# Chapter 4: Thieves in the Night

“Hiding like thieves in the night from life… stop hiding your face / Said it ain’t no hiding place.” — Black Star

They look free. The kids.  
  
Handles loose. Jumpshots fluid. Eyes up. Smiles wide.  
  
But it’s an illusion.  
  
Because most of them aren’t playing—they’re performing. They’ve been trained to be “role players” before they’ve even found their roles. They’ve been assigned labels: shooter, defender, facilitator. They’ve been told what they can and can’t do before their bodies or minds even knew what they could become.  
  
They’re licensed, not free.  
  
And there’s a difference.  
  
A licensed player is one who’s been handed a script. “Do this, don’t do that.” It feels like control, but it's framed as permission. You’re allowed to shoot here. You’re allowed to dribble there. And if you color inside the lines, you’ll be rewarded.  
  
But freedom? Real freedom? It’s messy. It’s fluid. It’s terrifying and beautiful. It’s making the wrong read, failing, and adjusting. It’s having the courage to try something your coach didn’t script—because the game asked you to.  
  
Most kids never learn that courage. Because most systems don’t teach it.  
  
I know because I lived it.  
  
My junior year was the best I’d ever felt. I wasn’t the biggest scorer or the flashiest name. But I was present. I was in flow. I made reads, played free, trusted my instincts. I was in rhythm with the game.  
  
And then senior year hit.  
  
Same school. Same teammates. Same gym. But everything changed. Suddenly, I was “the guy.” And being the guy came with weight. Expectations. Narratives. Coaches tightened the leash. I was told when to shoot, where to pass, how to play. They wanted efficiency. Control.  
  
I played to please. I made “the right play.” And I lost my edge.  
  
My love for the game didn’t die that year. But it dimmed.  
  
And that’s when I realized the game can be taken from you—even while you’re still playing it.  
  
It took me years to name that theft. To understand what was taken. And now that I coach, I see it happening everywhere. Players who are talented, smart, capable—but afraid. Afraid to go off-script. Afraid to fail in public. Afraid to show their face in a system that only wants their productivity.  
  
I’ve coached that way too. Early on, I tried to “clean up” kids’ games. I corrected every move. I froze out creativity. I rewarded safety. And I watched kids shrink.  
  
Teaching freedom is harder. It’s scarier. It’s longer. You have to let kids stumble. You have to let them improvise. You have to step back while they figure it out. And sometimes, that’s uncomfortable—for them, for parents, even for me.  
  
But that discomfort is where identity forms.  
  
Because when you steal autonomy, you don’t just steal play—you steal personhood. You stop kids from becoming.  
  
And that theft has a cost.  
  
It shows up in burnout. In identity crises. In kids quitting because they don’t feel like themselves anymore. Or worse, in kids who stay and succeed—but never love the game again.  
  
That’s why Max Potential exists.  
  
Not to be soft. Not to be different for the sake of it.  
  
But to return autonomy to the athlete.  
  
To guide discovery without scripting it.  
  
To raise decision-makers, not dependents.  
  
To help kids fall in love with the game \*as themselves\*—not as the version we want them to be.  
  
Because once you taste real freedom?  
  
You don’t go back to licensed.  
  
You show your face.  
  
You stop hiding.  
  
And you ball.