

Beginnings

Summer 1991

Sweat poured from the seven-year-old's face and arms and legs, soaking through his shirt, slickening his hands. The father watched from twenty feet away, his face expressionless, his shirt soaked, too, as the boy did dribbling drills, trying to control the basketball, wet with his sweat. Their backyard was filled with splotches of wiregrass, holes, roots, and a single basketball goal, ten feet high. Temperatures soared into the nineties. Spots of brown dotted the yard. The rest of the summer hadn't been much cooler.

Between the wiregrass, holes, and roots, the yard always made dribbling way more difficult than it already is for most seven-year-olds. Sometimes the ball hit soft spots and didn't bounce at all. Sometimes it hit hard patches and rocketed up, jamming fingers or thumbs. Sometimes it skipped left or right, and the boy had to chase it, and start over.

The boy stumbled over a hole, exhausted. For some reason, the drills seemed especially impossible today, as though demons were flicking the ball. It kept skipping away. On normal days the boy had to give chase once or twice; today it felt like every two minutes. Then the ball hit one of those hard patches and shot up and jammed his thumb.

The boy had light brown eyes, set nicely against his dark skin. When he grew older, teammates would joke that he had "the eyes that catch all the girls." Right now, though, they fought back rising tears, tears pushed by pain and frustration.

He stumbled over another hole, twisting his ankle, and the ball bounced sideways off a patch, rolled away again. The boy slumped his shoulders, flopped his hands, despondent.

Then the father started yelling. "You have to keep going! You gotta be tough! You gotta play through it!"

Inside, the mother watched, jaw clenched, her anger rising. That was her boy and her husband, and she felt as though the father was getting far too hard on the child.

As the boy chased down the ball, he felt something he'd never felt before. He felt like quitting. He was in pain, he was tired, he was hungry. To go inside, to leave this behind, to let the day end so he could

forget how badly this was going—nothing would feel better. He could go to bed and look forward to doing better tomorrow.

But instead, he did dribbling drills.

When those finished, he did defensive shuffles.

Then he denied passing lanes between invisible point guards and their invisible teammates.

Then he ran sprints.

Then it was back to dribbling drills.

Another bad bounce. Again, the ball hit the thumb.

Again, the boy crossed the yard and grabbed the ball. The rising tears pushed harder, like a river swelling against a dam. He ran back, dribbled to the end of the yard, then cut hard to turn and go back, and slipped. Too tired to catch his balance, he fell, his knees slamming into the ground. He slapped his hands to the earth to save his face. Sand spurs dug into his skin. The ground had gashed his knees, and he bled. The ball rolled toward the house, settled in the grass against the porch. This time, the boy let it go, under no compulsion to pursue. The dam broke, releasing the river. The boy wept.

Never before had he asked for a workout to end. Never before had the boy wanted a workout to end the way he wanted this one to right now.

He wouldn't have to ask. His mother charged through the back door, yelling, "That is *enough*. He needs to come inside!"

The boy was done. There was no question. It was over.

But the father yelled back. "Do you want people talking about your son in the game, Vivian? About how terrible he is?"

The mother didn't answer.

"He's gotta stay out here and *work!*" the father barked.

The mother replied, "Anthony, he's crying! He's *seven!*"

"Stay here," Anthony Atkinson Sr. said, turning to his son, who shared his name. "You don't want people talking bad about you at the game, do you? You want to be the best, don't you?"

The yard fell silent. Everyone knew that answer.

Vivian turned her eyes from Senior to Ant, silently demanding that he do what *he* wanted to do. And she knew Ant would. They'd talked before. He didn't have to endure this, she told him. He could quit the minute it became too much. He should do what he wanted; she could deal with his father. Ant promised if he ever needed to quit, he would quit.

"He would be working out little Anthony so hard," Vivian recalls. "And little Anthony would be crying...I wanted him to work with him, but sometimes he could be so hard. I thought he was being mean to him."

Ant stood, walked toward the house, toward his mother. Stopped at the porch. Beside his feet was the ball, the thing that had him sweating and bleeding and crying. Beside it were the porch steps, steps to safety, into his mother's arms, into the house.

His eyes met hers, saying, *I love you*. And then Ant did what he wanted.

He picked up the ball and began dribbling again.

For another hour and a half, the father and son worked. Then, together, they walked inside. Ant held the ball under his arm; Senior took Ant under his, squeezed him close. Then the father spoke again, and what he said wasn't an order or a challenge, but something more important.

"I'm proud of you."