaks to us.

Daniel's jaw tense, but he nods, trying to stay calm.

DANIEL
We just want to know what's wrong- if
anything.

Dr. Henderson listens intently, studying Benjamin's distant expression.

DR. HENDERSON
Alright. Let's do a few simple checks.

TIME CUT:

INT. NEUROLOGIST'S OFFICE - LATER

Dr. Henderson sits behind her desk. Elizabeth and Daniel sit opposite her; Elizabeth's knuckles are white around a tissue, Daniel's foot taps anxiously. Benjamin plays on the floor with a set of wooden blocks, oblivious to the tension.

DR. HENDERSON
(after a deep breath)
Mr. and Mrs. Cohen... the evaluations
show that Benjamin is on the autism
spectrum.

Elizabeth closes her eyes for a moment, relief and worry blending together.

ELIZABETH
Autism...

Daniel's face hardens in denial or confusion.

DANIEL
So he's not... normal?

Dr. Henderson leans forward, hands clasped.

DR. HENDERSON

No, Daniel. It's not like that.
Everyone's brain works a bit
differently. Autism means Benjamin's
brain processes the world in its own
unique way. He will have challenges
with communication and sensory
overload, as you've seen. But he also
may have unique strengths.

Daniel shifts in his chair, struggling with an inner turmoil.

DANIEL

So... he'll always be like this? In
his own world, not looking at us?
Communicating with us?

Elizabeth places a hand over Daniel's. He's rigid, eyes on
Benjamin who is still playing on the floor, completely
absorbed in aligning his toy cars.

ELIZABETH

(voice trembling)
He'll be able to go to school, have
friends... have a life, won't he?

DR. HENDERSON

(smiles reassuringly)
Absolutely. It might be a different
life than you imagined, but it can be
a rich, happy one. The key thing is
understanding and acceptance- from
family most of all.

Daniel stands abruptly, unable to sit any longer. The chair
legs screech on the linoleum. Benjamin flinches at the sound,
his hands pausing over his toys.

DANIEL

(raising his voice, overwhelmed)
I don't want him treated like he's
different. He's... he's my son. He'll
be fine.

Elizabeth stands too, gently touching Daniel's arm.

ELIZABETH

Daniel...

Daniel pulls away, pacing a short line.

DANIEL
(frustrated, uncertain)
We'll give him structure, discipline.
He'll have a Bar Mitzvah. He'll learn.
I won't let some label define him.

Dr. Henderson remains calm.

DR. HENDERSON
A label doesn't change who Benjamin
is. It just helps us help him. Think
of it like getting a pair of glasses-
finally seeing clearly what we're
dealing with.

Daniel's eyes flick to Benjamin again. The little boy is
staring up at him now, drawn by his father's raised voice.
Daniel sees fear and confusion in Benjamin's wide eyes.

He swallows hard, then nods curtly.

DANIEL
(quiet, subdued)
What... what do we need to do?

Elizabeth exhales in relief, squeezing Daniel's hand. Dr.
Henderson begins outlining an intervention plan as the
parents listen intently, trying to hope.

CUT TO:

INT. SHARON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL - RESOURCE OFFICE - DAY

Sunlight streams through a window... decorated with finger-
painted stars. Elizabeth sits in a small chair across from
MS. JENKINS (47), a kindly special education teacher. Between
them, a table is strewn with colorful fidget toys and
worksheets.

MS. JENKINS
(smiling)
Benjamin's already showing an affinity
for patterns. We'll create an IEP-
Individualized Education Program-
tailored just for him.

Elizabeth's shoulders ease with relief.

ELIZABETH

We just want him to be understood. To
not feel so... lost.

Ms. Jenkins nods, hands folded warmly.

MS. JENKINS

He's not lost. We just have to speak
his language.

(beat)

I worked with a student last year-
Adam-who was a lot like Benjamin.
Smart kid, had trouble connecting.
With some classroom supports and
patience, he blossomed. We can do the
same for Benjamin.

Elizabeth's eyes mist.

ELIZABETH

Thank you. I-I can't tell you how good
it is to hear that.

MS. JENKINS

You are very welcome!

Elizabeth reaches across to squeeze Ms. Jenkins' hand
gratefully.

INT. COHEN FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Silence.

Daniel stares at a pamphlet labeled "Understanding Autism,"
untouched on the coffee table.

Elizabeth quietly packs Benjamin's toys into organized boxes-
blocks, cars lined up neatly.

Elizabeth glances at Daniel, but he avoids her gaze.

Elizabeth finally sits beside him, placing a comforting hand
on his knee.

Daniel looks down at her hand, tension in his posture easing
slightly.

From the hallway, little Benjamin peers quietly, toy car in
hand-observing without words, sensing the tension he doesn't
fully understand.

DISSOLVE TO:

INT. COHEN FAMILY HOME - DINING ROOM - NIGHT (2012)

Flash title card: Thirteen years later.

Warm light from a modest chandelier falls over a dinner table set for three. Benjamin, now 18, sits with his parents, Daniel (now, 48) and Elizabeth (now, 45). Benjamin pokes at his food, shoulders hunched. His movements are small and tense; the clink of silverware and ticking of a wall clock echo loudly in his sensitive ears.

Daniel studies Benjamin with a mixture of concern and frustration. He's a traditionally observant Jewish man, a kippah on his head and years of expectations weighing on his brow. Elizabeth glances between them, gentle and cautious.

DANIEL
(slowly, measured)
How was school today?

Benjamin doesn't look up. He shrugs almost gradually, continuing to push peas around his plate. He doesn't speak.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
Benjamin? Your math test-you had one, right?

BENJAMIN
(murmurs, without eye contact)
It was fine.

Elizabeth smiles softly at Benjamin, trying to encourage him.

ELIZABETH
That's good, sweetheart. Did Mrs. Kline like the project you turned in?

Benjamin nods a little. He still doesn't raise his eyes. Daniel's jaw tightens. He clears his throat and sits up straighter, attempting a patient tone that barely hides his impatience.

DANIEL
Your mother's talking to you. Look at us, please.

Benjamin lifts his head just a few degrees, but his gaze remains distant, fixed somewhere around the saltshaker.

BENJAMIN

(quietly)

Sorry.

There's an awkward pause. Daniel exchanges a look with Elizabeth, then reaches for his glass of water. The clink as he sets it down is too loud in Benjamin's ears. He flinches, fingers tapping twice against his thigh under the table - a tiny stimming motion.

Elizabeth notices Benjamin's discomfort and shoots Daniel a cautionary glance. Daniel clears his throat again, trying another approach.

DANIEL

You know, uh... I was thinking, maybe after dinner we could practice your Bar Mitzvah portion- well, your Haftarah reading? Even though it's been a few years, it's important to keep up, right?

Benjamin's brow furrows. The suggestion seems to come out of nowhere. He stops moving his fork.

BENJAMIN

(flat)

My Bar Mitzvah was four years ago.

DANIEL

It wouldn't hurt to review. You haven't read from the Torah since then. Tradition matters.

Benjamin finally looks up directly at Daniel, an edge of irritation or boldness flashing in his eyes.

BENJAMIN

I-I remember it fine, Dad. I don't need practice.

Daniel sets his jaw. He wasn't expecting pushback. Elizabeth reaches over to put a gentle hand on Daniel's arm.

ELIZABETH

(smiling tightly)

Maybe Benjamin has other things on his mind. Senior year is busy.

Daniel pulls his arm away, folding his hands. He addresses Benjamin again, trying to remain calm.

DANIEL

What "other things"? You barely talk
to us about school or... anything.

Benjamin's eyes dart away again. He shrinks under Daniel's
scrutiny, shoulders tensing. Silence.

Daniel sighs, frustration seeping through despite himself.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

You can't just sit there and not
respond. Sit up straight, please.

Benjamin obeys mechanically, straightening in his chair, but
still says nothing. Elizabeth noticed Benjamin's hand
trembling slightly as he grips his fork. She decides to
intervene, keeping her tone light.

ELIZABETH

Daniel, it's okay. Let's not press him
right now.

DANIEL

(low, to Elizabeth)
We tiptoe around everything lately...

ELIZABETH

Daniel.

A beat. Daniel pinches the bridge of his nose, collecting
himself. He addresses Benjamin again, voice softer but
strained.

DANIEL

Look, your mother and I... we worry.
We want to help you, son. But you have
to meet us halfway.

Benjamin's throat bobs; he struggles to find words.

BENJAMIN

(halting)
I... I'm fine. I just...

He trails off, unable to articulate the storm inside. The
ticking clock grows louder in his ears. Daniel waits, but
Benjamin doesn't finish.

DANIEL

(sees Benjamin's distress; tries a gentler approach)

It's just dinner, Benjamin. We're just talking. I know sometimes it's hard for you-

BENJAMIN

(defensive whisper)

I said I'm fine.

Daniel's hand slams down on the table-harder than he intended. The plates rattle. Benjamin jumps, eyes wide at the sudden sound. Elizabeth gasps softly.

DANIEL

(not shouting, but firm)

No, you're not fine. Sitting here in silence isn't fine!

Realizing he's raised his voice, Daniel exhales, trying to steady himself. He softens slightly, but his words remain tense.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Benjamin... we can't help you if you won't let us in.

Benjamin's face flushes. There's hurt and confusion in his eyes-he wants to speak, but he can't find the right words or courage. Instead, he pushes his chair back suddenly, the legs scraping.

BENJAMIN

May I be excused?

Elizabeth bites her lip. Daniel presses his fingers against his temple, temper held on a leash.

DANIEL

(after a moment)

Fine. Go.

Benjamin stands so quickly his chair nearly tips. Without another word, he turns and walks out of the dining room. The moment he's out of sight, he breaks into a near-run up the stairs.

Elizabeth rounds on Daniel, keeping her voice low to avoid Benjamin hearing.

ELIZABETH
(firm, quiet)
That was too much.

DANIEL
(defensive, whispering)
What was I supposed to do? He won't
talk to us, he won't even look at us!
We have tried everything.

ELIZABETH
He's overwhelmed, Daniel. You know how
he gets-especially after school.

DANIEL
We all have hard days. It doesn't mean
he can ignore his parents.

Daniel shakes his head, lowering his voice further as he
continues.

DANIEL (CONT'D)
We've bent over backwards since he was
five. The specialists, the therapy,
always adjusting. And still-still he
behaves like... like this.

ELIZABETH
He's not behaving badly. He's
different. That's part of his Autism.
And he's seventeen; teenagers aren't
exactly chatty with their parents to
begin with.

Elizabeth's attempt at lightness doesn't land. Daniel's face
hardens. He mutters, almost to himself.

DANIEL
It's more than that and you know it.

Elizabeth crosses her arms, voice tight.

ELIZABETH
Please, don't start.

DANIEL
Start what? Speaking the truth? Liz,
he's-

He catches himself, inhales, then continues deliberately.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

He's not like other kids. And I'm
scared for him. The world isn't kind
to...

He doesn't finish the sentence, but both of them know the
word unsaid: "people like him". Elizabeth's expression
softens slightly.

ELIZABETH

We could never really put him in a
box, like everyone wanted. But he is
kind, and brilliant, and creative. The
world might be unkind, but we have to
be kind, Daniel.

DANIEL

I am kind. I'm his father. I'm trying
to prepare him. Because if he can't
adapt even a little... life will chew
him up.

Elizabeth's eyes glisten. She looks toward the staircase
where Benjamin fled.

ELIZABETH

(softly)

Maybe life wouldn't chew him up if
those who are supposed to love him
unconditionally didn't try to change
him.

Daniel flinches as if slapped. For a moment, regret flickers
over his face. He opens his mouth to answer, but closes it,
at a loss. Elizabeth silently begins clearing the plates, her
lips pressed thin. Off this uneasy scene of the parents at
odds.

INT. BENJAMIN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Posters. Stars. Guitar. A safe haven.

Benjamin sits in the corner, knees to chest, blocking out the
argument downstairs. The muffled voices fade. He exhales.

Moves to his bed. Strums his guitar softly. Opens his
notebook. Writes:

"I speak in silence, linger unseen..."

Then:

"But shadows don't hold hands in daylight."

He stops. Eyes wet. Types a message to Max:

"Hey... I wrote a song. It made me think of you."

He never sends it. The screen fades. So does he.

FADE TO:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL CLASSROOM - THE NEXT MORNING

A crowded 12th grade algebra class. The teacher, MR. LUCAS (56), scribbles an equation on the chalkboard.

Benjamin sits in the second row. He's taller, thin, shoulders slightly hunched. As Mr. Lucas writes, Benjamin taps his pencil in a quick, controlled rhythm on his desk-a self-soothing pattern.

MR. LUCAS

Alright, who can tell me the square root of 289? Anyone?

A few students furrow their brows, counting on fingers or writing out 289's factors. Benjamin's hand shoots up almost immediately. In fact, he blurts out the answer even before Mr. Lucas calls on him:

BENJAMIN

Seventeen.

The class turns to look at Benjamin. Mr. Lucas smiles, a bit surprised.

MR. LUCAS

That's correct, Benjamin. Next time, try waiting for me to call on you, okay?

Benjamin flushes slightly and nods, realizing he spoke out of turn. Some classmates snicker. JASON (18) - a bulky football type - smirks across the aisle at Benjamin and stage-whispers to his buddies NATE (18), KYLE (17), and BRANDON (17).

JASON

Whiz kid couldn't wait two seconds.

NATE

(chuckling)

Human calculator over there.

A couple of kids nearby giggle. Benjamin hears them. He lowers his head, letting his shaggy hair fall forward to hide his face, and pretends to re-read his notes. We see him quietly tap the side of his notebook three times with his index finger-a grounding habit.

Mr. Lucas gives the boys in the back a warning glance and continues the lesson. Benjamin keeps quiet now, but his answer already made him a target.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY - LATER

The final bell rings. Students flood the hallways, heading for lockers or the exits. Benjamin walks alone, hugging a couple of textbooks to his chest. He navigates the chaos carefully, as if each force or loud laugh is a potential threat to his senses. The fluorescent lights overhead seem too bright; the dissonance of hundreds of teenagers talking and slamming lockers is overwhelming. Benjamin's steps quicken as he is approaching his locker - he's focused on escape.

JASON (O.S.)

(to his friends)

Yo, check it out - it's Rain Man!

Benjamin tenses. He glances over his shoulder. Jason, Nate, Kyle, and Brandon are leaning against a set of lockers a few yards away, sneering in Benjamin's direction.

BRANDON

(grinning)

Hey Benjamin! What's the square root of, uh, I dunno, 10,000?

KYLE

(fake gasp)

You mean he hasn't answered already?
Must be slipping.

They laugh. A few other students within earshot watch the brewing confrontation, some curious, some uncomfortable. Benjamin turns back to his locker, face hot. He wills himself to ignore them.

JASON

(voice dripping with mock
sweetness)

Aww, don't be rude. We're just dying
to know the answer.

Benjamin grabs a notebook from his locker, trying to keep his cool. His heartbeat thuds in his ears, faster with every taunt. One of his bullies - Nate - slams his own locker shut loudly as he passes by, the bang making Benjamin flinch. Jason notices Benjamin's reaction and smiles like a predator scenting blood.

JASON (CONT'D)

(to Benjamin)

What's wrong, freak? Too many voices
in your head?

Benjamin breathes sharply. He grips the edge of his locker door.

Before Benjamin can gather any response, a voice hollers out.

MAX (O.S.)

Jason, leave him alone!

It's MAX, broad-shouldered in a varsity jacket. Jason spins. Max steps forward, arms crossed. He faces Jason and his friends, arms loosely at his sides but stance firm. The tension shifts.

MAX

(voice calm, but strong)

Back off.

The bullies hesitate. Max is well-known, well-liked-and he's the star of the basketball team. Jason's swagger fluctuates for a split second.

JASON

(sneering, but uncertain)

We're just talking to him, Max. No
harm.

MAX

Doesn't look like he wants to talk to
you.

He meets Jason's eyes unflinchingly. There's a quiet authority in Max's tone that even Jason has to respect. The hallway noise continues around this standoff, but a small circle of silence has formed between them.

NATE

Come on, man, we're just messing
around.

MAX

Yeah? Doesn't look fun for him.

Benjamin glances at Max's back, astonished and grateful. He doesn't speak—he rarely can in these moments—but we see a flicker of relief in his eyes.

Jason scoffs, trying to save face. He raises his hands in a mock surrender.

JASON

Alright, alright. Didn't know you were the freak's bodyguard now.

Max steps forward just enough that Jason has to either yield ground or bump into him. Jason chooses to take a step back.

MAX

(low and firm)

Don't call him that. Ever.

Jason's face flushes. His friends nudge him, and with a final glare at Benjamin and Max, Jason mutters under his breath.

JASON

Whatever. Let's go.

The bullies slink away, trying to act nonchalant, but clearly frightened by Max's intervention. The tension in Benjamin's shoulders releases slightly when they disappear into the crowd.

Max turns to Benjamin. Up close, Benjamin can see Max's face is a mixture of concern and something softer—empathy.

MAX

You good?

Benjamin opens his mouth. For a moment, no sound comes out. He nods rapidly, then finally manages:

BENJAMIN

(throat dry)

... Thank you.

MAX

(smiles gently)

Don't worry about it.

Benjamin's gaze flashes to Max's hand, which is resting at his side. Impulsively, Benjamin's fingers twitch as if he

wants to reach out - maybe shake Max's hand in gratitude or some gesture of connection. But he stops himself, his courage failing at the last second. He curls that hand into a loose fist instead.

Max notices the aborted movement. He seems to understand; instead of drawing attention to it, Max simply gives a friendly pat to Benjamin's shoulder.

MAX (CONT'D)

Hang in there, Benjamin.

Benjamin's face warms at the touch, but he doesn't flinch. It's a brief, reassuring pat, and then Max picks up his backpack from the floor.

MAX (CONT'D)

See you around, okay?

He offers Benjamin one more encouraging nod and then moves off down the hallway, merging into the stream of students leaving. Benjamin watches Max go, standing by his locker in a kind of daze.

The hallway is thinning out now. A distant bell signals the school buses are about to depart. Benjamin blinks and realizes he's been standing there, replaying Max's words in his head: "Hang in there, Benjamin." The sound of his own name spoken kindly seems to echo.

He swallows and turns back to his locker, retrieving a worn spiral notebook - the one containing his lyrics. On its cover, scribbled in marker, is the title of the song he was writing: "Hidden in the Quiet."

Benjamin presses the notebook to his chest and closes his locker. The hallway is nearly empty now. The fluorescent lights hum quietly, and a janitor's distant mop sloshes.

With a new resolve in his eyes, Benjamin heads down the hall.

CUT TO:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL - LOCKER ROOM - AFTERNOON

Max sits on a bench, head bowed slightly. Jason enters, his fellow baseball teammates trailing behind.

JASON

Yo, Max-what's with you sticking up
for the weird kid?

Max doesn't immediately respond. He tightens his shoelace unnecessarily, buying time.

MAX

Why do you care?

Jason shrugs, a sneer masking insecurity.

JASON

People talk, man. You keep doing that, they'll start talking about you.

Max finally meets Jason's eyes calmly.

MAX

Maybe I don't care what they say.

Jason scoffs but leaves, uncertain. Alone, Max exhales slowly -clearly troubled, perhaps feeling the weight of expectation.

INT. COHEN FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

A modest living room decorated with family photos and Judaica. The house is quiet. Elizabeth stands near the couch folding laundry. Daniel sits in an armchair with a newspaper, though he's mostly staring into space, lost in troubled thought. The front door opens and Benjamin steps in, home from the prom committee meeting (or so his parents think). It's evening, later than usual for a school event. He's dressed in neat casual clothes, but there's a nervous energy about him.

ELIZABETH

(relieved, smiling)

Hi, honey. How was the meeting?

BENJAMIN

It was... fine.

He slips off his shoes. Daniel folds his newspaper and looks at Benjamin.

DANIEL

You're late. It's almost nine.

BENJAMIN

Sorry. There was a lot to plan-prom is in two days.

Elizabeth notices Benjamin carrying his guitar case on his back in addition to his school bag.

ELIZABETH

You took your guitar to a meeting?

Benjamin hesitates. He touches the guitar case strap, fingers tapping it.

BENJAMIN

(softly)

I... went to the music room after.
Just to practice a little.

It's not exactly a lie; he did practice, though the true reason is tucked away in his notebook: he's preparing for something special at prom.

Daniel's eyes the guitar case, then Benjamin.

DANIEL

Prom, huh... I remember mine. You
taking anyone?

Benjamin's face goes blank for a moment. He shakes his head quickly.

BENJAMIN

No, um... just going with, like,
friends.

He edges past, clearly eager to escape further questioning.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

I'm pretty tired. Gonna go do
homework.

Elizabeth senses he wants privacy and nods.

ELIZABETH

Alright, sweetheart. There's leftovers
in the fridge if you're hungry.

Benjamin raises a small grateful smile to his mom and then disappears down the hall toward his bedroom. As soon as he's out of earshot, Daniel sighs and rubs his face.

DANIEL

He's taking that guitar everywhere
lately.

ELIZABETH

Better than not leaving his room at
all, don't you think?

Daniel grunts, half-agreeing. We hold for a moment on the parents' worried expressions, then...

INT. BENJAMIN'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Benjamin closes his bedroom door behind him.

He leans against it, exhaling like he's been holding his breath the entire conversation.

He sets down his guitar case and backpack.

On his bed lies a plastic garment bag containing a formal dark outfit - his suit for prom.

Benjamin glances at it and then goes to his desk.

Scattered across the desk are sheet music and his lyric notebook, open to "Hidden in the Quiet."

The lyrics are now mostly complete.

He picks it up and reads over a line, lips moving silently: "When you smile, just for a moment, I wonder if I could be..."

He's editing, fine-tuning.

Benjamin opens his laptop and wakes it.

On the screen, a social media event page is displayed: "ROBBINSVILLE HIGH PROM - Talent Show Sign-up" with his name listed next to a performance slot.

It looks like the prom organizers planned an open mic portion. Benjamin's name is one of a few listed; he's going to sing.

He hovers the cursor over his name on the sign-up list, as if second-guessing his choice to volunteer.

After a moment, he closes the laptop resolutely.

Benjamin's face is a mix of excitement and absolute terror.

He retrieves his guitar from the case and strums it very softly, mindful of his parents down the hall.

The tune "Hidden in the Quiet" blooms again.

As he plays, he shuts his eyes and envisions the moment on

stage that he fantasized about.

We see quick flashes: his fingers on strings, a crowd, maybe the outline of someone like Max at the edge of stage lights.

Benjamin's determination strengthens. This song, this moment, could convey everything he can't say out loud.

He finishes the song quietly in his room, the last chord hanging in the stillness.

Benjamin's trembling, but he smiles to himself with determination.

BENJAMIN

(whispering to the empty room)

It's time to be heard.

CUT TO:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL - MUSIC ROOM HALLWAY - NIGHT (PRE-PROM)

The prom buzz pulses faintly from the gym down the hall - music, laughter, feet stomping. But here, the hallway is still.

Benjamin stands near the music room door, clutching his guitar. He's dressed up, trembling slightly, counting under his breath.

"One... two... three... four..."

From around the corner, Max appears - tux half-done, boutonniere slightly crooked.

MAX

There you are.

(beat)

We've been looking for you - they're about to start the talent segment.

Benjamin tries to answer. Fails. Nods instead.

Max notices the guitar.

MAX (CONT'D)

So you're really doing it, huh?

Benjamin shrugs. Then nods again - more resolutely.

Max leans against the wall. His tone is soft, maybe

impressed. Maybe unsure.

MAX (CONT'D)
You've got guts, man.
(beat)
I couldn't do what you're about to do.

Benjamin finally speaks - just barely.

BENJAMIN
You already do. Every day.

Max tilts his head, not sure what that means - but intrigued.

MAX
Is it a love song?

BENJAMIN
(quietly)
Something like that.

A long beat. Max almost says more - maybe suspects the truth. But he just nods.

MAX
Well... break a leg.

He offers a small fist bump. Benjamin hesitates - then returns it. Their knuckles meet.

MAX (CONT'D)
(softly)
You're braver than you think.

Max walks away, back toward the gym. Benjamin watches him go. Eyes soft. Hopeful.

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL GYM - PROM - NIGHT (FANTASY)

Benjamin sings confidently on stage. Students applaud. Max steps forward, smiling warmly. He extends a hand. Benjamin, heart swelling, accepts.

They dance slowly-Benjamin feels safe, accepted, loved.

CUT IMMEDIATELY BACK TO REALITY: Benjamin backstage, anxious, about to perform.

INT. HIGH SCHOOL GYM - PROM NIGHT

A banner reading "A Night Under the Stars - Prom 2012" hangs above a transformed gym.

It's now PROM: colored lights spin, a cheesy pop song thumps through speakers, and clusters of students in suits and gowns mingle and dance. Laughter and chatter echo.

Benjamin stands just off the makeshift stage, half-hidden behind a curtain. He's in a well-fitted black suit with a subtle silver sheen - looking sharp but pale with nerves. His hair is neatly combed for once.

He clutches his guitar, fingers flexing anxiously on the fretboard. From here, he can see the crowd but they haven't noticed him yet.

On stage, the Prom DJ is speaking into the mic:

DJ
(lively)
Alright, folks! It's time for
something special. We have a few brave
souls who signed up to share their
talents tonight!

Some applause and whoops from the crowd.

Benjamin peeks out - hundreds of students, plus some chaperoning teachers, all facing the stage.

He spots familiar faces: Jason and his crew near the punch bowl, already snickering; and... Max, at a table with fellow basketball players and their dates.

Max looks a bit bored by the DJ's patter, sipping a soda, but he's here.

DJ (CONT'D)
First up, please welcome... Benjamin
Cohen!

A spotlight swings to the side of the stage.

Benjamin's breath catches. This is it.

For a second, his feet feel rooted to the spot. There's an awkward pause; the crowd murmurs, scanning for who's coming up.

From the wings, a senior girl on prom committee gently nudges Benjamin. He forces himself forward, stepping into the light.

A hush falls. Some students whisper in surprise - many have barely heard Benjamin speak, let alone volunteer to perform.

Benjamin stands at the mic center stage, guitar strapped across him. In the brightness, he can barely see the audience, just vague outlines. But he knows they're all staring. His heart hammers.

He leans toward the mic. A long beat passes. His mouth opens, but no words come at first. A bead of sweat trickles down his temple. Benjamin's vision swims with anxiety. The silence stretches.

Finally, in a voice that cracks immediately, he addresses the crowd:

BENJAMIN
(quietly)
H-hi...

His voice echoes slightly in the large gym. He swallows hard. A few giggles erupt from the back at his awkwardness.

Benjamin's eyes desperately search the faces beyond the lights - and find Max. Max is standing now, watching intently. He isn't laughing; his expression is one of gentle encouragement, as if silently saying - You got this.

Benjamin takes a shaky breath. He remembers a classmate's advice from drama class-find one friendly face in the crowd and focus on it. Max's face will do.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
I wrote it for... someone.

Some students perk up, intrigued. Murmurs ("who?") ripple through the crowd. Max leans slightly forward, brow furrowing with curiosity or realization.

Benjamin's throat tightens; his courage nearly buckles under the vulnerability of that statement. But then he adjusts his grip on the guitar and presses on:

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
I hope... I hope you like it.

With that, he lowers his eyes to his guitar and begins to play. A gentle picking pattern flows from the strings - the

melody "Hidden in the Quiet." The room falls completely silent except for the music.

Benjamin sings, voice trembling at first:

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(sings)

"I speak in silence, linger unseen,
Afraid to step where the light has
been. In crowded rooms I stand apart,
Quiet hands and quiet heart."

His voice is pure, hauntingly clear despite the nerves. A few students in the crowd exchange surprised looks - he can sing?

Benjamin continues, gaining a bit more strength as he loses himself in the song:

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(sings)

"But when you smile, even just for a
moment, The shadows fade, my world
feels open. For just that glance, I
think I could be Something more than
the silence in me."

On these lines, Benjamin's eyes flick up and find Max in the crowd again.

Max's lips part in astonishment. He seems to realize the song is about him - or at least that he's the one whose smile Benjamin's singing about.

Max's friends notice too, whispering in confusion.

Some scattered sighs come from the audience - the song is beautiful and achingly sincere.

But near the back, Jason and his buddies snicker. This is the confirmation of what they suspected: Benjamin's singing a love song, and possibly to a guy.

Benjamin moves into the chorus, voice growing steadier and louder, pouring years of unspoken feeling into the words:

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(sings)

"Hidden in the quiet, that's where I
stay, Yearning for dawn while stuck in
the grey. Shadows don't hold hands in
daylight, Echoes never get to say what

(MORE)

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
they might. So I'll keep this secret
safe and sound, In the silence where I
won't be found."

A few students begin to sway gently. Some phone screens are up, recording this unexpected prom moment.

Benjamin closes his eyes as he bridges to the next verse:

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
(sings)
"If I could be braver, step into the
sun, Would you see me, hear me, the
silent one? My words are locked but
this song is free, Carrying the hope
that you'll notice me..."

He opens his eyes on the last line and locks eyes directly with Max. The intensity in Benjamin's gaze leaves no doubt who he's singing to. A ripple of realization goes through the crowd like a current.

Max's face flushes deep red. Around him, his teammates and their dates stare at him in shock, some covering mouths.

Max looks around at the eyes on him and shifts uncomfortably.

Benjamin is too caught in the music and emotion to notice the reactions fully.

He goes into the final chorus, voice cracking with emotion but still beautiful:

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
(sings)
"Hidden in the quiet, longing to rise,
To break the silence and shatter the
disguise. But shadows don't hold hands
in daylight, And echoes fade when the
morning's bright. Still in this song
maybe you'll see, The true color of
the quiet in me."

As Benjamin strums the final chord, his voice trails off softly.

The gym is dead silent for one breathless moment, everyone absorbing what just happened: shy Benjamin publicly poured his heart out, seemingly to Max. Then-

JASON (O.S.)
(loudly, with cruel glee)
Did he just sing a love song to Max?!

Laughter erupts from a knot of students - mainly Jason's group and a few others.

A mix of reactions ripples through the crowd: stunned silence from many, scattered laughter from bullies, and a few claps from someone sympathetic that quickly die out.

On stage, Benjamin stands frozen as the humiliation sinks in. He hadn't fully considered this outcome: that his secret would be laid bare in front of everyone.

His cheeks burn.

Max, standing amid his friends, is wide-eyed and pale.

His buddies stare at him, some snickering in disbelief.

BRANDON
(laughing)
Yo, Max, you got yourself a boyfriend?

Kyle howls with laughter.

Max's head whips around, panic in his eyes. He's caught in the worst spotlight of his life.

He steps back as if trying to distance himself physically from Benjamin's declaration.

BENJAMIN
(into the mic, desperate and raw)
Max-

His voice echoes across the gym, cracking.

Benjamin takes a half-step forward on the stage, one hand reaching out painfully as if Max were within arm's length.

Tears prick at the corners of Benjamin's eyes, his worst fear materializing before him.

Max meets Benjamin's gaze from across the room. For a split second, his expression is pained, conflicted. But then a few of Max's teammates snicker again, and someone loudly mimics a kissy-face.

Max's face hardens defensively. He finally shouts, voice

cracking with strain:

MAX

Uh... I'm not-I'm not gay!

He says it loudly, for everyone to hear. The words hang in the air like a slap. Benjamin reels as if physically struck.

The microphone picks up a small, wounded sound from his throat. Laughter swells-some of it uncomfortable, some vicious.

The DJ, sensing disaster, fumbles to play a generic upbeat pop song to cut the tension. Music begins blaring from the speakers, but it's too late.

Benjamin's vision blurs with hot tears. On stage, under the harsh lights, he suddenly feels unbearably exposed, naked in front of a hundred mocking eyes.

He does the only thing his fight-or-flight response will allow:

He turns and rushes off the stage, nearly tripping down the small steps at the side.

A teacher chaperone reaches out as if to comfort him, but Benjamin slips past and runs.

Behind him, a chaos of mixed noises: the DJ awkwardly hyping people back to dancing, pockets of laughter, a few murmurs of sympathy.

But Benjamin hears none of it clearly over the roar of blood in his ears.

CUT TO:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

Benjamin bursts out of the gym into an empty hallway, guitar still in hand, tears streaming down his face. The muffled bass of the dance music pounds through the walls behind him.

He stumbles blindly down the hall, chest heaving with suppressed sobs. Around a corner, he finds a deserted stretch of lockers and the door to the boys' bathroom. He pushes into it.

CUT TO:

INT. SCHOOL BATHROOM - CONTINUOUS

Harsh fluorescent lights flicker awake as Benjamin slams the bathroom stall door behind him.

He collapses onto the closed toilet seat, guitar clutched to his body as if it's his lifeline.

Inside the stall, graffiti scrawls surround him-inked names of couples, stupid jokes, one "CLASS OF '12 RULES!" in Sharpie. Benjamin stares blankly at the graffiti, breathing hard.

He carefully sets his guitar on the floor, then presses both palms to his ears, trying to block out the phantom echoes of laughter still ringing in his mind.

BENJAMIN

(choking out a sob to himself)

Stupid... I'm so stupid...

He squeezes his eyes shut, tears spilling freely now. His breath comes in quick, panicky gasps. After a few seconds, he remembers one of his coping strategies. He presses his back against the stall wall and begins to count under his breath:

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(one hand tapping each number on
his knee)

One... two... three... four...

He inhales sharply and closes his eyes, focusing only on the count.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

Five... six... seven... eight...

His breathing slowly starts to regulate. The counting steadies him just a little, grounding him to something concrete.

After reaching ten, he stops, panting softly. The crisis moment passes, leaving a heavy numbness in its wake. Benjamin lowers his hands from his ears. The bathroom is silent but for the dripping of a faucet.

Sniffling, he digs into his pocket and pulls out his phone. With trembling fingers, he opens a messaging app and begins typing a draft to his mother: "Mom, something happened at prom. I-"

He stops, a fresh wave of shame washing over him. How can he explain this? What if his father finds out? Benjamin imagines Daniel's face: anger, disgust, the word "humiliated" hurled like a dagger.

Benjamin deletes the draft text. Instead, he clicks open Twitter, fingers hovering over the compose field. The cursor blinks, daring him to unload his hurt in 280 characters to the void. He types: "I wish I could just..." then deletes it. No, he can't share this pain anywhere. He feels completely alone.

He wipes his face with the back of his hand and tucks the phone away.

Benjamin gently lifts his guitar again and holds it against himself, forehead resting on its wooden body. In this tiny stall, in this moment, it's the only thing offering him any comfort. As he sits there, small and heartbroken under the flickering light, we...

CUT TO:

INT. HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY - MINUTES LATER

Benjamin opens the men's bathroom door to get out.

Then- we see Jason, Nate, Kyle, and Brandon emerge. They approach Benjamin slowly, predatory grins in place. Benjamin senses them and looks up, eyes red.

JASON
(sing song)
Going somewhere, princess?

Benjamin's stomach drops. He tries to straighten, wipe his face.

BENJAMIN
(voice small, raw)
Leave me alone, Jason.

KYLE
What? No encore for us? That was quite the show.

Nate steps forward, cracking his knuckles.

NATE
You really thought the star jock would be your boyfriend? That's cute.

Benjamin darts his eyes toward the exit. Jason steps into his path, blocking him.

JASON

You humiliated us at our own prom. You think we're gonna let that slide?

Benjamin backs up against the bathroom door.

BENJAMIN

(pleading)

I don't want any trouble...

Brandon snatches the guitar case from Benjamin's hand and tosses it aside. It hits the floor with a metallic TWANG. Benjamin flinches. "Please" dies on his lips as Jason's fist suddenly drives into Benjamin's gut.

Benjamin doubles over with a gasp.

JASON

That's for the little serenade.

Benjamin coughs, trying to suck in air. Kyle and Nate each grab one of Benjamin's arms, yanking him upright and pinning him against the bathroom door.

Terror floods Benjamin's face as Jason steps closer, eyes cold.

JASON (CONT'D)

What should we do with the prom queen?

Brandon cackles, producing a pocketknife and flicking it open to cut through Benjamin's dress shirt sleeve. Benjamin's eyes go wide with panic.

BENJAMIN

(Choking out)

No-stop!

NATE

(hisses)

Shut up!

Jason clamps a hand over Benjamin's mouth, muffling his cries.

JASON

(low, vicious)

You like putting on a show? How about
(MORE)

JASON (CONT'D)
we give you one-one you'll never
forget.

Benjamin squirms desperately, but Kyle and Nate's grips are iron.

Brandon yanks Benjamin's belt open. The clink of the buckle echoes in the empty bathroom.

Benjamin thrashes, screams stifled under Jason's palm. Tears stream down his face. Suddenly-

TEACHER (O.S.)
Hey! What the HELL is going on here?!

A male teacher and a security guard sprint down the hallway toward them.

The bullies jolt in surprise.

JASON
(snarling)
Shit-go!

Jason releases Benjamin, and the four scatter like rats. The security guard chases after them, shouting into his radio.

The teacher (Mr. Lucas, the math teacher) rushes to Benjamin, who collapses to the floor, trembling violently. Benjamin's tux shirt is torn, belt hanging loose. He curls up, sobbing silently.

MR. LUCAS
(kneeling, gentle)
Benjamin... my God. It's okay, they're
gone. You're safe.

Benjamin rocks, eyes unfocused, gasping for breath.

Nearby, his guitar lies on the floor, case flung open. A couple strings have snapped from the impact, dangling limp.

Mr. Lucas shrugs off his suit jacket and carefully drapes it around Benjamin's shoulders.

Benjamin grips the jacket closed with shaking hands, trying to cover himself. He won't look up, face burning with shame.

The distant echo of the security guard's shouts and the bullies' running footsteps fade.

Mr. Lucas pulls out his phone, voice tight with anger and urgency.

MR. LUCAS (CONT'D)

Yes, this is Mr. Lucas. I need the principal and nurse in the south hallway, now. A student's been attacked... Yes... I think it was going to be a sexual assault-

(he swallows hard)

They ran off. Security is pursuing.

Benjamin presses his forehead to his knees, dizzy and sick.

Mr. Lucas finishes the call and crouches again beside Benjamin. He places a hand gently on Benjamin's back.

MR. LUCAS (CONT'D)

(soft)

Benjamin... look at me, son.

Benjamin lifts his head. His face is streaked with tears, eyes full of agony.

Mr. Lucas's eyes glisten too as he musters a steady voice.

MR. LUCAS (CONT'D)

This is not your fault. Do you hear me? You didn't deserve any of this.

Benjamin bites his lip hard, trying not to break completely. Sirens wail in the distance-someone must've called the police.

Benjamin nods jerkily, though it's unclear if he believes Mr. Lucas.

The teacher stays by Benjamin's side, never letting go of his shoulder, as others finally arrive to help.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. HOSPITAL - PRIVATE ROOM - NIGHT

Dim, quiet. Machines softly beep. Benjamin lies in a hospital bed, eyes closed, face turned away. He looks small and fragile against the white sheets. Faint bruises mar his cheek and arms.

Elizabeth sits in a chair at his bedside. Her face is a mask of heartbreak; she's been crying but now is still, just

watching her sleeping son.

Daniel stands by the window, staring out at nothing. His arms are crossed tightly. He hasn't said a word in hours.

A DOCTOR (Dr. Lee, 60) quietly confers with a nurse by the door, then approaches the Cohens.

DR. LEE
(gentle hush)
He's stable now. Physically, he'll
recover...

Elizabeth wipes her eyes and stands. Daniel turns from the window, face pale.

ELIZABETH
And otherwise...?

Dr. Lee sighs softly.

DR. LEE
We have a trauma counselor on staff
who will want to speak with Benjamin
when he's awake. Given the
circumstances, it's important he has
support.

Elizabeth's hand flies to her mouth, containing a sob. Daniel steps forward stiffly.

DANIEL
(strained)
Can we take him home?

DR. LEE
(cautious)
Perhaps tomorrow, if there are no
complications overnight. But Mr.
Cohen... when he goes home, he'll need
a lot of care. Emotional above all.

Daniel nods woodenly. The doctor quietly exits.

In the silence, Elizabeth moves to Benjamin's side and gently brushes a lock of hair from his forehead.

ELIZABETH
(whisper)
My baby...

DANIEL
(voice thick)
This never should've happened.

Elizabeth looks up at him, eyes blazing suddenly.

ELIZABETH
No. It shouldn't have.

For a moment, both their gazes rest on Benjamin's sleeping form-his face bruised but peaceful for now.

CUT TO:

EXT. NEW JERSEY TURNPIKE - NIGHT

A gray sedan cruises down a nearly empty turnpike under a moonless sky. In the back seat, Benjamin sits with a small duffel bag and his guitar case on his lap. He stares out the window, eyes hollow. Elizabeth sits beside him; Daniel drives in tense silence. No one speaks. The hum of the road fills the void.

Benjamin absently touches the bandage on his forearm - a remnant of the IV from the hospital. It's been a week since the prom night attack. The physical wounds are healing; the emotional ones, far from it.

Headlights flare as Daniel takes an exit for Robbinsville. The car eventually pulls onto the quiet suburban street where the Cohen house stands.

INT. COHEN FAMILY HOME - LIVING ROOM - LATER THAT NIGHT

The front door opens. Benjamin steps in, followed by Elizabeth and Daniel. The house is dim and still, as if holding its breath.

Benjamin sets down his guitar and duffel gently. He looks around; everything is the same, yet he feels like a stranger here.

The atmosphere in the house is tense and heavy, like the moments before a storm. Daniel paces near the sofa, fists clenching and unclenching. Elizabeth stands by, worry engraved on her features. Both parents have heard about what transpired at prom-perhaps through the parental grapevine or a phone call from the school.

Benjamin sits on the edge of an armchair, arms wrapped around himself. His injuries from the week before are healed. He

also looks exhausted, eyes red-rimmed from crying through the last week. His guitar and school bag lie by the front door-he hasn't touched them since returning home early from prom and locking himself in his room.

DANIEL

(voice low, trembling with
controlled anger)

Do you have anything to say for
yourself?

Benjamin flinches at the tone but lifts his chin. His back is pressed against the chair, cornered. Elizabeth opens her mouth to interject, but Daniel holds up a hand to stop her.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

No, I want to hear it from him.

Benjamin opens his mouth, but there's a lump in his throat the size of a fist. He can't find words. The silence infuriates Daniel further.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Fine. Then I'll speak. Do you have any
idea what you've done? The calls I
got? What people are saying?

BENJAMIN

(voice cracking)

I-I'm sorry...

DANIEL

Sorry? You embarrassed yourself!
You...

(he struggles, the word catches)

... you embarrassed this family,
Benjamin.

Elizabeth cringes at Daniel's phrasing. She steps forward carefully.

ELIZABETH

Daniel, please-

DANIEL

No! Not this time, Liz.

He turns back to Benjamin, eyes blazing not just with anger, but hurt.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

I've bent over backwards to give you a normal life and then you-

(voice wavers ever so slightly)

-you do this? In front of everyone?

(steadies, cold)

I will not have it under my roof.

Each word is laced with disbelief and a kind of betrayal. Benjamin feels tears prick again, but he bites them back.

BENJAMIN

(soft, pleading)

I didn't mean to embarrass anyone. I just...

Finally, finally, he tries to say it out loud, for himself as much as for them.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

It's who I am.

Daniel's face goes gray. Elizabeth's eyes widen slightly; she steps closer to Benjamin, as if ready to comfort or protect. Daniel sets his jaw.

DANIEL

No. No, it's... it's a phase or confusion or-

BENJAMIN

(stronger, through tears slip out)

It's not a phase. I'm gay.

There. The word sits between them like a live wire. Benjamin's voice softens after the admission, but there's relief in finally saying it. Elizabeth brings a hand to her mouth, emotion welling in her eyes-not surprise, but heartbreak at seeing this confrontation unfold.

Daniel's nostrils flare. He half-laughs in disbelief, running a hand through his hair.

DANIEL

A rebellion. That's what this is. A... sickness that you think you have.

BENJAMIN

(defensive now)

It's not a rebellion or sickness! It's me. It's just... me.

Daniel slams his palm on the side of the sofa, making both Benjamin and Elizabeth jump.

DANIEL

Enough!

A heavy, thick silence falls. Daniel inhales deeply, nostrils flaring, trying to contain an anger that's turning into something cold and final.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

(picking each word with icy
precision)

Go upstairs. Pack your things.

Elizabeth's face crumples.

ELIZABETH

Daniel-!

Benjamin's heart plummets to his stomach. He grips the armrest with white knuckles.

BENJAMIN

(voice small)

...Mom?

Elizabeth turns to Daniel, eyes flashing through tears.

ELIZABETH

You can't mean that. He's our son.

Daniel's stare remains fixed on Benjamin, stone-like. His voice lowers to barely above a whisper, but it's deadly firm.

DANIEL

Get out.

Benjamin doesn't move, shock rooting him. Daniel takes one menacing step forward.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

Don't make me throw you out myself.

Elizabeth quickly moves between Daniel and Eli, putting a hand on Daniel's chest.

ELIZABETH

(tears in her voice)

That's enough, Daniel!

For a moment, husband and wife lock eyes. Elizabeth's are pleading, Daniel's blazing. Finally, Daniel's resolve wobbles just a hair. He looks at Elizabeth and the pain in his expression matches the anger.

DANIEL

You.. you think I want to do this? You think I like this?

ELIZABETH

Then don't! We can-

DANIEL

His choices have consequences.

He steps around Elizabeth to loom nearer to Benjamin.

DANIEL (CONT'D)

If you're so determined to "be you", then you can do it elsewhere. Under someone else's roof. Not mine.

Benjamin stands slowly from the armchair on shaky legs. There's no fight left in him; he looks ghost-like, the aftermath of last week and now this draining every ounce of energy.

He turns his gaze to Elizabeth, silently begging for her help. Elizabeth's face is streaked with tears now.

ELIZABETH

(choking out)

I'm sorry, son.

She wants to say more but doesn't. She doesn't contradict Daniel. Her silence is an agonizing echo of last night's crowd - she isn't standing up for him either.

Something in Benjamin breaks. He nods faintly, numbness overtaking his panic.

BENJAMIN

(whisper)

Okay.

He walks past them in a daze, heading to his bedroom.

Elizabeth reaches a hand toward him as he passes. She almost grabs his arm but lets it fall.

ELIZABETH
(calling after gently)
Just... pack what you need for now,
sweetheart.

But her attempt at softness does nothing to put an end to the devastation in the air.

INT. BENJAMIN'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Benjamin tears a duffel bag from his closet, vision blurred by tears he refuses to fully shed. He moves around without thinking, stuffing clothes, a pair of sneakers, his notebook of lyrics, whatever essentials his mind registers.

The camera pans over the room - the twin bed neatly made, the posters, the little trophies from science fairs long past - all the familiarity he's about to leave behind. Benjamin spots a small, framed photo on his dresser: a younger him grinning, perched on Daniel's shoulders at some childhood outing, Elizabeth laughing beside them. The happy family. His chest wrenches. He takes the frame, then hesitates, and sets it face-down on the dresser. He doesn't pack it.

Finally, he zips the bag. He slides his guitar-his constant companion-carefully into its soft case and slings it over his shoulder.

Benjamin stands in the center of his room, bag in hand, guitar on back. He does a slow turn, taking in everything with glistening eyes. A life he's known, about to become memory. He reaches over and flicks off the light switch.

EXT. COHEN FAMILY HOME - NIGHT

The front door opens. Benjamin steps out into the chilly night. Daniel stands stiffly in the doorway, watching him go with a hardened expression, arms crossed. Elizabeth is half-hidden behind Daniel, tears shining on her cheeks.

Benjamin pauses on the porch and looks back at them-at his parents, framed in the warm light of home that he is being cast out from.

BENJAMIN
(voice breaking, staring at Daniel)
You always wanted a version of me that
never existed.

A beat. Benjamin turns to his mom.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

...Goodbye.

Elizabeth lets out a soft sob. Daniel's face distorts-anger, sorrow, regret, it's a storm of emotions he masks behind a scowl.

The door closes abruptly, cutting off the light and leaving Benjamin outside in darkness. We hear the click of the lock. Elizabeth's silhouette lingers in the window, her palm pressed to the glass. She raises it, as if almost waving-or reaching-but then she pulls it back and disappears.

Benjamin stands alone on the front path, steam of his breath visible in the cold air. The quiet suburban street around him feels spooky and foreign now.

He adjusts the strap of his guitar case and the weight of the duffel. With one last shattered glance at the dark, silent house, he turns and walks down the block into the night.

FADE TO BLACK:

EXT. SUBURBAN ROAD - LATER THAT NIGHT

A one-lane county road stretching through the outskirts of Benjamin's New Jersey hometown.

It's late; distant streetlights are few and far between. The moon is nearly full, casting a pale glow on the asphalt.

Benjamin lurches along the shoulder of the road, the duffel bag slung across his back now, guitar case in one hand.

His breath comes out in puffs.

He shivers in just a light jacket over his clothes, clearly not dressed for a long trek on a cold night.

The road ahead is long and empty. In the distance behind him, faint headlights appear - a bus coming up the road.

Benjamin stops and squints. The bus approaches, its destination sign glowing: "NEW YORK CITY."

Benjamin's exhausted face fills with a flicker of hope.

He steps to the bus stop sign a few yards ahead and waits, trembling from cold and nerves.

The bus begins to slow with a hydraulic hiss.

The doors swing open. THE DRIVER (55), a weary middle-aged man, looks at Benjamin expectantly.

Benjamin fumbles for his wallet, patting his pockets.

Realization strikes: in his rush and panic, he left without it. A wave of nausea hits as he remembers his wallet is still sitting on his nightstand at home.

The driver clears his throat, raising an eyebrow.

Benjamin's eyes well up anew. He quickly wipes them and musters his voice:

BENJAMIN

Sir, I-I don't have my wallet. I...
please, I need to get to New York.
It's important.

BUS DRIVER

(flat, unsympathetic)
Fare's \$15, kid. No exceptions.

Benjamin stands there, humiliated and desperate.

He reaches into his duffel, rifling for anything - a stray \$5? Some coins? He finds only a crumpled \$1 bill and a few quarters. Nowhere near enough.

The bus driver shakes his head slowly, as if to say "I'm sorry, can't help you." Benjamin's lip trembles.

BENJAMIN

(voice cracking)
Please...

The driver looks away, uncomfortable. After a beat, he presses a button. The doors start to close.

Benjamin steps back, shoulders slumping in defeat. The bus pulls away, red taillights disappearing into the dark. A small sob escapes him.

He stands alone again by the roadside, the silence loud in his ears. Above, the indifferent moon shines.

After a long, empty moment, Benjamin hoists his duffel and continues down the road on foot.

EXT. NEW JERSEY TURNPIKE - NIGHT

Benjamin trudges along the roadside, shivering, exhausted. Headlights approach. A car slows. The window lowers-revealing a middle-aged DRIVER (47).

DRIVER

You need a ride, kid?

Benjamin hesitates, sensing danger beneath the stranger's smile. He takes a cautious step back.

BENJAMIN

I'm good. Thanks.

DRIVER

Suit yourself.

The car accelerates away, tires kicking gravel. Benjamin breathes shakily, relieved but shaken, continuing his weary trek down the dark highway.

EXT. NEW JERSEY TURNPIKE - LATER

The Turnpike at midnight: endless lanes of concrete with occasional cars and trucks whooshing by, their headlights cutting through the dark.

Benjamin hauls along the shoulder, now hitchhiking. Every time he hears an engine approach from behind, he turns and half-heartedly sticks out his thumb. Most vehicles roar past without slowing.

Benjamin's face is blank, shock and exhaustion intermingling.

The events of the night replay in disjointed fragments in his mind: his father's rage, his mother's apology, the stranger's stare in the green glow of the dashboard...

He squeezes his eyes shut as he walks, trying to block it all.

Finally, headlights sweep over him as a vehicle actually slows down. Benjamin turns, hope flaring.

It's an eighteen-wheeler truck, rumbling to a halt on the shoulder a few yards ahead. Air brakes hiss as it stops.

Benjamin hurries toward it, wiping at his face and trying to compose himself. The passenger side door of the cab swings open from inside.

TRUCK DRIVER (O.S.)

You need a ride?

Benjamin gazes up. The Truck Driver (50) is a middle-aged woman with kind, tired eyes under a baseball cap. She leans over, looking down at him.

TRUCK DRIVER

C'mon, hop in if you're going north. I
can take you as far as Manhattan.

Relief floods through Benjamin, so powerful it almost knocks him to his knees. He nods gratefully and climbs the metal steps into the truck's cab.

INT. TRUCK - CONTINUOUS

The cab is cluttered but cozy - bobbleheads on the dash, a dreamcatcher hanging from the rearview. Country music plays softly on the radio.

Benjamin barely gets out a whisper of thanks.

BENJAMIN

Th-thank you.

The truck driver eyes him briefly as she settles in. She notes the red eyes, the disheveled clothes, the haunted look. But she asks no prying questions, for which Benjamin is grateful beyond words.

TRUCK DRIVER

Buckle up.

The driver offers him half a sandwich from her cooler which Benjamin accepts with murmured gratitude and consumes - it's the first real food he's had since morning.

They exchange only a few words; she mostly focuses on driving, and he stares out at the dark ribbon of road ahead, hugging his guitar case with one hand.

As the truck makes its way up the Turnpike, city lights gradually grow larger ahead.

Benjamin watches the New York skyline resolve out of the gloom. It's imposing and chaotic even from afar - and to Benjamin's exhausted mind, beautiful.

Benjamin closes his eyes for a moment, listening to the low country song on the radio. The singer croons about heartache

and resilience.

Cradled by the rumble of the engine, Benjamin finally drifts into a light, troubled sleep as we...

CUT TO:

EXT. NEW YORK CITY STREETS - DAY

The truck driver was true to her word:

She dropped Benjamin in Manhattan between West 42nd Street and Port Authority Bus Terminal.

The sky is just beginning to lighten to a dark indigo as dawn approaches.

Benjamin walks to the sidewalk outside Port Authority, Manhattan's main bus terminal. Stops.

Around him, the city stretches awake - early commuters, street vendors setting up, honking cabs, the works.

The sensory input is immense.

A taxi barrels past, splashing a puddle. Benjamin jumps back, avoiding getting soaked.

The blare of a car horn startles him; he flinches visibly.

The onslaught of sound - engines, distant sirens, clattering subway beneath grates - is like a physical force hitting him after the relative quiet of his journey.

He closes his eyes, takes a deep breath, and consciously reminds himself:

"I chose this."

This cacophony means he made it here. And somewhere hidden in the noise is freedom.

He squares his shoulders, lifts his belongings, and begins walking into the heart of the city.

As he moves, every scent assaults him: exhaust fumes, hot pretzel carts warming up, damp concrete, a whiff of urine from an alley. Neon signs flicker off as the coming daylight renders them moot.

Benjamin walks and walks, leaving the bus terminal behind.

Overwhelmed yet determined, he weaves through streets half-familiar from movies but totally alien in reality. Tall buildings loom on either side, glass and steel canyons.

He stops at a crosswalk on 8th Avenue. An electronic billboard above flashes images too fast for him to process - a music video, then an ad for a Broadway show, then breaking news. It's dizzying.

Benjamin cradles his head for a moment; he's at risk of sensory overload.

But then he notices something: even as his ears ring and his head spins, nobody on the street is looking at him. No one cares that he's standing there flushed and shaking, or that tears have begun drying on his cheeks. They're all too busy, too absorbed in their own world.

For once, his invisibility feels like a gift, not a curse.

In this city, he can be anyone - or no one at all - and that means he can simply be.

The light changes. The pedestrian signal chirps (another jarring noise, but he tolerates it).

Benjamin steps into the intersection with the crowd, heading to explore Manhattan and Brooklyn.

INT. SUBWAY PLATFORM - NIGHT

The shriek of brakes. Fluorescent lights flicker.

Benjamin flinches. Breath short. Clutches his guitar case.

A rhythm starts: distant train, tap of his shoe, buzz of neon.

He finds a pattern. A beat. He breathes.

Welcome to New York.

EXT. BROOKLYN BACKSTREET - LATE NIGHT

Benjamin walks. Three men catcall. One blocks his path.

MAN

Hey, where you headed, sweet thing?

Benjamin grips his guitar case tighter. Speeds up.

Another man grabs the strap.

BENJAMIN

Don't-please-

A scuffle. They shove him, steal his bag. Benjamin falls hard. Blood on his lip.

The men laugh and disappear.

Benjamin hugs his guitar. Trembles. But intact.

CUT TO:

EXT. BROOKLYN STREET - PRE-DAWN

Benjamin emerges from the alley onto a deserted street. The sky is just beginning to lighten. His breaths come in sobbing gasps, each step an agony.

He stumbles forward, leaving small drops of blood on the sidewalk from wounds unseen.

Eventually, he collapses at the entrance of a subway station.

He curls up against the concrete wall by the stairs leading down.

His guitar case lies beside him now-he's pulled it open, takes the guitar out, gently leans it against the wall, and drapes the guitar case's soft velvet liner across his lap in a feeble attempt at warmth.

Benjamin's eyes flutter closed as exhaustion and trauma overwhelm him.

EXT. TOMPKINS SQUARE PARK - MANHATTAN - MORNING - LATER

We find Benjamin later that morning sitting on a bench in a small East Village Park.

The sun has come up, filtered through city haze.

He looks utterly spent - dark circles under his eyes, posture slumped - but there's a tiny spark in his gaze now.

He made it.

He watches a few pigeons pecking at the ground near his feet.

A homeless man sleeps on a bench across the way, bundled in

coats.

Two joggers run past, chattering to each other about their fitness app.

A red heart appears as his mother reacts to the message almost instantly; she must have been up all-night worrying.

He can't deal with more right now. He powers the phone off to preserve the battery and to give himself peace.

His stomach growls. The half-sandwich wasn't much. But he has very little money to his name.

Hesitantly, Benjamin swings his guitar around. Maybe... maybe he can busk? Earn a few dollars for food?

He glances around the park. A few scattered people, not a big crowd, but maybe enough foot traffic by the perimeter.

It takes what little energy he has to do this, but he knows if he doesn't try, he might not eat today.

Benjamin takes out the guitar and checks the tuning - miraculously still intact after everything.

He wipes the instrument where the Stranger's hands might have touched it, a shudder passing through him, then forces that memory back down.

He starts to play a gentle melody - not one of his original songs, something more familiar to attract attention.

"Hallelujah" by Leonard Cohen perhaps; a song often busked, known to many.

His fingers find the chords easily, and he begins to sing softly. The acoustics in open air are different, but his voice, even cracked with exhaustion, floats with aching emotion.

A few heads turn.

The joggers slow down to listen a moment as they pass.

The homeless man on the bench across moves, raising his head to hear better.

A small child tugging her mother's hand towards the playground stops and watches Benjamin with big eyes.

Verse by verse, Benjamin pours his loneliness into the song. Maybe he's singing for himself as much as for anyone else.

As he sings "I used to live alone before I knew ya," tears slip down his face again, but this time they're cathartic, each note releasing a bit of the hurt inside.

By the song's end, a couple of people have approached. The joggers toss a few dollar bills into his open guitar case, giving him a thumbs-up.

The mother with the child fishes out a \$1 and gently places it on top of the others.

MOTHER
(slightly)
Beautiful song, sweetheart.

Benjamin ducks his head in thanks, voice too hoarse to reply properly.

He finishes with a quiet final strum. Those who paused now move on, carrying on their day, though perhaps a little touched by the unexpected morning serenade.

Benjamin gathers the crumpled small bills and coins - altogether, just under \$6. It's enough for a couple cheap meals if he's careful. Gratitude washes over him. His music - his voice - earned him nourishment, however modest.

He carefully tucks the money into his pocket and stands. The adrenaline of performing diminishes, replaced by bone-weary fatigue and hunger. It's time to find food and perhaps a place to rest.

He places his guitar back in its case and slings everything on his back again. With one last look at the bench where he sang, he whispers to himself:

BENJAMIN
I survived.

It's not just about the last two nights or the journey here. It's everything - the prom, the two assaults, the heartbreak. He survived it all, and now he's here.

The city around him is chaos, but within that chaos is a strange peace - anonymity, opportunity.

As the sounds of Manhattan swirl - a dog barking, a siren wailing several blocks away, a street vendor hawking bagels -

Benjamin stands in the middle of it and feels something unexpected: a faint sense of hope kindling.

He wipes his face, straightens his posture, and takes a step forward into his uncertain New York future as we...

CUT TO:

EXT. CITY STREET - THE NEXT MORNING

Benjamin, wearing a decent button-up and tie (found in a dumpster), stands outside a chain pharmacy (CVS). Through the glass, we see a manager type shaking his head.

Benjamin emerges, folds his copy of the application into his pocket, shoulders slumped. Yet another rejection.

MONTAGE: BENJAMIN JOB HUNTING

- INT. COFFEE SHOP: Benjamin at a counter asking a barista if they're hiring. The barista points to a "Help Wanted" sign and hands him a form. Cut to Benjamin leaving, the form crumpled, as the manager waves off to indicate position filled.

- INT. FAST-FOOD JOINT: Benjamin in the back, trying on a uniform cap while a supervisor rattles instructions. Next, Benjamin accidentally flinches as a grill sizzles loudly, dropping a spatula. The supervisor shakes his head disappointedly.

- INT. OFFICE LOBBY: Benjamin waiting nervously among others for a mailroom job interview, tapping his knee in 4-count rhythm. Later, a polite HR person is handing him back his resume with a regretful smile.

- EXT. STREET: Benjamin marks off items on a printed list titled "NYC Job Apps" - most are crossed out.

END MONTAGE

FADE TO:

INT. DINER - LATE NIGHT - SIX DAYS LATER

A new title card: Six days later

A retro 24-hour diner off a busy downtown street. It's quiet at this late hour - just a few patrons: a couple in a booth, a lonely older man at the counter stirring coffee.

Benjamin sits in a back booth by himself, a half-eaten plate of fries in front of him. These are likely the cheapest item on the menu, and he's eking them out to justify sitting here.

He looks cleaner now - perhaps he found a public bathroom to wash up a bit - but the same hoodie and jeans, same heavy eyes.

He absentmindedly scribbles in his lyric notebook, penning thoughts about the city: fragmented imagery of noise and color.

It's something to keep his mind busy so the trauma doesn't seep in too much.

A shadow falls over the page. Benjamin looks up.

LIAM (34) stands at his table, a confident smirk on his face. He's sharply dressed - slim-fit blazer, open collar with a bit of stylish jewelry. His eyes have a predatory gleam, but also a charismatic warmth. In the neon diner light, Liam could be mistaken for friendly if one didn't know better.

LIAM

Mind if I sit?

He doesn't really wait for permission. He slides into the booth across from Benjamin smoothly.

Benjamin tenses, clutching his notebook. He's wary of strangers now. But Liam's appearance and manner are worlds apart from the Stranger on the highway. This man seems urbane, friendly.

BENJAMIN

Uh... do I know you?

LIAM

Not yet.

He extends a well-manicured hand.

LIAM (CONT'D)

Name's Liam.

Benjamin hesitates, then shakes Liam's hand politely. Liam's grip is cool and self-assured.

BENJAMIN

I'm Benjamin.

Liam's eyes flick to the guitar case leaning against the wall by Benjamin's side.

LIAM
I noticed you got a guitar. You a musician?

BENJAMIN
(soft)
I... I write songs.

Liam's smile widens, genuine interest or a good replica of it.

LIAM
No kidding? I run a little spot in town - a bar that features live music sometimes. Always on the lookout for talent.

Benjamin's heart skips.

This feels incredibly fortunate - almost too good to be true. But he's been starving for any sense of belonging or opportunity, and Liam's attention is like a beacon.

BENJAMIN
I-I'm not sure if I'm any good... I only ever played for myself.

He's humble, but there's a flicker of longing in his voice at the idea of performing.

Liam picks up a fry from Benjamin's plate, with a cheeky raise of the eyebrows asking if that's okay. Benjamin nods mutely. Liam chomps it.

LIAM
These fries are terrible. Don't fill up on 'em. My bar's got better food - and good ears for real music.

He leans forward, a cautious gleam in his eye.

LIAM (CONT'D)
Tell ya what: I've got an open mic night tomorrow. Why don't you come by, play something? See how it feels on stage?

Benjamin's breath catches in his throat. An invitation to

perform - to be heard again. That spark of hope in him glows brighter.

Still, caution remains: nothing in his life has come easy, so why would a stranger be so kind?

BENJAMIN

Why are you... I mean, you just met me.

Liam chuckles.

LIAM

I've got an eye for these things.
You've got the look of a real artist.
Sensitive, hungry...

The word "hungry" lingers strangely, but Liam smoothly continues.

LIAM (CONT'D)

Plus, I overheard you humming to
yourself when I passed by earlier. You
got a voice, kid.

Benjamin flushes pink. He didn't realize he'd been humming. This man's been observing him.

BENJAMIN

(quiet)

I... okay. I could come by.

Liam grins and pulls a business card from an inside pocket. He slides it over. It reads: "The Duplex: Proprietor - Liam Hart". An address in the Lower East Side is listed.

LIAM

Tomorrow night, 10pm. It's a bit of a
queer bar, just so you know. You're
family, right?

Benjamin's eyes widen a fraction at how casually Liam clocked him.

He nods shyly.

Family - a funny way to put it.

Benjamin hasn't felt part of a family since the moment his father said "Get out."

LIAM (CONT'D)
(relieved smile)
Good. No drama then. We've had enough
of closeted boys causing trouble.

For a fleeting second, something flashes across Liam's face - a bitterness, perhaps a memory - but it's gone as quickly as it came.

Liam stands, smoothing his jacket. He tosses a ten-dollar bill on the table, more than covering Benjamin's fries and a tip.

LIAM (CONT'D)
Get some real food, on me.
(he winks)
Consider it an advance for tomorrow's
set.

Benjamin stares at the money, stunned.

This is the second time in a day someone's offered him kindness - but this one feels more personal, and thus more overwhelming.

BENJAMIN
Th-thank you. I...I won't let you
down.

Liam reaches out and lightly ruffles Benjamin's hair in an almost brotherly gesture.

Benjamin stiffens at the unexpected touch - a reflex from trauma - but Liam's hand is gone in an instant, as if he didn't notice Benjamin's discomfort.

LIAM
I know you won't. See you tomorrow,
Benjamin.

With that, Liam strides out of the diner, confidence in every step.

Benjamin sits there, heart pounding with a confusing mix of hope and nervousness.

He picks up the ten-dollar bill; it might as well be magic.

He signals the waitress timidly and actually orders something nourishing - a grilled cheese sandwich and tomato soup perhaps.

As he waits for the food, he gingerly touches the spot on his head where Liam tousled his hair. It's been so long since anyone touched him kindly.

He doesn't quite know what to make of Liam - the man feels a bit intense - but right now, Liam represents an open door where all of Benjamin's had been slammed shut. And Benjamin can't help but walk through it.

CUT TO:

INT. THE DUPLEX - EARLY AFTERNOON

JACKIE (26), vibrant, sharp-witted, and full of warmth, rearranges mic cables while humming Donna Summer.

Benjamin enters tentatively.

JACKIE

You must be the new nightingale Liam keeps hyping up.

BENJAMIN

Uh... I guess?

JACKIE

(smiles)

You've got storm clouds behind your eyes, baby. That's where the best songs come from.

BENJAMIN

(quiet)

I don't always get people.

JACKIE

That's fine. Just get your sound right. The rest will catch up.

They smile.

INT. THE DUPLEX - BACKSTAGE GREEN ROOM - NIGHT

Dim lights. Thrift-store couch. Muffled jazz from the stage.

Jackie sips from a coffee cup, flipping through setlists. Benjamin tunes his guitar on a stool nearby.

Liam stands across the room, texting on his phone. The screen briefly lights up with a woman's name - "*M: Missed Call (4)*".

He flips the phone face down on the table.

Jackie clocks it.

JACKIE
(smooth)
So... how long have you known this
kid?

Liam looks up — too fast.

LIAM
Since yesterday. Time blurs when
there's music going on in here.

JACKIE
Mm-hm.

She sips her drink, eyes still on him. Benjamin doesn't notice. Focused on a new chord progression.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
Just don't break his strings while
he's still learning to tune.

Liam forces a smile.

LIAM
Wouldn't dream of it.

Jackie's eyes linger. That smile doesn't land.

INT. THE DUPLEX - OPEN MIC BAR - NIGHT

A small, wooden bar with a cozy stage in the back.

String lights crisscross the ceiling; the walls are adorned with old event posters and pride-themed fluorescent lights.

It's got character - a little rough around the edges but inviting.

It's open mic night and the place is modestly crowded with an eclectic mix: queer artists, punk-ish looking regulars, a few older gay barflies, some artsy college kids. A warm murmur of conversation fills the air between performances.

On stage, an amateur drag queen finishes a comedic lip-sync number to polite applause.

As she exits, Liam, who's hosting, steps up to the mic. He

looks effortlessly charismatic in a tight black t-shirt and jeans tonight.

LIAM
(into mic)
Alright, give it up for the fabulous
Miss Terri Cloth!

Laughter and applause. Liam grins.

LIAM (CONT'D)
Next up, we've got a newbie to our
stage. Please welcome... Benjamin!

Benjamin stands just off to the side of the stage, clutching his guitar. Hearing his name, he inhales sharply. This is it.

His first time on a real stage in front of strangers - and supportive strangers at that, presumably.

His last performance was prom, which ended in disaster, but he steels himself: this is different, this crowd is different.

As he steps into the light, a few whoops greet him. Benjamin sits on the provided stool, adjusting the mic with trembling fingers. The spotlight is bright, but he can still make out faces in the audience - all unknown to him, yet hopefully friendly.

BENJAMIN
(softly into mic)
Um, hi. I'm Benjamin.

A voice from the bar calls out, not unkindly:

VOICE
Hi Benjamin!

Scattered friendly laughter. Benjamin relaxes a fraction.

BENJAMIN
I... I'm gonna play an original song.

He takes a breath, then begins strumming. The opening chords are delicate, drawing the room's ear. He's singing "COLORS OF SILENCE" though it's possible he's retitled it since prom - either way, it's his soul he's baring.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(sings)

I was born where echoes fade to grey,
Taught to tiptoe, keep the world away.
They said love should hide and not be
seen, That quiet comfort would keep me
clean. But silence never mended my
soul, It only kept me under control.

As Benjamin sings, we see Liam in the shadows near the bar, watching with intense focus.

He smirks, sipping a whiskey, pleased that his intuition about the kid was right.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(sings)

Now a spark ignites inside my core, A
burst of color I can't ignore.

(beat)

I'm done with quiet and living half-
alive. No more shame - watch these
wings soar. Every hue of me, loud and
untamed, Paints the sky where once I
was framed. No more shadows chaining
who I can be, My silence erupts into a
symphony. These colors of silence,
once held inside, Now bloom in the
open, no longer denied.

Benjamin's voice wavers at first, but as he spills lyrics about finding light in darkness and voice in silence, a hush falls over The Duplex.

His emotion is raw and real; you could hear a pin drop by mid-song.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(sings)

Every whispered dream I never spoke,
Rises up in a chorus stroke by stroke.
A rainbow riot breaking through
clouds, Hear me now - I'm singing out
loud. From hurt and pain I draw new
art, Each note a healing of my
fractured heart.

As Benjamin repeats the pre-chorus and chorus, we catch glimpses of faces:

A tattooed lesbian nodding along.

A gay couple at a table squeezing each other's hands.

Jackie at the back wiping a tear.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(sings)

For so long I was afraid to be seen,
Muted palette in others' scenes. But
here I stand in technicolor light, My
voice finally claiming the night. And
if the world can't accept my song,
It's still mine - vibrant, proud, and
strong.

(Modified, triumphant)

No more quiet, I shout and I sing, No
more hiding the truth within. The
colors of silence were always there,
Waiting for courage to burst into air.
Now I am sound, unbound and free, A
kaleidoscope of identity. These colors
of silence I give a name, It's love,
it's pride, no fear or shame.

(anthemic)

My silence was color waiting to shine.
I was worthy, and the voice was mine.

(Spoken softly)

I'm seen... I'm heard... and I'm
alive.

Benjamin finishes to robust applause. It's not a stadium
roar, but it's genuine and enthusiastic.

People liked him - they truly listened.

For the first time, Benjamin doesn't feel like a freak on
display; he feels... accepted.

A shy, unconscious smile blooms on his face as he murmurs
thanks into the mic and steps off stage.

Liam claps him on the back as he comes down.

LIAM

(low to Benjamin, pleased)

You killed it, kid.

BENJAMIN

(beaming, adrenaline rushing)

That... that felt really good.

LIAM

Come on, you earned a drink.

He guides Benjamin to the bar. People congratulate Benjamin as he passes - a "Great song, man" here, a "Beautiful voice" there. Compliments are foreign to Benjamin; he ducks his head, blushing and thanking them quietly.

At the bar, Liam slides a soda to Benjamin.

JACKIE

(off screen, loudly)

Well, look at the baby songbird flying high!

Benjamin turns to find Jackie strolling towards him, arms open as if to hug him. She embraces him in a floral-scented hug.

JACKIE (CONT'D)

That was *gorgeous*, hon!

Benjamin stiffens a second at the sudden hug, but Jackie's warmth is disarming. He finds himself leaning into it, an unfamiliar but welcome comfort.

BENJAMIN

(softly)

Thank you.

Liam watches this with a smirk, letting Jackie fawn over Benjamin.

JACKIE

(to Liam, stage-whisper)

Where'd you find this precious angel?
Can we keep him?

LIAM

(laughs)

That's the plan.

Benjamin's cheeks flush.

It feels bizarre and wonderful to have people jokingly talk about him like a prized find. Jackie releases him and plants herself next to him at the bar.

JACKIE

Haven't told you my name yet. It's Jackie.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
 (she extends hand, then with a
 flamboyant flip)
 Jacqueline if you're nasty.

BENJAMIN
 (small smile)
 Benjamin.

JACKIE
 Oh I heard. And heard you. "Colors of
 Silence," was it? It hit me right
 here.

She taps her chest. Benjamin's eyes light up that she caught
 the song's name/theme.

BENJAMIN
 You... you really liked it?

JACKIE
 Honey, it gave me chills. And I don't
 give that praise lightly.
 (leans in, mock serious)
 Trust me, I've seen some tragic open
 mic acts in this joint.

Benjamin laughs, genuinely, maybe for the first time in ages.
 Liam tosses a towel over his shoulder, pleased.

LIAM
 Benjamin, meet Jackie, one of our
 resident divas and part-time therapist
 to all waifs and strays.

JACKIE
 (touching her chest theatrically)
 I provide pro bono services to the
 queer and confused. Neuroqueers
 especially welcome.

Benjamin tilts his head.

BENJAMIN
 Neuroqueer?

Jackie rests an elegant hand on Benjamin's shoulder, looking
 at him shrewdly but kindly.

JACKIE
 Well, I clock that you might be on a
 (MORE)

JACKIE (CONT'D)
 different wavelength, sweetie. The way
 you carried yourself... reminds me of
 some lovely folks I know. Am I right?

She's gently inquiring about Benjamin's neurodivergent background without saying the word "autistic" outright.

Benjamin blinks in surprise-no one in NYC knows that about him; how did she sense it?

He gives a tiny, confirming nod. Jackie's face softens, her voice dropping to a true sincerity unlike her flamboyant act.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
 Neurodivergent and queer - neuroqueer.
 That's you. And that's beautiful.

Benjamin's eyes sting unexpectedly.

Being seen so clearly and accepted without question-he's never experienced this.

He quickly sips his soda to cover the lump in his throat. Jackie rubs his back in a little circle, understanding.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
 You've had a hell of a journey, huh?
 (gestures at his duffel and guitar)
 I can tell when someone's living out
 of a bag.

BENJAMIN
 (voice small)
 I... yeah.

Jackie shoots a glance at Liam - something like "poor kid" - and Liam nods subtly.

LIAM
 Actually, Benjamin, I might have a gig
 opportunity for you here. A paid one.

Benjamin's head snaps up.

BENJAMIN
 Really?

LIAM
 I need someone to play a few nights a
 week - background music mostly, maybe
 (MORE)

LIAM (CONT'D)
a set or two on weekends. Interested?

It's astonishing - a job, doing what he loves. Benjamin eagerly nods, hardly believing it.

BENJAMIN
Yes! I mean, absolutely.

LIAM
Good. Consider it done. We'll sort out details later.

Liam tosses back the last of his whiskey.

LIAM (CONT'D)
Jackie, can you give our star here the tour? I need to check on things in the back.

JACKIE
(salutes)
Sure thing, boss.

Liam claps Benjamin's shoulder once and departs.

Benjamin feels a rush of gratitude and relief. Less than 48 hours ago he had nothing. Now he has potential work, new friends... a community possibly.

Jackie slides onto a barstool and motions Benjamin to do the same.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
So, you got a place to stay, songbird?

Benjamin shifts, hesitant to admit his homelessness. Jackie reads it on his face.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
Thought not. You crashing at a shelter or something?

BENJAMIN
(quiet)
Not yet... I was figuring it out.

Jackie tut-tuts and flips out her phone.

JACKIE
Hold tight. I might know someone with
(MORE)

JACKIE (CONT'D)
a spare couch. We queers gotta help
each other out, right?

Benjamin cannot respond, overwhelmed by her proactive kindness. He just nods, blinking fast to push back more tears.

Jackie pats his knee as she texts someone.

JACKIE (CONT'D)
(murmurs)
We're gonna find you a safe spot,
don't worry.

In this moment, surrounded by empathy he never thought he'd receive, Benjamin begins to realize: in this city of chaos, he's not alone.

Strangers - now friends - are lifting him up. It's liberating and disorienting all at once, like stepping into bright sunlight after years in a dark room.

He allows himself the smallest hopeful smile as Jackie makes her calls.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE DUPLEX - LATE NIGHT (AFTER OPEN MIC)

Benjamin exits the club, guitar in hand, clearly exhausted but relieved. Jackie steps outside with him, spotting JIN (25, gentle demeanor, quietly confident), waiting near the entrance.

JACKIE
Ben, meet Jin. He's our resident caretaker.

JIN
(smiling warmly)
Hi. Heard your set tonight. You're good.

BENJAMIN
(shy, unsure)
Thanks... I'm just glad I survived it.

Jin smiles, sensing Benjamin's vulnerability. Jin gently takes Benjamin's bag off his shoulder, a silent offer of help.

JIN

Come on. Let's get you set up at my place. No pressure, promise.

Benjamin's shoulders visibly relax as he nods gratefully. The trio moves off down the sidewalk together, Benjamin safely flanked by new friends.

MONTAGE - "LIFE IN NEW YORK" (MUSIC)

A montage set to an upbeat, wordless tune (perhaps the band plays an instrumental piece), showing Benjamin's evolving life over the next few weeks:

- Benjamin at the Job: Benjamin performing a light-hearted task at Trader Joe's (stocking shelves meticulously, stacking cans into a tall, playful pyramid that promptly collapses - he and a coworker laugh as they pick them up).
- Found Family: Scenes of Jackie and Benjamin hanging out after hours - maybe she takes him to a late-night diner where they try to top each other's milkshake mustaches, making him giggle. Liam bringing Benjamin into conversations with his friend circle (Rina, Jordan, Mateo, Sofia - who greet and welcome Benjamin once they realize Liam's taken him under his wing).
- Embracing the City: Benjamin experiencing sensory overload on a busy Manhattan Street at midday - noise pressing in - but then cutting to him at night on a quiet rooftop (maybe Liam's rooftop) overlooking the skyline, where the distant city noise is gentler, almost like a lullaby. He breathes calmly, feeling free.

INT. DINER - NIGHT

A retro neon glow. Booths filled with teens. Plates of fries, milkshakes, and half-eaten burgers. Benjamin sits with JACKIE, JIN, SOFIA, and RINA. They're mid-laugh.

RINA

(to Benjamin)

Okay, but you *did* kinda give "sad poet meets sexy vampire" on stage tonight.

BENJAMIN

(smiling, bashful)

That.. was the vibe.

SOFIA

You need to record that set. Like,
(MORE)

SOFIA (CONT'D)

now.

JACKIE

Or... we all become your backup dancers. Visuals and vibes.

BENJAMIN

(sincerely)

You guys are nuts.

JIN

(offering fries)

You okay with the noise in here?

Benjamin pauses, then nods. Jin casually nudges the ketchup closer.

JACKIE

Someone at the back said you looked like a cult leader. I told them to sit their beige energy down.

Laughter. Benjamin beams, caught off-guard by how seen he feels.

BENJAMIN

Thanks... for all of this.

They clink soda bottles. An ordinary night, but for Benjamin, it's everything.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. THE DUPLEX - LATE NIGHT - A FEW WEEKS LATER

The bar after closing. Chairs are up, lights low. Benjamin counts tip money from a jar - he's done a paid gig tonight and did decently. Liam watches him from behind the bar, nursing a drink. The atmosphere is collegial but with an undercurrent - Liam seems troubled by something, perhaps a personal issue.

LIAM

Good haul tonight, huh?

BENJAMIN

(smiles)

Yeah. Thanks to you.

LIAM
(brooding a bit)
Don't thank me. You earned it.

He downs his whiskey. Benjamin senses Liam's mood and tilts his head.

BENJAMIN
Is everything okay?

Liam snorts softly, debating. He decides to confide:

LIAM
My... wife found out about some
things. Kicked me out.

Benjamin's eyes widen. Wife? He had no idea Liam was married.

BENJAMIN
I-I'm sorry.

Liam shrugs like it's no big deal, but his clenched jaw says otherwise.

LIAM
It was doomed anyway. I never was the
husband type.
(He forces a grin at Benjamin)
Guess we both know what it's like to
be thrown under the bus by family,
huh?

Benjamin's empathy is instant. He knows that pain intimately.

BENJAMIN
If you... need to talk or anything...

Liam's expression softens at Benjamin's innocence. He reaches out and gently squeezes Benjamin's shoulder.

LIAM
You're a sweetheart.
(his voice drops)
Too good for this world, honestly.

A beat passes.

Liam's hand slides from Benjamin's shoulder down his back in a way that is slightly beyond platonic. Benjamin tenses unsurely.

This feels different from Jackie's hugs - an undercurrent of something else.

Benjamin carefully steps back, putting the tip money in his pocket.

BENJAMIN

Um, I should get going. Jin's waiting-

Liam looks at him a moment, something unreadable in his eyes - disappointment? desire? It vanishes as Liam plasters on a friendly smile.

LIAM

Sure, kid. See you tomorrow.

Benjamin nods and exits into the night.

Liam remains, face falling into regret or frustration. He mutters to himself and pours another drink.

CUT TO:

MONTAGE 45A - "CELEBRATION SPARKS"

- Jin and Benjamin clink soda bottles.
- Jackie raises a "toast" with a fry: "To Benjamin, Destroyer of Open Mics!"
- Mateo tosses him a sticker: "Certified Sadboy Rock Star."
- Rina shoves a camcorder in Benjamin's face: "How does it feel to be loved?"
- Benjamin smiles, overwhelmed in the best way.

END MONTAGE

FADE TO:

EXT. STREET NEAR THE DUPLEX - ANOTHER NIGHT

Benjamin walks toward Liam's apartment (a modest share he's crashing at). It's quiet, past 2AM. As he turns a corner, two men emerge from a dark doorway - they're part of Liam's friend group, MATEO (24) and JORDAN (26).

MATEO

Hey, Benjamin!

They're a bit drunk but cheerful.

JORDAN
Heading home?

BENJAMIN
Y-yeah. You guys?

MATEO
We were at The Duplex, but left early.
Liam still around?

BENJAMIN
He was closing up when I left.

Jordan and Mateo exchange a glance.

JORDAN
(in a lowered tone)
We're worried about him. He's been...
off.

MATEO
Yeah, after what he pulled with...
(catches himself)
well, anyway.

They think Benjamin might not be aware of Liam's marriage or misdeeds, so they don't elaborate.

JORDAN
Just... be careful, okay? Liam's our
friend, but sometimes he hurts the
people close to him.

MATEO
No matter how good his intentions are.

Benjamin frowns, not fully aware or understanding but nodding. The men pat him goodnight and wander off.

Benjamin proceeds home, thoughts swirling: that sounded like a warning. He thinks of how Liam's gaze lingered the night before, how Liam has been so generous but maybe expects something?

Benjamin hugs his guitar case tighter and walks faster, uncomfortable for reasons he can't quite articulate yet.

INT. LIAM'S APARTMENT - NIGHT

Liam opens the door wearing a soft long-sleeve shirt and sweats. The hallway light catches BENJAMIN, shivering slightly, guitar in hand. His face is unreadable.

LIAM
Hey. Everything okay?

BENJAMIN
(stiffly)
I ran into Mateo and Jordan.

Liam's smile falters.

LIAM
(chuckles dryly)
Let me guess - they were wasted and dramatic?

Benjamin doesn't answer. Liam studies his expression, then steps aside.

LIAM (CONT'D)
Come in.

INT. LIAM'S LOFT - LATER THAT NIGHT

The loft is dim. Rain taps softly against the large windowpanes.

Benjamin sits on the couch, hunched over his guitar, gently plucking a melody. He's wearing headphones, focused inward.

Liam stands nearby, watching - drink in hand. His eyes linger on Benjamin a bit too long.

LIAM
Didn't realize I was hosting a silent concert.

Benjamin takes off the headphones, startled.

BENJAMIN
Sorry. I was just working on something.

LIAM
(sips his drink)
For Jackie's little open mic night?

BENJAMIN

She... said I should write more.

LIAM

(smiling thinly)

She says a lot of things doesn't she?

A beat Liam walks over, sits across from Benjamin.

LIAM (CONT'D)

Yknow, when I found you, you could barely say a sentence without shaking. Could barely breathe. And now suddenly - what, you're the bar's Next Big Thing?

BENJAMIN

(firm but soft)

I never said that.

LIAM

But you think it.

He leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees.

LIAM (CONT'D)

Let me tell you something sweetheart... people like Jackie? They're part-time saviors. They'll hype you up, then move on to the next broken bird.

BENJAMIN

She's been kind. That's all.

LIAM

(grins)

Kindness has an expiration date. Ask anyone in this city.

(beat)

You forget who kept you warm when nobody else would?

Benjamin tenses slightly, looking down at his guitar.

LIAM (CONT'D)

I let you in when everyone else passed you by.

(leans in)

And now, you're pulling away. Writing songs for someone else's stage.

(MORE)

LIAM (CONT'D)
Talking to people who don't get you.

BENJAMIN
(quietly)
Maybe they do.

Liam freezes - just for a second. His smile fades. The air tightens.

LIAM
You want to find out what it's like
out there again? Go ahead.
(softly)
Just remember - without me, you're a
whisper in this city.

Benjamin gently sets the guitar down. He meets Liam's eyes - no longer scared, but sad.

BENJAMIN
Maybe.
(beat)
But at least it'll be my own voice.

He stands, walks toward the kitchen. Liam doesn't move, just watches.

LIAM
(sharply)
You're welcome, by the way.

Benjamin pauses, then exits the frame. Liam's eyes narrow.

CUT TO:

INT. DANIEL'S STUDY - NIGHT

The room is dim. Rain drums softly against the windowpane.

Daniel sits alone at his desk, nursing a glass of whiskey, staring at a framed photo of young Benjamin - around 8 years old, cradling a guitar nearly his size, mid-laugh at a family picnic.

Daniel's expression is unreadable - guilt, longing, something breaking.

He turns the frame over. On the back, in Elizabeth's gentle handwriting: "You were his first audience. He just wanted you to listen."

Daniel exhales shakily. A beat. He closes his eyes.

--FLASH MEMORY - EXT. COHEN BACKYARD - DAY (1999)--

Young Benjamin, seated on a blanket, strums a toy guitar. Out of tune, but full of joy. He looks up at Daniel, grinning.

YOUNG BENJAMIN
Daddy, listen!

Daniel - younger, distracted, on the phone - barely glances down.

DANIEL (1999)
In a minute, bud.

Benjamin keeps strumming, undeterred.

YOUNG BENJAMIN
Look - I made a song for you.

But Daniel turns his back, walking away. The boy's smile flickers.

--BACK TO PRESENT - INT. DANIEL'S STUDY - NIGHT--

Daniel opens a drawer. Pulls out a dusty old tape recorder - the kind kids used in the 90s. Presses PLAY.

A crackly voice - young Benjamin, off-key and full of like:

YOUNG BENJAMIN (V.O.)
This one's for my daddy... 'cause he
works hard... and I love him even when
he yells.

The tape cuts off.

Daniel crumples inward, holding the recorder tight against his chest. His drink forgotten.

A long, aching silence.

DANIEL
(whispers)
I heard you, Ben.
(beat)
I just didn't know how to listen.

INT. LIAM'S APARTMENT - ANOTHER NIGHT

A private party. Liam's friends laugh loudly, passing substances around-cocaine on a coffee table.

Benjamin sits stiffly beside Liam, anxious.

Liam offers Benjamin a bump of cocaine, noticing Benjamin hesitate. Liam's eyes narrow subtly.

LIAM

Come on, Benjamin. Don't embarrass me.

Under pressure, Benjamin nervously complies, awkwardly partaking, coughing lightly afterward.

Liam pats Benjamin approvingly, his grip possessive.

Across the room, JACKIE watches worriedly, noticing Benjamin's distress.

CUT TO:

EXT. CITY STREET CAFÉ - AFTERNOON

Benjamin exits the café to find Jackie waiting. Jin stands nearby, clearly worried. Benjamin is surprised, wary.

JACKIE

Hey, stranger. Got a sec?

Benjamin hesitates. Jackie continues gently.

JACKIE (CONT'D)

Something's off with Liam, hon. It feels like he's taking you away from us.

BENJAMIN

(defensive)

It's fine. Liam's helping me with stuff-

JIN

Ben, you don't seem like yourself lately. We want to protect you.

(softly)

We're here if you need to talk, okay?

Benjamin looks from Jin to Jackie, their concern clear. He nods, conflicted.

BENJAMIN
I know. Thanks.

He walks away, unsettled but touched.

CUT TO:

INT. LIAM'S APARTMENT - ANOTHER NIGHT

Benjamin practices guitar quietly in bed. Liam, slightly drunk, enters harshly.

LIAM
Can't you give that a rest for one night?

Benjamin stops, startled.

BENJAMIN
It helps me relax-

Liam approaches aggressively, grabbing the guitar roughly, tossing it aside.

LIAM
I said stop. Pay attention to me, for once.

Benjamin shrinks, hurt.

BENJAMIN
I-I'm sorry...

Liam softens slightly, realizing he's frightened Benjamin. He gently kisses Benjamin's forehead, controlling and reassuring again.

LIAM
It's okay. You just need to listen more. You know I care about you.

Benjamin nods quietly, disoriented emotionally, subdued.

CUT TO BLACK.

INT. JIN'S APARTMENT - LATE EVENING

Benjamin and Jin sit on the floor of Jin's small living room, eating takeout curry. They've grown close as friends (and perhaps unspoken mutual crush).

JIN
 (with gentle concern)
 I hardly see you lately. Always at
 Liam's place or the bar.

BENJAMIN
 (fidgets)
 He's... done so much for me. I just
 want to repay him, you know?

JIN
 (gentle)
 Hey... you know you don't have to
 carry this alone. You have people who
 care about you.
 (a beat, earnest)
 I care about you.

Benjamin looks down. Since he and Liam have become...
 entangled, he has indeed been distant from others.

BENJAMIN
 (softly)
 Liam needs me. I.. I think I make him
 feel better.

Jin hears the uncertainty, even naiveté, in that statement.
 He tentatively places a hand on Benjamin's.

JIN
 Does he make you feel better?

Benjamin bites his lip.

Flashbacks: Liam praising him on stage - but also Liam
 pushing him against a wall in a heated kiss last night when
 Benjamin came off stage flushed with adrenaline; Liam buying
 him gifts - but also Liam snapping at him in a moment of
 stress.

Confusing signals.

BENJAMIN
 Sometimes.

JIN
 You don't owe him your happiness,
 Benjamin.
 (chooses words carefully)
 Just... make sure this is what you
 want.

Benjamin's eyes brim, overwhelmed by conflict. Jin's thumb unconsciously strokes Benjamin's hand, a tender, stabilizing gesture.

They lock eyes. Something unspoken and warm passes between them - Jin truly cares, without ulterior motive. Benjamin realizes how safe he feels with Jin vs. how anxious with Liam lately.

He suddenly leans forward and hugs Jin tightly. Jin holds him, a bit surprised but glad.

BENJAMIN

(muffled)

Thank you.

It's ambiguous what he's thanking for - likely for being there, for caring enough to say something.

Jin sighs, relieved Benjamin isn't pushing him away.

JIN

I'm here, okay? Whatever you need.
Whenever.

CUT TO:

INT. THE DUPLEX - LATE AFTERNOON

Benjamin sits anxiously at a table, neatly dressed, glancing repeatedly at his phone and the empty bar. His guitar rests by his chair. He checks his watch-no one arrives.

The silence is deafening. Benjamin's anxiety mounts, realization slowly dawning.

Jackie wipes down the counter. A few low ball glasses clink in the sink.

JACKIE

(smiling)

Hey, why are you here so early?

BENJAMIN

(uncertain)

Liam told me to be here at three. Said someone from Hunter College music department was stopping by... for an informal audition?

Jackie blinks. Confused.

JACKIE
From Hunter College?

BENJAMIN
He said he knew someone there. That if
I played for them, it might help me
get in.

Jackie puts down her rag. Her smile fades gently.

JACKIE
Honey... no one's coming today.

Benjamin stands frozen. His fingers flex on the guitar strap.

BENJAMIN
But he said-

JACKIE
(sincerely)
I know. Liam says a lot of things.
Especially when he wants to feel
important.

A beat.

Benjamin looks toward the empty stage, swallowing hard.

BENJAMIN
(quiet)
I really thought this was real.

Jackie steps closer, her voice gentle.

JACKIE
You're real. Your music is real. Don't
let his lies take that from you.

Benjamin nods faintly. Shoulders tight. He heads for the
door.

BENJAMIN
Thank you.

He exits.

Jackie watches the door shut behind him, heart sinking.

CUT TO:

INT. LIAM'S APARTMENT - LATER (THE REVEAL)

The loft is quiet. Too quiet.

Benjamin stands in the kitchen, washing a mug. The sounds of running water, the hum of the fridge.

Liam's phone buzzes on the counter. Benjamin hesitates.

Benjamin glances at it casually, then freezes.

INCOMING CALL: 'WIFE'

The world tilts. The water roars in his ears. His heartbeat pounds.

Liam walks in, towel slung over his bare shoulders. He stops. Sees Benjamin staring at the phone.

A long beat.

BENJAMIN

(quiet, measured)

Who is she?

(beat)

You said you were divorced.

LIAM

(sighs)

It's complicated.

BENJAMIN

And the college audition? That was a lie too, wasn't it?

Liam shrugs, indifferent.

LIAM

What did you think was going to happen? I hand you an education?

Benjamin's expression breaks. Devastation quietly spreading.

BENJAMIN

You said you had a connection. I showed up with my guitar. You let me stand there... waiting.

LIAM

I never promised you anything.

BENJAMIN

Yes, you did.

(beat, choked)

You promised I mattered.

Liam scoffs.

LIAM

You wanted to matter so badly, you
clung to the first person who smiled
at you.

Benjamin's jaw tightens. His breath quickens.

BENJAMIN

I trusted you.

LIAM

That was your mistake.

Benjamin SLAMS the mug into the sink. It shatters.

BENJAMIN

I fucking loved you!

Liam barely reacts.

LIAM

And I let you.

Benjamin steps closer, trembling with rage, heartbreak.

BENJAMIN

Was any of it real?

Liam meets his gaze. Cool. Detached.

LIAM

I gave you what you wanted.

A beat.

Then-Benjamin shoves Liam's chest. Hard.

Liam staggers back. Surprised.

BENJAMIN

Fuck you!

Liam chuckles darkly.

LIAM
(smiling darkly)
That's the most passion I've ever seen
from you.

Benjamin shoves him again, harder, pushing him into the
fridge.

BENJAMIN
I fucking hate you!!

Liam's amusement disappears. He straightens up, eyes
darkening dangerously. Benjamin goes for him again-but this
time, Liam anticipates it, GRABBING Benjamin's wrists and
spinning him around forcefully, pinning him against the
kitchen counter. Benjamin struggles furiously.

LIAM
(low, dangerous)
Careful. You don't want to start
something you can't finish.

Benjamin elbows Liam sharply in the ribs. Liam winces,
loosens his grip momentarily. Benjamin spins around, anger
blazing, eyes wet with tears.

BENJAMIN
Don't touch me!

He swings wildly. Liam ducks, grabs Benjamin by the
shoulders, pushing him backward forcefully. Benjamin slams
into the counter, breath knocked out of him. He freezes,
winded, stunned.

Both men pant-then still.

SILENCE.

Benjamin stares at him, betrayal etched into every line of
his face. Then he gathers himself, grabs his backpack,
guitar, coat.

Liam stands still, arms crossed. Smug creeping back.

LIAM
You're not leaving. Don't be stupid.
(beat)
This world eats kids like you.

Benjamin stops by the door. Tense. Spine straight. Guitar
case slung across his shoulder like armor.

He doesn't turn around yet.

BENJAMIN

Then let it.

(beat, low and steady)

But it won't be you feeding on me
anymore.

LIAM

You think your little rainbow kids out
there care? They'll drop you the
second you stutter or flinch.

BENJAMIN

(turning, eyes blazing)

They don't need to save me.

A beat. He steps forward, clutching the strap of his case
like a shield.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(gathering courage)

You know what I think, Liam? You look
for broken people... so you can feel
powerful.

(beat, voice strengthening)

Well, I'm done being broken.

LIAM

You're nothing without me.

BENJAMIN

Then watch me be *everything* without
you.

He turns. Hand on the doorknob.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(quiet but firm)

You didn't love me. You used me.

(beat)

But you don't get to keep my voice.

A flicker of doubt crosses Liam's face. He stays still.

Benjamin opens the door. Light from the hallway spills in
like a sunrise.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(final)

Goodbye, Liam.

He steps through.

The door closes-softly. With anger and clarity.

ON LIAM - Left behind in a pool of his darkness. Still.
Silent.

For the first time-he's the one without power.

EXT. LIAM'S APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Benjamin storms into the hallway, then breaks into a run outside, into the street.

It's raining.

He runs and runs, breath hitching in sobs, until finally he collapses in a narrow alley a few blocks away.

He slides down a wall, dropping his guitar, covering his face as he sobs uncontrollably.

The city rain plasters his hair, but he doesn't care.

EXT. ALLEYWAY - MOMENTS LATER

A single streetlight flickers above, casting Benjamin in flashes of light and shadow. He looks exhausted, eyes red-rimmed once again from crying moments ago.

Benjamin's fingers fumble at the latches of the case. The one thing he still owns. The last piece of himself.

His hands tremble violently as he opens it. Inside-his guitar gleams under the cold light.

But Benjamin doesn't reach for it. Instead, his fingers curl around something else-

A broken glass bottle. His breath catches. His reflection stares back at him in the jagged edge. A distorted, shattered version of himself.

His heartbeat pounds in his ears. The neon lights beyond the alley blur and streak. The world feels too sharp, too loud, too much.

Benjamin presses the glass against his skin. A thin line of red wells up. The pain is sharp, grounding.

But then-his chest caves in. A SOB RIPS THROUGH HIM!

His fingers shake violently. the glass presses deeper.

--FLASH CUTS - BENJAMIN'S MIND SPIRALING--

His father's voice. "Get out."

Liam's confession. "I never promised you anything."

The prom laughter. The snickers. "Freak."

Jason's scoff "Going somewhere, princess?"

His mother's betrayal and tearful apology. "I'm sorry, son."

Benjamin gasps, choking on air. The world contracts.

The streetlight above flickers wildly-plunging him into momentary darkness.

This is it. This is the edge.

Then-A NEW SOUND-A VOICE. DISTANT. SHAKEN.

PASSERBY (O.S.)

Oh my god! Hey!

Footsteps rush toward him. A hand grabs his wrist-firm, pulling the glass away.

Benjamin's vision spins, black spots creeping in.

PASSERBY (O.S.) (CONT'D)

Stay with me! Stay-

The sirens grow closer. Benjamin's body slumps. The glass bottle clatters to the pavement.

Darkness takes him.

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY

Benjamin awakens, bandaged wrist, to the soft beeping of monitors. DR. LEWIS (44) sits beside him, holding his hand firmly. She has kind eyes and an aura of steady compassion.

DR. LEWIS

Welcome back, Benjamin.

Benjamin blinks, tears forming as memory returns - shame floods him.

BENJAMIN
(whispers)
I'm sorry...

Dr. Lewis squeezes his hand.

DR. LEWIS
You have nothing to apologize for.
You've been through unbearable things,
and you're still here. That's bravery,
not failure.

Her words uncork something. A tear rolls down Benjamin's cheek.

BENJAMIN
I... I don't want to feel like this
anymore. Everything hurts.

Dr. Lewis nods, eyes moist too.

DR. LEWIS
That hurt won't vanish overnight. But
piece by piece, we'll help you carry
it. You're not alone, Benjamin.

Almost on cue, the door opens quietly. Elizabeth (his mother) peeks in, eyes red from crying.

ELIZABETH
Benjamin?

Benjamin's breath catches. He hasn't seen her since that night. Dr. Lewis stands.

DR. LEWIS
I'll give you two some time.

She leaves as Elizabeth approaches hesitantly.

ELIZABETH
Oh, my baby...

She bursts into tears and carefully, if he allows her to, folds him into a hug.

Benjamin stiffens, then melts against his mom, sobbing softly.

BENJAMIN
Mom...I'm so sorry...

ELIZABETH

No, no sweetheart. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I didn't protect you.

She pulls back to cup his face, looking into his eyes with fierce guilt and love.

ELIZABETH (CONT'D)

I left him. I filed for divorce. I should have done it years ago - I was a coward. But I'm here now. I'm choosing you.

Benjamin searches her face - she means it. Despite everything, his mother truly loves him.

He nods, tears of a different kind falling - relief, and tentative forgiveness.

BENJAMIN

(voice small)

I missed you so much.

They hug again, both crying, mending a broken bond.

We fade out on this image of mother and son clutching each other, healing together.

FADE OUT:

INT. HOSPITAL ROOM - DAY (SHORT TIME JUMP)

Benjamin, resting upright in bed, gently strums chords on his guitar, soft, unsure. He wears hospital wristbands, clearly recovering.

A gentle knock: JACKIE, JIN, SOFIA, MATEO, JORDAN, and RINA, enter quietly. Jackie carries flowers; Jin, snacks.

JACKIE

Hey stranger. Permission to invade?

Benjamin smiles warmly, emotional, relieved.

BENJAMIN

Invasion granted.

Jackie sets flowers on a bedside table, Jin hands Benjamin a bag of snacks, smiling supportively.

JIN

We brought the good stuff.

Benjamin chuckles, genuinely touched.

BENJAMIN

Missed you guys.

Jackie squeezes Benjamin's hand gently, protective.

JACKIE

We missed you too. You're stuck with
us now, okay?

Benjamin nods softly, grateful.

INT. HOSPITAL CORRIDOR - LATER

Jackie steps out to get coffee, immediately spotting LIAM
down the hall, hesitating near Benjamin's room. Liam looks
disheveled, ashamed.

Jackie instantly confronts him, protective stance.

JACKIE

(turning coldly)

Not happening, Liam.

Liam, eyes red from tears, tries to protest weakly.

LIAM

I just need to talk to him. Please,
Jackie.

Jackie fiercely protective, unwavering.

JACKIE

You've done enough damage. Stay away.

Liam pleads weakly.

LIAM

Please-I've lost the bar. I've lost
everything. I just want to apologize.

Jackie softens momentarily but stays firm.

JACKIE

Then show him respect. Give him space.
You don't get to ease your conscience
at his expense.

Liam deflates, defeated. Jackie watches, not budging. Liam slowly retreats, turning away quietly, consequences fully felt.

FADE TO BLACK:

INT. CAFE - DAY (POST-HOSPITALIZATION)

A cozy cafe, muted hum of chatter, clinking mugs. Benjamin sits alone by the window, slowly stirring honey into tea. Healing, but feeling heavy.

A shadow falls across the table.

MAX (O.S.)
Mind if I sit?

Benjamin looks up - and freezes.

MAX, standing there awkwardly but sincere, holding a coffee and a nervous half-smile.

BENJAMIN
(soft, stunned)
Max?

MAX
Hey.

Benjamin blinks - unsure if he's dreaming or disassociating. Max sits.

MAX (CONT'D)
You didn't respond to my message,
so... I took a chance.

BENJAMIN
I didn't know what to say.

MAX
Neither did I.

They sit in silence for a moment. A beat.

MAX (CONT'D)
Prom was a mess. I should've said
something sooner.
(beat)
I panicked. That's not an excuse,
just... the truth.

Benjamin nods, absorbing that.

BENJAMIN

I used to replay that night. Over and over.

(beat)

Now... I'm just trying to move forward.

MAX

Good. You should.

(beat)

I saw a video of you at The Duplex. You were... incredible.

Benjamin looks up, surprised.

MAX (CONT'D)

You've got something, man. Real voice.

BENJAMIN

(quietly)

Took a while to hear it myself.

Max offers a small smile, then reaches into his bag, pulling out something wrapped in a paper napkin - a friendship bracelet.

MAX

You gave me this in sixth grade.

(beat)

Kept it. Thought maybe... you'd want it back?

Benjamin reaches for it, stunned. Touches it like a relic.

BENJAMIN

I forgot about this.

MAX

I didn't.

A long beat. They sit in peaceful silence, two lives that briefly intersected in pain, now sharing mutual understanding.

MAX (CONT'D)

(softly)

You're not invisible, Benjamin.

Max stands. Nods. Starts to leave.

MAX (CONT'D)
I'll see you around.

Benjamin watches him go. His fingers tighten around the bracelet.

CUT TO:

INT. BENJAMIN AND JIN'S NEW APARTMENT - NIGHT (A FEW WEEKS LATER)

A modest apartment, warm, simple. Benjamin sits alone, writing in a notebook, guitar nearby. Lyrics scribbled, scratched out. He softly sings, unsure, then stops. Deep breath.

Jin enters gently, carrying takeout food.

JIN
How's the writing going?

Benjamin looks up, thoughtful.

BENJAMIN
Slow. But different. Better, maybe?

Jin smiles warmly, supportive as always.

JIN
Progress. Can I hear something?

Benjamin hesitates, then picks up the guitar, gently singing revised lyrics, tentative but hopeful:

BENJAMIN
(singing)
I'm done with quiet and living half-
alive, No more shame - watch these
wings dive. Every hue of me, loud and
untamed, Paints the sky where once I
was framed. No more shadows chaining
who I can be, My silence erupts into a
symphony. These colors of silence,
once held inside, Now bloom in the
open, no longer denied.

Benjamin stops, vulnerable, looking up at Jin.

Jin smiles softly, moved, proud.

JIN
It's beautiful, Benjamin. You're
reclaiming it.

Benjamin relaxes, relieved, hopeful.

BENJAMIN
I think I am.

Benjamin and Jin gaze at each other. Moments later, they lean
into a long kiss.

CUT TO:

INT. THE DUPLEX - EVENING (UNDER NEW OWNERSHIP)

Jackie, Jin, Sofia, Mateo, Jordan, Rina, and Elizabeth gather
around Benjamin at a corner table, laughing warmly. The vibe
is lighter, healing. Mateo raises a toast.

MATEO
To Benjamin. The strongest guy we
know, who deserves only good things
from now on.

All cheer warmly. Benjamin, moved, raises his glass,
emotional.

BENJAMIN
And to you-all of you. My family.

Jackie warmly nudges Benjamin, affectionate.

JACKIE
We always were, silly.

Elizabeth smiles, feeling a sense of belonging and happiness
she hasn't felt in years.

ELIZABETH
This is wonderful. Thank you all for
being so good to my son.

Benjamin's eyes shine with deep gratitude, belonging. Then,
Jackie remembers something-

JACKIE
Oh! Jin wanted me to give you
something.

BENJAMIN

Huh...

Jin turns around, pretending he doesn't know anything. Jackie hands over a small, wrapped box. Inside, Benjamin finds a flash drive labeled "Benjamin's Video Essay."

He remembers: he'd applied to a music program, sending an audition video, and essay before all the chaos.

Then, Jin secretly texts Jackie. She reads the message.

JACKIE

He says check your email, mister.

Benjamin quickly pulls out his phone. He opens an email - face lighting up:

BENJAMIN

(reading)

"Congratulations! We are pleased to share your acceptance into our Hunter College B.A./M.A. Music Education program."

His eyes widen. Applause erupts around the table. Sofia squeals, hugging him.

SOFIA

That's huge! Congratulations, hon!

BENJAMIN

Thank you, Sofia.

Elizabeth bounces excitedly, hugging Benjamin.

ELIZABETH

(tears swelling in her eyes)

I didn't know you applied to a music program. Congratulations, my boy!

Benjamin looks confused but embraces Elizabeth in a warm, congratulatory hug.

BENJAMIN

(softly)

Thank you mom!

Benjamin stares at his friends.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

I-I got in. I'm going to college.

RINA

And someday teaching kiddos like you.

JACKIE

The neuroqueer pied piper!

They all laugh.

Then- Benjamin stares at Jin, sitting next to him.

BENJAMIN

You did all of that... recording my songs for the application... I didn't even realize...

JIN

You deserve it.

(He gently takes Benjamin's hands)

Told you, I'm here whenever you need it.

Their closeness blossoms in the golden hour light.

Benjamin, for once, doesn't feel the urge to look away or hide. He moves his chair closer.

BENJAMIN

I need you now.

It's both a confession and permission. Jin beams softly.

JIN

You have me.

They lean in and share a tender kiss - nothing dramatic, just sweet and genuine. The camera circles them amid the supportive crowd, two young men finding love in honesty and mutual respect.

As they pull apart, both a little teary and smiling-

Jackie clears her throat. Benjamin and Jin turn to their friends and Elizabeth, all of whom are staring at them.

JACKIE

You two can play your "smoochy-smooch" game, later.

RINA
Let's celebrate!

CUT TO:

EXT. STREET - NIGHT

Benjamin and Jin walk home together, comfortably wrapped in their coats.

They walk past familiar places: Liam's former bar, now boarded up, closed permanently.

Benjamin pauses, reflective, but determined.

Then, Jin holds Benjamin's hand and they continue onward.

INT. BENJAMIN AND JIN'S NEW APARTMENT - LATER THAT NIGHT

Benjamin and Jin enter, hang their coats. Jin yawns, feeling tired.

JIN
I'm going to bed, babe.

BENJAMIN
Okay, I'm gonna stay up for a bit.
I'll be in bed in about an hour.

JIN
(softly)
Okay, good night, Benjamin.

Jin leans towards Benjamin, giving him a goodnight kiss on the lips. Then, he turns towards the bedroom.

BENJAMIN
(softly)
Good night, Jin.

Then, Benjamin picks up his guitar. He sits quietly, notebook open. He scribbles confidently now, inspired.

Benjamin writes clearly:

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
(V.O., Writing)
My name is worthy, my love is true,
What once I thought weakness is
strength breaking through. Every
color, every scar, every fear, has led
(MORE)

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
me to this moment here. I won't hide
anymore behind doubt, I know who I am
and I'm living out loud.

He smiles, calm and confident. He hums softly, quietly
strumming, empowered by his new voice.

CUT TO:

INT. THE DUPLEX - NIGHT (FINAL PERFORMANCE)

The crowd settles into a hush. The small venue is glowing-
intimate and alive. The room is filled with warmth and color:
fairy lights, mismatched chairs, laughter in between
silences.

FRONT ROW - Jackie, Jin, Rina, Mateo, Jordan, Sofia, and
Elizabeth beam with quiet pride.

Benjamin steps into the soft glow of the spotlight, guitar
resting naturally in his hands. His posture isn't perfect-
it's *real*. Grounded. Steady.

He takes a breath-not to fight fear, but to savor presence.

Benjamin breathes deeply, addresses the room warmly.

BENJAMIN
These songs used to belong to someone
else.
(beat, soft grin)
Tonight, they're mine again.

Scattered nods and murmurs of encouragement. A shared
understanding.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
(smiling wide)
This one's about finding something I
never thought I had.
(beat)
A voice. A self.
(beat)
It's called "Learning to Be Me".

Benjamin gently strums, clearly stronger, voice soaring
freely:

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(singing)

For too long I hid in shadows small,
Silent while the world around me
roared. I bent my soul to fit their
frame, Called myself safe in fear and
shame. But a fire kept burning deep
inside, A voice whispering I shouldn't
hide.

(beat)

Now I'm breaking free, no longer
confined, The strength I've found was
here all this time. I'll rise above
and I'll take a stand, This is my
life, my heart in my hand. No more
quiet, no more chains, No more apology
for what remains. I'm learning to be
me at last, you see- Finally, I am
free.

As the music rises, we move with it-

-MONTAGE-

Benjamin's fingers glide on strings with ease.

Jackie wipes tears beside a stunned, proud Elizabeth.

Jin smiles, mouthing the lyrics like a prayer.

At the bar, MAX sits on a stool, watching Benjamin with a
small grin.

At the very back-DANIEL, stiff in the doorway. Uninvited,
unnoticed-but there.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

Every tear I shed watered seeds of
hope. Through cracks in the pavement,
they helped me grow. Each rejection
taught my heart to fight, Each
loneliness reached for the light. All
the broken pieces of who I am, I
embrace them now as part of the plan.

(repeat chorus)

My name is worthy, my love is true,
What once I thought weakness is
strength breaking through. Every
color, every scar, every fear, has led
me to this moment here. I won't hide
anymore behind doubt, I know who I am

(MORE)

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
 and I'm living out loud.
 (singing, final chorus with choir
 backing)
 I'm breaking free, watch me soar and
 climb, All that I lost brought me to
 this time. I stand in the sun, I sing
 proud and strong, This is my voice,
 this is my song. No more quiet, no
 shame to erase, I hold my truth with
 gentle grace. I'm learning to be me
 with every breath-Here I am, I have
 life after death. Finally I'm living,
 finally I see: Learning to be me set
 me free.(soft, heartfelt) This is my
 time, my truth to be- After all the
 silence... I'm finally me.

As the last note rings out, the crowd erupts in applause and
 cheers.

ANGLE ON: Jackie sobbing. Jin grinning. Even Elizabeth claps,
 eyes shining.

IN THE BACK: Daniel. Alone. Watching. Unsure. But clapping.

Benjamin looks out at loving faces and feels, at long last,
 whole and heard.

Tears of happiness brim in his eyes as he bows gratefully.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)
 (eyes locked on crowd)
 Thank you... for listening.

INT. THE DUPLEX - BACKROOM - NIGHT (AFTER FINAL PERFORMANCE)

Benjamin sits alone, sipping water. Daniel enters, out of
 place in the crowd, but trying.

DANIEL
 You were... good. Up there.

BENJAMIN
 Thanks. That's not why I did it.

Awkward silence. Then-

DANIEL
 I... I heard what happened. With the
 man. The hospital. Your mother told
 (MORE)

DANIEL (CONT'D)

me.

BENJAMIN

That man was kind to me. Until he
wasn't.

(beat)

Sound familiar?

Daniel drops his eyes. Shame creeps in.

DANIEL

I never meant to-

(beat)

You were my son. You are my son. I
didn't know how to...

BENJAMIN

Love me as I am?

Daniel nods, quiet.

DANIEL

I'm trying to learn.

Benjamin studies him-wounded, wary.

BENJAMIN

Then listen. Don't fix.

(beat)

Just... listen.

Daniel nods, unsure. But he sits.

BENJAMIN (CONT'D)

(softly)

Start there.

INT. THE DUPLEX - STAGE - EMPTY - LATER THAT NIGHT

The performance is over. The crowd has long gone. What
remains is quiet.

The lights are low. Folding chairs are stacked. A single
microphone stands center stage, still faintly lit-like a
sentinel.

Benjamin enters slowly from stage right, guitar case slung
over one shoulder. He stops at the edge of the platform.

He gazes at the stage-not with fear or longing, but

reverence.

He sets down the case gently and steps into the light.

A pause.

BENJAMIN (V.O.)
"For so long, I believed my silence
was all I had. But I was wrong."

He walks to the mic, brushes his fingers across it like an old friend.

BENJAMIN (V.O.) (CONT'D)
"My voice wasn't missing... it was
waiting-just for me to finally use
it."

Benjamin closes his eyes.

The silence wraps around him-but this time, it isn't suffocating.

It's sacred.

A space that now belongs to him.

His hand lingers at the mic. He takes a breath-not to perform, but to exist.

Then-he smiles.

A soft, radiant, wet-eyed smile.

BENJAMIN
(whispers)
I'm here.

He turns, walking offstage-not with hesitation, but with peace.

The camera lingers on a glowing mic. A symbol once of fear, now of power reclaimed.

The screen begins to fade.

BENJAMIN (V.O.)
(final)
"After all the silence... I'm finally
me."

100.

FADE OUT.

THE END.