# Chapter 4: Thieves in the Night

“Not strong, only aggressive / 'Cause the power ain’t directed, that’s why it’s ineffective.” — Black Star

It wasn’t taken all at once.  
  
It was stolen in pieces.  
  
Freedom. Joy. Identity. Not with violence, but with structure. With praise that came with conditions. With coaching that rewarded predictability over curiosity. With systems that licensed players—but never truly freed them.  
  
We say development, but we mean control.  
  
We say roles, but we mean ceilings.  
  
We say “play the right way,” but what we really mean is, “don’t make us uncomfortable.”  
  
And I’ve lived that theft.  
  
Junior year of high school, I was free. Loose. Shooting threes. Fifty-five of them, to be exact. I moved how I wanted, read the game, flowed through it. I was a player with rhythm and vision.  
  
Then came senior year.  
  
Same school. Same gym. Same name. But everything tightened.  
  
I was the guy now. Already committed to Maryland. Expectations changed. My coach needed structure. My teammates needed predictability. And suddenly, I wasn’t playing—I was performing.  
  
I wasn’t failing. But I was less me.  
  
And I’ve watched that same theft play out again and again.  
  
A kid gets labeled “3-and-D” before they’ve turned twelve.  
  
A team wins with full-court press, not because they’re skilled, but because they’re bigger, faster—and they think that means development.  
  
A player’s role gets set before their voice even cracks.  
  
And here’s the truth: most of these kids are licensed—but not free.  
  
Licensed to shoot here. Dribble there. Cut only when told. They’re actors reciting a script—not authors writing their story.  
  
And when they step outside the lines? We pull them back.  
  
Because we confuse compliance with discipline.  
  
But discipline without discovery isn’t growth. It’s obedience.  
  
I’ve coached both ways.  
  
I’ve been the guy with the clipboard, scripting every moment, “correcting” creativity, tightening the leash with every possession. And for a while, it worked. Until it didn’t.  
  
Until I looked at a player in my own gym and saw the same slump I used to wear.  
  
A droop in the shoulders. A hesitation before the shot. A second-guess that didn’t used to be there.  
  
He was fading. Not from lack of effort—but from lack of permission.  
  
That’s when I knew: we weren’t coaching for expression. We were coaching for control.  
  
And control can win games.  
  
But it breaks kids.  
  
Because we’re not raising hoopers. We’re raising humans.  
  
And humans need freedom.  
  
Freedom to try. To create. To mess up. To feel the game, not just memorize it.  
  
I had a kid once, not on my team, tell his mom in the car: “I like basketball now because Coach Holden makes it fun again.” He didn’t even say it to me. But that hit harder.  
  
Because joy isn’t soft. It’s strength under control.  
  
Another time, I saw a ten-year-old cry on the court. Middle of the game. Shoulders shaking. Tears falling. And no one moved. His mom watched silently. Like this was normal.  
  
If a stranger had yelled at him in a grocery store, she would’ve stepped in.  
  
But in this gym? This system?  
  
She froze.  
  
Because this isn’t a sport anymore. It’s a system. And systems condition us to accept the theft.  
  
Licensed but not free.  
  
Talented but not trusted.  
  
Aggressive but not strong—because the power isn’t directed, so it becomes ineffective.  
  
So now, I coach differently.  
  
Not hands-off. Hands-deep.  
  
I design chaos. I invite decisions. I praise risk.  
  
And I catch myself when I want to pull the reins—because I know that urge isn’t about them. It’s about me.  
  
Their game isn’t mine to license.  
  
It’s theirs to discover.  
  
Let’s stop stealing the game in the name of teaching it.  
  
Let’s stop scripting kids into roles they haven’t even auditioned for.  
  
Let’s stop confusing polish with potential.  
  
Because the cage can be gold-plated. But if the bird forgets how to fly, what have we really built?  
  
Licensed but not free.  
  
Not anymore.