

1

INT. INDEPENDENCE BALLROOM - GRAND HYATT WASHINGTON - DAY

1

SLOW MOTION SHOT of 11-year-old AKEELAH ANDERSON, African-American, diminutive, bespectacled, making her way through a CROWD OF PEOPLE as CAMERAS FLASH.

AKEELAH (VO)

You know that feelin' where everything seems like a dream even though it's happening right around ya? Don't know the word for that. "Verisimilitude"? "Somnambulism"? "Deja vu?" Nah, those ain't right. But there's gotta be a word for it, 'cause it's how I've been feelin' all year. My name's Akeelah Anderson, and I'm eleven-years-old...

A camera FLASHES, and the image of Akeelah FREEZES.

AKEELAH (VO) (CONT'D)

And this all started a year ago at Crenshaw Middle School in South Los Angeles.

\*\*\*

2

EXT. CRENSHAW MIDDLE SCHOOL - DAY (VARIOUS SHOTS)

2

Gang graffiti scrawled on walls. AFRICAN-AMERICAN and HISPANIC KIDS crammed into overfilled classrooms. Bathrooms with dangling pipe fixtures where the sinks used to be.

3

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

3

*Start* →

A teacher, MS. CROSS, 41, walks down a row of desks occupied by noisy SEVENTH-GRADERS and hands out graded spelling tests.

MS. CROSS

You're all in the seventh grade now. That means when I give you a list of words -- you study them.

We see the scores written in red ink at the top of each paper: 35%... 61%... 9%! Ms. Cross stops at Akeelah's desk. She's turned around, whispering with her best friend, GEORGIA, 12.

MS. CROSS (CONT'D)

Akeelah!

Akeelah jumps and looks up at the teacher.

MS. CROSS (CONT'D)

How long'did you study for this spelling test?

*Scenes 3+4*

(CONTINUED)

*1st page*

AKEELAH  
 (aware of classmates)  
 ... I didn't.

It's not the answer Ms. Cross was looking for. Classmates  
 SNICKER. Ms. Cross slaps the test facedown on the desk.

MS. CROSS  
 See me after class.

Akeelah looks at Georgia and giggles. Then she secretly  
 lifts up the corner of her test. In bold red: 100%.

INT. CLASSROOM - DAY

Moments later, Akeelah stands in front of Ms. Cross's desk in  
 the now empty classroom. Georgia tries to get her attention  
 through the small window in the door.

MS. CROSS  
 You know, you could be one of my very  
 best students. But you don't turn in  
 half your homework and sometimes you  
 don't even show up for class. So what's  
 going on?

AKEELAH  
 ... I dunno.

Akeelah has to suppress a laugh as she sees Georgia making  
 faces in the window.

MS. CROSS  
 (frustrated)  
 Akeelah -- do you know about next  
 week's spelling bee?

AKEELAH  
 No.

MS. CROSS  
 Well, I think you should sign up for it.

Ms. Cross hands her a flyer for "Crenshaw's Inaugural  
 Spelling Bee!" Akeelah glances at the flyer then lets out an  
 annoyed breath.

AKEELAH  
 Ms. Cross, can I go now?

A beat, as a disappointed Ms. Cross just stares at her.

Silver 3+4  
 2nd page

She stops. Welch scrutinizes her.

MR. WELCH (CONT'D)

Are you signed up for the school spelling bee today?

AKEELAH

No.

Embarrassed, Welch glances back at Larabee, who looks a little annoyed by this diversion.

MR. WELCH

Come to my office.

14

INT. MR. WELCH'S OFFICE - DAY

14

Akeelah stands before Welch's desk. Behind her, Larabee scrutinizes some class pictures on the wall. Welch is looking over Akeelah's file.

MR. WELCH

Well... Ms. Cross tells me you've never missed a word on your spelling tests. But your attendance record leaves a little to be desired.

(studies her)

You're only eleven? Did you skip a grade?

AKEELAH

(reluctantly)

... the second.

She curiously glances back at Larabee, who takes a seat and seems bored with the whole affair.

MR. WELCH

Akeelah -- have you ever heard of the Scripps National Spelling Bee? \*

AKEELAH

(takes notice)

Uh... think it was on TV last week. \*

MR. WELCH

ESPN shows it every year. Middle-schoolers from all over the country compete in school, district, and regional spelling bees trying to make it to the National Bee.

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

Scene 14  
1st page

CONTINUED:

MR. WELCH (CONT'D)

And next year I want one of our students there. So whoever wins our school bee today will represent Crenshaw at the district bee next month!

AKEELAH

Why'd anyone wanna represent a school that can't even put doors on the toilet stalls?

Larabee makes a NOISE -- was it a laugh?

MR. WELCH

(embarrassed)

Look, Akeelah... if we can't show our students can perform -- there might not be money for books let alone bathroom doors. Now I want you to do that spelling bee today, alright?

AKEELAH

Why, so everybody can call me "freak" and "brainiac"? Nah, I ain't down for no spelling bee.

MR. WELCH

(glowering)

Well, then maybe you'd be "down" for spending the rest of the semester in detention for all your absences.

15

INT. SCHOOL GYMNASIUM - DAY

15 \*\*

Akeelah sits in a row of FIFTEEN SPELLERS at one end of the gym. Ms. Cross and another TEACHER sit behind a card table next to them. A hundred folding chairs have been set up, but only a quarter are filled with other teachers and some BORED STUDENTS. A half-dozen ROWDY STUDENTS, including the Tough Girls, hang out at the other end of the gym.

\*\*  
\*\*  
\*\*  
\*\*  
\*\*  
\*\*

Super: CRENSHAW MIDDLE SCHOOL SPELLING BEE

Akeelah stares at the ground, her hand nervously tapping her leg. Georgia waves to her from the third row.

\*\*  
\*\*

MS. CROSS

Welcome to Crenshaw's first school-wide spelling bee. We have some very special students competing today, so let's give them all a round of applause!

\*\*

(CONTINUED)

Scene 14  
2nd page

18

CONTINUED:

18

GEORGIA

But you knocked all them other words  
right back at that dude!

AKEELAH

They were just trick words.  
Everybody knows "pterodactyl" starts  
with a "p."

GEORGIA

Girl, if I could spell like you, I  
know I could be a flight attendant.

Akeelah gives her friend an odd look, and they keep on  
walking.

DEVON (V.O.)

(softly)

Keelie?

19

INT. AKEELAH'S BEDROOM - MORNING

19

Lying in bed, Akeelah opens her eyes and finds Devon, a  
knapsack over one shoulder and wearing USAF regalia, kneeling  
down next to her. She wipes the sleep from her eyes.

AKEELAH

Devon...? You leavin'?

DEVON

Gotta get back to the base. Hey, your  
principal called Mama. Said you did  
real good in a spelling bee last week.

\*\*\*

AKEELAH

I messed a word up.

DEVON

He also said you got an opportunity  
to go to a bigger contest pretty  
soon.

\*\*\*

\*\*\*

AKEELAH

I don't wanna do it.

DEVON

Why not?

AKEELAH

I dunno, it's just dumb. Everybody's  
gonna be lookin' at me. And there's  
gonna be a ton a words I don't know.

Scene 19  
1st page

(CONTINUED)

DEVON

So you're scared, huh? Well, how you think I felt first time I jumped outta an airplane? My whole body said don't do it. But sometimes your brain gotta be smarter than your body.

AKEELAH

But I don't like my school. Don't see why I gotta do anything for 'em.

DEVON

Then do it for Dad. You know how he was about words. He'd a loved to see you do something like this.

Akeelah looks over at the picture of her father. Thinks.

AKEELAH

What'd Mama say about it?

DEVON

Ah, you know how Mama is, she got a million things to worry about. Tell you what, just do this contest, and if you make it all the way to DC -- I'll parachute down to see you.

She smiles, and Devon kisses her.

20

INT. AKEELAH'S BEDROOM - DAY

20

Akeelah sits in front of her computer. On it, is the website for the Scripps National Spelling Bee, with a picture of the victorious red-haired girl. \*

Akeelah looks up at the picture of her father, who's warm eyes seem to be staring back at her, encouraging her.

She looks back at the red-haired girl, thinks. She inhales deeply, then lets out a long nervous breath.

21

INT. MR. WELCH'S OFFICE - DAY

21

Akeelah stands across from an overjoyed Mr. Welch.

MR. WELCH

I think you've made an excellent decision, Akeelah! An excellent decision!

Scene 19  
2nd page

(CONTINUED)

AKEELAH

Dang, this place is like a mansion!

He opens the door to his dad's office.

INT. JAVIER'S DAD'S OFFICE - DAY

The office walls are decorated with plaques and awards for journalism. There are many pictures of foreign wars. Javier proudly shows Akeelah the display.

JAVIER

My dad's a journalist. He travels  
all over the place. And he's written  
a buncha books...

\*  
\*  
\*

Akeelah notices a picture of Javier with his FATHER on a boat. They have their arms around each other. Akeelah seems affected by this picture.

JAVIER (CONT'D)

What's your father do?

AKEELAH

My daddy?

(beat)

Uh... He used to work for the city  
parks...

Dropping the subject, she quickly goes to the window and looks down at the birthday party below.

AKEELAH (CONT'D)

Man, you got a lot of friends. I  
never had a birthday party this big.

JAVIER

(stepping up to her)

Really? I'd think you'd have lots of  
friends.

A beat. Then Javier leans forward and kisses her on the cheek.

AKEELAH

(shocked)

Why'd you do that?

JAVIER

I had an impulse.

(beat)

(MORE)

(CONTINUED)

Scene 52  
(only page) 1st page

JAVIER (CONT'D)

What will Dylan do? He's fighting the clock. You could cut the tension with a butter knife.

DYLAN

Shut up.

Javier makes a face behind Dylan's back. A tense moment... when suddenly Dylan smiles -- and slowly spells out the word "SHARPENS."

JAVIER

Shazam! Dylan gets his own "bingo" for seventy-six points!

Dylan smirks. Akeelah lets out a breath. She can't believe he countered her brilliant opening move.

54

EXT. JAVIER'S HOUSE - BACKYARD - DAY

54

LATER: Keisha and Georgia come around the corner of the house and see all the kids clustered around the back porch. They curiously approach the silent crowd and see:

Dylan sitting across from Akeelah at the only remaining Scrabble game. The board is filled with words and only a few unused tiles remain.

JAVIER

It's come down to this: Having crushed all five other opponents, Dylan has only Akeelah to beat. But she's ahead by seventeen points with only a few letters left! Is this an upset in the making?

GEORGIA

(to Keisha)

What kinda birthday party is this?

Dylan spells the word "LUCID."

JAVIER

Yowza! Using the triple-word score, Dylan charges ahead by thirteen!

Akeelah concentrates. Dylan nervously looks behind him to see his father, Mr. Watanabe, standing with his arms crossed and looking none too pleased.

Akeelah shuffles the letters on her rack. Thinks.

Scene 54  
1st page

(CONTINUED)



CONTINUED:

DYLAN

Just go.

She looks up. He's staring her dead in the eyes. A beat.

Akeelah spells out the word: "FUNNEL".

JAVIER

Hoo-YA! Akeelah's back in the lead by seven and has two tiles left! But this could be Dylan's final play!

Keisha smiles broadly at her sister's move. Mr. Watanabe continues to glower. Dylan, starting to sweat, studies the board. Suddenly, he smiles and looks up at Akeelah.

DYLAN

Arrivederci, sweetheart.

Using his remaining three tiles, he spells "LIMN."

JAVIER

Seven points ties the game! But Dylan gets Akeelah's last two points! He wins! A heartbreaker!!

Dylan walks off with his father. Akeelah SIGHS, as all the kids start CHATTERING about the close match.

JAVIER (CONT'D)

Wow, Akeelah! No one ever gets that close to beating Dylan!

AKEELAH

But I didn't beat him.

GEORGIA

Girl, you passed up the mall to play Scrabble?

55

INT. JAVIER'S LIVING ROOM - DAY

55

Dejected, Akeelah walks down the hall and grabs her coat from a bedroom. She hears an ANGRY VOICE in the living room. She peeks around the corner and sees Mr. Watanabe scolding Dylan.

MR. WATANABE

If you can barely beat a little black girl at a silly board game, how do you expect to win the National Bee?

Scene 54  
2nd page

(CONTINUED)