

THE DMV

"NBA"

by

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INT. SMALL CITY APARTMENT - KITCHEN - DAY

Fragmented images. Dreamlike. A strong brown hand draws something on a sheet of paper. Seemingly random lines, curves and shapes start to appear -- flowing, crossing, weaving into organized chaos. It comes into focus. A HAND-DRAWN MAZE. Nothing fancy or professional but there is great pride here.

A plastic, four-foot basketball hoop is in the background against the wall. The amateur maze-creator is 29 year-old BILLY CARSON (Handsome, African-American, rough around the edges but gentle in this moment). He slides the maze across the table to a 4 year-old BOY. His son. The Boy is gleeful. Excited. His dad is his hero.

BOY

Easy.

BILLY

Nah, Little Man. Not this one. It's gonna be hard.

(beat)

By the time I'm back in town, you should be finished.

Billy kisses his son on the forehead. Rushes off.

WOMAN (O.C.)

You're full of shit, Billy.

BILLY (O.C.)

I'll call you.

Little Man, taking this in, watches his dad exit. He grabs a pencil and begins navigating his way through the maze.

-TEN YEARS LATER-

INT. JACE'S BEDROOM - MORNING

A tall, lanky body belonging to JACE CARSON (14, African-American. "Little Man" is now a 6'3 man-child). He stares at the maze, weathered but in good shape considering. He hears someone coming. Quickly, he folds up the maze, places it in a Ziploc bag and shoves it under his pillow. He lays down pretending to be asleep as his mother JENNA (African-American, 38, determined, loving) walks in and pulls the window shade open. It was her voice we heard in the flashback. Jace puts his hands over his face to block out the sun.

JENNA

C'mon now, Jace.

JACE
I'm too tired.

JENNA
Tired can beat you or you can beat
tired.

Jenna waits. Jace doesn't budge.

JENNA (CONT'D)
Really? Okay. But there's a target
on your back. Number one in the
area code. And what do the haters
want my baby to do? They want him
to lay there.

Jace sighs. Slowly gets out of bed. Grabs his phone. Hands it
to his mother. Sinks to the floor. Begins doing push-ups.
Jenna records him as she stands over him counting.

JENNA (CONT'D)
One, two, three, four...

Camera pans his room, revealing an insane collection of
championship trophies and MVP awards. Posters of the 4 K's:
Kilmonger, Kaepernick, Kendrick and KD. Camera rests on a
HOMEMADE SIGN taped to the wall. It reads "NBA." This isn't
fandom. It's a declaration.

INT. ALEXANDER BATHROOM - MORNING

PHIL ALEXANDER (14 and-a-half, African-American, linebacker
build). Phil showers up, getting ready for school. He winces.
Raises his arm. There is a bruise by his rib cage.

INT. ALEXANDER KITCHEN - MORNING

Phil puts eggs and sausages on a plate. Wraps it in foil.
Glances over to the living room where a MAN is asleep on the
couch. Phil writes "Dad" on top of the foil with a Sharpie.
He puts the plate in the fridge. On the door of the fridge
are magnets and photos. One photo is a year old. It's of Phil
with his 40 year-old mother KEICIA. They look happy in the
photo. Happier than Phil looks right now. A notification pops
up on his phone. He sees a post of JACE DOING PUSH UPS.
Instead of liking it, he types a comment "#WEAK." That makes
him smile. He grabs his egg sandwich, backpack and walks out,
eating.

INT. AUDI - DAY

Dressed in his prep school uniform is DREW MORRIS (White, 14, clean-cut but has an edge). He slumps in the passenger seat as his mother EVA (42, a well-paid lobbyist), drives through the D.C. suburbs. Eva, wearing a headset, is on the phone with a client.

EVA

She must commit to voting no on all restrictions. Then she gains our support.

(beat)

Okay, I'll hold.

Eva turns her attention to Drew.

EVA (CONT'D)

Today's the math test?

DREW

Yesterday.

(then)

I have practice after school today.

EVA

You know, we're not going to be able to keep driving you all the way out there. Not when there are perfectly good teams close by.

Eva's client is back on the line.

EVA (CONT'D)

(into the phone)

Hi. Yes, I'm still here.

Drew frowns at his mother's response and looks out the window. He gets a FaceTime call and answers. On his screen is his best friend, MUSA (African-American, weeks away from turning 14).

MUSA

How do I look?

DREW

Like you're rocking my headband.

EXT. SEAT PLEASANT NEIGHBORHOOD - MORNING

Wearing his Catholic school uniform, Musa continues FaceTiming with Drew as he walks to school. He sports a headband, cocked at an angle.

MUSA

You left it at practice. I'm thinking about burning this corny shit.

DREW

Was Allen Iverson corny when he wore it?

MUSA

No.

DREW

What about Carmelo?

MUSA

No.

DREW

What about LeBron?

MUSA

No. What about you? Hell yeah.

DREW

Just make sure you bring it with you.

MUSA

Jace Carson did 100 pushups today.

DREW

Not impressed. I did 100 with one hand. Oh wait. Maybe those weren't pushups.

Musa sees someone.

MUSA

You're sick. I gotta go.

He abruptly hangs up. Down the block is TAMIKA (14, African-American, guarded), a beautiful 8th grade girl headed in his direction. She, too, is dressed in a Catholic school uniform. Tamika turns and heads up the steps to their school. The crush Musa has on Tamika is major. He hurries to catch up to her. She turns. Notices him. Nervously, he forces a smile. She looks at him and rolls her eyes. Musa realizes he left the headband on his head.

MUSA (CONT'D)

Oh, I was just...

He snatches it off but it's too late. Tamika is gone.

EXT. SEAT PLEASANT, MARYLAND - MORNING

Overhead shot. A Kia Credenza makes its way through a maze of different sorts. Just five miles outside the nation's capital.

INT. JENNA'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

Heading to school, Jace looks through the passenger side window of the Kia. He takes in this world around him. SLOW MOTION SEQUENCE. Folk in his NEIGHBORHOOD are primarily poor and African-American. He glimpses their proud faces. Colorful fingernails. Dreadlocks. Twists. Tats. Like the newly launched "Gladiator-Highs" sneaker, on the MASSIVE BILLBOARD dominating the landscape -- style, flavor and swagger are oxygen.

A sense of URGENCY inhabits everyone's survival. Jace feels the urgency. Lives it. A SCREECH of a car brings us to NORMAL SPEED. TWO HARDCORE GANGSTERS pull alongside him at a red light. Hip Hop blaring from their ride. They glare at Jace. They know him and turn down the music.

GANGSTER

Staying focused?

JACE

Always.

The Gangster nods. Turns the music back up. Speeds off when the light turns green. Jenna stares at her son, questioning the gangster connection. He shrugs it off. Beat, then Jenna resumes driving. Camera reveals a basketball in the back seat and Mary Kay cosmetics.

EXT. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY - DAY

Washington, D.C. Same building the NBA champions chose to visit instead of Trump's White House. A school bus pulls up. EIGHTH GRADERS, predominantly African-American, pile off. The girls wear nice blouses. The boys rock dress shirts and ties. Jace stands with his classmates as they huddle around MISS JACKSON, their teacher.

MISS JACKSON

You all look elegant. Dignified.
Like future leaders. You should
dress like this every day.

Phil, as if clearing his throat --

PHIL
Bullshit.

MISS JACKSON
Did you say something, Phil?

Phil, pretending to cough --

PHIL
No, Miss Jackson.

MISS JACKSON
Remember everyone, when you see
Frederick Douglass, Harriet Tubman,
Dr. King, don't just think of them
as people who changed the world.
Think of them as you.

Miss Jackson turns to CRYSTAL JEFFERS (14, African-American, attractive and athletic). She wears a protective boot around her left foot.

MISS JACKSON (CONT'D)
Crystal, would you like us to get
you a wheelchair?

CRYSTAL
Yes, please.

Jace whispers to Crystal.

JACE
Soft-ass.

Crystal playfully punches him.

JACE (CONT'D)
See my post?

CRYSTAL
Yeah.

JACE
Two hundred likes already. How come
you're not one of them?

CRYSTAL
Cause I'm not one of your damn
groupies. And why do you care
anyway?

JACE
I really don't.

INT. NATIONAL MUSEUM OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN HISTORY - DAY

The Tour Guide and Students finish absorbing the exhibit of Emmett Till, killed on August 28, 1955. He was 14-years-old. The same age as the students.

Then they come across the "Sports: Leveling The Playing Field" display. Jace perks up. There are tributes to Jackie Robinson, Althea Gibson, Jesse Owens, Venus, Serena, Tommie Smith, John Carlos, etc.

TOUR GUIDE

This exhibit depicts our history in sports. From African-Americans being denied an opportunity to compete, to the formation of African-American leagues during the height of segregation, to the hard-fought battles to perform at the highest levels...

Jace, swept up, crosses over to a statue, enthralled. Crystal, seated in a wheelchair, wheels herself over. She, too, stares up at the statue.

CRYSTAL

Can you even imagine --

Before Jace can answer, Phil walks up. Looks at the statue. Turns to Jace. Scoffs at him and walks away. Crystal rolls her eyes at Phil's crazy-ass antics then wheels herself over to another display. Jace doesn't budge. Camera reveals the statue is of Michael Jordan. Jace stares at M.J. He doesn't want to "Be like Mike." He wants to dethrone the G.O.A.T.

INT. GLADIATOR OFFICES - DAY

TED NICHOLS (White, 45, measured), the CEO of start up Gladiator Sneakers. He sits behind his desk interviewing ALONZO PARKS (African-American, late thirties, determined). The D.C. skyline looms through the window.

TED

You come highly recommended.

ALONZO

That's good to know.

TED

Played D-1.

ALONZO

Rode the bench a lot. But yes. At Howard.

Ted, looking over Alonzo's resume - -

TED

You worked with quite a few athletic brands in merchandising. But not grassroots.

ALONZO

However, my employment and life experiences have taught me a great deal about how to be competitive in this space.

TED

You're opinionated.

ALONZO

I am, sir.

TED

So give me a fresh opinion.

ALONZO

The major brands are going after star players once they're in high school. They get in early, build long lasting relationships with them and their families. However, if you employ that same exact strategy Mr. Nichols, Gladiator will never be able to compete on a grass roots level. Ever hear of Issac Edwards?

TED

Doesn't ring a bell.

ALONZO

First time I saw him play was in a tournament. We were both 8th graders. He wore red laces on one sneaker. Green ones on the other. Dropped 40 points in his first game. 52 in his second. The next day, just about all of us rocked one color laces on one sneaker and another color on the other. Sir, 9th grade phenoms are already in bed with other brands. You need to go younger. To 8th graders.

Ted takes this in. Possibly a believer.

TED

Whatever happened to the Isaac kid?

ALONZO

Burned out in senior year
unfortunately. Never made it.

INT. IKE'S TOYOTA CAMRY - AFTERNOON

IKE (32, African-American) sits in his dinged up ride in the middle of the Home Depot parking lot. D.C. GOGO MUSIC BUMPS on his car stereo. Resting on the seat beside him is a Home Depot apron. This is his lunch break. He eats a sandwich while carefully looking over the AAU schedule for the Seat Pleasant Jaguars. A CO-WORKER taps on his window, snapping him out of his trance. She walks by pointing at her watch. He finishes the sandwich. Exits the car. Through the windshield, we catch the brother's full height. He is BIG. Well over six feet. He balls up his sandwich bag. Tosses it to the garbage can ten feet away. Bucket. He drops the apron over his head. Disappears inside...

INT. HOME DEPOT - LATER

Ike struggles to contain his frustration with CRAIG (50's, high-strung, slightly inebriated).

CRAIG

This flapper you sold me don't work. All damn day my toilet's running.

Jenna stands nearby, shifting impatiently.

CRAIG (CONT'D)

I ain't got time to keep coming down here.

Jenna crosses over.

JENNA

Excuse me.

Ike turns to her.

IKE

Just a minute.

He turns back to Craig. Examines the flapper Craig handed to him.

CRAIG

Ya'll know how much a water bill costs these days?

IKE

Actually, sir, it doesn't look damaged.

CRAIG

Meaning what?

IKE

Maybe it was installed incorrectly.

CRAIG

So it's my fault? That's what you saying?

Jenna interjects --

JENNA

Yes. That's what he's saying. Now get your drunk ass a plumber and leave this man alone.

Jenna stares him down. Craig cowers away. Ike, slightly embarrassed for needing to be rescued --

IKE

Get all types up in here. What can I do for you?

JENNA

Truth, justice and the American Way. Home Depot Clark Kent.

IKE

I'm sorry?

JENNA

I know your real identity. Isaac Kennedy Edwards. AKA IKE. AKA "Icon." Former gold medal winner with the U.S. National Team. High school State Champion MVP.

IKE

Can't talk basketball at my job.

He turns. Walks away. She follows.

JENNA

I watched your AAU team play. They're not great but they're good.

(MORE)

JENNA (CONT'D)

You know what you're doing and my son needs a coach like you.

IKE

That's what this is about?

JENNA

Team I yanked him off of never played up-tempo. Only wanted my boy pounding the ball with his back to the hoop. Never let him use his instincts.

She waves her son over.

JENNA (CONT'D)

This is Coach Ike. Say hello.

Ike sees the 6'3" man-child who barely makes eye contact.

JACE

Hello.

JENNA

He'll take your team from good to "Oh My God."

IKE

(to himself)

Oh my God is right.

JENNA

Excuse me?

IKE

Look sis, nice meeting you and your boy but we can't do this here. Besides, I'm not coaching high school kids. My team is eighth graders. 14U.

JENNA

Good. Cause Jace turned fourteen yesterday.

Ike takes a good look at Jace.

IKE

Jace Carson?

And finally a light in the kid's eyes --

JACE
 (cocky)
 Real superheroes don't wear capes.

INT. SEAT PLEASANT COMMUNITY CENTER GYM - DAY

Jace participates in a two-on-one drill with Ike's 14U TEAM. They are surprised and somewhat star-struck to be playing with Jace. They wear practice jerseys that say "Jaguars." Jace's jersey is a retro Washington Wizards Chris Webber joint. While most of the TEAM watches from the sidelines, a PLAYER runs up court with Jace. At the other end of the court is a LONE DEFENDER. The Player dribbles. Passes to Jace. Jace dunks it over the Defender. This is literal. He goes OVER the defender and dunks it. Drew, Musa and the rest of the kids are in awe. Intentionally, Jace acts like it's just another day at the office.

NOTE: The ball playing will never be cheesy. We will never have players shoot the ball and then cut to close-ups of the ball going through the hoop. Players will make shots. Players will dunk. This will look and feel real.

NAIM (35, African-American, assistant coach), crosses to Ike.

NAIM
 Still wanna call this a "try-out?"

No response.

NAIM (CONT'D)
 Scouting reports say he's an NBA prospect.

IKE
 Scouting reports on fourteen-year-olds are bullshit.

Jace stays on one end of the court by himself. Now he's the lone defender. Musa dribbles the ball down court. He passes it back and forth to Drew who is rocking his headband. Musa's dribbling and footwork keeps Jace off-balance. He gives a sick pass to Drew. Jace is caught off guard. Drew goes up for a lay-up. Jace recovers. Blocks Drew's shot and lets out a primal yell.

JACE
 Ahhh!

Drew tops him. Louder.

DREW
 Ahhhhh!

Musa turns to him.

MUSA

You know he blocked your shot,
right?

DREW

I'm just getting in his head.

Ike blows his WHISTLE. The place quiets down. He turns to Jace.

IKE

Lazy defense.

JACE

He didn't score.

IKE

Don't matter. You're standing too tall. A quicker player will blow right by you. Move your feet. Run it again.

The drill resumes. Drew and Musa attack. Jace continues to stand tall, content to impose his height. This time Musa drives, gets around Jace and puts up a floater. He scores. Annoyed, Ike walks over to Jace.

IKE (CONT'D)

You don't hear so good?

JACE

Nah. But I ball good.

IKE

Plenty kids can ball. Can you get better? Can you learn?

JACE

If I wanna learn about toilet flappers, I'll hit you up. Other than that, I just need PT. Alright, Coach?

IKE

You don't get any playing time on my team if you ain't coachable and if you can't defend.

JACE

Ain't no one in here I can't defend.

Aggressively, Jace throws the ball to Ike. Clear challenge. Everyone in the gym looks shocked. Ike contemplates. Accepting the challenge, he bounces the ball to Jace.

IKE

Check.

Jace bounces the ball back. Game on. Ike dribbles, backs him down, does a quick spin-move and DUNKS ON JACE'S YOUNG ASS. The other players erupt with laughs, and "oh shit." Jace's face flushes with anger.

JACE

My turn. Check.

He bounces the ball to Ike. Ike bounces it back. Ike gets low with outstretched arms.

JACE (CONT'D)

(amused)

That's how you want me to defend?

IKE

Lock-down defense. Learn some damn fundamentals or get the hell off my court.

Suddenly, Jace makes a quick move and does a REVERSE DUNK ON IKE'S OLD ASS. The other players go even crazier, shocked to see a kid abuse their coach like that.

JACE

Your court?

From the sidelines --

NAIM

(to himself)

Ahh shit.

Naim knows what's about to go down. Ike takes off his jacket and throws it to the side. A one-on-one battle between Ike and Jace ensues.

Jace's athleticism is undeniable. Ike hasn't been pushed like this in years. Drew and Musa spectate like fans, conflicted on who to root for -- coach or potential teammate. As this prize-fight on the court continues, parents of the other players and some folks from the neighborhood begin to trickle into the community center gym. Some record the game with their cell phones.

Jenna arrives, taken aback to see what's happening on the court. Instantly, she is the lioness protecting her cub.

JENNA

Be first, baby... Cross him up...
He can't guard you.

As the game proceeds, it becomes more physical which is to Ike's advantage. He is much stronger than the 14 year-old and boxes him out for rebounds. D's him up like crazy. Bumps him. Backs him down in the post. HITS A 20-FOOT JUMPER TO SEAL THE DEAL. The crowd cheers. Jace kicks the ball off the court and angrily storms away in tears. He hates losing more than he'll ever love winning. Out of breath, Ike picks up his jacket, heads to the exit, receiving pats on the back by spectators. As he walks by Jenna --

IKE

Your boy made the team.

Jenna looks at Ike as he pushes through the doors of the gym and walks out.

EXT. SEAT PLEASANT HOUSES - NIGHT

Jace and Jenna get out of the Kia and walk towards the townhouse style apartment-buildings. Jace is still pissed.

JACE

I'm not playing for him.

JENNA

The hell you're not.

JACE

You told me it was an experiment.

JENNA

I know you lost but it was one of the best games I've seen you play.

JACE

Then I must suck cause he didn't even make it to the NBA.

JENNA

He didn't beat you cause he's better. He beat you cause he's smarter.

JACE

You said if I didn't like him I could go somewhere else. Right?

Jenna acquiesces.

JENNA

Right.

JACE

I don't like him.

They get to their door and walk inside.

INT. CARSON APARTMENT - CONTINUOUS

Jenna and Jace enter. Inexpensive furniture. Plants throughout the apartment. Religious plaques on the wall such as Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me." And there are family photos of Jenna, of Jace's older sister, JACKIE, but mostly there are pictures of Jace. No signs of a man in the house. Jackie (16 years-old, naturally attractive, hates the concept of make-up), is in the kitchen.

JACKIE

Hey. Pasta's almost ready.

JACE

Why is she making dinner?

JACKIE

Don't eat it then. I won't shed any tears. Trust.

JENNA

Both of you stop. Jackie's making dinner because I have a meeting with my sales-folks in half-an-hour. I don't know why that hoodie is still in the living room. Get it picked up. After dinner, scrape plates, take out the garbage and jump into homework.

JACE

What about finding me a new team?

JENNA

Right now, no drama. Can you handle that?

(beat)

Not rhetorical.

JACE

I can handle that.

Jace picks his hoodie up off of the couch.

INT. EDWARDS APARTMENT - BATHROOM - NIGHT

A cramped, modest, two bedroom apartment. Ike's body is sore from the game. He soaks in an Epsom salt bath. His beautiful wife, TONYA (31, African-American, five months pregnant) sits on the edge of the tub, clowning him.

TONYA

Trying to make our baby an orphan?
Lucky you didn't end up in the ER.

IKE

Just cause I'm sore as hell don't
mean I'm old as hell.

TONYA

I don't know. There's a lot of
mileage on that body.

IKE

How 'bout you put a little more
mileage on it?

Tonya moves closer and they give each other a deep long kiss.

IKE (CONT'D)

How was your day saving the world?

TONYA

My day. What's my least favorite
thing to do?

IKE

Ah, no. Social worker paperwork.

TONYA

From the second I walked in 'til
the second I left.

IKE

Damn. Sorry to hear that, baby.
How's your back feeling?

TONYA

The baby's been good to me today.
What do you think of "Elise
Kathryn?"

IKE

(wincing)
Both of our mother's names?

TONYA

Well, what do you have in mind?

IKE
 "Serena Edwards." Or "Lisa Leslie
 Edwards." Oh, "Venus Laila Ali
 Edwards." Now that has a nice ring
 to it.

Tonya laughs.

TONYA
 There is a chance our daughter
 won't be an athlete.

IKE
 Yeah, right.

They kiss again.

TONYA
 So how good is he?

IKE
 Who?

TONYA
 Jace Carson.

IKE
 You're kind of killing the vibe.

TONYA
 I just wanna know.

IKE
 Can't hit a three to save his life.
 Doesn't slide his feet on defense.
 But he's explosive as hell.
 (beat)
 He's special. If he comes back,
 we'll have a hell of a season.

TONYA
 "If?"

IKE
 He was a little bent out of shape
 after the game.
 (then)
 A lot bent out of shape.

TONYA
 Maybe you should call him. Or his
 mother.

IKE

Maybe.

TONYA

Right now you're just breaking even. But a kid like that can attract more players, help your program get more exposure and become a money-maker. Right?

IKE

Right.

TONYA

But you still won't call.

IKE

I can't, Tonya.

TONYA

Why not?

IKE

I don't chase.

INT. CARSON APARTMENT - NIGHT

Jace is scraping plates. Jackie is washing pots. Jenna sits in the Family Room with three other African-American women. Sipping coffee and eating dessert, they are her Mary Kay sales-folks known as CONSULTANTS.

JENNA

How did everyone do last week?

CONSULTANT 1

I picked up two new customers.

JENNA

(impressed)

Scared of you.

CONSULTANT 2

I was able to give three facials.

CONSULTANT 3

Mike didn't give me any help with the baby. I was too busy and tired. Sorry, Jenna.

JENNA

That's understandable. But even when you are tired, remember girl, gotta look your best to sell cosmetics.

She leans into the group, whispering.

JENNA (CONT'D)

I've been trying for a week to get my daughter to at least wear the mineral powder and lip gloss. When we go out in public, she hurts my sales.

The ladies laugh. Jace and Jackie don't hear Jenna's comment. But they can both sense that Jackie is the brunt of the joke.

JACE

Why does she always have to have these meetings?

Jackie shrugs.

JACKIE

Mom recruited those women. If they generate enough sales, she gets herself a pink Cadillac.

JACE

When I go pro, I can buy her three Caddies.

JACKIE

What about me?

JACE

I'll send you to cooking school.

Jackie glares as Jace snickers. As he ties up a garbage bag, Jace makes sure Jenna can't hear him. Then --

JACE (CONT'D)

Look at this.

He hands her a folded up sheet of paper.

JACKIE

It's one of those mazes you used to draw.

JACE

Our father drew this one.

JACKIE

What?

JACE

Ten years ago today.

Jackie, taken aback, studies it.

JACKIE

How come you still have it?

JACE

I don't know. Just do.

As they both wrestle with their emotions --

JACKIE

I think I may have found him.

JACE

How?

JACKIE

Did another search. Looks like he works in Vegas. If I get an address, maybe we should find a way to see him. Or talk to him.

Jace contemplates.

JACE

I don't want to talk to him. I just want him to know how good I am.

(beat)

Without him.

He takes back the maze and folds it up.

EXT. SEAT PLEASANT HOUSES - NIGHT

Jace, hoodie on, carries a garbage bag outside. Puts down the garbage, opens the dumpster. He reaches into his hoodie pocket, grabs his cell to see a text message come in from Crystal. It reads, "What's up, scrub?" Suddenly, A POLICE CAR SPEEDS UP, LIGHTS BLARING.

OFFICER RICHARDS (30's, African-American man) and OFFICER WARD (20's, White guy, a rookie), rush out of the squad car, weapons drawn.

RICHARDS

Hands up! Let me see your hands!

Jace quickly puts up his hands, trembling.

JACE
I didn't do nothing!

RICHARDS
On the ground! Now!

Jace keeps his hands raised as he lays on the ground. Ward moves in to cuff him and check his pockets. His house key, a few coins and the folded maze gets thrown to the ground.

WARD
What do they call you?

Jace struggles to stay calm.

JACE
Jace.

WARD
Your other name.

JACE
Carson.

WARD
Your gang name, asshole.

JACE
I'm not in a gang.

RICHARDS
Sit his ass down.

They roughly pull Jace off the ground and sit him up with his hands cuffed behind his back.

RICHARDS (CONT'D)
I seen you in the precinct before.
Where's your ID?

JACE
Upstairs, man.

RICHARDS
Tell me what you know about a car
being jacked three blocks away.

JACE
Nothing.

RICHARDS

Bullshit.

(threatening)

Maybe a drive around the block will
jar your memory.

Jenna and Jackie rush outside. Jenna's Consultants and other
NEIGHBORS, form a small crowd.

JENNA

You leave my son alone! He didn't
do a damn thing!

WARD

Ma'am, you need to back up.

Jace, scared, calls out --

JACE

Mom.

JENNA

Don't hurt him. Swear to God --

JACKIE

That's my brother. He was just
emptying garbage.

RICHARDS

He fits the description of a car
jacker.

JENNA

Car jacker? He's fourteen-years-
old, damnit! He doesn't even know
how to drive!

RICHARDS

Why's he hanging out here so late?

JENNA

Emptying the garbage ain't the same
as hanging out. His name is Jace
Carson. He is an eighth grade honor
student at Seat Pleasant Middle
School. And so help me God, if you
don't get those cuffs off my boy, I
will have your badge.

WARD

(to Richards)

Can I talk to you for a second?

Ward and Richards huddle off to the side. Jace shifts on the hard pavement. Eyes on the cops.

WARD (CONT'D)

I think I know this kid. He wasn't at the station. He's got videos all over the internet. I showed you one. Fourteen-year-old middle schooler in that slam dunk contest?

Richards looks over to Jace, now recognizing him.

RICHARDS

Shit.

(beat)

Take the cuffs off.

Ward goes to take off the cuffs.

WARD

Next time you go outside late, have some ID. It'll save all of us some trouble.

JENNA

He needs ID to empty the trash? Are you out your damn mind? You a Black man, gonna let your partner say that shit to my boy?

Both cops choose not to respond. They get in their car and drive off. Jenna and Jackie, emotionally collapsing, hug Jace tightly. He hugs them back.

INT. JACE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Jace sits on the edge of his bed. He has retrieved the maze, flattens it out and stares at it. A FLASH of 4 year-old Jace working on the maze pops on screen.

EXT. SEAT PLEASANT MIDDLE SCHOOL - DAY

Lunch time. Jace goes outside to eat. A couple of people walk by snickering at him. He has no idea what the hell is going on. Phil approaches.

PHIL

Heard you're playing on the Jags.

JACE

Can't believe everything you hear.

A couple of other kids pass by snickering at Jace.

PHIL

Can't blame you if your over-rated ass chickens out. Cause we gonna bust their asses this weekend whether you play with them or not.

JACE

Know what would be crazy? If this season, you actually made more points than fouls.

Phil takes in the insult, suddenly jerks his arms like he's going to punch Jace. Jace flinches. Phil is pleased. Crosses away. Jace walks up to Crystal who is still wearing the protective boot.

CRYSTAL

Hey, scrub. What's up with you not hitting me back last night?

JACE

Didn't feel like talking.

CRYSTAL

Have anything to do with you getting your ass spanked?

JACE

What are you talking about?

She pulls up a video on her cell phone. It's footage of Ike scoring on Jace. Whoever posted the video, labeled it, "OVER-RATED JACE CARSON."

JACE (CONT'D)

Shit.

CRYSTAL

Dropped this morning. And only twelve thousand and eight hits so far. Now see, you could have played NBA-2K with me instead. You still would have gotten your ass beat but at least the world wouldn't know it.

JACE

That's why everyone's looking at me like I got drawers on my head. What am I supposed to do?

CRYSTAL

Take the 'L' and forget about it.

JACE

I don't take L's. I'd rather starve to death - -

CRYSTAL

Than lose. I know.

JACE

And what do they mean, "Overrated?"

CRYSTAL

They're trying to clown you. Look, you're not gonna get them to take down the post.

JACE

Shit.

CRYSTAL

So you just gotta post something better. A dunk. A buzzer beater. Something epic. I'll even record it for you. Alright?

Jace takes in the advice. Nods. Then --

JACE

Cops put cuffs on me last night.

CRYSTAL

Wait. What?

JACE

They thought I jacked a car.

CRYSTAL

That's crazy. You alright?

JACE

Yeah.

CRYSTAL

Were you scared?

Jace shrugs. Which is as much as a confession as he'll offer. She gets it.

JACE

When are you back on the court?

CRYSTAL

Still can't put pressure on it.
Doctor says a week or two.

JACE

Got any more of that vegan brownie
crap you make?

She hands him a homemade brownie. He begins to devour it
which secretly makes her happy. Then --

CRYSTAL

That fool's got issues.

Across the yard, Phil shoves a kid named TOMMY, knocking him
down. Then he proceeds to punch him.

INT. PRINCIPAL'S OFFICE - DAY

Phil's dad, MR. ALEXANDER (41, African-American, wearing a
security guard uniform) sits with Phil and PRINCIPAL WALTERS
(African-American woman, 50-years-old, all business).

PRINCIPAL WALTERS

Why did you attack Tommy?

PHIL

I didn't attack him. We had a
fight.

MR. ALEXANDER

(impatient)

Did you hit him first or not?

PHIL

I hit him first.

PRINCIPAL WALTERS

Mind telling me why?

Phil hesitates.

MR. ALEXANDER

We ain't got all day.

PHIL

(angrily)

He said I was a bully.

The statement gives Principal Walters and Mr. Alexander
pause.

PRINCIPAL WALTERS
 You beat up someone because he
 accused you of being a bully?

Phil shrugs.

PHIL
 I don't like bullies.

PRINCIPAL WALTERS
 It's unfortunate that you were not
 able to resolve this verbally. We
 can't condone violence. This is a
 discipline and safety issue. I have
 no recourse but to suspend you for
 a week.

MR. ALEXANDER
 Ms. Walters, we're applying to one
 of the nicer high schools. Will
 this go into his transcript?

PRINCIPAL WALTERS
 I'm afraid so.

Mr. Alexander angrily takes this in as Phil exhales.

EXT. DC RECREATION CENTER - DAY

SEVERAL GUYS, predominantly White and Black, pull up in
 Escalades, Range Rovers and Beemers. Ike pulls up in his
 dinged up Toyota Camry, embarrassed.

INT. DC RECREATION CENTER - DAY

Ike rushes in, takes a seat in one of the thirty folding
 chairs assembled in a circle. It is a pow-wow for AAU coaches
 and owners. Also present is MEGAN BUCK AKA MEG (28, White,
 former baller) the only woman in the room and COACH BOBBY
 (White, 35), a small-time guy ready to be big-time.

COACH MAX, an O.G. in the AAU world (60's, African-American,
 rocking a dope warm-up suit), starts the meeting.

COACH MAX
 Thanks to all of you who could make
 it out. I've been at this so long,
 some of you played for me back in
 the day.

A few chuckles from his former players.

COACH MAX (CONT'D)

I got two daughters in college now and this is still my livelihood. I don't want any of your greedy asses messing it up for me. If the FBI could turn the NCAA upside down, imagine what they could do to AAU.

Coach Bobby chimes in.

COACH BOBBY

You telling us not to make money? No disrespect, Coach Max, but you were one of the first dudes to really get paid in the game. I mean, a lot of big-time agents were at your mercy when they needed help signing some of your former players. From what I understand, you've been handsomely compensated.

COACH MAX

Whether I was compensated or not ain't the damn point.

COACH HARRISON (40's, African-American, flashy) speaks up.

HARRISON

I don't think my man means that as a slight, Coach. You're a role model for most of us.

Nods from Coach Bobby and other coaches.

COACH MAX

We're role models for these kids. Keeping them off the streets and helping them get to college is what we do. But they got Condoleezza Rice in this shit now. You feel me? Unless you want to see her knocking on your door, don't be sloppy. Make sure your not-for-profit paperwork is legit and up to date. If a sneaker company wants to give you a hundred thousand dollar donation, because they think your players positively reflect their brand, that's not illegal. If you write-off your Escalade as a business expense so you can drive your players around, not illegal.

Ike glances around the room, seeing everyone else hang on to Coach Max's every word.

COACH MAX (CONT'D)

But taking cash under the table, promising the assistant of the assistant coach at a university that you'll get a player to commit to their program in exchange for cash, ain't a game for sloppy ass individuals. Sloppy can jack us all up. We got a good thing going. The best high school players in the world are in AAU. And if you look around the room, you'll see, sneaker companies agree with me.

A few people laugh as several of the coaches in attendance are suited down in Nike, Under Armour and Adidas gear. None of which is lost on Meg and Coach Bobby. Ike shakes his head, muttering to himself.

COACH MAX (CONT'D)

Got something to say, Ike?

Ike knows the "smart" thing to do is stay quiet but --

IKE

Ya'll are here trying to figure out how to fatten your pockets. But "role models" don't kick a kid to the curb if his career doesn't pan out. Ain't that right, Coach?

Coach Max is at a loss for words. He and Ike have history.

HARRISON

Hold up. I got a question for Mr. Moral High-Ground. Stealing other coach's players is all good to you?

IKE

I didn't steal Jace from you. They came to me.

HARRISON

Yeah, right. But I'm willing to bet, you just a pit stop anyway.

INT. DC RECREATION CENTER - MINUTES LATER

The meeting has adjourned. Ike and Meg happen upon each other. She wears a sweatshirt which reads, "Hoops For Life."

MEG

You really know how to liven things up. Ever notice how you're always the only purist. And I'm always the only woman in the room.

IKE

That awkward for you?

MEG

It is. I obviously have an unfair advantage.

He smiles. Then --

MEG (CONT'D)

Shouldn't let these guys piss you off so much.

IKE

They don't piss you off?

MEG

I have two coaches on my payroll. I'm about the purity and the cash. Gotta put that business degree to good use.

(then --)

I'll see you on Sunday.

IKE

See you on the court.

MEG

Don't be mad when we win.

IKE

You just jinxed yourself.

Meg smiles and crosses away.

EXT. CATHOLIC SCHOOL - DAY

Musa and his Jaguar teammate, VINCE, both dressed in their Catholic School uniform, step outside the building.

MUSA

We got forty minutes to get back. Let's go.

Musa and Vince sprint down the street.

EXT. SEAT PLEASANT MIDDLE SCHOOL - SHORT TIME LATER

EARL, another Jaguar teammate who attends Seat Pleasant middle school, opens a back door. Musa and Vince sneak in.

INT. SEAT PLEASANT MIDDLE SCHOOL LOCKER ROOM - DAY

The guys do their team "handshake." Aside from Musa, Vince and Earl, the room is empty.

VINCE

Are you guys sure about this?

MUSA

In 2015, when the Mavericks tried to sign Deandre Jordan, the Clippers players flew out to Texas. Got in a room with him and wouldn't let him leave until he committed to re-signing with them.

Drew, on FaceTime, chimes in.

DREW

(through Musa's phone)
Jace is the missing piece our team needs. We gotta do this.

EARL

You're not even here.

DREW

(through Musa's phone)
My school's too far away. But I'm cutting class to be on the phone with you. So I'd appreciate a little respect.

They hear a door open.

JACE (O.C.)

Yo Earl, where you at?

The friends nod to each other and walk around the corner. They approach Jace who is blind-sided by seeing them there.

JACE (CONT'D)

What are ya'll doing here? Earl, where are the jerseys you wanted to show me?

EARL
Sorry, dawg. I kind of lied to you.
There are no jerseys.

MUSA
We came to talk to you about your
intentions.

JACE
With what?

MUSA
With us. With the squad.

JACE
Ya'll are crazy.

MUSA
Our first game is this Sunday. And
we know you're thinking about
leaving the team.

JACE
(guarded)
What makes you say that?

MUSA
'Cause all of us tried to DM you
and you won't hit us back.

EARL
Plus, that video of Coach beating
your ass must be mad humiliating.
Forty-four thousand views --

Musa shoots Earl a stern look of "shut up."

JACE
Alright. To keep it one hundred, I
gotta make moves that will get me
on the right path. I know that
makes me sound like a dick but --

MUSA
The only dick move would be to quit
our team 'cause our coach won't
kiss your ass.

JACE
I can't quit something I never
joined in the first place.

Jace turns to leave.

MUSA
Just hear us out.

Jace stops.

MUSA (CONT'D)
We have a point guard who can get
you the ball.

VINCE
We got shooters.

EARL
We got rebounders.

DREW
(through Musa's phone)
And more importantly, if you're a
Jaguar, we got your back.

VINCE
For life, yo.

MUSA
On and off the court. Family.

Jace scans their faces, taking in their pitch. Then--

JACE
I gotta go.

Musa walks to the other side of Jace and blocks the door.

JACE (CONT'D)
Really?

MUSA
Sorry big homie. Until we work this
out, you ain't going nowhere.

Jace walks up to Musa. And in one move, he picks him up and
lifts him out of the way. Jace walks out the door.

MUSA (CONT'D)
I didn't see that coming.

INT. HOME DEPOT - DAY

Ike talks to his manager, SHEILA.

IKE
You give any more thought to what I
asked you about?

SHEILA

Ike, now's not a good time.

IKE

Sheila, I'm gonna be a father in four months. You feel me? You can't keep kicking me to the curb. I'm not trying to disrespect the situation, but I got to figure this out.

SHEILA

I can't give you a raise right now, Ike. But, I got a full shift that opened up Sunday mornings.

IKE

I got games on Sunday.

Sheila shrugs.

SHEILA

Priorities.

She goes back to her paperwork. Ike stands there a second, feeling stupid. He gathers himself and walks away.

INT. SEAT PLEASANT LIBRARY - EVENING

Jace, doing homework, pushes aside his 8th grade math book and checks his social media. The "Over-rated" post now has 49 thousand views. Frustrated, Jace puts down his phone. Puts on headphones and does an internet search on the library's computer for Isaac Kennedy Edwards "Icon."

An old basketball video FILLS THE SCREEN. The Icon in his glory days. An unstoppable, fearless, high school player. A player who should have made it to the NBA. Jace laughs to himself. He sees Ike use one of the same moves Ike used against him. He continues to watch, completely mesmerized. Then an ADVERTISEMENT on the screen grabs his attention. "Las Vegas AAU National Championship. Who will be crowned champ this year?" This freezes Jace.

EXT. DC SUBURBS - BUS STOP - DAY

Drew, rocking his prep school uniform, stands at a bus stop near his school. A parade of fly-ass luxury vehicles drop by. Drew puts on headphones. A BANGING HIP HOP TRACK plays. The bus arrives.

MONTAGE

INT. DC BUS - DAY

Drew looking out the window, head bobbing to the track, watches the landscape change as he travels from the SUBURBS to the CITY. He sees less trees, less space, less White people and less privilege. Yet, he feels connected.

INT. FITNESS CENTER GYMNASIUM - DAY

Where Meg holds her Hoops For Life AAU practices. The ten-year-olds finish their basketball practices and the 14's, coached by DEANDRE (26, African-American) gets started by stretching on the court. Phil is intense even when stretching. Another player, ROYALE (14-years-old, African-American, expensive sneakers), is also stretching.

They go into a layup drill. All the players get the ball into the basket except for Royale. He misses his layup. Coach Deandre shakes his head, frustrated. The MUSIC carries us to...

EXT. MARYLAND BUS STOP - DAY

A predominantly African-American area. Drew hops on another bus, headed to Seat Pleasant...

INT. SEAT PLEASANT COMMUNITY CENTER - DAY

Ike's team practice. Drew, Musa and OTHER PLAYERS step on the court performing a dribbling drill. The doors open and to everyone's surprise, Jace walks in. Musa and Drew smile. Jace walks up to Ike.

JACE

Sorry, I'm late, Coach.

Ike is too proud to show any emotion.

IKE

Show up late, you run two laps.

They stare at each other a beat. Jace concedes. Runs his laps. Ike makes eye contact with Coach Naim and gives the most subtle smile.

INT. FITNESS CENTER GYMNASIUM - DAY

The intensity in the Hoops For Life practice is heating up. They are running specific plays for the upcoming game. One of the players messes up. Coach Deandre loses his mind.

DEANDRE

If this is too hard for you, let me know. You want to play rec league ball and have someone tell you, "Just have fun, Johnny," then knock your ass out. This is AAU. This league, this team, is for serious ballers!

Phil, pumped up, takes it upon himself to challenge his teammates.

PHIL

Hoops for what?

PLAYERS

Life!

PHIL

Hoops for what?

PLAYERS

Life!

Phil nods to Deandre. Deandre is impressed.

DEANDRE

Run it again. And do this shit right.

Off to the side, Royale's dad, BRETT (45, African-American, expensive suit) speaks with Meg.

BRETT

How are you feeling about the season opener?

MEG

I think we'll do well.

BRETT

Think we can stop that Jace Carson kid?

MEG

We'll be throwing him double-teams, zone, man-to-man, he'll never get comfortable.

BRETT

And how's Royale shaping up?

Meg glances towards the court as Royale messes up the play.

DEANDRE

Everyone drop! 20 push-ups.

The team drops and begins doing push-ups. Meg awkwardly turns back to Brett.

MEG

He's working hard. At this stage of development, that's the most important thing for your son.

BRETT

The more he gets to play, the more he learns.

(then)

I know the team needs new uniforms for the season. Consider this a donation. As always, let's keep it between you and I.

Meg takes the check he's holding out to her.

MEG

Thanks for the support.

Brett nods and crosses away.

INT. SEAT PLEASANT COMMUNITY CENTER - DAY

We're back with Ike's team. Jace plays defense on Drew with the kind of "lockdown" defense his coach is looking for. However, Drew drives and Jace fouls him a little bit too hard. Drew crashes to the floor. His headband falls off. Everyone is still for a second, hoping he's not injured. Then, Drew pops up and gets in Jace's face.

DREW

Someone should've told you! No one knocks off my headband!

Jace tenses, ready for a fight. And then a big smile slides across Drew's face. He cracks up along with everyone else. Jace laughs, accepting Drew's initiation. Ike looks on, smiling.

END MONTAGE.

INT. SEAT PLEASANT COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Jenna sits at a table across from Coach Bobby, a White guy who participated in the coach's AAU meeting.

COACH BOBBY

Whether it's bad coaching, or if the players around him aren't next level, it won't matter. If they rack up L's, Jace will be perceived as a player who can't get it done.

JENNA

Or if they get W's this season, he'll be perceived as someone who can carry his team.

COACH BOBBY

Jenna, we have other top players on my team and we are on the verge of landing a sneaker contract. Look, everyone knows Ike is a well-intentioned guy. But he was the number one player in the entire nation at one time and screwed it up. You gotta ask yourself if a has-been with a crumbling program can get Jace to the next level.

JENNA

Crumbling?

COACH BOBBY

He struggles with paying tournament fees. You didn't know?

Jenna takes this in.

INT. SEAT PLEASANT COMMUNITY CENTER GYM - DAY

Practice is over. The players teach Jace the team "handshake." Players begin to disburse. We see Coach Naim and Musa's special connection.

NAIM

Ready, son?

MUSA

Question is, are you ready Pops?

They begin slap-boxing as they head to the exit. Jace watches their father and son moment thinking it's cool. Ike approaches MAC, another parent.

IKE

Hey Mac, got a minute?

MAC

Yeah.

They step off to the side.

IKE

You haven't paid Vince's dues.

MAC

Damn. My bad, brother. Was kind of juggling too many things. Cool if I hit you off next week and shit?

IKE

(not happy)

Alright. Next week then.

Mac and son, Vince exit. Ike and Jace are the only two left.

JACE

My mom's is running late. Can I put up some free throws?

IKE

Bet.

Ike stands underneath the basket to rebound.

NOTE: Jace is an incredible free-throw shooter. During this scene, Jace will make every single free-throw.

JACE

I watched some of your old games online. Glad you fixed that haircut. Ya'll didn't have clippers back then or something?

IKE

We didn't believe in being pretty, like most of you ballers coming up.

Jace laughs.

JACE

Jokes.

(beat)

Mind if I ask you something about that Junior National team?

IKE

If you have to.

JACE
Every single starter on that squad
made it to the NBA, except you.

IKE
Is there a point?

JACE
Just wondering how come.

Ike contemplates his response.

IKE
Too much outside noise.

JACE
What does that mean?

IKE
If you get good enough, you'll find
out.

JACE
Well, I got your back, Coach. When
I get in the NBA, I'll pull some
strings. Get you on the coaching
staff.

IKE
I should take that to the bank,
huh?

JACE
You know it. I'mma be the greatest
of all time. The Kendrick Lamar of
basketball.

IKE
Now you've crossed the line. You
trying to tell me in the history of
hip hop, Kendrick is the GOAT? Jay
Z's been doing it for like, three
decades. That boy's been around for
thirty seconds.

JACE
And raised the bar.

IKE
Sorry but you're clueless kid.

JACE
Coach, if we win the DMV
tournament, are we going to Vegas
for nationals?

IKE
We'll be eligible but I don't know.
Vegas tournament costs money.

Jace nods, disappointed. Ike senses how important this is to Jace.

IKE (CONT'D)
But, you know what? Yeah. We win
DMV, we'll get some sponsors or
something. I'll figure it out.

Jace smiles, elated.

JACE
That's what's up.

Jenna walks in.

JACE (CONT'D)
Hey, Mom.

JENNA
Sorry I'm late.

IKE
No problem. His game is looking
good. But we're going to have to
expand his hip hop repertoire.

JACE
Whatever.

JENNA
Ike, I need to tell you something.
Jace, give us a couple of minutes.

Jace walks away, takes off his sneakers and puts on flip flops. Jenna and Ike talk in private.

JENNA (CONT'D)
A lot of people have been talking
to me about your program.

IKE
People?

JENNA

They say your program could fold.
That it may not survive the season.
Is that true?

IKE

(beat)
I'm not folding.

JENNA

People have been saying the best
thing for Jace is to be on a team
with other top players so he'll get
more exposure.

IKE

Jenna, people are always gonna have
something to say. But ya'll
shouldn't be stressing about his
exposure. Ya'll should be stressing
about his improvement.

Jace overhears some of this conversation.

JENNA

I gotta make sure I'm making the
right moves for my boy.

IKE

And I understand that.

JENNA

No, you don't. His father is a
piece of shit.

Jace looks over, absorbing the comment.

JENNA (CONT'D)

And Jace has gotta watch his back
from thugs and police in our
neighborhood. I gotta get this
right. Look, we'll see how things
go this weekend, but out of
respect, I just wanted you to know,
there are other teams on the table.

She turns to Jace.

JENNA (CONT'D)

Let's go.

Jace, carrying his backpack, heads out with his mom. Ike,
blind-sided, begins to close up.

EXT. SEAT PLEASANT COMMUNITY CENTER - MINUTES LATER

As Jenna and Jace walk to the Kia --

JACE

Let me get this right. First, you won't let me leave the Jaguars. Now you saying I gotta go?

JENNA

Decisions like this are life and death.

JACE

Then I should have a say in it, shouldn't I?

Jenna doesn't respond. They get in the car.

INT. JENNA'S CAR - CONTINUOUS

As they settle in --

JACE

That wasn't the first time a cop rolled up on me.

Jenna, totally taken aback, turns to him.

JENNA

What?

JACE

You don't think I know when some people see me, first thing they think is that's a big nig--
(catches himself)
A big, "N-word?" Mom, I'm gonna be dealing with that my whole life. Even when I make it.

She ends the conversation with --

JENNA

It's not just talented people who make it. It's talented people who make the right decisions.

Conversation over. They drive off.

EXT. CATHOLIC SCHOOL - DAY

Musa sees Tamika approaching. Determined, he walks up to her.

MUSA
Excuse me, Tamika.

TAMIKA
Yes?

MUSA
You don't know me, but my name is
Musa Scott. I'm in your math class.
I sit two rows behind you, off to
the right. I mean left. I mean,
anyway, I got a B+ on the last test
and if you ever have any trouble or
need a tutor, I got you. Okay,
that's it. Bye I guess.

Musa starts to walk off, then --

TAMIKA
I get A's in math. So, if you ever
need help, you should let me know.
And I already knew your name, Musa.

She crosses away as Musa is taken aback.

INT. PHIL'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Phil's asleep. His dad, Mr. Alexander, quietly enters his room wearing his security guard uniform. He sits at Phil's bedside.

MR. ALEXANDER
(whispering)
Phil. Philly, wake up.

Phil stirs. Sees his dad at the bedside. Nervously, sits up.

MR. ALEXANDER (CONT'D)
Said I was gonna talk to you when I
came home.

PHIL
Dad, I'm sorry. When that kid
pissed me off, I lost my head and --

MR. ALEXANDER
Shhh.
(then --)
It's not you that's sorry.
(MORE)

MR. ALEXANDER (CONT'D)
I'm sorry. I'm sorry I had to sit
in front of that principal
yesterday, hearing about the dumb
shit my kid decided to do.

PHIL
It won't happen again.

MR. ALEXANDER
No. It won't.
(then)
Get the hanger. The thick one.

Phil hesitates.

MR. ALEXANDER (CONT'D)
Don't make me repeat myself.

Phil gets out of bed. Walks to the closet. Takes a thick
wooden hanger off the closet rod. He hands it to his dad. His
dad stands up, looks at his son who's nearly as big as him.

MR. ALEXANDER (CONT'D)
You lack discipline. Like your
mother. No moral code. That's why
she's sitting in prison right now.

PHIL
(carefully)
At least she wasn't dealing or
nothing. She had an addiction and
they locked her up.

They silently stare at each other, Mr. Alexander taking note
of his son defending his ex-wife.

MR. ALEXANDER
There are always consequences for
your actions. Say that.

PHIL
There are always consequences for
your actions.

Suddenly, he wails on his son, using the wooden hanger as a
weapon. Phil sinks to the floor, whimpering.

INT. CARSON APARTMENT - DAY

Jace stands, holding hands, forming a circle with Jenna and
Jackie in the Family Room. Their eyes are closed in prayer.

JENNA

Game day is a blessing. Thank you, Lord, for this opportunity you have bestowed upon your faithful servant, Jace. Sinning is doing less than you are capable of doing. So we ask you on this day, to guide him and give him the strength and energy it will take for him not to sin...

INT. JACE'S BEDROOM - DAY

Jace finishes his push-ups and stares at his homemade sign on the wall that says, "NBA." He taps it with the palm of his hand and walks out...

JENNA (V.O.)

We praise you, Lord, for this dream that you have placed inside his heart. A dream that says, I'm not here to just take up space. I'm here to be special. And to serve you to the highest.

INT. PHIL'S KITCHEN - DAY

Phil cooks breakfast, he glances over at his dad who's asleep on the couch. He leaves his dad's breakfast in the refrigerator. Grabs a baggie full of ice and holds it at his side, nursing another bruise.

JENNA (V.O.)

We welcome the obstacles. We say hallelujah to the mountains placed in his path...

INT. CRYSTAL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Crystal sends Jace a text message which reads: "Good luck, scrub." Jace's reply is an emoji with a BASKETBALL ON FIRE. Crystal smiles. She walks around her room, normal, with no limp. There's a KNOCK on her door. She quickly stuffs her foot back in the boot and begins limping again when her mother enters.

JENNA (V.O.)

The mountains are not there so he can retreat. We know, oh Lord, the mountains are just a test...

INT. MUSA'S BEDROOM - DAY

Allen Iverson doing cross-overs are on Musa's TV screen. Musa imitates A.I. move for move.

JENNA (V.O.)
They are a test of determination
and will...

INT. DREW MORRIS' BEDROOM - DAY

Clothes are thrown on the floor as he rifles through his dresser drawers, desperately looking for something.

INT. MORRIS LAUNDRY ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Drew runs in, opens the dryer, breathes a sigh of relief when he finds his headband.

JENNA (V.O.)
And so we say to the mountains, no
matter what form they come...

INT. MEG'S BEDROOM - DAY

Meg and Deandre are in bed having sex...

JENNA (V.O.)
Whether it is a spiritual
mountain...

INT. IKE'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Ike sitting by the window, takes a news clipping out of a manila envelope. It's of the Junior National Team he was a part of. Headline reads, "National Team Overcomes Uncharacteristic Poor Play by 'Icon' and Wins Gold."

For Ike, this does not symbolize achievement. It reflects the event that changed the trajectory of his career. He looks out the window, over the city landscape.

JENNA (V.O.)
Whether it is an opposing coach, a
physical ailment or self-inflicted
mountain. In the name of our Lord
and savior, we say, mountain be
moved.

INT. THE JAGUARS LOCKER ROOM - DAY

And here we are, the opening game of the season. The Jaguars are revved up to play. Ike enters to see his team huddled around Musa kicking a FREESTYLE about the Jaguars, AAU, the start of the season, how they have each other's back and how they're gonna kick ass.

IKE

Alright. Bring it in.

Pumped up, the players raise their hands in a huddle. Jace, in his own head is late to join in.

IKE (CONT'D)

If we live up to our potential this season, it's not gonna be because we learn what it means to be a team. It's gonna be because we learn what it means to be a family. Musa, take us out.

Musa nods. Looks at his teammates.

MUSA

Fam on three. Fam on me. One, two, three.

TEAM

Fam!

They charge out of the locker room.

INT. SEAT PLEASANT COMMUNITY CENTER GYM - DAY

The place is PACKED. The Jaguars and Hoops For Life are on the court battling. Tonya, Ike's wife, is there to root on the Jaguars along with Crystal, Jenna, Drew's parents and others. For Meg's team, Brett and all the other Hoops For Life parents are there. Alonzo, whom we last met interviewing for Gladiator sneakers, is present. It's a highly competitive game. However, Meg's team has no answer for Drew's corner jump shot or his smack-talking.

DREW

Grab an umbrella. I'm raining on you all day.

Jace is the natural leader of the Jaguars and out-finesses Phil and his teammates. Meg's team wants to keep the ball out of Jace's hands but Musa is such a skilled point guard, he gets it to wherever it needs to go.

Then Phil gets BUMPED IN THE SIDE where his bruise is. The PAIN is a jolt to his anger. Emotionally, Phil goes to another place that makes him more aggressive and even more physical. No one can match his intensity. After delivering a hard foul to Vince --

PHIL
(sarcastically)
My bad.

At the end of the first half, the score is Home (Jaguars), 40. Visitors (Hoops), 31. Jenna is in the stands high-fiving all of the Jaguars fans.

INT. JAGUARS LOCKER ROOM - DAY

The team is feeling pretty good about themselves.

IKE
Keep grinding. Stay disciplined.
Let's go crush this second half...

INT. HOOPS FOR LIFE LOCKER ROOM - DAY

Deandre is yelling at his players, trying to light a fire underneath them. Meg stands off to the side, becoming unsettled by Deandre's tone.

DEANDRE
Ya'll are playing like you got no heart. Like you're scared! Like a bunch of little bitches. Get your shit together!

INT. SEAT PLEASANT COMMUNITY CENTER GYM - DAY

Ike's team continues to play, inspired. The score reaches 50 for the Home team. 38 for the Visitors. Deandre tries a different tactic. As Jace dribbles --

DEANDRE
Guard his over-rated ass. Get in his grill.

Jace seems unfazed and scores. As he comes down court, he glances at Deandre and pounds his chest. Deandre smirks. He's got his attention.

INT. SEAT PLEASANT BASKETBALL COURT - MOMENTS LATER

Musa passes Jace the ball.

DEANDRE

His jumper is weak. Rebound!

The defender backs off. Jace shoots a jump shot and misses. Phil gets the rebound.

On the Jaguars' next possession, Ike calls a TIME-OUT. In their huddle --

IKE

(to Jace)

Jace, play your game. If they can't get in your head, they can't win. You feel me? All of you remember, it's basketball. Have fun.

Jace and the other Jaguars nod.

AT THE HOOPS FOR LIFE BENCH, Meg huddles with Deandre.

MEG

(whispering)

Tone it down.

DEANDRE

Game is ninety percent mental. You want this victory, don't you, boss?

MEG

I want you to stop being a jack ass.

DEANDRE

Hate me now. Love me when we win.

Dismissively, he turns away from Meg as the time-out is over.

DEANDRE (CONT'D)

D-up! D-up!

Hoops for Life snatches a rebound and quickly scores again. They continue to out-hustle and out-play the Jaguars as Jace loses his swagger...

INT. SEAT PLEASANT COMMUNITY CENTER GYM - LATER

Ten seconds left on the clock. The scoreboard now reads 64 to 62. The Jaguars' lead is only by 2.

Jace passes to Drew. Phil deflects it, passes it to a TEAMMATE. His teammate scores a three. Hoops For Life takes the lead by one. From the stands, Jenna winces. Five seconds left on the clock. Musa dribbles up court, crosses up Royale who falls down. The crowd reacts. Then Musa gives a sick pass to Jace. Jace goes up to dunk but is fouled hard by Phil and misses.

The Ref blows his whistle. No time left on the clock.

REFEREE

Foul! Two shots.

The Referees direct the players to walk off the court. Jace is on an island. He stands alone at the free throw line. Last play of the game. Jenna and Jackie nervously hold hands in the stands. Crystal is recording through her cellphone. Alonzo curiously takes in the moment.

IKE

(confident)

Let's go, Jace. Bang these down and let's go home.

Coach Deandre, not letting up, revs up people in the crowd. They begin to chant.

DEANDRE AND CROWD

Over-rated! Over-rated! Over-rated!

JENNA

Why don't you shut the hell up!

This energizes the crowd. Everyone begins hurling insults. From the stands, Crystal whispers.

CRYSTAL

Haters are gonna hate. C'mon, Jace. You got this.

Jace is unnerved but takes a deep breath, TUNES OUT ALL THE NOISE. We hear NOTHING BUT THE BALL. And then, the FAINT SOUND of "Over-rated" slips through. He shoots the first free throw. It bounces off the rim. The crowd reacts. "Over-rated" becomes deafening. He looks defeated. Takes a breath. Hears his coach's words.

IKE

Shake it off. Tie it up. First step to Vegas right now!

"Over-rated!" Jace looks around the gymnasium. "Over-rated!" People root for him. People root against him. His mother has her hands clasped in prayer. He tells himself he can do this.

Jace shoots the next free throw. IT RATTLES OUT OF THE RIM. HE MISSED. WITH JACE IN POSITION TO WIN THE GAME, THE JAGUARS LOSE.

Jace collapses to the floor, emotions taking over. This one hurts. Now he knows the meaning of "outside noise." Musa, Drew and the other Jaguar players walk over to Jace and pull him up.

Phil looks over, surprisingly empathetic.

While Meg's team and her fans celebrate, she glares at Deandre, annoyed.

Alonzo, disappointed by what he saw, exits.

Ike looks over to his wife in the stands. She reads his disappointment.

And as Jace wipes away tears, he walks off with his team. His fam. SLOW MOTION ENDS.

INT. JAGUARS LOCKER ROOM - TWENTY MINUTES LATER

Jace and Ike are the only two left in the locker room. Jace, still crushed, has now composed himself. They are silent for a few moments.

IKE

Let me ask you something, you cry every damn time you lose?

Jace shrugs. But Ike gets it.

IKE (CONT'D)

My father would tell me, I have to learn what it is to lose before I learn what it is to win. But for me, that was like learning how to suffocate before learning how to breathe.

JACE

Please don't tell me it's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game, bullshit.

IKE

I won't. I'll tell you the truth. You could have won us the game and you didn't.

Jace reacts.

IKE (CONT'D)

Hold on to this feeling you have right now. Carry it with you to your next practice, your next game and do something about it. The longer you wait to redeem yourself, the harder it becomes.

Jace looks up, wondering if he's talking about Jace or himself.

IKE (CONT'D)

No matter what team you end up playing on, win or lose, you walk on the court with fuckin' swagger. And you walk off the court with fuckin' swagger.

Ike walks out, leaving Jace to ponder this.

EXT. SEAT PLEASANT COMMUNITY CENTER GYM - MINUTES LATER

Ike walks out to the parking lot where Deandre is joking around with players and their families. He goes up to him.

IKE

I need to talk to you.

Deandre throws Ike a condescending look, then steps to the side to converse.

DEANDRE

Good game, Coach. Ya'll made us earn that.

IKE

You know they're just kids, right?

DEANDRE

Huh?

IKE

Jace is just a kid. We don't need to be tearing young brothers down. We need to be about building them up.

A few feet away, Meg looks over, watching the interaction.

DEANDRE

So is that why you were too mentally weak to make it? Somebody hurt your feelings?

IKE

Don't make this shit personal.

DEANDRE

If I destroyed your prima donna,
then better he find out he doesn't
have it now. I did his momma, you
and his bitch-ass a favor.

Ike punches Deandre in the face. Deandre goes down, bleeding profusely from the nose. Ike looks up noticing Jenna, Jace and sister Jackie in the parking lot. Jenna takes this in. Meg does not rush to Deandre's aid. And Tonya, Ike's wife, disapproves. She angrily turns away. In the distance, to make matters worse, POLICE OFFICERS in the vicinity approach.

INT. HOLDING CELL - DAY

Ike sits in a holding cell with TEN OTHER MEN. He leans back against the wall, frustrated and uncertain about the future of his team and of his career.

INT. JACE'S BEDROOM - NIGHT

Jace stares at his homemade NBA sign and rips it off the wall. Is his spirit broken? He stands still for a beat. Then he grabs his ten-year-old maze. Looks at it. Tapes the maze-side facing the wall so he can longer see it. On the other side of the maze is a new homemade sign. Camera reveals the sign reads, "NBA." But under the letter "N" it reads, "Never," under "B" it reads, "Believe" and under "A" it reads, "Assholes." "Never Believe Assholes." This is his new mantra. Jace slowly places his hand on the sign...

FADE OUT.