

WE GOT NEXT

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Story by
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Inspired by the true story
of the WNBA

OPEN ON: BLACK

"Tremendous amounts of talent are lost to our society just because that talent wears a skirt."

-Shirley Chisholm

EXT. ARCTIC - NIGHT

Heavy snowfall. Abandoned cars. Battered buildings.

A solitary figure cloaked in mounds of fur trudges across the desolate arctic tundra.

He makes his way to the peak of a snowdrift, revealing a cluster of lights flickering in the horizon.

The subtle voice of an ANNOUNCER crackles over radio static. It's in Russian.

RUSSIAN ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

*Yesli rossiyane rasschityvayut na
pobedu, im nuzhno bol'she ot
Baranova.*

SUPER: "SIBERIA - 1996"

The winds HOWL. His pace quickens. The STOMPS and CHEERS of a distant crowd grow louder as he approaches the bright glow of his destination: A basketball gym.

The static dissipates.

RUSSIAN ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

Rossiyane teryayut liderstvo...

The doors OPEN. A FLASH OF LIGHT.

EXT. WESTCHESTER SUBURBS - DAY

The sound of the broadcast continues. But now, an ENGLISH INTERPRETER speaks over the Russian announcer.

ENGLISH INTERPRETER (V.O.)

(over Russian)

This is anybody's game now.

The FLASH OF LIGHT sharpens to reveal VAL ACKERMAN (late 30s), running briskly through a quaint park, pushing a stroller.

Her daughter, EMILY (6 months), rests peacefully while the game blasts through the headphones of Val's WALKMAN.

ENGLISH INTERPRETER (V.O.)
(over Russian)
*And Sheryl Swoopes nails her fourth
three of the night. She has single-
handedly willed Team USA back from
the dead.*

Val's locked in, as if she were playing.

ENGLISH INTERPRETER (V.O.)
(over Russian)
*Nikonova hurls the ball down the
court... A steal by Swoopes! It's
another steal by Swoopes.*

She pumps her fist in the air, startling a group of PEDESTRIANS. She can't help it. They're winning.

INT. SIBERIA BASKETBALL COURT - DAY

The female Michael Jordan, SHERYL SWOOPES (25), dribbles through her legs, crosses the ball behind her back, and explodes toward the rim.

RUSSIAN SPORTS ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
(in Russian)
*And Swoopes with a shifty crossover
to the hoop for two.*

Sheryl exhales a vaporous fog. The sweat on her hair has hardened into tiny frozen crystals.

She squints at a scoreboard draped in icicles. It reads: "USA 53 RUSSIA 50"

THUMP! THUMP! THUMP! The ground vibrates as screaming spectators jump up and down on the frosted bleachers. Even though it's -20 degrees, the windows are cranked open for the locals to puff on their Belomorkanal cigarettes.

The 20-something RUSSIAN POINT GUARD dribbles down the court.

RUSSIAN ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
(in Russian)
*It's a stunning collapse by Russia,
who was up by thirty at the half.*

On the sidelines, the US NATIONAL TEAM clap their gloved hands in oversized parkas.

The Russian point guard passes to a driving YELENA BARANOVA (20s), who lightly bounces the ball off a backboard coated in snowy dust. CLANK! She barely misses.

RUSSIAN ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
(in Russian)
Baranova off the glass...

USA's center, LISA LESLIE (23), comes down with the rebound.

CUT BACK TO:

EXT. WESTCHESTER SUBURBS/BASKETBALL COURT - DAY

Val cranks up the volume.

ENGLISH INTERPRETER (V.O.)
(over Russian)
... and Leslie takes the rebound.

As Val runs past an outdoor court, the broadcast is drowned out by the SHOUTING of children.

They're playing their own game of five on five, decked in their prized jerseys: JORDAN, BIRD, BARKLEY, and MAGIC. Val notices.

ENGLISH INTERPRETER (V.O.)
(over Russian)
The Russians have to match Team USA's intensity if they plan to recapture the lead.

BEEP! BEEP! Val reaches into her stroller's pocket and snags a PAGER. It reads: "We got bumped up. Get here now!"

VAL
(to herself)
Shit!

PRE-LAP: WHISTLE!

BACK TO:

INT. SIBERIA BASKETBALL COURT - DAY

Head Coach, TARA VANDERVEER (40s), motions for a timeout.

Sheryl and her four teammates: Lisa, REBECCA LOBO (22), DAWN STALEY (26), and TERESA EDWARDS (32) hustle off the faded green cement court to the sidelines. Their teammates quickly wrap the players in heavy blankets.

COACH VANDERVEER
 (in a huddle)
 We need to do a better job at
 switching on defense. Keep Baranova
 off the glass!

DAWN
 (breathing heavily)
 Coach, I can barely feel my
 fingers.

COACH VANDERVEER
 Ruthie, suit up! You're in for
 Dawn.

RUTHIE BOLTON (29), pops up, removes her gloves, unzips her parka, and throws it at Dawn.

The sudden rush of cold washes over her. Ruthie jumps up and down, desperate to get warm.

COACH VANDERVEER (CONT'D)
 However bad you think you feel now,
 losing is worse. So let's get it
 done!

Sheryl locks eyes with her Coach and nods.

INT. VAL'S CAR (MOVING) - DAY

Val drives through Times Square, immersed in a sea of vibrant colors and classic brands: AOL, Kodak, Tower Records...

The final seconds of the radio broadcast continues in the background.

ENGLISH INTERPRETER (V.O.)
 (over Russian)
*And Bolton scores one last bucket
 at the end of regulation...*

A billboard catches her eye. A larger-than-life ad of Sheryl holding the world's first-ever woman's signature shoe: "THE NIKE AIR SWOOPES"

ENGLISH INTERPRETER (V.O.)
 (over Russian)
*... The U.S. women's basketball
 team continue their improbable
 winning streak with a defeat over
 Russia 75 to 63.*

She parks inside a cavernous Midtown garage.

The sign above her vehicle reads: "NBA PARKING ONLY"

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - MAIN OFFICE - DAY

Val maneuvers through a crowded office.

Her colleagues, MOLLY LUND (20s) and RICK WELTS (40s), approach her swiftly. They're pressed for time.

MOLLY
(handing over documents)
This is everything.

Val rifles through the papers.

VAL
So, what am I walking into?

RICK
Relax, you're gonna do great.

VAL
I hate going in blind.
(turns)
Molly?

MOLLY
Privately, I'm hearing the owners are leaning toward the minor league.

VAL
All of them?!

Rick shoots Molly a "why'd you tell her" stare.

RICK
Look, they're just a bit spooked from the NBA lockout.

VAL
That's old news.

MOLLY
Not to their wallets. Salary caps grew. More shared revenue. Nobody wants to take another risk.

Val scoffs. Always convenient excuses.

RICK

Nothing's final. But whatever happens, just promise you won't go all Bobby Knight in there?

They pause in front of a double-door conference room. Molly hands Val a pair of heels.

VAL

(changing shoes)

Who do you think I am?

RICK

(sarcastic tone)

A recovering lawyer.

Val rolls her eyes.

VAL

Yeah, Rick... great pep talk.

Rick and Molly stay behind as Val pushes the conference room doors open.

INT. NBA BOARDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

A television set freezes on the still image of a commercial for the Air Swoopes.

Val sets down the remote and turns to face a conference room filled with wealthy middle-aged white men: the NBA BOARD OF GOVERNORS.

Seated at the head of the table is the Commissioner of the National Basketball Association, DAVID STERN (50s).

VAL

Meet the new face of basketball.
Sheryl Swoopes.

BOARD MEMBER #1

(turns to the
Commissioner)

David, why am I listening to a
pitch from legal?

STERN

Val isn't just our in-house
counsel. She helped form our
women's national team. I'd like to
finish hearing what she has to say.

VAL

Thank you, Mr. Stern.

(and then)

Given the market exposure and the national team's recent success, I believe now is the perfect moment to launch a professional women's league.

BOARD MEMBER #2

(scoffs)

We've been through this.

VAL

(taking ownership)

They're 52 and 0. You can't deny their level of play.

BOARD MEMBER #3

Yes, they're good players. I still don't see your point.

VAL

Talent like this doesn't come often.

BOARD MEMBER #2

Maybe for the women's team. But the NBA, my dear, is brimming.

Val HATES being called dear.

STERN

He's right. We've never had more talent. But gentlemen, let's not forget that our association exploded off the backs of just a few stars.

Behind them looms the iconic image of *His Airness*, Michael Jordan, dunking over Magic Johnson.

The Board nods in acknowledgment.

BOARD MEMBER #4

What about the ABL?

VAL

The American Basketball League is a pipe dream. Without marketing, tv deals, or proper sponsors... it'll never take off--

BOARD MEMBER #5
 Just like the last seven women's
 leagues.

BOARD MEMBER #3
 Seven? Did you say seven failed?!

Val's losing them.

VAL
 This won't.
 (passing out a stack of
 documents)
 We'll own basketball on a yearlong
 basis through deals with our
 trusted partners: NBC and ESPN.

BOARD MEMBER #2
 Why would they ever stick their
 necks out? You just heard it
 yourself. Seven failed.

VAL
 Because we're the NBA.
 (beat)
 And soon millions will be watching
 women play basketball.

BOARD MEMBER #2
 They'll be watching the Olympics.

VAL
 With these players, they'll do it
 again.

BOARD MEMBER #4
 I get it. It's not a terrible idea.
 But my gut tells me this is nothing
 more than a fool's errand.
 Countless women are signing with
 the ABL as we speak.

VAL
 (pointing to the tv)
 Not the one that'll count.

The door OPENS. A nondescript executive, CHRIS (30s, male), pokes his head inside the boardroom.

CHRIS
 Is right now still good?

STERN
 (looks at the time)
 Yes, yes. It's perfect.
 (and then)
 Val, we'll follow up.

Val's taken aback as her colleague, Chris, takes center stage.

CHRIS
 Thank you Commissioner Stern and
 NBA Board of Governors.

Chris disperses a stack of documents.

CHRIS (CONT'D)
 As you're aware, my team's been
 tasked with exploring the prospects
 for an official minor league within
 the NBA...

INT. VAL'S CAR - NBA GARAGE - DAY

Val sits motionless in her parked car. Keys in the ignition. In a spontaneous fury, she BANGS her hands against the steering wheel -- a hopeless attempt to release her pent-up frustration.

She feels her dream of professional basketball slipping away. Again.

BEGIN FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

SWOOSH! YOUNG VAL (23), wearing her University of Virginia Jersey, strokes shot after shot inside her alma mater gym. SCOUTS nod. They've found a gem in this young rising star.

FRENCH SCOUT #1 (O.S.)
 Ackerman!

Val hustles to the sidelines. She's greeted by three FRENCH SCOUTS (40s).

YOUNG VAL
 Yeah?

FRENCH SCOUT #1
 (thick accent)
 Do you know who we are?

She shakes her head.

FRENCH SCOUT #1 (CONT'D)
We're collegiate scouts for Union
Cosnoise.

(off Val's puzzled look)
A professional basketball team in
France. You ever been to France?

YOUNG VAL
No, sir.

FRENCH SCOUT #1
Well, we'd like to change that.

FRENCH SCOUT #2
Your coach tells us that your dream
is to play pro ball. That right?

YOUNG VAL
(trying to contain her
excitement)
Yes, sir.

FRENCH SCOUT #1 pulls out a folder.

FRENCH SCOUT #1
Good. Because I have a feeling,
you'll be playing with us for a
long time.

PRE-LAP KNOCK! KNOCK!

END FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

INT. VAL'S CAR - NBA GARAGE - DAY

Rick and Molly peer through the driver side window.

VAL
Yeah?

Val rolls down the window ever so slightly.

MOLLY
I take it the meeting didn't go
well.

VAL
It's under control.

RICK
(scoffs)
That's all you're gonna give us?

Val never opens up.

VAL
Sorry guys...
(car turns on)
Gotta run.

She can't wallow in defeat any longer.

MOLLY
(watching Val speed away)
Christ. Does she trust anyone?

RICK
Yeah... herself.

EXT. OLYMPIC VILLAGE - DAY

Sprawling lawns. Lush gardens. State-of-the-art arenas.

The Atlanta skyline glistens behind a colorful sculpture of the Olympic Rings. The plaque reads: "ATLANTA 1996 OLYMPIC GAMES"

SUPER: "3 MONTHS LATER"

PRE-LAP: Faint cheering.

INT. GEORGIA DOME - DAY

The thunderous CHEERS of the crowd permeate the stadium.

Sheryl hounds the AUSTRALIAN POINT GUARD on defense. In a quick move, she steals the ball from her opponent --

NBC ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
A steal by Swoopes!...

INT. VAL'S OFFICE - DAY

The broadcast now blasts from Val's small office television.

She stares at the screen with the competitive eyes of an athlete.

NBC ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*... Sheryl passes it to Leslie,
BANG! Another two!*

The Women's USA Olympic team embraces as the clock expires.

Val leans back, a bit more relaxed.

NBC ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
And that should do it folks. Ninety-three...

INT. GEORGIA DOME - DAY

Sheryl races along the sidelines, high-fiving the boisterous crowd. She's a fan favorite.

NBC ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
... to seventy-one. Next up, Team USA is headed to the gold medal game against the undefeated World Champions, Brazil. Now, to our own, Robin Roberts, who is courtside with the team.

ROBIN ROBERTS (30s, reporter) stands next to three grinning Olympians: Sheryl Swoopes, Lisa Leslie, and Rebecca Lobo.

ROBIN ROBERTS
I'm here with the stars of the night: Sheryl, Lisa, and Rebecca...
(faces the players)
Now ladies--

INT. VAL'S OFFICE - DAY

WHOOSH! The door swings open. It's Molly.

MOLLY
He's back, Val.

Val darts for the hallway.

INT. COMMISSIONER STERN'S OFFICE - DAY

Val barges inside Commissioner Stern's office.

STERN
(startled)
Val?

VAL
I'm sorry for rushing in. But I need to know.

STERN
Huh?

VAL

Are we doing this or not?

STERN

The Board will reconvene--

VAL

The shot clock's winding down,
David. We need to make a decision.

(then)

Look.

Val snatches a remote off Stern's desk and flips on the television. It's the Olympic broadcast.

VAL (CONT'D)

They sold out the Georgia Dome,
David. The Georgia Dome!

Stern gestures toward a more relaxed setting of lounger chairs in the corner of his impressive office.

STERN

Take a seat. You're making me nervous.

Val sits as Stern pours himself and Val a glass of scotch, her drink of choice. He hands her the glass.

VAL

(takes a sip)

You remember what you told me on my first day?

(off Stern's look)

Failure isn't fatal. But failure to change might be.

STERN

(takes a seat)

That's from Wooden, y'know.

VAL

Whoever it's from -- it stuck.

(then)

It was All-Star weekend. Magic had just been diagnosed. Everyone was scared. Do we really let him play? Would players protest? Would fans? What if he goes to the bucket and gets a bloody nose?

Val leans in.

VAL (CONT'D)

Everyone was telling you not to do it. The easy decision would have been to move on. But you knew we needed to see it. We needed to change.

(beat)

And when he won the MVP of that game, the world did.

STERN

I remember.

A beat.

VAL

(with conviction)

Let's change the game again.

STERN

It's more complicated, Val. This isn't just one game -- it's an entire league. And you saw the Board... they're not ready for this leap.

VAL

They'll do what you tell them.

STERN

Even if you're right, that still doesn't change the scope. I can't possibly commission both leagues.

VAL

That's why you have me.

STERN

You?! You'd really want that? The scrutiny, the hours, the--

VAL

I want a league that lasts. That's what I want.

(then)

And you wouldn't have let me pitch to the Board if you didn't want that too.

Stern can't help but smile.

STERN

Let's not get ahead of ourselves.

He stands. Ponders a moment.

STERN (CONT'D)
I If I was to commit to anything --
and that's a big if... there'd need
to be some conditions.

Val's eyes widen. Her pitch is working.

STERN (CONT'D)
The women must win gold. The Board
will never give our American
players a professional league if
they can't beat the international
teams.

Stern picks up a magazine off his desk and sets it on the table in front of Val.

STERN (CONT'D)
And the league needs faces. We'll
need stars to sign...

Val looks down to see a cover photo of Magic Johnson, Michael Jordan, and Larry Bird from the '92 Olympic Games. The Dream Team.

STERN (CONT'D)
... or else we'll fail.

She picks up the magazine.

VAL
(confirming)
Our own Michael, Magic, and Bird.

STERN
At a minimum.

INT. HOTEL ROOMS - MORNING

QUICK CUTS of TEAM USA zipping up their bags for their final game.

EXT. OLYMPIC VILLAGE - MOMENTS LATER

Team USA exit the doors of the hotel and walk by the OLYMPIC RINGS.

They pass the US WOMEN'S GYMNASTIC TEAM in front of the OLYMPIC FOUNTAIN in matching gear.

Team USA "low-fives" their fellow female American athletes, standing over a foot above them.

The team struts confidently onto their bus. It's game time.

INT. VAL'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Val nervously bites her fingernails as she sits on the edge of her sofa. Her husband, CHARLIE (40s), sits next to her, carefully holding their baby daughter in his arms.

He turns up the volume on their television.

NBC ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
This is the game that everyone wanted. The long-awaited matchup between the United States and the reigning world champions, Brazil. Team USA has not forgott--

CLICK! -- The television set flickers off.

CHARLIE
What're you doing?!

VAL
(shoots up from her seat)
I don't think I can stomach this.

CHARLIE
It's the Olympics! What's the matter with you?

VAL
Oh, I don't know, Charlie. Maybe everything I care about is riding on this one game!

Val storms away.

CHARLIE
(smiles at the baby)
Mommy didn't mean that.

INT. GEORGIA DOME - DAY

The crowd ROARS. The spectators are on their feet.

NBC ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
Team USA is trying to win back the gold after a disappointing loss in '92.

Sheryl huddles with her teammates.

SHERYL

Look around, ya'll.
(off their look)
More people than ever before are
about to watch us ball.
(then)
Let's show 'em what they've been
missing.

The players nod. They're ready for battle.

-- The BRAZILIAN CENTER wins the tip off against Leslie.

-- The BRAZILIAN POINT GUARD maneuvers past a screen, tosses it to their starting FORWARD, who drives to shoot when -- WHISTLE! There's a foul down low.

-- Vanderveer SCREAMS from the sidelines as the Brazilian power forward knocks down one of two free throws.

COACH VANDERVEER

It's okay! Stay aggressive!

-- Staley dribbles up the court, sending a pass to an open Sheryl. She bursts past one defender and glides over another with a reverse layup for two.

NBC ANNOUNCER (V.O.)

*Now that's why she's called,
"Her Airness"!*

-- QUICK CUTS OF THE GAME -- Staley drives to score -- Leslie muscles down low for two -- Lobo knocks down a mid range shot -- Sheryl with a three. Team USA is pouring it on.

-- A LITTLE GIRL (10) is mesmerized watching a replay on the stadium jumbotron.

INT. ITALIAN AIRPORT - DAY

Americans cheer as they watch the game over the blare of gate announcements in Italian. CYNTHIA COOPER (33, future WNBA MVP) watches bitterly.

RANDOM AMERICAN

Cynthia, we're winning! Lighten up.

CYNTHIA
 (under her breath)
 I should be there.

BACK TO:

INT. GEORGIA DOME - DAY

Sheryl swings the ball to Ruthie, who passes it to Leslie. She settles for a mid-range shot. Just missing.

SHERYL
 (to Leslie)
 They can't handle you down low.
 Don't settle for the mid-range.
 Let's go!

Leslie nods back with steely determination.

Brazil's point guard drives to the basket -- SWAT! Leslie slaps the ball out of bounds. She snarls as her teammates egg her on. She means business.

INT. VAL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Val is on the floor reading to her daughter.

The door CREAKS open. Charlie gazes at his family.

VAL
 (without looking up)
 I don't wanna know.

CHARLIE
 Val--

VAL
 Just tell me--

CHARLIE
 Val! It's over.
 (then)
 USA is up by twenty in the fourth.

The reality washes over her.

CHARLIE (O.S.) (CONT'D)
 You're getting your league.

Val's stunned expression softens into what might even pass for a smile.

INT. VAL'S LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Filled with a wave of emotions, Val watches the game's final seconds tick away.

NBC ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*The United States women have proven
that all it took was all they have.
And if there's anyone out there...*

INT. GEORGIA DOME - DAY

NBC ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*... that doesn't believe dreams
come true. Well, I have news for
you.*

The clock strikes zero. The match is over.

NBC ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*It's official. The United States
has the best women's basketball
team in the world!*

The crowd noise is deafening. It's a scene of overwhelming jubilation. The Olympians yell and jump into each other's arms in joyous victory.

The CROWD chants in melodic unison.

CROWD
USA!... USA!... USA!...

INT. VAL'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

Val kisses her daughter.

In the background, the celebration continues on their television.

Charlie gently wraps his arm over his wife's shoulder.

CHARLIE
So, what now?

VAL
(watching the players on
screen)
I have to convince 'em.

INT. SHERYL'S BEDROOM - DAY

Sheryl lays in bed, while her husband, ERIC JACKSON (20s), finishes getting dressed for work.

He FLICKS on their bedroom light.

SHERYL
(groggy)
Turn it off. I'm sleeping.

The doorbell RINGS.

ERIC
I swear your mom comes over every
damn morning.
(walking to the door)
She might as well move in!

EXT. SHERYL'S DOORWAY - CONTINUOUS

Eric opens the door...

ERIC
Louise, I can't...
(startled)
Oh.

Val stands in the entryway.

VAL
Hello Mr. Jackson. I'm looking for
your wife.

Sheryl stumbles toward the door.

SHERYL (O.S.)
(sarcastic)
Don't listen to Eric, Mama! He just
jealous of our relationship!

Sheryl notices Val.

SHERYL (CONT'D)
(embarrassed)
Mrs. Ackerman?

VAL
Call me Val.
(then)
Do you have a minute?

INT. SHERYL'S LIVING ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Sheryl nervously tidies up in a hurry. She gestures to Val to take a seat on the living room sofa.

SHERYL
(noticing Val's shoes)
Wait, are those?--

VAL
You kidding me?!

(showing off her sneakers)
I traded in my Jordans the second I saw these.

SHERYL
Y'know Nike actually pays me to wear those. Pays me to wear my own shoe!
(quietly)
Don't tell Phil but uh... I would've done it for free.

They share a laugh.

VAL
You remind me of him.
(off Sheryl's look)
Michael.

SHERYL
No offense, Mrs. Ackerman--

VAL
Val.

SHERYL
(slight smirk)
Mrs. Val... people have been telling me I play like a boy my whole life. They're wrong... I play like me.

VAL
I'm not talking about your game, Sheryl. I'm talking about you. Your energy. Your smile. How you connect with fans. I can't really explain it, but you know it when you see it.

Sheryl takes this in.

VAL (CONT'D)

Y'know everyone at headquarters is freaking out because it might be his last season. They argue all the time over who's gonna be the next face of basketball.

(beat)

But every name they float... is wrong.

Val leans forward.

VAL (CONT'D)

The next Michael Jordan of professional basketball is not in the NBA... She's sitting across from me.

SHERYL

That's kind.

(then)

But did you really come all this way just to flatter me?

VAL

No...

Val grabs a set of loose papers from her purse.

VAL (CONT'D)

I came to build you a legacy.

Sheryl can see it's a contract.

SHERYL

Before you go any further, you should know, the ABL already promised I'd be the face of my own franchise.

VAL

Franchise? Why settle for just a franchise?

Val slides the paperwork across the table.

VAL (O.S.) (CONT'D)

A legend deserves a league.

Sheryl holds the contract in her hand...

INT. VAL'S OFFICE - DAY

MATCH ON a framed fax of Sheryl's signed contract next to pictures of Val's family and former international basketball career.

Val paces while squeezing a stress ball as Rick and Molly stand by a giant whiteboard with a list of the Olympic players' names. There are check marks by the first two: SHERYL SWOOPES and REBECCA LOBO.

RICK

Okay, we've got our hands full.
Eight teams to fill and eight
months til opening day.

One name, KATY STEDING, is crossed off.

VAL

Wait, what happened with Katy?

RICK

Since Swoopes and Lobo signed with us, the ABL's been promising the world.

MOLLY

They told her she could go home to Portland. Be their founding player.

VAL

Damn, they move fast.

RICK

So, let's move faster.
(then)
I say we divide and conquer.

VAL

No. You focus on media planning.

RICK

Val, you can't do this on your own.
The ABL has scouts all over the--

VAL

Guys, I'll handle this.

Rick and Molly exchange glances.

BEGIN MONTAGE: VAL RECRUITS PLAYERS

-- QUICK CUTS of Val in her office dialing numbers and talking on the phone.

VAL (CONT'D)
(cheerfully)
Hey, Ruthie, it's Val Ackerman.

-- Val holds her daughter at home while talking on her landline.

VAL (CONT'D)
Do you know when she'll be back?

-- Val speaks on her car phone.

VAL (CONT'D)
Well if you ever reconsider, you
can call me anytime, day or night.

-- Rick crosses Ruthie's name off the whiteboard.

-- Val wheels a compact suitcase through a crowded airport terminal.

-- Val sits at a coffee shop across from NIKKI MCCRAY (25).

NICKI
It's not personal, Val. They just
had a better offer.

-- Rick crosses Nikki's name off the whiteboard.

-- Val applies deodorant and brushes her teeth inside an airport bathroom.

-- From a hotel room, Val talks to Lisa on speaker phone.

VAL
Lisa, what's it gonna take? You
tell me.

LISA (ON PHONE)
I'm not making any decisions yet.

-- Val's on the phone in her office. Molly steps inside.

MOLLY
I've got Katrina on Line 3.

-- Rick crosses Katrina's name off the whiteboard.

-- Val applies lipstick in her rearview mirror.

-- Val sits on bleachers with JENNIFER AZZI (28).

JENNIFER
I'm just weighing my options...

-- Rick crosses Jennifer's name off the whiteboard.

-- Charlie, at home, holds his daughter to the phone. On the other end, Val talks to them both from a payphone.

VAL

Hi sweetie! Mommy misses you. I'll be home soon.

CHARLIE (ON PHONE)

We miss you more.

-- On the side of a rural road, Val bites into a burger while poring over a map on the hood of her rental car.

-- While Val approaches a modest home, the door opens. Teresa Edwards is letting out two executives holding folders labeled: ABL. She's too late.

-- Rick crosses Teresa's name off the whiteboard. Only a few remain.

END MONTAGE

EXT. SUPERMARKET PARKING LOT - DAY

Lisa loads groceries into her car. Val approaches her from behind.

LISA

(without turning around)

Are you stalking me?

VAL

It's my job.

LISA

Well, I still don't have an answer.

VAL

Lisa, we need you.

LISA

Then why is the ABL offering me double?

VAL

The ABL is bankrolled by a bunch of venture capital guys out of Silicon Valley. They don't know the game like we do.

LISA

Y'know if I was a guy, I would've been the number one pick in the draft. Never have to worry about a dime.

Lisa loads a bag of off-brand cereal into her trunk.

LISA (CONT'D)

But now, I gotta choose between Cocoa Nuggets and Honey Nut Scooters.

VAL

Honey Nut Scooters?

LISA

Exactly!

Val slightly smiles.

VAL

I get it. It's not fair. I can't give you the same money, but I can give you exposure.

Lisa sighs.

VAL (CONT'D)

Look I shouldn't be telling you this. But we plan to have a team here in LA.

LISA

So?

VAL

You'll play at the Forum.

Lisa stops in her tracks.

VAL (CONT'D)

Work with me, Lisa... and the next cereal you buy will have your face plastered on it.

On Lisa.

INT. VAL'S CAR (MOVING) - DAY

The thoroughfare noises of congested New York City traffic SCREECH in the background. Val attentively turns up the volume to SPORTS RADIO.

RADIO ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
*The WNBA is being announced
 today... thoughts?*

RADIO ANNOUNCER #2 (V.O.)
*Are we really doing this again? I
 hate to be the bearer of bad news,
 but nobody wants to watch women
 play basketball.*

RADIO ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
*You watched the Olympics, didn't
 you?*

RADIO ANNOUNCER #2 (V.O.)
*I also watched Archery.
 (off laughs)
 Doesn't mean they should have a
 league!*

Val grips the steering wheel tighter. Stares ahead.

INT. COMMISSIONER STERN'S OFFICE - LATER

KNOCK! KNOCK! Val lets herself in.

VAL
 David, I just wanted to thank you
 agai--

STERN
 Keep the champagne on ice.

VAL
 (off Stern's worried
 stare)
 What is it?

STERN
 We really lost nine Olympians to
 the ABL?

VAL
 Yes, but--

STERN
 I mean, I figured three. Maybe
 four...

VAL
 Well, we never anticipated--

STERN
You guys couldn't get one more
Olympian?!

Val's silent.

STERN (CONT'D)
Whether we like it or not, those
three just became that much more
valuable. Nothing can happen to
them, Val. Nothing. Hell, bubble
wrap 'em if you need to.

Val taps her foot, anxiously.

INT. ELEVATOR (MOVING) - NIGHT

MATCH ON Val's anxious tapping as she stands next to Molly in
an empty elevator.

MOLLY
They're gonna meet you outside the
press room.

VAL
Okay, great.

Doors open. Molly senses Val's nerves.

MOLLY
And, Val.
(then)
Don't worry about the ABL hype...
You're about to make history.

Val steps out.

VAL
Haven't done anything yet, Molly.

MOLLY
The first woman to head an NBA
sports league. It's a big deal.

VAL
Look, Molly...

Val stops. Turns around.

VAL (CONT'D)
I'm not doing this for firsts.
(then)
I just wanna make it last.

The doors close SHUT.

BEGIN FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

INT. LOCKER ROOM - DAY

YOUNG VAL (23), drenched in her sweaty Euroleague jersey, approaches her locker.

A sudden hush falls over her FRENCH TEAMMATES. She feels the weight of their stares.

The rusted locker door CREAKS open, revealing what every pro athlete dreads: Emptiness.

FRENCH COACH (V.O.)
We're going another direction.

INT. FRENCH COACH'S OFFICE - DAY

YOUNG VAL
(confused)
I -- I don't understand, I--

Her FRENCH COACH (40s) nonchalantly looks up from his desk.

FRENCH COACH
It's your knee, Val.

YOUNG VAL
But -- but I told you... I just
tweaked it.

FRENCH COACH
And next week it could be a tear. I
can't afford you if you're not
available.

YOUNG VAL
Afford? You're paying me 800 bucks
a month.

Nothing.

YOUNG VAL (CONT'D)
C'mon, Coach. I trusted you! I flew
halfway around the world to play
for you!

FRENCH COACH
Rien n'est éternel. Nothing lasts
forever, Val.

END FLASHBACK SEQUENCE

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CORRIDOR - DAY

Val stares at a gallery of portraits peppered along the hallway. A shrine to EVERLASTING ICONS. ALL MEN: Bill Russell, Wilt Chamberlain, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Walton, Dr. J, and Michael Jordan.

Sheryl joins her.

SHERYL
I see some room.

Val shoots back a winsome smile. She's greeted by the three pillars of her new league.

VAL
Ready?

LISA
Let's do this.

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - PRESS ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Val opens the door to reveal a chaotic scene. The room is teeming with sports journalists and media giants. Propped in the center of the space are cameras from every major national network.

FLASH! FLASH! A barrage of pictures track the athletes. Molly shows them to their seats at a conference table alongside Commissioner Stern.

Commissioner Stern adjusts his mic.

STERN
Thank you for coming today. We wanted to gather you all here because we have some very exciting news.

(beat)
We believe at the NBA that there is an opportunity to drastically expand our footprint, and inspire a new generation of athletes.

CAMERAS FLASH as a backdrop reveals the new WNBA logo.

STERN (CONT'D)
We officially present to you... the
Women's National Basketball
Association.

REPORTERS harangue Commissioner Stern with questions.

REPORTER #1
Will this interfere with the NBA
schedule?

REPORTER #2
How many teams do you anticipate?

STERN
I believe our acting league
President, Val Ackerman, can answer
your questions.

Stern shoots Val a "good luck with them" look.

BEGIN MONTAGE: REPORTER QUESTIONS

Reporters fire off a rapid onslaught of questions at Val, Sheryl, Lisa, and Rebecca.

-- A crew of reporters gather around Val.

REPORTER #1
Heard you had trouble recruiting
talent away from the ABL. Do you
think that's going to hurt the
product?

VAL
I'm very confident with who we
have.

REPORTER #1
Isn't it just three players?

The crew of reporters smirk.

-- Interviewing Sheryl.

REPORTER #2
You left the University of Texas.
You left your squad in Italy. Can
your WNBA team really rely on you?

SHERYL
Everywhere I go, I win. That's what
they can rely on.

-- Interviewing Lisa

REPORTER #3
Given your recent modeling
contract, some might wonder if
you're more focused on being famous
than a basketball player?

LISA
Who says I can't be both?

Reporter #3 grins as others chuckle.

LISA (CONT'D)
Don't let the lipstick fool you.
(beat)
I'm a baller.

-- Interviewing Rebecca.

REPORTER #2
You were 35-0 in college. And 60-0
with the Olympic team. Do you ever
lose?

REBECCA
(straight face)
No.

The reporters smile.

-- Back to Sheryl.

REPORTER #4
How does it feel to be the first
athlete to sign?

SHERYL
Honored. Truly. But I'm just the
first of many.

Reporter #4 looks unconvinced.

END MONTAGE

EXT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - NIGHT

The three athletes gather after a long day of press banter.

LISA
Now we need to celebrate!

Rebecca and Sheryl look reluctant.

LISA (CONT'D)
C'mon, we earned it.

REBECCA
I did see this karaoke spot on the
way here.

Lisa shrugs.

REBECCA (CONT'D)
What -- not a fan?

LISA
Let's make it interesting...
(then)
Fifty bucks I can take you both.

REBECCA
In karaoke?!
(laughing)
Damn, Lisa. Not everything's a
competition.

Sheryl abruptly stumbles toward an outdoor garbage can --
heaving.

LISA
Sheryl, you ok?

SHERYL
(wiping her face)
Just somethin' I ate.

Rebecca helps Sheryl up.

REBECCA
C'mon, let's get you back.

SHERYL
No... No... I'm good. I'ma take a
cab.

LISA
Sorry Swoopes. We're takin' you
back.

SHERYL
I'm fine! Go! Have fun.

A car pulls up to the side of the curb. The window rolls down
-- it's Val and Molly.

VAL
Is she alright?

SHERYL
I'm fine! Everything's good.

Lisa and Rebecca shake their head.

VAL
(to Sheryl)
I'm giving Molly a lift anyway. Hop in.

INT. VAL'S CAR (MOVING) - NIGHT

Sheryl's head rests against the car window, slowly rocking back and forth.

In the midst of all the city commotion, she spots a pharmacy.

SHERYL
Pull over here.

Val swerves to the curb. She locks eyes with Molly -- something seems off.

INT. DUANE READE - CONTINUOUS

Sheryl quickly roams the aisles, snapping up every stomach reliever she can find: PEPTO, TUMS, PRILOSEC -- the classics.

The more she hurries, the greater her concerns grow. She finally faces the one thing she really came here for... a PREGNANCY TEST.

INT. VAL'S CAR - MEANWHILE

Val and Molly stare through the frosted glass pharmacy windows. They look concerned.

VAL
Maybe I should check on her.

MOLLY
It's okay, I'll do it.

INT. DUANE READE BATHROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Sheryl furtively checks the lock on the door, then anxiously looks down at the results in her hand.

Overwhelmed by the gravity of the moment, she loses her balance and slides against the bathroom's bare white wall.

Shaking from the shock, Sheryl closes her eyes, trying to regain her composure.

KNOCK! KNOCK!

MOLLY (O.S.)
(through the door)
Sheryl, is everything alright?

With her hands still shaking, Sheryl drops the test results -- it's two lines.

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - COMMON AREA - DAY

A cacophony of CHATTER. RINGING phones. CLACKING keyboards. The discordant CHIME of dial-up modems and the occasional BLARING intercom announcement.

NBA front office employees ALAN (30s) and GARY (40s) read from a set of binders as they walk with Val through the hive of activity.

VAL
Who do we like?

GARY
Tina Thompson.

VAL
She's a Trojan, right?

ALAN
Sure is. Got solid post skills too.
Plays tough. Larry Johnson type.

VAL
Good. Who else?

GARY
Tamecka Dixon.

ALAN
She's All-American. Big-12 player
of the year. A real ankle breaker.

VAL
She'll go with us?

ALAN
So we've been told.

GARY
Then there's Sue Wicks.

VAL

I don't know her.

GARY

She's played all over. Italy,
Japan, Spain, Israel--

VAL

How long?

ALAN

Long. But she can still play. Not
the best scorer. But decent in the
paint. Tough on "D".

They approach Val's new office.

INT. VAL'S NEW OFFICE - CONTINUOUS

Door opens.

VAL

How many is that?

She takes a seat at her desk where a nameplate now reads:
"Val Ackerman, WNBA President"

GARY

Around 30. But after the European
pickups, we should land at 72.

VAL

Only 72 players?!

ALAN

But good ones.

VAL

We're 48 short.

GARY

ABL is offering 80k a pop. How are
we supposed to compete with that?!

VAL

I can't change the numbers, Gary.
It was hard enough convincing the
owners to back this league.

Rick pokes his head inside Val's office.

RICK

Can we chat?

VAL
 (to Alan and Gary)
 Give us a second, guys.

Rick firmly SHUTS the door as his colleagues EXIT the room.

He turns to face Val with an expression that looks like a million tiny needles pierced into his brain, leaving him unable to think straight.

RICK
 Molly just told me -- what the fuck!

VAL
 Jesus, she shouldn't have said anything.

RICK
 So it is true!

VAL
 Shh! This can't get out. It's still early.

RICK
 Wait, who else knows?

VAL
 You're looking at it.

RICK
 Good god. Where is she?

INT. STADIUM CORRIDOR - DAY

Sheryl struts confidently down a stark hallway in a buttoned-up leather jacket. Lisa follows closely behind her in a similar get-up next to Rebecca, wearing a backwards Kangol hat. They look cool.

They're each carrying a bright blue gym bag with their respective last names etched on the side above the WNBA logo.

FLASH! FLASH! FLASH!

PHOTOGRAPHER (O.S.)
 Last one!...

FLASH! -- The athletes drop their bags and stone-faced expressions. It's a photo shoot.

The PHOTOGRAPHER (male, 30s) approaches.

PHOTOGRAPHER (CONT'D)

That was great, ladies! Let's run it again but this time, Sheryl, you and Lisa switch places. Oh, and how 'bout we unbutton the jackets.

Lisa and Rebecca loosen their jackets. Sheryl eyes Lisa's bare midriff.

SHERYL

(hugging her jacket
tighter)

I kinda prefer mine how it is.

The photographer senses Sheryl's unease.

PHOTOGRAPHER

Sure, sure. Whatever makes you feel strong, confident. That's what we're going for.

Sheryl nods unassuredly.

INT. VAL'S NEW OFFICE - DAY

Rick's now seated by Val's desk.

RICK

We're in uncharted waters, Val.

VAL

Well, lemme know when you find us a paddle.

RING! She picks up the phone.

VAL (CONT'D)

Yeah...

(off inaudible mumble)

Wait, what?!

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - COMMON AREA - DAY

Val and Rick watch the television in disbelief.

ON TELEVISION:

ESPN BROADCASTER

The recently announced women's professional league is off to a peculiar start.

(MORE)

ESPN BROADCASTER (CONT'D)

As reported by the Associated Press, Sheryl Swoopes, perhaps the biggest star of the fledgling Women's NBA, will miss its inaugural season for a reason that never plagued the men's league: She is pregnant.

Rick anxiously paces as faint rumblings of the broadcast play in the background.

RICK

It already leaked?

Val's frozen in shock.

RICK (CONT'D)

Are we being ambushed?!

She subtly shakes her head.

RICK (CONT'D)

Shit. We needed prep for this, Val.
The owners? Stern?

INT. VAL'S CAR (MOVING) - NIGHT

Val listens intently to sports radio.

RADIO BROADCASTER #3

You cannot underestimate the diva quotient in Sheryl Swoopes. And for her to just play with everyone else would have been too ordinary.

RADIO BROADCASTER #4 (V.O.)

So, you think she planned this?

RADIO BROADCASTER #3 (V.O.)

I'm just stating the obvious. She quit on her team in Italy. She bailed on the Longhorns. The WNBA took a big risk making her one of the faces of their new league. If they're smart, they'll move on...

Val rubs her head. But the tension remains.

INT. VAL'S LIVING ROOM - NIGHT

Val sluggishly ENTERS her home.

She's greeted by Charlie SNORING on the sofa next to a baby monitor. Another futile attempt to stay up for his wife.

She CLICKS off the TV, drapes a blanket over her husband, and makes her way upstairs.

INT. EMILY'S BEDROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Val tiptoes towards her daughter's bed, careful not to wake her. She pulls up a chair and strokes Emily's hair gently, letting out a soft sigh.

She sits back and catches her weary reflection in a mirror.

INT. COMMISSIONER STERN'S OFFICE - DAY

Rick, Val, and two league advisors, JOSH (40s, VP of Marketing) and BRANDON (40s, Head of Sponsorships), sit across from Commissioner Stern's desk.

STERN

This is new ground for us. So now
is the time to be blunt.

(then)

Brandon, what's your take?

BRANDON

I'd move on from her. While we
still have time.

STERN

Josh?

JOSH

The face of the WNBA can't be
sitting on the sidelines. Any
campaigns with her, we squash them
now. It's already gonna hurt ticket
sales.

STERN

Rick?

RICK

(nervously rambles)

On the one hand, we could pivot.
Market the stars that we know will
play. Then again, that may not be
the friendliest look. So uh, I mean
there's a lot of ways one could go
here.

STERN

Wow, Rick. That was a very impressive way of not taking a stance.

(then)

Val?

Val looks conflicted. The wheels are turning.

STERN (CONT'D)

... Val?

Her mind shifts gears.

VAL

Screw the talking heads.
Make her promotions even more prominent.

(looks around)

This is Sheryl Swoopes we're talkin' about.

JOSH

(scoffs)

This is a business. Why would we spend limited resources on someone who can't even play?

VAL

You're acting like pregnancy is the kiss of death.

BRANDON

We're not the bad guys, Val. I've never seen a pregnant athlete make a successful comeback.

STERN

Everyone, clear the room.

(then)

Val, stay.

The room clears.

Stern muses by the window.

STERN (CONT'D)

I do not envy you.

He focuses on Val.

STERN (CONT'D)

And whatever you decide, I'll back your decision. But keep in mind...

(MORE)

STERN (CONT'D)
 we're paying Leslie, Lobo, and
 Sheryl five times more than the
 average player.

VAL
 That's the case for any star.

STERN
 Maybe so.
 (then)
 But it still doesn't change the
 fact that Sheryl's costs could
 cover several key additions.

He walks closer to Val.

STERN (CONT'D)
 This isn't just some branding
 issue, Val. This has real financial
 implications. You need to ask
 yourself...

INT. VAL'S NEW OFFICE - LATER

STERN (V.O.)
 ... *Is it worth the risk?*

Val's seated at her desk, staring dejectedly at a faded photograph from her professional debut. A bittersweet reminder...

-- FLASH to her empty locker. Her teammate's stares. The expression on her Coach's face as he casually discards her.

YOUNG VAL (V.O.)
I trusted you!

Back to scene.

RICK (O.S.)
 You see Josh's memo?

Rick appears in the doorway.

VAL
 Huh?
 RICK
 (holding the memo)
 Marketing is axing Sheryl's media
 blitz.

VAL
Excuse me?

Val jumps to her feet.

VAL (CONT'D)
Where the hell is he?!

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CORRIDOR - MOMENTS LATER

Val races down the hallway. She SHOVES the swinging doors OPEN to the CAFETERIA.

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CAFETERIA - CONTINUOUS

Josh and his team of TEN MARKETING STAFFERS are chatting over lunch.

VAL
Hey!

Everyone stops and looks to Val.

VAL (CONT'D)
Nobody, and I mean nobody is
stopping Sheryl's media tour unless
I say so!

JOSH
This is my departme--

VAL
Nobody!
(then)
Do you understand?

Everyone but Josh nods. The rest of the cafeteria can't help but gawk at the unfolding drama.

JOSH
Look, you wanna keep her in the
league, fine. But we know what
we're doing. Leave the marketing to
marketing.

VAL
You act like you have the playbook
to make this work. You don't have
the playbook. There is no goddamn
playbook. Because newsflash -- this
never has worked.
(MORE)

VAL (CONT'D)
(addresses the whole
table)

Now we have less than 7 months til
opening day and I need fresh ideas
to make it work. No more silos. You
have a pitch... You bring it to me!

Val turns to EXIT. She SHOVES the cafeteria doors OPEN and...

EXT. ROCK STEADY PARK - DAY

... MATCH ON Sheryl pushing a metal gate open and stepping
onto an outdoor court. A perimeter of chain link fencing
surrounds two well-worn basketball hoops.

Molly, Lisa, and Sheryl observe a camera crew.

MOLLY
(to Sheryl)
Val wants to make sure you're still
comfortable with this.

Sheryl's tying her shoes.

SHERYL
I'm good.

MOLLY
And the doctor approved?

Sheryl stretches her calves.

SHERYL
Yes... we're all good.
(smiling)
We're making a Spike Lee joint!

Spike Lee steps forward, wearing a New York Knicks hat,
jersey, and matching orange glasses.

SPIKE LEE
Ms. Swoopes, Ms. Leslie, it's an
honor.
(then)
You all know Dawn.

Lisa and Sheryl embrace their former teammate, Dawn Staley.

SLAM! They all turn and notice a group of 12 STREETBALL
PLAYERS (20s) -- driving, shooting, and dunking on the court.
They got game.

LISA
Those actors can ball.

SPIKE LEE
That's cuz they ain't actors.
That's your competition.
(then)
Meet Rock Steady's finest.

Spike gives love to a few of the players.

SPIKE LEE (CONT'D)
On this very court, legends like
Grand Master Flash and Kool Herc
blessed us with hip hop.

Spike struts to the side of the hoop.

SPIKE LEE (CONT'D)
Streetball icons like Earl "the
Goat" Manigault, would use his 50-
inch vert to swipe quarters off the
top of the backboard.

DAWN
Dope.

SPIKE LEE
And now it's time for you to make
your mark.
(looks to the
streetballers)
Fellas, come in.

They quickly huddle around Spike.

SPIKE LEE (CONT'D)
This is how it's gonna work -- Four
teams. No cuts. No script. No
breaks. Just ball.

SHERYL
(confused)
Wait, we're playing all you guys?

SPIKE LEE
That's right. It's real. Gritty.
Poetry in motion.
(then)
Cool?

The athlete's nod.

SPIKE LEE (CONT'D)
Okay... lets do this!

Spike moves behind his camera crew.

SPIKE LEE (CONT'D)
And roll film.... Action!

The camera crew circle Lisa as she watches a spirited game of three on three.

LISA
Yo... We got next!

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CONFERENCE ROOM - DAY

VAL
Alright, who's next?

Val sits at the head of the conference table surrounded by Rick, Josh, Brandon, Gary, Alan and some other guys in the marketing department - KARL, DAVE, and SULLY. They're all in their 30s and they all buy their suits at the same place.

RICK
(whispers to Val)
This is the agency that did the Knicks promos.

Two ad guys - RYAN (30s) and DERRICK (40s) - present to them on a screen that reads "WNBA: Fresh Look For A Fresh League."

A projector flashes as it changes slides.

DERRICK
Okay -- so our mission is to finally get NBA fans excited about women's basketball...

EXT. ROCK STEADY PARK - DAY

Spike and the CAMERA CREW follow the action on the court.

STREETBALLER #1 swings it to his teammate, STREETBALLER #2. He dribbles off a screen, forcing Dawn and Leslie to switch on defense.

DERRICK (V.O.)
... *They're used to watching men play...*

Now with the height advantage, Streetballer #2 bullies Dawn down low, spins, and DUNKS with authority.

STREETBALLER #2
(hanging from the rim)
Easy money!

DERRICK (V.O.)
*So, we have to spice things up to
get their attention...*

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CONFERENCE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

CLICK. The slide changes to ad copy: "BEAUTY MEETS BASKETBALL."

The ad is one we've seen a million times. Lower half of a woman in the foreground. Short shorts. Basketball at her hip. Hoop in the background.

RYAN
Beauty meets basketball.

Val stares unamused. Not again.

EXT. ROCK STEADY PARK - MEANWHILE

Streetballer #1 steals from LESLIE, then passes behind his back to STREETBALLER #3. He charges toward the basket, knocking Sheryl to the ground as he goes in for a dunk.

DERRICK (V.O.)
*We'll plaster these at every arena,
along with calendars for the fans
to take home as souvenirs.*

Streetballer #3 extends his hand to Sheryl.

STREETBALLER #3
(with a cheshire cat grin)
I guess I'm better than MJ.

Sheryl's pissed.

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CONFERENCE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Val's pissed.

CLICK. The slide changes to one of the Knicks cheerleaders in a bikini on the beach with two pom-poms in the sand.

RYAN

Of course, we'll want to swap the pom-poms for basketballs.

Flashes of slides of Knicks cheerleaders transition between the pickup game and the guys in the room.

Val watches, rubbing her temples.

SULLY

Sorry, who's going to be in the photos?

RYAN

The players. We're thinking at least one from each team.

ALAN

Love the variety. Makes sense.

Val's tired of being dunked on.

VAL

This is insane.

The room falls silent.

JOSH

(looks to the agency execs)

Sorry -- Can you guys give us the room?

Ryan and Derrick EXIT.

JOSH (CONT'D)

What're you doing, Val? In case you forgot, these are the guys who put asses in seats.

VAL

(dripping in sarcasm)

What, did I speak out of turn?

JOSH

No -- but you called it insane. And, it's not insane to try to sell talent with sex appeal. You think people are tuning in to watch Anna Kournikova because they just want to watch a good tennis match?

(off Val's look)

(MORE)

JOSH (CONT'D)

She's ranked 67th, yet number one in endorsements. Now, why do you think that is?!

EXT. ROCK STEADY PARK - MEANWHILE

As the Streetballers celebrate, Dawn, Leslie, and Swoopes glare at their opponents with narrowed eyes. Determination burning in their veins. It's go time.

VAL (V.O.)

Insanity is trying the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result... That's what I think this is.

Off a check at the top of the key, Streetballer #2 attempts the same move. However, this time as he swings toward the hoop, Leslie meets him at the rim -- SWAT!

VAL (V.O.)

We're selling a women's basketball league, not a Victoria Secret catalog.

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CONFERENCE ROOM - MEANWHILE**BRANDON**

I'm sorry if this makes you uncomfortable, Val. But this isn't rocket science. Sex sells.

VAL

Really? Then how come seven other leagues failed when they did this same old tired shit?

EXT. ROCK STEADY PARK - MEANWHILE

Sheryl picks up the rebound, swings it over to Dawn, who bounce passes it back to Sheryl in the corner for an open three. SWOOSH! Nothing but net.

LISA

(to streetballer #2)
Why so quiet?

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CONFERENCE ROOM - MEANWHILE

VAL

Seven leagues guys -- seven leagues have failed with this same, run-of-the-mill mentality. Stop acting like we have to distract people with bells and whistles.

(then)

Their gameplay speaks for itself.

EXT. ROCK STEADY PARK - MEANWHILE

Sheryl dribbles at the top of the key. Seeing that her defender's stance is too broad, she quickly bounces the ball through his legs and drives down the lane. Streetballer #2 rushes over to block her shot.

JOSH (V.O.)

Their gameplay amounts to a scrimmage at a D3 school. Except they're slower and can't dunk.

Sheryl recognizes the switch on defense and calmly bounces the ball off the top of the backboard to Lisa, who empathically catches it mid-air for a thunderous DUNK!

Sheryl and her teammates confidently jog to the top of the key with a new sense of swagger. They've made their mark.

SHERYL

Next!

Everyone on set has the same reaction -- "Damn".

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CONFERENCE ROOM - MEANWHILE

JOSH

You've already tied our hands with Sheryl. Now this?

VAL

Pick up a history book. Those who don't learn from the past are doomed to repeat it.

(then)

It's time to switch things up.

JOSH

Proverbs are not an answer, Val.

VAL
(pointing at the screen)
Neither is this.

INT. SEARS - NIGHT

Sheryl and her husband push a shopping cart filled to the brim with baby clothes and various newborn gear.

They approach a SEARS ASSOCIATE (20s).

SHERYL
Where are the car seats?

SEARS ASSOCIATE
Just hang a left and go straight
past electronics.
(looking at Sheryl's cart)
Congratulations.

SHERYL
Thanks.

As they approach the ELECTRONICS DEPARTMENT, Sheryl spots TWENTY CUSTOMERS transfixed by a wall of televisions.

Suddenly, the spectators erupt into CHEERS! They're watching the Chicago Bulls.

ERIC
Yo -- let's check the score.

Sheryl and Eric join the crowd.

The color and quality varies. But every screen reflects the same image -- Michael Jordan. Sweating buckets, he looks on the verge of collapse.

MARV ALBERT (V.O.)
*The big story here tonight is
Michael Jordan's physical
condition. He is suffering from flu-
like symptoms.*

It's the legendary FLU GAME.

Sheryl's mesmerized. A depleted Jordan somehow manages to still glide in the air, nailing jumper after jumper. He's willing his team to victory.

NBA CO-HOST #1 (V.O.)
*Doctors said there was no chance he
can play, and yet... Here. He. Is.*

NBA CO-HOST #2 (V.O.)
*I don't know how he does it, Marv.
But it's hard not to be inspired...*

Sheryl looks down at her growing belly.

VAL (PRE-LAP)
What if I'd stopped working when
she was born?

INT. VAL'S KITCHEN - NIGHT

Val's slouched over the kitchen counter, cradling her daughter.

She's perusing another sub-par marketing pitch, while Charlie reheats the dinner she missed on the stove.

CHARLIE
I'd wonder what happened to my
wife.

VAL
(flips the page)
Well, your wife didn't prepare for
this...

Charlie looks puzzled.

VAL (CONT'D)
What? My star player's out. I'm
short fifty athletes. And our
marketing's gone to shit...

Val tosses the pitch in the trash.

VAL (CONT'D)
I'm running outta plays here,
Charlie.

Emily cries. Val rubs her back.

CHARLIE
Well, for what it's worth, my mom
says she'll tune in.

VAL
(sarcastically)
Oh great. We locked in Mrs.
Rappaport. The woman who's never
watched a basketball game.

Charlie laughs awkwardly. He sets dinner in front of Val.

But she doesn't notice. Her mind races.

CHARLIE
Aren't you gonna eat?

She doesn't hear him.

CHARLIE (CONT'D)
Everything okay?

Suddenly, something clicks.

INT. VAL'S HOME OFFICE - DAY

Val paces back and forth as the phone RINGS.

VAL
C'mon... c'mon. Pick up...

RICK (ON PHONE)
Hello?

VAL
Rick, it's Val.

RICK (ON PHONE)
Jesus. You ever sleep?

VAL
Do you still have the original
focus group files?

RICK
Uh, yeah, they're in archives --
why?

INT. RICK'S OFFICE - DAY

It looks like Einstein's lab. A patchwork of papers, walls
decorated in post-its, binders stacked precariously like
Jenga blocks.

In the doorway, Val eagerly watches Rick tediously crunch
numbers on the computer.

RICK
(suddenly stops)
Holy shit.

VAL
What? What is it?

RICK
Can this be right?

Val rushes toward the computer. The glow of the screen illuminates her face.

VAL
(with a smile)
Get the team.

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - PRESENTATION ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

Val and Rick stand in front of a group of approximately twenty seated NBA EMPLOYEES.

Rick dims the lights and flicks on an overhead projector. On the screen appears a convoluted spreadsheet of attendance and viewership figures.

Val eagerly circles the numbers 4,000 and 15,000,000 on the transparent page.

VAL
Does anyone know what these numbers mean?

Nobody says a word.

VAL (CONT'D)
Well you better memorize 'em.
Because that's our break-even. Four thousand attendance and fifteen million viewers.

Rick removes the page and places a new spreadsheet on the projector. It's just as convoluted.

VAL (CONT'D)
Our analysts currently project an average turnout of three thousand fans per game and ten million annual viewers across our two networks. If we don't bump up these numbers...

Val circles the figures 4,000 and 15,000,000 again.

VAL (CONT'D)
... We won't survive.

Another spreadsheet comes on the screen, highlighting figures from previous professional women's leagues.

RICK

We believe that this is only achievable if we don't repeat the same mistakes that led to the failures of the last seven women's leagues.

Brandon frustratingly blurts from the audience.

BRANDON

And what exactly is that?

RICK

We need to stop trying to reach people who attend NBA games. They have finite time and finite resources. They'll always choose the known commodity.

Josh shouts back.

JOSH

Then where the hell do you expect us to find the fans?!

RICK

We make them.
(then)
Look at this.

He pulls out the slide on focus group analytics.

RICK (CONT'D)

Last year, you may remember, we market-tested the idea of a women's league with focus groups. Well, when you segment that data by avid NBA viewers, you'll notice only a nominal uptick in interest to attend games.

(throws up the next slide)

But when you look at the cohorts of folks who rarely or never watch the NBA...

Rick circles three groups: 18-35 YEAR OLD WOMEN, 65+ ADULTS, and LGBT.

RICK (CONT'D)

... you'll see a significant increase--

BRANDON

Hold on. You're suggesting we promote a basketball league to people who don't go to basketball games?

VAL

(pointing to the three groups)

That's because they've never felt invited.

The NBA employees mumble amongst themselves. They've been thrown for a loop.

VAL (CONT'D)

Listen guys, you've seen the projections. We stay the course, we fail.

JOSH

You're making some pretty big fucking assumptions over a few focus groups.

VAL

They aren't assumptions. They're facts.

JOSH

You're playing with our careers, Val.

VAL

This isn't up for debate.

(to everyone)

Don't invite the same beat writers. Don't advertise on the same channels. Don't court the same sponsors. We made a new league. Now let's make new fans.

The room falls awkwardly silent.

GARY

(sheepishly)

Val, I don't mean to step out of bounds, here.

(off her look)

But who do you expect these fans to root for? We're still 50 players short.

VAL

We have a solution for that too.

INT. ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL GYM - DAY

Molly, Gary, and Rick sit on folding chairs behind a plastic table with a dangling paper sign that reads: "WNBA - Open Tryouts"

In the background, homemade cheer signs adorn the cement walls below State Championship banners hanging from the rafters. Fluorescent lights flicker above half-extended bleachers. Welcome to Roosevelt High.

A procession of 100 WOMEN approach their table one by one.

MOLLY

(passing a clipboard)

Please fill out your name and contact information, here.

Rick hands each participant a number to pin onto their shirt, as Gary sizes up the prospects.

GARY

(under his breath)

We're so screwed.

VAL (PRE-LAP)

Thank you all for coming...

INT. ROOSEVELT HIGH SCHOOL GYM - BLEACHERS - MOMENTS LATER

Women from all walks of life sit in the bleachers in oversize shirts, sweatbands, neon lycra, worn sneakers, and sweat suits.

Val stands in the center of the court.

VAL (CONT'D)

... To our open tryouts--

An EAGER ATHLETE (20s) raises her hand.

VAL (CONT'D)

(caught off guard)

Yes?

EAGER ATHLETE

So this is real? This is actually for the NBA?

VAL
The WNBA, yes.

The eager athlete looks around at her humble surroundings.

EAGER ATHLETE
Really?

VAL
Yes. Really.
(then)
And I'm confident that right now,
I'm looking at some of the future
stars of women's basketball.

Val's not confident.

VAL (CONT'D)
And now I'd like to introduce you
to the New York Liberty's first
head coach, Nancy Darsch.

NANCY DARSCH (40s) receives a modest applause, as Val heads to the sidelines.

NANCY
Thanks, Val.
(then)
Over the next two days, we're gonna
put you through the ringer. Wind-
sprints, shooting drills, five on
five scrimmages, the works. Sound
exciting?!

The athletes nod along tepidly.

NANCY (CONT'D)
But before we break you into
teams...
(raises her hand)
Show of hands. How many here have
played professional ball overseas?

Nobody responds.

NANCY (CONT'D)
That's okay. Now, how many played
Division One?

Two women raise their hand.

NANCY (CONT'D)
Alright, any D2 or D3ers out there?

A handful of women raise their hands.

This is not what Val had in mind.

VAL

(whispering to Rick)

We should probably expand the tryouts.

RICK

I'll make some calls.

INT. UTAH HIGH SCHOOL GYM - DAY

-- WIND SPRINTS: WHISTLE! 50+ WOMEN explode off the baseline, running full speed up and down the court.

SUPER: "UTAH TRYOUTS"

-- CATCH & SHOOT: One by one, participants catch a ball from the top of the key, jab step, and shoot.

Head coach, DENISE TAYLOR (40s) screams from the sidelines.

COACH TAYLOR (O.S)

Quicker release, 44. Let's go!

-- DRIBBLING DRILL: From opposite ends, PLAYER 18 and PLAYER 65 dribble down the court. They each face an opponent, PLAYER 22 and PLAYER 99, applying full-court pressure defense.

COACH TAYLOR (CONT'D)

Don't let up! Play through the contact.

Player #22 nimbly steals the ball from her opponent.

COACH TAYLOR (CONT'D)

That's it, 22!

She lets out a celebratory ROAR.

INT. VAL'S NEW OFFICE - NIGHT

Val goes over the whiteboard with Rick, Molly, and Brandon. It's a list of potential sponsors: Neutrogena, Sears, Lee Jeans, Mattel.

VAL

What about Monistat? Thought they were interested?

BRANDON

Promoting feminine hygiene products
at a pro ballgame? C'mon Val, it'll
turn off viewers.

VAL

And what do the numbers show us,
Rick?

RICK

That it aligns with our target
demo.

VAL

Then Brandon, what're you waiting
for? Sign them up.

INT. PHOENIX HIGH SCHOOL GYM - DAY

In a new high school gym, 200 WOMEN wait for their chance to
shine. Turnout is growing.

SUPER: "PHOENIX TRYOUTS"

-- ONE ON ONE DRILL: COACH CHERYL MILLER (30s) watches the
late, great KIM PERROT (PLAYER 25) square off against PLAYER
77 while five women wait on the baseline. Perrot backs down
her opponent, turns, and kisses the ball off the glass for
two.

COACH MILLER

Winner stays. Next up!

PLAYER 59 hustles forward.

COACH MILLER (CONT'D)

Don't give her space! Force her
away from her strong hand.

Scouts on the sidelines point at players, taking notes on
their clipboards.

-- DEFENSIVE DRILL: It's a five-on-five scrimmage.

COACH MILLER (CONT'D)

Switch to a box and one.

(off players switching
positions)

Show me a 3-2 zone.

PLAYER 42 looks lost on defense.

COACH MILLER (CONT'D)
Player 42, off the court.
(then)
33, get in.

PLAYER 33 sprints onto the court.

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CAFETERIA - DAY

Val, Rick, Molly, Gary, and Sully sit around their makeshift "war room" table. Notepads coated in quasi-legible scribble. Half-eaten sandwiches. Stale coffee. They've been here awhile.

RICK
Where are we on player allocation?

GARY
We have six assigned to each team.
The rest will go through the draft.

RICK
Good. Then let's start the meet and greets.
(then)
Molly, you coordinate with the players.

MOLLY
On it.

VAL
Just make sure it's not the same old routine.

SULLY
What does that mean? No more sports bars?

INT. GIRL BAR NIGHTCLUB - NIGHT

Rainbow flags. Laser lights. It's the biggest lesbian club in the country. On stage, Lisa and five LA SPARKS TEAMMATES throw Sparks t-shirts and hype up the raucous crowd. There's never been a meet and greet like this...

VAL (V.O.)
Just not the typical ones.

EXT. RACE FOR THE CURE - DAY

A sea of pink shirts. Sheryl and Rebecca mingle with a crowd of mostly OLDER WOMEN. High fives. Hugs. They're bona fide celebrities.

VAL (V.O.)

If we're gonna attract new fans, we need to meet them where they're at.

Above them, the starting line banner reads: "RACE FOR THE CURE."

INT. CHARLOTTE HIGH SCHOOL GYM - DAY

In yet another high school gym, 300 WOMEN now stand on the sidelines, along with a group of new attendees: THE LOCAL NEWS.

SUPER: "CHARLOTTE TRYOUTS"

-- THREE-PERSON WEAVE: THREE WOMEN pass and weave up and down the court ending in a layup while COACH MEADORS (50s), stands under the basket.

COACH MEADORS

Finish hard at the rim!

-- CHARLOTTE NEWS ANCHOR #1 (50s) speaks to PROSPECT #1 as the drill continues in the background.

PROSPECT #1

I've been a firefighter for four years. I love my job but this, this is my dream.

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - FILM ROOM - DAY

Val, Rick, Gary, and Alan are huddled around a film projector. The room feels like a bunker. No light. No windows. No color.

They're captivated by their new TV spot: Women dripping with sweat. Playing tough. Muscles glistening. Looking like Amazon warriors.

The ad ends with their campaign slogan: "WE GOT NEXT"

ALAN

Some in marketing think it's too butch. Not appealing to Middle America.

RICK

Well, Middle America can grow up.
(looks to Val)
Where do you wanna play it?

VAL

Everywhere.

INT. HOUSTON HIGH SCHOOL GYM - DAY

HOUSTON CAMERA CREWS film the PROSPECTS as SCOUTS confer with their ASSISTANTS on the sidelines.

SUPER: "HOUSTON TRYOUTS"

PROSPECT #2 (30s) speaks to a HOUSTON NEWS ANCHOR (40s).

PROSPECT #2

I drove 17 hours to be here. Slept in my car last night. I hope it was worth it.

PLAYER 68 sits on the bleachers icing her ankle, trying to hold back tears.

A SCOUT (40s) leans down.

SCOUT

Keep your head up. You gave it your all.

The scout then directs her attention to the remaining group of 300 women.

SCOUT (CONT'D)

If I call your number, we'll see you tomorrow.

EXT. COFFEE SHOP - DAY

Val's eating lunch alongside Rick and Molly.

MOLLY

(rifling through papers)
To confirm, we're placing more media buys on daytime talk shows and network sitcoms than sports channels?

RICK

Yes.

VAL

Yes.

MOLLY

Jesus -- Next you'll be tellin' me
we're making a Lifetime movie.

INT. LIFETIME HEADQUARTERS - DAY

Val and Rick sit awkwardly on a pink tufted sofa. Clearly built for looks. Not comfort.

The LIFETIME LOGO hovers above their heads in big bold pink letters.

RECEPTIONIST (O.S.)

Mr. McCormick is ready for you.

INT. LIFETIME OFFICE - DAY

Val and Rick are seated behind the desk of newly-minted Lifetime CEO, DOUG MCCORMICK (50s). He's well-groomed, slick, knows his stuff.

DOUG

Not gonna lie, Val -- I was surprised to get your call.

VAL

Well, we figure where there's new blood, maybe there's room for a new partnership.

DOUG

What did you have in mind?

RICK

Something that highlights our players. Appeals to both our demographics.

DOUG

A lot of Golden Girls fans in the NBA these days?

Val affords him a courtesy smile.

VAL

End of the day, Doug...

INT. VARIOUS HIGH SCHOOL GYMS - DAY

VAL (V.O.)
... it's all entertainment. Sports, sitcoms -- we're just telling stories.

A FEW PROSPECTS celebrate as their numbers are selected by various SCOUTS. Two in Utah... Four in Phoenix... Five in Charlotte... Six in Houston.

VAL (V.O.)
And we have a league full of women eager to share theirs.

A succession of headshots of the lucky few chosen. Older. Younger. Big. Small.

BACK TO:

INT. LIFETIME OFFICE - DAY

Val and Rick pitching Doug.

DOUG
 We've already locked in our production schedule.

RICK
 We're not asking you to change it.
 We have a modest budget. But enough to be meaningful.
 (off Doug's look)
 We're thinking 30-minute promos.
 Something in the same vein as your show, *Intimate Portraits*.

DOUG
 I'm not interested in knockoffs.

VAL
 Are you interested in primetime games?

DOUG
 (surprised)
 We're talking broadcast rights?

RICK
 (more surprised)
 We are?

VAL

One game a week.

DOUG

And Stern's good with this?

VAL

It's not David's call.

(then)

You air our player promos. I'll see
that you get the games.

Doug leans forward. He's interested.

EXT. LAX RUNWAY - DAY

The sky fades to soft shades of yellow as the sun slowly dips beneath the horizon. Planes land one after the other on the runway.

EXT. LAX TERMINAL - DAY

Val, Rick, and Molly wheel their suitcases outside the arrivals gate.

Rick's phone RINGS.

RICK (ON PHONE)

Gary, we just landed.

(off inaudible mumble)

Slow down... say that again?

Rick aggressively SNAPS his fingers at Val.

VAL

What -- what is it?

RICK

(to phone)

Hold on.

(to Val)

Looks like our little kumbaya with
the ABL's over.

VAL

What do you mean?...

INT. HOSPITAL WAITING ROOM - DAY

The new ABL promo plays on a boxy, wall-mount TV, glorifying their Olympian stars: Edwards. Azzi. McCray. McClain...

Sheryl watches with Eric next to a dozen PREGNANT PATIENTS.

The promo's finale mocks the WNBA "WE GOT NEXT" campaign with the ABL's new slogan: "WE GOT PLAYERS".

Sheryl and Eric exchange glances.

SHERYL

So, that's how it's gonna be.

A NURSE yells from the hallway--

NURSE (O.S.)

Sheryl S!

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - MOMENTS LATER

A DOCTOR waves an ultrasound probe over Sheryl's exposed belly. Eric sits next to her. They stare at the blurry image on screen. And for just a moment, nothing else matters.

DOCTOR

Do you hear that?

The faint THUMPS of a heartbeat echo throughout the room. The steady sound slowly transforms...

INT. TAXI - DAY

... into the BUZZ of a phone.

Val, Rick, and Molly sit in the back of the car.

MOLLY

(looks down at the phone)

We're getting a call from Johnny Buss?

VAL

(confused)

Johnny Buss?

RICK

Y'know, Jerry's son. The Lakers--

VAL

I know who owns the Lakers, Rick.
Why's he calling?

MOLLY

What do I do?

VAL

Pick up!

Molly hits speaker.

VAL (CONT'D)

Johnny, how are you?

JOHNNY BUSS (ON PHONE)

What is this I'm hearing about an open tryout in LA?

VAL

There's a lot of talent in LA... thought we'd open it up for the last few spots on the roster.

JOHNNY BUSS (ON PHONE)

My dad's not too happy. We were promised stars, Val.

VAL

You wanted Leslie, we gave you Leslie. It doesn't get bigger.

JOHNNY BUSS (ON PHONE)

Starssss... as in plural.

Val mutes the phone.

VAL

Who else can we give him?

Rick shakes his head.

JOHNNY BUSS (ON PHONE)

This is the Forum, Val. It's no place for bank tellers and stay at home moms who played hoops at summer camp.

VAL

Well, you'd be surprised--

JOHNNY BUSS (ON PHONE)

Look, it's gonna cost me 14k a game to just staff the stadium. Another four hundred grand on marketing.

Val hits mute.

VAL

What do we do?

Molly and Rick shrug.

VAL (CONT'D)

Screw it.

(unmute)

Look, Johnny, if you wanna tell
your dad you're getting cold feet,
we have other options.

Val mutes the phone and looks to her advisors.

VAL (CONT'D)

Do we have other options?

RICK

No. What're you doing?

VAL

(unmutes)

Sterling seems interested...

Rick mutes the phone.

RICK

The Clippers?! He hates Sterling.

VAL

Everyone does.

(unmutes)

Look, I'd rather know now than
after the draft.

JOHNNY BUSS (ON PHONE)

We just need assurances.

VAL

I don't know what that means?

JOHNNY BUSS (ON PHONE)

We'd like opening day to happen
here.

Val mutes.

VAL

Can we do that?

MOLLY

Definitely not. We've been planning
New York.

VAL

Is it final?

MOLLY
We're four months out.

VAL
(sighs)
Is it final?

MOLLY
Not technically--

VAL
(unmutes)
Ok, Johnny. We'll do it.

Molly looks at Rick, and mouths the words "WHAT THE FUCK."

VAL (CONT'D)
(mutes)
I'm not about to lose the most
important franchise in the NBA.

JOHNNY BUSS (ON PHONE)
And we're gonna need to amend the
operating agreement.

VAL
(unmute)
What?!

JOHNNY BUSS (ON PHONE)
We'll settle on a three year
commitment under one condition.

VAL
Uh huh--

JOHNNY BUSS (ON PHONE)
We get an early out clause. Average
6k attendance a game. Or we can
walk away.

VAL
Hold on.

Val mutes the phone and looks to her colleagues.

MOLLY
If we do this for LA, we'll have to
do it for everyone.

RICK
I dunno, Val. It's going to be hard
enough reaching 4,000.
(MORE)

RICK (CONT'D)

If we can't hit the attendance,
owners have an excuse to cut the
cord.

Val looks oddly calm.

VAL

Do you trust the strategy?

RICK

Huh?

VAL

Stop wavering. Do you trust our
strategy?

Rick nods.

VAL (CONT'D)

So do I.

Val unmutes the phone.

VAL (CONT'D)

Ok. Deal. Send the paperwork.

The call ends.

Molly still looks displeased.

VAL (CONT'D)

It's only 6,000.

MOLLY

Only?

INT. LA HIGH SCHOOL HALLWAY - DAY

The faint squeaks of sneakers and shouts of athletes permeate through the hallway.

As Val heads to the gym, she notices Josh screaming at Rick in front of a wall of student lockers.

JOSH

Are you fucking serious?!

Val approaches her colleagues.

VAL

What's going on?

JOSH

Why the hell would you promise
6,000 tickets?

VAL

Don't worry about it, Josh.

JOSH

I have no idea what Stern sees in
you.

VAL

Oh, that's what this is about.
You're mad you're not in charge.

JOSH

Anyone would be better than you!
See, there's a difference between
ingenuity and desperation. You're
desperate, Val. And you're gonna
take us all down with you.

(then)

Rick, you wanna say something?!

RICK

(without missing a beat)
I support Val.

JOSH

Fuck off! Open tryouts? Attendance
quotas? Parading around a pregnant
woman? This isn't basketball, this
is a circus!

VAL

Then take your act on the road.
You're done here, Josh.

JOSH

(inches closer)

Y'know, Val, the thing is you think
you're actually helping women. But
when this fails, you'll have set
women's sports back 20 years.
They'll never get another chance.
And it won't be the media's fault.
It won't be the fans. It will be
because of you!

Josh storms away.

RICK

I'm sorry, that--

VAL
(back to business)
It's okay, Rick. We have tryouts to finish.

Val PUSHES the gym doors open.

INT. SHERYL'S HOME - DAY

MATCH ON Sheryl ENTERING, where she's greeted with a loud chorus from 50 GUESTS of family and friends.

GUESTS
Surprise!

She forces herself to smile as she weaves through the room filled with balloons and streamers. It has the telltale signs of a last minute get-together.

Her husband swiftly approaches.

ERIC
I know you hate surprises, but with how much you've been traveling, when else would you have time for a baby shower?

Sheryl's instantly swarmed by the guests with unsolicited advice.

In a series of QUICK CUTS:

GUEST 1
Congrats, Sheryl! You're gonna have such a cutie.

GUEST 2
Make sure you buy a bassinet, not a crib. You'll thank me later.

GUEST 3
Have you bought your pump yet? You know what, don't worry. I know the best brand.

GUEST 4
You're not gonna feel like yourself for 6 months. But it's all worth it!

GUEST 5

Every Tuesday, we have play dates
while our hubbies are at work. You
should come.

It's all too real. Too much. Sheryl escapes to her bedroom.

INT. SHERYL'S BEDROOM - CONTINUOUS

She looks at her reflection in the mirror. She's trying to
keep it together.

ERIC (O.S.)

Sheryl?

No response.

ERIC (CONT'D)

You good? Everyone's waiting--

SHERYL

(to her reflection)

They're counting on me to be the
female Jordan.

ERIC

Huh?

SHERYL

You know how much pressure that is?

She turns to her husband.

SHERYL (CONT'D)

What if I can't do it?

(then)

If I don't come back the same
player, then who am I?

INT. LA HIGH SCHOOL GYM - LATER

Val seeks out head coach, VAN CHANCELLOR (50s) who's smacking
on gum as he goes over his illegible player valuations.

VAL

Van, thanks for making the trip.

Van sternly shakes hands with Val and Rick.

RICK

(while shaking)

We're very excited to have you.

COACH VAN

Are you?

(off Rick's look)

Rumor is you went ahead and asked
just about every other coach in the
college ranks for the Comets job.

A beat.

VAL

(with a smirk)

We just like to do our due
diligence.

COACH VAN

You sound like my mother-in-law. I
was also her 25th choice.

Val smiles. The mood is light.

COACH VAN (CONT'D)

(to Val)

I hear you were a pretty decent
ball player back in your day.

BUZZ! Rick checks his PAGER. He heads to the other end of the court to take a call.

VAL

I could play. Yourself?

COACH VAN

I did a little JC over at
Mississippi. Let's just say I was
the 12th best player... on an 11
person team.

CLANG! TIGHT ON Cynthia Cooper aimlessly rolling her carry-on suitcase into the gym.

She yells to Rick as he passes by on his phone.

CYNTHIA

Um, I'm here for tryouts!

Rick waves Cynthia away; he is far too captivated by his phone call.

She looks irritated. Cynthia flew halfway around the world for a reason. She drops her luggage by the bleachers and snatches a rogue basketball.

SWISH! SWISH! SWISH! Cynthia's showing off. Turn around jump shots. Lethal handles. Beautiful floaters. Three-point buckets. She's a mix between Allen Iverson and Steph Curry.

TIGHT ON Van looking past Val, enthralled by the beautiful play of Cynthia.

COACH VAN
Who the hell is that?

RICK (O.S.)
Val!

Rick rushes over.

RICK (CONT'D)
You're not gonna believe it.
(then)
Ruthie Bolton's no longer going with the ABL. She'll join us for the draft.

VAL
Don't bullshit me. You're certain?

COACH VAN
(eyes stuck on Cynthia)
Bolton's a heck of a pick-up. But I'll happily let'r go to another team.
(points to Cynthia)
As long as I get her!

Van walks to the half-court line.

COACH VAN (CONT'D)
Hey young lady! What's your name?

SWISH!

CYNTHIA
(turning around)
Cynthia Cooper.

INT. HOTEL AUDITORIUM - NIGHT

Athletic hopefuls dressed in formal attire sit in anticipation with family members around black cloth tables.

Behind the podium is a giant backdrop of the eight newly minted team logos surrounding the WNBA emblem.

ESPN ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
The cities are chosen. The orange and oatmeal ball is crafted. And now it's time for the remaining players to be selected. Welcome to the first-ever WNBA draft.

INT. GREEN ROOM - NIGHT

Val looks at the long list of players to announce with Rick and Gary.

VAL
 So this is final?

RICK
 Lookin' like it.
 (giddy)
 It's happening.

Molly charges in.

MOLLY
 Sorry to kill the vibe.

RICK
 What is it?

Molly sets down a WASHINGTON POST newspaper. The headline reads: "ABL OPENS TO UNDERWHELMING TURNOUT"

VAL
 Shit. How bad?

MOLLY
 Opening game was barely over five thousand.

GARY
 Isn't this good? ABL's competition.

MOLLY
 Hell no! They're projected to beat us with turnout.

RICK
 Technically, with more Olympians they should.
 (shakes his head)
 We hit these numbers, it's over.

Val feels disoriented as the audio from the stage blasts from the speakers.

WNBA PRESENTER #1 (O.S.)
Please give a warm welcome to the
President of the WNBA, Val
Ackerman!

VAL
(sarcastic)
Perfect timing.

INT. HOTEL AUDITORIUM - MOMENTS LATER

FLASH! FLASH! Countless photographers take Val's photo as she walks onto the stage for the ceremony. She manages to put on a fake smile for the flood of cameras.

INT. VAL'S NEW OFFICE - LATER

Val sits deep in thought in an empty office. She's drinking a glass of scotch. It's not her first.

Rick opens her office door.

RICK
Forgot my keys. What're you doing
here?

She sets down the glass.

VAL
How long do ya think I played pro-
ball?

RICK
(shrugs)
No idea.

VAL
Take a guess.

RICK
Uh, three years maybe?

VAL
Nope. Guess again.

RICK
C'mon Val, I'm not doing--

VAL
It's a game! Take another.

RICK

Four?

Val takes another sip.

VAL

Colder.

RICK

One?

VAL

(snaps her fingers)

Bingo!

(then)

Me and professional basketball do
not get along, Rick.

RICK

It was a good night, Val. Go home.

VAL

I can't have my league last as long
as my career.

RICK

It's gonna be--

VAL

These just came in...

Val slides a fax across her desk. Rick picks it up.

VAL (CONT'D)

Ticket sales haven't moved an inch.

(then)

What if we're wrong, Rick. Maybe
people aren't ready. Maybe going
after these fans won't matter.

RICK

Don't say that, Val.

Rick's pensive. He sets down the fax.

RICK (CONT'D)

Remember last April, when I took a
few days off work because my friend
passed away...

He tentatively takes a seat across from Val.

RICK (CONT'D)

Well he wasn't just my friend.

A long beat.

RICK (CONT'D)
 For six months, I hid a thermometer
 in my desk. Taking my temperature
 every morning. Wondering... is
 today the day? Am I next?

VAL
 Jesus, I didn't--

RICK
 Nobody knows, Val. And I still
 don't know whether I should be
 relieved or ashamed.

Rick leans forward.

RICK (CONT'D)
 But what I do know... is what we're
 trying to do here -- it matters.
 Trust me. This matters.

On Val.

INT. RICE UNIVERSITY GYM - DAY

Shoes SQUEAK over the DRIBBLE of orange and oatmeal striped
 basketballs. The New York Liberty and Houston Comets ENTER
 the gym from opposite ends of the court.

SUPER: "PRE-SEASON"

Val and Rick greet a few players as they jog through the team
 tunnel.

VAL/RICK
 (shaking hands)
 Good luck... Big fan...

Sheryl takes Val aside. She looks flustered.

VAL
 You okay, Sheryl?

SHERYL
 Some of the players saw the ABL
 turnout. Should we be worried?

VAL
 No. Not at all.

SHERYL
 (skeptical)
 Ya sure?

Rick watches Val lie through her teeth.

VAL
 Ticket sales look strong. Honestly.

He looks uneasy.

ANNOUNCER voices are played over light clapping from the crowd.

PRE-GAME ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
*Welcome to our pre-season showdown
 between the New York Liberty and
 the Houston Comets.*

PRE-GAME ANNOUNCER #2 (V.O.)
*While we won't see Sheryl Swoopes
 in action, we will get to see a
 preview of the leagues' favorites --
 the New York Liberty - Headlined by
 you know who...*

Rebecca Lobo struts to center court.

PRE-GAME ANNOUNCER #2 (V.O.)
*... Rebecca Lobo and defensive
 juggernaut Teresa Witherspoon.*

PRE-GAME ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
*On the other side of the ball is
 the Comets' number one draft pick,
 Tina Thompson, and the breakout
 star of the pre-season, Cynthia
 Cooper.*

Val and Rick walk the aisles, greeting MEMBERS OF THE PRESS.

VAL
 (to different people)
 Thanks for coming. Thanks. Loved
 the column--

ESPN reporter, Robin Roberts, whispers to Val.

ROBIN ROBERTS
 (looks around)
 Who are these people?

In the background, a sign reads: "RESERVED FOR PRESS"

VAL
We've invited a few new outlets...

In the corner of her eye, Val sees Rick gesturing to follow him outside.

VAL (CONT'D)
(to Robin)
... One moment.

EXT. RICE UNIVERSITY GYM - CONTINUOUS

Rick and Val huddle in an outdoor parking lot.

VAL
Make it quick. We gotta mingle.

RICK
What was up with the Sheryl convo?

VAL
Are you serious?
(then)
She doesn't need to worry about our shit.

RICK
It's her shit too, ya know.

VAL
What -- what is this?

RICK
Maybe it's time we tried being real with them. Told 'em the truth.

VAL
Let's stick to the strategy, okay?

Val turns to walk inside.

RICK
And what if it's more than just the X's and O's?
(then)
Ya ever think that maybe being open with people could be helpful?

She turns back.

VAL
How's that?

RICK

I dunno. Maybe they'll do more. Could be as simple as a few more signings... or a few more interviews. I mean shit... maybe it's something we can't see yet.

VAL

Play it out, Rick. You tell Sheryl, then her team knows. If the team knows, then the coaches know. And if the coaches know, the media knows.

(then)

In my experience, the moment you open up, you get burned.

A beat.

RICK

That's not how I feel about you.

VAL

Not everyone's you and me, Rick.

RICK

You gotta learn to trust people, Val!

(off Val's look)

And it's so goddamn frustrating because I see how good you are at this job. You're really good. But nobody can do this on their own.

Just as Val is about to respond, she's saved by the sudden BLARE of an airhorn followed by the MUZZLED SOUND of announcers.

VAL

We don't have time for this.

She heads inside, leaving Rick in her wake.

INT. RICE UNIVERSITY GYM - LATER

The play on the court is intense. Teresa Witherspoon hounds Cynthia Cooper as she takes the ball up the court.

PRE-GAME ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)

The New York Liberty have lived up to the hype. Already up by 15 in the first half.

Cynthia passes the ball -- It's intercepted by the New York Liberty POINT GUARD. She launches the ball over to Lobo who races down the court for an easy two.

PRE-GAME ANNOUNCER #2 (V.O.)
*Despite the great play from Cooper,
The Comets just can't seem to get
in sync.*

On the sidelines, an arrogant HECKLER insults Sheryl.

HECKLER
Yo Swoopes! You ain't no Jordan.
Jordan don't quit on the team.

Sheryl's eyes are glued to the action on the court.

HECKLER (CONT'D)
They shoulda thrown yo ass back in
the kitchen.

SHERYL
(turns)
Watch your mouth.

HECKLER
How'd you get pregnant anyway? I
thought all you bitches were
lesbians.

Sheryl shoots up from the bench. She lunges toward the fan as her teammates, Kim Perrot and Tina Thompson, frantically try to hold her back.

KIM
He ain't worth it, Sheryl. He ain't
worth it.

The halftime BUZZER goes off.

INT. RICE UNIVERSITY - LOCKER ROOM - NIGHT

Sheryl is fuming as she storms from locker to locker while her teammates watch.

SHERYL
I'm so tired of this shit.

Her rage grows.

SHERYL (CONT'D)
 Everywhere I go, people questioning
 my character, my dedication, our
 damn league!

TINA THOMPSON
 Don't let'em win.

SHERYL
 Y'know, if any guy has a kid, it's
 no big deal. But the second I got
 pregnant -- I'm selfish. I'm a
 diva. I'm throwing away my career!

Sheryl picks up a basketball and heatedly chucks it across the room. BOOM! The lockers rattle from her fury.

INT. RICE UNIVERSITY GYM - NIGHT

Sheryl sits in silence within the empty gym. The bleachers loom like ancient monuments as she contemplates her future.

CRANK! The door opens.

SHERYL
 Everyone's left.

VOICE
 I wasn't looking for them.

The person steps forward into the light. It's Cynthia Cooper.

SHERYL
 (in jest)
 If you're looking for a match,
 you're outta luck.

Cynthia cracks a smile.

CYNTHIA
 Trust me. Nothing would give me
 more pleasure than defeating "Her
 Airness".

She playfully takes a bow. Then a seat next to Sheryl.

SHERYL
 Don't think they'll be calling me
 that anymore.

CYNTHIA
 C'mon, Swoopes. You're really gonna
 let some asshole get in your head.

SHERYL

Look at me, Coop.

(then)

I'm pretty sure everyone's trying
to show me the writing on the wall.

CYNTHIA

Well, then fuck 'em.

(off Sheryl's look)

You know how much we envy you? Shoe
deals. Gold medal. I would've given
anything to be on that team. But
they didn't want some 34 year-old
has-been.

(then)

I waited 11 years, Swoopes. 11
lonely ass years playing overseas.
My own mom's never even seen me
play pro-ball.

SHERYL

Well, now you have your team.

CYNTHIA

It's our team. And those people you
talk about... ain't us.

(then)

They don't write our stories... we
do.

Sheryl looks at her teammate with a newfound resolve.

EXT. COMMISSIONER STERN'S HAMPTONS HOME - DAY

Cars pull up to the circular driveway where a troupe of impeccably dressed VALETS in matching uniforms await.

David Stern's coastal estate is classic Hamptons. Grand windows. Natural landscape. Incredible views.

INT. HAMPTONS HOME - DAY

NBA employees mill around the lavish gathering sipping champagne and nibbling on hors d'oeuvres.

Rick huddles with Val near the buffet table

RICK

Wish we had access to this launch
party budget.

VAL

No kidding.

RICK
 Oh by the way.
 (then)
 About the other night--

VAL
 Don't sweat it, Rick. I--

Molly joins the group.

MOLLY
 Been looking for you both.
 (then)
 The team was thinking it'd be a
 good idea to have Sheryl do the tip
 off for opening night.

RICK
 (thinking)
 Hmm, it does get our three stars
 under one roof.
 (looks to Val)
 What do you think?

David Stern makes his way over.

STERN (O.S.)
 Nice to see you three.

RICK
 You have a beautiful home, sir.

Stern smiles then turns to Val.

STERN
 (whispering)
 Let's grab some fresh air.

EXT. HAMPTONS BACKYARD - DAY

Val and Stern stroll along a tidy, gravel path surrounded by lush greenery. Their shoes CRUNCH on the stones over the CAW of seagulls.

VAL
 (looking out)
 Quite the view.

STERN
 (smiles)
 There's something about being out
 in nature that just clears your
 head.

They continue walking in silence for a moment before Stern speaks again.

STERN (CONT'D)
I've been meaning to talk to you
about something, Val.
(off Val's look)
Buss told me the season opener
sales stalled?

Val looks uneasy.

STERN (CONT'D)
Is it really just 3,000 tickets?

VAL
Yes, but--

STERN
6,000, Val. Why'd you have to
promise him 6,000?

VAL
We anticipate movement at the door.

Stern stops walking. He looks serious, even for him.

STERN
Here's the thing. The owners aren't
so optimistic.

VAL
These things take time. They'll
need to be patient.

STERN
C'mon, Val. You know them. They
only look at the here and now.

Stern lets out a deep sigh.

STERN (CONT'D)
I don't know how else to say this.
(then)
There's rumblings of a crisis of
confidence.

VAL
(scoffs)
On what grounds?

STERN
It's the optics. The sponsors, the
ad buys, the ads--

VAL

For Christ's sake, we haven't even
started a game!

Stern nods and resumes walking.

STERN

I know. I know. I'm just sending
fair warning. If the opener
misfires, they'll want cover.

(then)

We don't hit 6,000, we don't have a
league.

She can tell he's not bluffing.

INT. VAL'S CAR - DAY

Val drives home. She looks defeated.

Various RADIO TALKING HEADS play in the background.

CO-HOST #1 (V.O.)

*Next week's the opening game of the
WNBA.*

CO-HOST #2 (V.O.)

*I can't believe they're really
going through with this.*

EXT. VAL'S DRIVEWAY - DAY

Val tightens her laces. She hits the pavement, jogging along
tree-lined streets.

RADIO HOST #1 (V.O.)

*The truth is the ABL has better
players, better talent, and they
still opened to crickets.*

CO-HOST #1 (V.O.)

*Did you hear about their open
tryouts?*

CO-HOST #2 (V.O.)

They're that desperate, huh?

EXT. WESTCHESTER SUBURBS - DAY

She's running through a quaint park. The shadows from the
sunlit trees streak across her face.

CALLER #1 (V.O.)

Look, I'm not saying women can't play sports. I'm saying nobody's gonna pay to watch it.

RADIO HOST #1 (V.O.)

Why does the NBA have to shove this down our throats?

She runs faster.

RADIO HOST #2 (V.O.)

Have you seen the ads for this league? Who are they even appealing to?

And faster.

RADIO HOST #3 (V.O.)

This was a PR stunt, plain and simple.

Val sprints at breakneck speed.

CO-HOST #3 (V.O.)

They have this Val Ackerman lady running the league now--

CO-HOST #4 (V.O.)

And what even are this woman's qualifications?

CO-HOST #3 (V.O.)

I think you just said 'em right there.

Over the cackling of the radio hosts, Val's furious pace grinds to a halt.

EXT. OUTDOOR PARK - DUSK

Val stands on a concrete court. She picks up a basketball.

CALLER #2 (V.O.)

They can't dunk. They play below the rim...

She nails a jumper.

CALLER #3 (V.O.)

I'd like to see them play a high school boy's team. Or is it not PC for me to say that?

Standing at the free throw line, she DRIBBLES, stares down the hoop, and DRIBBLES again.

RUSH LIMBAUGH TYPE (V.O.)
There's not one single male endeavor that women haven't invaded now. They have invaded the country clubs, the business clubs, and now...

She drills the free throw.

RUSH LIMBAUGH TYPE (V.O.)
... The National Basketball Association.

Val makes a flurry of fadeaway shots.

RADIO HOST #1 (V.O.)
Commissioner Stern needs to grab himself a lifeboat and let this Val Ackerman go down with the ship.

She tosses the ball to the side. Depleted and drenched in sweat.

INT. VAL'S HOME OFFICE - NIGHT

Val stares at an old scrapbook of her basketball career. As she flips the page, a newspaper headline reads: "Ackerman, first UVA player to hit 1,000 points"

Her husband observes her with a puzzled look.

CHARLIE
 You okay?

He walks over. Notices the pictures.

VAL
 Did you know I had to share my scholarship my first year?
 (off Charlie's look)
 There was only one scholarship and I got a sliver of it. The men's team had a full load. We had one.

Charlie tenderly rubs her back. He notices a black and white newspaper clipping of Val facing off against Old Dominion.

CHARLIE
 You played Nancy Lieberman?

VAL

(slight smile)

Got smoked is more like it. I think I held her to 30 points, 20 assists and 12 steals. Or something like that.

(then)

Best athlete I've ever faced.

-- FLASH to 1970s desaturated clips of NANCY LIEBERMAN dominating.

VAL (CONT'D)

The scoops. The crossovers. The floaters. It's a shame more didn't see her play.

-- FLASH to Nancy winning the championship in college.

VAL (CONT'D)

Without a league, you don't have the stats to compare. The rivalries to follow. The athletes to cheer...

-- FLASH to grainy black and white 1960s footage of the All-American Redheads professional women's team. Spinning basketballs. Dribbling on the floor. Performing trick shots.

VAL (CONT'D)

... You just have the stories. The folklore.

(then)

If this doesn't work, who's gonna remember these women, huh?

-- FLASH to 1975 film of the WPBA, the first women's pro-league.

VAL (CONT'D)

They deserve better.

(then)

Look, it's one thing to work for the NBA. But this. This is different.

-- FLASH to Nancy Lieberman and the Dallas Diamonds against the Columbus Minks in the final game of the WABA in '84.

VAL (CONT'D)

These girls weren't getting paid under the table at sixteen.

-- FLASH to a picture of a YOUNG CHERYL MILLER sitting in a basketball hoop. The number one draft pick of a league that folded before it began.

VAL (CONT'D)

They didn't have boosters throwing everything their way to get them to attend their colleges.

-- FLASH to early '90s footage of the LBA and WBA.

VAL (CONT'D)

Hell, many are lucky to earn in a year as much as the NBA players get fined in a game.

(beat)

They just want the chance to keep on playing.

-- FLASH to Sheryl and the 1996 Olympic team celebrating their victory over Brazil.

Val looks at her husband, teary-eyed.

VAL (CONT'D)

And I think I ruined it for them, Charlie. I wasn't good enough...

-- FLASH to Young Val approaching her empty locker for the last time.

VAL (CONT'D)

... Maybe, I've never been good enough.

INT. SPORTS ILLUSTRATED PHOTO SHOOT - DAY

Cameras FLASH as Sheryl poses in her Comets jersey. One hand on her belly, the other holding a basketball. The future cover of the debut issue of Sports Illustrated for Women.

Sheryl spots Val watching off to the side. Val feigns an unconvincing smile. Too much on her mind.

INT. PHOTO SHOOT - GREEN ROOM - MOMENTS LATER

A beaming Sheryl greets Val.

SHERYL

I didn't know you were gonna be here.

VAL

Well, Sports Illustrated wanted
some quotes for your cover story.

(then)

Plus, I uh... I wanted to chat
anyway.

SHERYL

Okay? What is it?

VAL

We'd like you to handle the tip-off
on opening night. One last moment
for you, Rebecca, and Lisa to share
the court.

SHERYL

That's it?

(sigh of relief)

Damn, I thought it was gonna be
something serious.

Val looks down. She realizes it's time to drop the spin.

VAL

Well, to be honest, given the
latest crowd projections... it is
serious.

SHERYL

Huh?

She finally opens up.

VAL

Ticket sales are flat, Sheryl, and
as our first athlete to sign, I owe
you the truth.

(then)

I'm not sure if there's gonna be a
league for you to come back to next
season.

SHERYL

What?! Even after all these
junkets, meet and greets--

VAL

We're being measured on an unfair
scale. See, fans don't just come to
the stadiums to watch quality ball.
They come for the characters. The
relationships. The storylines.
Jordan's Return. Bad Boy Pistons.

(MORE)

VAL (CONT'D)

Lakers vs. Celtics. That's what draws them in. But unlike the NBA, we have days... not decades.

SHERYL

Why are you just now telling me this?

VAL

Pick a reason. Denial. Embarrassment. And to be frank, I thought I could handle it on my own.

(off Sheryl's look)

I know. It was wrong, Sheryl. I was wrong.

An ASSISTANT approaches.

ASSISTANT

Ms. Swoopes, they're all set for your interview.

Sheryl extends the assistant a convincing smile. She's a pro.

SHERYL

I'll be right there.

Val tenderly touches Sheryl's shoulder...

VAL

I'm sorry, Sheryl. I should've trusted you with this sooner.

Sheryl stares off at the set. It looks different to her now.

INT. TAXI - LATER

Val gazes out the window, her heart sinks as she notices a group of TEENAGERS, all boys, playing pick-up basketball. It's a sad reminder of what could have been.

RING! RING! Val looks at her phone but can't bring herself to answer.

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - COMMON AREA - NIGHT

Phones RING off the hook. But the desks are eerily deserted.

As a confused Val searches the office, she comes across Rick and twenty other WNBA EMPLOYEES inside an all-glass conference room staring at a small television.

Rick locks eyes with Val and bursts open the door.

RICK
What'd you say to Sheryl?!

VAL
Huh?... What do you mean?

RICK
Wait, you don't know?

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - GLASS CONFERENCE ROOM - CONTINUOUS

Rick rewinds the broadcast.

ON TELEVISION:

ESPN REPORTER
Sheryl Swoopes and the WNBA are both due this month. But don't expect one of the league's brightest stars to sit on the sidelines for long. In an explosive interview with Sports Illustrated given just hours ago, Swoopes made the shocking announcement that she will be making an unprecedented comeback this summer. For more on this story...

Rick pauses the broadcast.

RICK
What the hell is she thinking, Val?

Val smiles. She knows exactly what Sheryl's thinking.

VAL
(in a hurry)
Molly get me Doug McCormick on the line asap.

Without wasting any time, Molly springs into action.

MOLLY
On it.

VAL
Gary, Alan, get with production. Tell 'em to stop whatever they're doing immediately. We're focusing on Sheryl.

RICK
Stop production, are you crazy?

VAL
(to the team)
This is our story, people.

Gary and Alan scurry away.

VAL (CONT'D)
Rick, I need you on the ground in
LA handling all the prep for
opening night. I'll fly out when I
can.

RICK
Val, if we do this, we'll be
gambling the rest of our budget on
something that's never been done.

MOLLY (O.S.)
I've got Doug on the line!

VAL
I trust her, Rick.
(with conviction)
I trust her.

INT. GREAT WESTERN FORUM - BASEMENT - DAY

Sheryl walks with Molly down the long, snaking hallways.

MOLLY
Will Eric be joining us?

SHERYL
He's just parking the car but he
knows how to get in.

Sheryl stares at the black and white framed photos along the walls. Sold-out concerts and big-time games played in this arena. History made.

MOLLY
Well – you've done the tip-off a
million times, so you know the
drill.

SHERYL
I mean I've played during tip-off,
I've never actually thrown the
ball.

Sheryl keeps pace with Molly, but subtly holds her belly - a sudden wave of discomfort washing over her. She's pushing through a pain she doesn't want Molly to see.

MOLLY
I can grab a ball for you to practice. Would you want to do that?

Sheryl nods with a polite smile.

Molly trots off and left alone, Sheryl groans holding her stomach. Sheryl breathes through the intense pain.

The pain subsides momentarily. Then she looks down. This isn't just a pregnancy cramp. This is the real deal. Sheryl's going into labor.

On Molly - exiting an office with a ball to reconvene with Sheryl who's now keeled over. She notices a puddle on the ground.

MOLLY (CONT'D)
Oh shi--

INT. AIRPLANE - SAME

MATCH ON Val looking down at a fellow passenger's watch.

VAL
--Shit. It's already 4:30?

QUICK CUTS - *DING!* Fasten seatbelt light turns off. *CLICK!* Val unclips her seatbelt.

The PILOT makes an announcement over the intercom.

PILOT (V.O.)
We apologize for the delay. Please line up and wait and we should have you outta here soon.

INT. LAX AIRPORT - MOMENTS LATER

Val stands on a moving platform looking at her PAGER. BUZZ! BUZZ! It's bombarded with messages from Rick. She dials the number on her cell phone.

VAL
Rick? Hello?

RICK (ON PHONE)
Sheryl--a--'et here!

VAL
What? What happened with Sheryl?

RICK (ON PHONE)
-eed to see--!

VAL
My flight was delayed.
(Off murmur)
I can hardly hear you. Look, I'll
be there as soon as I can, ok?
Hello?

A fellow traveller walks past Val, knocking her carry-on bag
over, not even giving it a second look.

VAL (CONT'D)
Seriously?
(to phone)
Rick? Hello?

Click. The phone makes a CHIME signaling a dropped call.

VAL (CONT'D)
Damn it.

Val rushes outside. She flails her arms around as she flags
down a taxi.

INT. SHERYL'S CAR - SAME

Eric drives through LA traffic with Sheryl groaning in the
back of their car.

ERIC
Keep breathing, baby. Just
breeeeeathe.

SHERYL
(in pain)
Ahhhh.

ERIC
You're doing great, baby.

SHERYL
Just drive fast--

INT. TAXI - SAME

Val is in the back of the cab. Sitting in a similar position to Sheryl.

VAL
--terr. Can we please go faster?!

TAXI DRIVER
It's rush hour! There's nothing I can do about it!

INT. GREAT WESTERN FORUM - BASEMENT OFFICE - SAME

Rick's listening to the staccato rhythm of a phone no longer connected.

RICK
Val? Hello?

Rick hangs up the phone and sees Molly in the door frame.

RICK (CONT'D)
I can't reach her.
(then)
What's up.

MOLLY
The woman we booked to sing the national anthem just cancelled.

RICK
So we have no one for the tip-off or the anthem?

MOLLY
Well, that's the other reason I'm here. Johnny Buss got hold of the Sheryl news and well uh...

RICK
Well what?

MOLLY
He's now demanding his "lady friend" does the tip off.

RICK
Excuse me? Well that is not happening...

Rick gets up and charges out the door.

RICK (CONT'D)
That is not happening!

INT. SHERYL'S CAR - LATER

Eric is swerving through LA traffic as Sheryl howls through a painful contraction.

SHERYL
This is not happening! How much longer?

ERIC
I'm working on it - this traffic's crazy.

Eric tries to change lanes and a car cuts him off. He HONKS!

INT. TAXI - DAY

HONK! HONK!

Val's holding her phone in the air as she tries to get service.

VAL
(noticing service)
Finally!

Val punches numbers on her cell...

INT. GREAT WESTERN FORUM - BASEMENT OFFICE - SAME

... RING RING! The phone rings in an empty office.

INT. GREAT WESTERN FORUM - BASEMENT HALLWAY - CONTINUOUS

Rick sees Johnny Buss bouncing the GAME BALL as he shows his beautiful girlfriend, MISS APRIL around. He points out different framed photos on the wall.

JOHNNY BUSS
And this one was when I was probably about 9...?

Rick walks up to them casually.

RICK
Mr. Buss, so sorry to interrupt,
but--

JOHNNY BUSS

Rick, have you met Miss April yet?

RICK

Uh --

(off a limp handshake)

Nice to meet you.

JOHNNY BUSS

Shame we won't have Sheryl. But
fortunately we have this little
beauty to handle her duties.

He shoots Miss April a wink. She smiles.

RICK

Is that the game ball?

JOHNNY BUSS

Yeah?

RICK

Can I see that for a second? Just
need to make sure of something.

Johnny tosses it to him and Rick "examines" it, acting like
he sees something.

RICK (CONT'D)

Oh. Just what I thought. We gotta
swap this out.

(to the couple)

Be back.

EXT. TAXI - DAY

The taxi cab pulls to the front of the Forum. Val throws a
bundle of cash to the driver.

VAL

Keep it.

She sprints toward the entrance.

EXT. HOSPITAL - DAY

MATCH ON Sheryl being rushed by HOSPITAL STAFF in a
wheelchair through the front doors of the building.

INT. HOSPITAL HALLWAY - MOMENTS LATER

NURSE LAUREN runs alongside Sheryl's wheelchair as it's pushed down the hospital's dark hallway.

NURSE LAUREN
 Don't worry honey, you're doing great. I'm gonna take you over to the delivery wing where we're gonna get you all taken care of, alright?

Sheryl nods with a grimace.

INT. GREAT WESTERN FORUM - BASEMENT HALLWAY - LATER

MATCH ON - Val sprinting down the dark basement hallway.

SPORTS ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
Welcome to the Great Western Forum, where tonight we'll witness history for Women's Sports -- the birth of the WNBA.

The LIGHTS IN THE STADIUM TURN OFF as Molly slips a pre-recorded tape of the National Anthem.

Val grabs the curtain heading out toward the floor of the arena.

SECURITY GUARD
 Wait, ma'am!

Val flashes her badge.

INT. HOSPITAL - DELIVERY ROOM - SAME

MATCH ON the DOCTOR OPENING the curtain to the delivery room.

DOCTOR
 Ok Sheryl, all looks normal. You're fully dilated, and you're doing great. Just breathe...

Sheryl lets out a scream.

SHERYL
 I can't do this...

ERIC
 Yes you can, baby.

INT. GREAT WESTERN FORUM - ARENA - SAME

As the national anthem blares throughout the stadium, Val scans the arena and notices Rick standing at the end of the hall.

RICK
(noticing Val)
Oh thank god.

Val approaches, out of breath. He tosses her the basketball like a live grenade.

RICK (CONT'D)
You're doing the tip off.

VAL
What? Really?
(holding the ball in her
hands)
That bad of a turnout, huh?

Rick fights off a grin.

The lights in the stadium crank on. She looks out at an arena filled with far more than 6,000 fans.

RICK
(smiles)
Seems our new fanbase likes to buy
their tickets at the door. Go
figure.

SPORTS ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*And tonight's tip-off will be done
by none other than the WNBA'S
President, VAAAAL ACKERMAN!*

RICK (O.S.)
We live another day, Val...

As Val steps out onto the court, she stares up at the rafters, awestruck by the crowd. Filled with new faces. New fans.

VAL
(to herself)
Let's hope we can keep it up.

INT. HOSPITAL - DELIVERY ROOM - NIGHT

Sheryl's in labor pushing.

DOCTOR
 Keep it up, Sheryl! C'mon! Push,
 Sheryl! Push!

Sheryl screams!

INT. GREAT WESTERN FORUM - ARENA - SAME

Val holds the ball at tip-off. Rebecca and Lisa get into their jumping stance positions. The ref blows the WHISTLE.

DOCTOR (V.O.)
Push Sheryl! Push! C'mon, Sheryl!
Push! You got this.

Val throws the ball in the air.

DOCTOR (V.O)
Push... Pu...

PRE-LAP:

COACH VAN (V.O.)
... ushhh. Push it!

The sounds of beeping hospital machines and heavy breathing begin to blend with squeaking sneakers on a court.

INT. MADISON SQUARE GARDEN - DAY

On SHERYL'S PAINED YET DETERMINED FACE.

PUNCH OUT to see: Sheryl on the court grabbing a rebound and making a fast break. The sounds of the arena flood in.

Coach Van is yelling the doctor's same words from the sidelines.

COACH VAN
Push it, Sheryl! You got this!

Sheryl drives hard to the basket.

WHISTLE! She's fouled down low.

SUPER: 6 WEEKS LATER

Sheryl steps up to the free throw line.

COMETS ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
*You cannot make this up, folks.
 Just six weeks ago, Sheryl Swoopes
 was in a hospital giving birth --
 now she's back on the court as if
 she never left. Unbelievable.*

The crowd roars as Sheryl sinks the first free throw. A chant starts to build.

CROWD
*Swoopes, there it is!
 Swoopes, there it is!*

Sheryl gets the ball for free throw number two, and cracks a smile as she nails the shot again. Another crowd explosion!

The jumbotron reads "SWOOPES: THERE IT IS!"

COMETS ANNOUNCER #2 (V.O.)
*And it's a story that has
 captivated fans all over the
 country.
 (then)
 The only question is -- can she
 really keep this up?*

SUPER: "THE COMEBACK"

INT. COMETS STADIUM - NIGHT

The Comets face off against the Utah Starzz. It's mid-game.

Tina Thompson drives to the basket, then swings it back to Sheryl...

COMETS ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
Thompson back to Swoopes...

... Sheryl nails the jumper.

COMETS ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
*And Swoopes is clearly getting back
 into her groove.*

Sheryl drives off a screen and swings it over to Cooper who hits an open three.

COMETS ANNOUNCER #2 (V.O.)
*Cooper with another three! She
 makes it look so easy.*

INT. RICK'S OFFICE - DAY

Rick and Val review analytics on the computer while Sports Center plays the game highlights.

SPORTS BROADCASTER
(on office television)
The Comets last night were rolling. Swoopes scored 18 points in just over 20 minutes, while Cooper adds another stellar performance with a game high 21.

INT. CHARLOTTE STADIUM - NIGHT

In an away game against the Sting, Cooper steals the ball and hurls it down court to Sheryl. She flies through the air, rolling the ball off her fingertips for two.

COMETS ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
I think it's safe to say -- "Her Airness" is back.

INT - NBA HEADQUARTERS - PRESENTATION ROOM - DAY

Val and Rick give a spirited presentation on their marketing strategy to their 20+ WNBA employees. This time, the room is all ears.

VAL
The opener only bought us time. We need to maximize attendance.

RICK
So, ride the momentum.

VAL
And push the sponsors. This is when we lock in long-term commitments.

INT. AIRPLANE - DAY

Sheryl and the Comets fly coach after the game.

Her baby, JORDAN (newborn), is fast asleep in her arms.

RADIO ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
I can't believe what this athlete continues to prove, game after game, week after week.

INT. COMETS STADIUM - NIGHT

Sheryl steals the ball from the MERCURY POINT GUARD (20s) and speeds down court. She fires a pass further down court to Tina Thompson. Nearly slipping, Tina manages to make a turnaround two off the glass. The crowd cheers!

-- A COMETS SIDELINE REPORTER (30s) interviews Tina post-game.

COMETS SIDELINE REPORTER
 Tina, how does it feel to have
 Sheryl back on the court with you?

TINA THOMPSON
 I don't know if anyone thought that
 was possible until Sheryl did it...

INT. SHERYL'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

The LIFETIME documentary crew films Sheryl playing with her newborn.

TINA THOMPSON (V.O.)
*... But now that she has, she's
 made it the new normal.*

Sheryl smiles at the cameras.

SHERYL
 (waving baby's hand)
 Say hi!

INT. VAL'S NEW OFFICE - DAY

Val sits at her desk with her daughter, Emily, in her lap. Her new normal.

Rick goes over the latest attendance projections. He's underlining stats on the white board.

LIBERTY ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*And the fans just keep on coming!
 Over 10,000 are here at the Garden.*

INT. COMETS STADIUM - NIGHT

QUICK SHOTS of Sheryl and Cynthia: Cynthia dribbles up the court - Sheryl grabs a rebound - Cynthia with a reverse layup - Sheryl sinks a jumper - Cynthia and Sheryl high five.

COMETS ANNOUNCER #2 (V.O.)
*The dynamic duo of Cooper and
 Swoopes is not Batman and Robin.
 It's Batman and Batman.*

-- Cooper jumps on the scores table and raises the roof. The crowd cheers and raises the roof right back.

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CONFERENCE ROOM - NIGHT

Rick and Molly stand by a giant map of the United States featuring logos of all the NBA and WNBA teams. They're circling potential cities for the league's expansion.

SPARKS ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*Nearly 12,000 have turned out
tonight at the Forum...*

MERCURY ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*The crowd in Phoenix is 15,000...
And every one of them is on their
feet as--*

INT. COMETS STADIUM - NIGHT

While the Comets battle it out against the Sting, Eric cheers from the stands, holding baby Jordan.

COMETS ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
*The Comets are playing for a crowd
of over 18,000. You know what they
call that? A new record.*

INT. NBA HEADQUARTERS - CAFETERIA - DAY

Val and Rick discuss strategy with the WNBA marketing staff.

RICK
Sheryl's got viewers hooked.

VAL
So use it to highlight more of our
stars.

INT. COMETS STADIUM - NIGHT

Tina drives past a defender for two.

COMETS ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
*Tina Thompson is showing why she
was the number one draft pick.*

-- Lifetime cameras document Tina training, pumping iron, running suicides, etc. Looks like an episode of *Hard Knocks*.

-- On defense, Sheryl blocks a shot, pushes it out to Cooper who drills a fadeaway jumper. She looks like Kobe.

-- Val hands Cooper a trophy. It says the words MVP.

COMETS ANNOUNCER #2 (V.O.)
*And the 34 year-old journeywoman,
is now the WNBA's first league MVP.
Incredible!*

-- Cooper takes photos with fans.

INT. VAL'S NEW OFFICE - DAY

Val and Rick bracket out the quarter finals on a whiteboard.
The Comets are heading to the playoffs.

ESPN plays in the background...

ESPN BROADCASTER
*We've seen big threes in basketball
before. The Lakers with Magic,
Kareem, Worthy. The Bulls have
Jordan, Pippen and Rodman. And the
Comets' new trio is knocking on
their door.*

INT. RENTAL CAR (MOVING) - DAY

Val and Rick drive by a billboard of the Houston Rockets trio of Olajuwon, Drexler, and Barkley being painted over with a new trio: Cooper, Thompson, Swoopes.

COMETS ANNOUNCER #2 (V.O.)
*They're on their feet in Houston!
Olajuwon... Drexler... Barkley...*

INT. COMETS STADIUM - NIGHT

Val watches the Houston Comets play from the stands.

ANNOUNCER (V.O.)
*... It's time to make room for
Cooper, Thompson, Swoopes!*

-- QUICK CUTS of Cooper, Tina, and Sheryl making it rain, as the fans go wild.

COMETS RADIO HOST #1 (V.O.)
*I still don't think people fully
grasp how rare it is what we're
seeing...*

-- Sheryl reaches into the crowd where Eric hands her baby Jordan.

COMETS RADIO HOST #1 (V.O.)
... *This is a woman in the prime of her career, who got pregnant, gave birth...*

INT. COMETS LOCKER ROOM - NIGHT

Coach Van hypes up the team while Sheryl breastfeeds her son.

COMETS RADIO HOST #1 (V.O.)
... *and now is two games away from a finals championship. She's paving a new sense of normalcy in the sport.*

INT. RICK'S OFFICE - NIGHT

Val, Rick, and Molly go over the season's Nielsen ratings on the computer. The bar chart figures keep going up.

COMETS ANNOUNCER #1 (V.O.)
The Comets are one game from the finals!

-- 13 million viewers.

COMETS ANNOUNCER #2 (V.O.)
The Comets win! Comets win! They are going to the finals!

-- 18 million viewers.

COMETS SIDELINE REPORTER (V.O.)
People in Houston are lining the streets for tonight's Championship game. The fans feel a deep connection to these players...

-- 33 million viewers.

COMETS SIDELINE REPORTER (V.O.)
... *They aren't just athletes to them. As Joel Bell said, Swoopes is a symbol...*

Rick grabs Val by the shoulders. It's pure joy.

INT. COMETS STADIUM - DAY

COMETS SIDELINE REPORTER
 (speaking to the camera)
 ... A symbol of what a woman can do
 after doing the most womanly thing
 you can do.

The New York Liberty and Houston Comets warm up before the big showdown.

COMETS SIDELINE REPORTER (CONT'D)
 (speaking to the camera)
 Now we'll see if Sheryl and the
 Comets can complete the improbable
 tonight.

INT. VAL'S NEW OFFICE - DAY

CLICK. Val's staring at her computer, an AOL headline reads:
 "ABL LOSES KEY SPONSORS. NEW LEAGUE IN TURMOIL."

Rick walks in the office.

SLAMS down the New York Times. The headline reads: "COMETS WIN FIRST EVER WNBA CHAMPIONSHIP"

RICK
 Hell of a first season.

She responds with a polite nod.

RICK (CONT'D)
 Oh come on, Val! That's it? We just
 broke every damn record for a
 women's league.

VAL
 You see the ABL news?

RICK
 Sure. It's unfortunate, but it
 doesn't change the facts.
 (smiling)
 We did it.

VAL
 It's just one season, Rick.
 (off his look)
 Don't get me wrong, I'm happy...
 (MORE)

VAL (CONT'D)

but the ABL should serve as a reminder -- the moment the waters get a little rough, the owners, the sponsors... they could abandon our ship too.

(then)

Maybe one day we can look back and celebrate. But today is not that day.

Rick looks at Val, undeterred.

RICK

This is how it always starts...

INT. VAL'S KITCHEN - LATER

Val ENTERS to find Charlie cooking pasta.

RICK (V.O.)

It took sixty years for baseball to catch on. Forty for the NBA...

She leans over and kisses her husband.

VAL

Gonna take Emily for a run. Then dinner?

CHARLIE

Sure thing.

EXT. WESTCHESTER SUBURBS - MOMENTS LATER

Val runs beneath sun-dappled trees, pushing a stroller. Her daughter sleeps peacefully.

RICK (V.O.)

We're gonna have our ups and downs. No doubt. But as the game evolves, as more women come up through the ranks... We'll get there.

She jogs faster, hyped up on adrenaline coursing through her body. She's fixated on her destination - an outdoor basketball court. She's been here a million times before, but today, it looks different.

RICK (V.O.)

And in time, everyone will probably forget how it happened. But I'll know... and you'll know....

Children SHOUT as the rhythmic BOUNCE of a basketball slams against the pavement. It's FOUR GIRLS playing two on two. They're sporting Swoopes, Leslie, Cooper, and Lobo jerseys.

RICK (V.O.)
*It was this season. These players.
Your spark.*

Val soaks in the moment. She's changed basketball forever.

FADE TO BLACK.

EPILOGUE:

More than 50 million viewers watched WNBA games on television networks in its first season. Shattering all expectations.

Sheryl went on to become a three-time MVP and four-time WNBA champion, leading the league in scoring for two years.

Val served as WNBA president for eight years. For her groundbreaking achievement launching the WNBA, Val was Brandweek's Marketer of the Year, an award she won along with Rick.

25 years later, the WNBA lives on as the longest-running women's professional sports league in history.