EMPIRE

by

Lee Daniels & Danny Strong

Pilot

Imagine Television
20th Century Fox Television

Second Network Draft
January 21, 2014

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. COPYRIGHT © 2014 TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX FILM CORPORATION. NO PORTION OF THIS SCRIPT MAY BE PERFORMED, PUBLISHED, REPRODUCED, SOLD OR DISTRIBUTED BY ANY MEANS OR QUOTED OR PUBLISHED IN ANY MEDIUM INCLUDING ON ANY WEBSITE, WITHOUT THE PRIOR WRITTEN CONSENT OF TWENTIETH CENTURY FOX FILM CORPORATION. DISPOSAL OF THE SCRIPT COPY OR REMOVAL OF THIS NOTICE DOES NOT ALTER ANY OF THE RESTRICTIONS SET FORTH ABOVE.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - DAY *

A GIRL GROUP wails away at a microphone in a state of the art * recording studio. They sound as magical as Labelle and early * Whitney Houston. Angels sweating. Mind blowing. *

They finish a stunning three-way harmonized belt, staring * toward the glass booth, anxious to hear the response from the man inside... *

LUCIOUS LYON, 52, charismatic, tough, wise, a superstar. Wearing a gold chain over a white HANES T-shirt, he stares down, gathering his thoughts. His concentration is intense. He slowly lifts his head to give his verdict.

LUCIOUS
It ain't there yet. *

Their faces drop, they want to please him so bad.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
I need you to sing like you know you're going to die tomorrow. Like you know this is the last song you are ever going to sing. Can you do that? Because if you can. If you * can show us your soul through the * music, then you will own this world. Every single last bit of it. I promise you.

The Girls are hypnotized by him. They nod in unison, like cult followers talking to their leader. Lucious nods to the Sound Engineer, ROGER, mid-20's, a nerdy kid with big hands.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
Hit it again.

Roger hits play on the instrumental track as we hear SNORING from BUNKIE CAMBELL, 50's, a streetwise thug and Lucious' side kick from the old days, seems out of place here. He nods off, mouth open on a sofa nearby.

The LEAD SINGER storms to the mic with her opening stanza as * if life depended on it. In the booth, Lucious starts to * smile, she's made the adjustment he wants.

ROGER
It's better.

LUCIOUS
Shut up, ya little bitch.

Roger smiles, loves the ribbing. Bunkie snores louder. Then, ANIKA GIBBONS, 27, drop dead perfection and very smart, walks into the room sporting a white Tom Ford suit. She gives Lucious a peck on the mouth and sits next to him.

ANIKA
They sound great.

Lucious turns to her, he stares at her with intensity. He has something to tell her, something is wrong.

ANIKA (CONT'D)
What is it?

He nods to Roger to leave the room. He quickly hurries out.

LUCIOUS
(loud to Bunkie)
Wake up nigga! We need to be alone.

He kicks him on his leg to wake him. Bunkie's startled.

BUNKIE
Money why you so rude?

Irritated, he leaves. Lucious stares at Anika, very silent. Then - his eyes fill with dread, making her scared.

ANIKA
Baby, what is it?!

QUICK CUT TO: *

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY - NO SOUND *

Lucious sits in a doctors office wearing a patient's rob. A * DOCTOR stands in front of him explaining something to him. We * don't hear what is said, but Lucious face slowly drops. *

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - DAY *

Lucious WHISPERS in Anika's ear. Whatever he is telling her * causes her face to slowly drop in horror just like Lucious in * the doctor's office. Through the glass window, we see... *

...the Girl Group continue to sing their asses off. *

INT. HALLWAY - DAY *

We pull out from the studio into the hall with GOLD and * PLATINUM RECORDS on the walls next to pictures of Lucious * performing in various stadiums. As we continue down the hall * the Girls sound fainter until we burst through a door into... *

EXT. YACHT - NEW YORK BAY - DAY

An incredible PARTY on a huge YACHT (the recording studio is * on a yacht!). The ship is packed with PEOPLE, mostly African- * American, dressed in upscale clothes.

On the lower deck holding court is HAKEEM LYON, 20, swag, * beautiful, ripped and charming. A bad boy that all the girls love. He's focused on two HOTTIES in bikinis, both 19.

HAKEEM
I wanna change the culture with my music. You know what I'm saying? Like the way Shakespeare and Van Gogh pushed society forward with their art.

Like a group of sycophants, everyone nods in agreement.

CUT TO - ANOTHER PART OF THE SHIP.

Sitting by himself is JAMAL LYON, 24, not bad looking, shy, sensitive. Jamal plays his guitar, it's soulful and beautiful (a la Miguel). No one notices him and he doesn't care.

Hakeem walks over, watches his brother with a cocky grin.

HAKEEM (CONT'D)
Sounds good, Mal.

JAMAL
Thanks.

Jamal starts STRUMMING a fast up-tempo tune, it sounds guttural. Raw. Hakeem's eyes light up, loves it. Hakeem starts DRUMMING his hands on a nearby wooden chair, the sound fits in perfectly with the music Jamal is playing.

A CROWD starts to form watching them freestyle. Folks nod * their heads to the music being created right on the spot. Hakeem starts RAPPING free form lyrics. *

Brothers. So close that they can read each others minds. * Impromptu. Both massively talented. Magic. The crowd starts * clapping along.

CUT TO - UPPER DECK OF THE SHIP.

Watching from two decks up is their older brother ANDRE LYON, 27, tall, brilliant, but with a dark, depressed side. He dresses conservatively, khaki pants and button down shirt.

Andre does not look entertained watching his brothers. Standing next to him is his wife, RHONDA LYON, 26, white, sexy and manipulative. She also watches with annoyance.

RHONDA
Your brothers are showing off again.

ANDRE
It's what they do best.
(Then)
I'm surprised Hakeem is performing.

RHONDA
Why?

ANDRE
He likes to save it for when dad is around.

EXT. EMPIRE ENTERTAINMENT - DAY

A black SUV pulls up to the Gehry-esque marvel that's EMPIRE ENTERTAINMENT. A group of FANS and AUTOGRAPH SEEKERS wait outside the building behind SECURITY GUARDS.

As the SUV pulls up, Lucious hurries out followed by Anika, in dark sunglasses. They look as cool as can be, not a care in the world.

The crowd goes crazy, yelling, taking pictures, several hold pictures and CD cases of Lucious to sign, which he does.

INT. HALLWAY - EMPIRE ENTERTAINMENT - DAY

Lucious bustles down his hallway covered in DAMIEN HIRST art. A marble statue of APOLLO at the end of the hall faces us. His adorable assistant, BECKY, 23, looks like a little boy, struggles to keep up with him. She goes through a list on a iPad.

BECKY
The designs for the jacket line need approval by noon.
(MORE)

BECKY (CONT'D)
Still no word on when they are going to break ground on the Phoenix apartment complex. The Grammys are requesting you'll perform--

LUCIOUS
Pass.

BECKY
American Idol wants--

LUCIOUS
Pass.

BECKY
And the President asked if you'd attend the China State Dinner.

Lucious slumps in frustration.

LUCIOUS
Tell him yes, but make it clear this is the last one for a few months.

Becky starts to walks away, but Lucious stops her.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
Hey. After the press conference I want you to cancel my meetings for the day. *

Becky looks stunned.

BECKY
All of them?

Lucious nods, he's dead serious. *

BECKY (CONT'D) *
Did everything go okay with the doctor? *

LUCIOUS *
Oh, yeah, all good. *

She nods, relieved. As she walks away, he stares off at her with concern, clearly it wasn't all good. *

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - EMPIRE ENT - DAY

Lucious is at a conference table with the BOARD OF DIRECTORS. Next to Lucious sits VERNON TURNER, 60's, the Chairman of the Board, a commanding figure, built, handsome and all business.

Scattered around the room are a group of REPORTERS and CAMERAMAN from CNN, MSNBC, CBS NEWS. Lucious addresses them. *

LUCIOUS
On behalf of myself, our CFO Andre Lyon, our chairman, Vernon Turner.

He motions to Andre and Vernon who nod to the reporters.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
And the entire board of directors, we are proud to announce that Empire Entertainment has just filed documents to become a publicly traded company on the New York Stock Exchange.

VERNON
We are going to be the first urban entertainment company to ever be publicly traded.

Many clap. Flash bulbs pop as Lucious and the Board grin. Vernon and Andre exchange big smiles, Lucious notices, hides * his annoyance at their camaraderie. *

INT. PRISON - RELEASE ROOM - DAY

An AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMAN whose face we don't see, is getting released from prison, her belongings are slid under the bars by a PRISON OFFICER, 30's, female.

PRISON OFFICER
We're gonna miss you around here.

The Woman stares at the Prison Officer for a long beat. We still don't see her face, but we hear her mutter...

COOKIE
You gotta Newport?

EXT. FRONT ENTRANCE - PRISON - DAY

The steel gates to the prison slide open up and out walks COOKIE LYON, late 40's, thick, sexy as hell and a total bad ass. Wearing a 20 year old mink coat, she smokes a cigarette.

There is a fire in Cookie's eyes, a determination. She looks ready for vengeance as she mumbles to herself:

COOKIE
Cookie's coming home.

END OF TEASER

INT. DINING ROOM - LUCIOUS MANSION - DAY

Jamal and Hakeem are seated at the huge dining table in the beautiful room, a touch gaudy in how much money has been spent. Hakeem's feet are up on the table as he drinks a beer.

JAMAL
You gonna release another single? *

HAKEEM
I wanna take my time, cut a whole album first. I think that's why the * first one didn't catch on. *

JAMAL
Yeah, you're probably right. That's * smart to take your time. *

HAKEEM *
Oh, so NOW your ass didn't like it? *

JAMAL *
(laughs) *
Nah, it was good. But I think * cutting a whole album before you * release a single will strengthen * your sound. *

Hakeem nods, but looks bummed his brother didn't like it. * Andre walks in. There is an awkwardness between him and his * brothers, but Jamal gives Andre a hug. *

JAMAL (CONT'D)
Good seeing you, Dre.

ANDRE
You too. How's your friend? *

JAMAL
Good, real good. We should all get dinner, he'll cook for you and Rhonda. He cooks good.

ANDRE
Her schedule is pretty crazy, but we can figure something out.

Jamal nods, knows it will never happen.

JAMAL
Cool, cool.

Then, Lucious storms into the room, a barrel of energy.

LUCIOUS
All here. Good. I need to talk to you all.

He smacks Hakeem's feet off the table.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
And get your big ass feet off my forty thousand dollar table.

Lucious stands at the head of the table. He nods to Andre.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
Y'all know, your brother and I been working round the clock to turn Empire into a publicly traded company. This is some historic shit. I'm going to do what Berry Gordy, Quincy Jones, Russell Simmons, Puffy, and Jay Z were never able to. I'm going to turn our business into a Fortune 500 company. This is my legacy.

HAKEEM
You gonna be a tycoon.

Lucious grins at his favorite son.

LUCIOUS
That's right Negro. Once we go public, I'm no longer a retired gangsta from Philly, I'm IBM and Coca-Cola.

Hakeem and Andre beam at their father, they love it. Jamal looks indifferent. Lucious looks at each son pointedly and says the following carefully:

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
As part of going public, I need to pick someone who's going to take over the company when I'm gone.
(MORE)

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
It's not gonna happen today or tomorrow, but I need to start grooming a successor.
(Then)
And I can only pick one of you.

Andre and Hakeem stare at him, the importance of this conversation fully dawning on them. Jamal is nonplused.

JAMAL
Are you serious? What is this, King Lear?

LUCIOUS
You can call it that if you want to smart ass but over the next several months, I'm going to make a decision.

ANDRE
So what are you saying? That we're all in competition to be the future head of the company?

Jamal shakes his head amused. Can't believe it.

LUCIOUS
It's time for you boys to figure out what you want from this life. And then you need to take it.

The brothers all shoot each other glances, as they realize they are being pitted against each other. Lucious doesn't notice at all. He looks out at his magnificent view deeply troubled.

INT. JAMAL'S LOFT - SOHO - NIGHT

Jamal's boyfriend, MICHAEL SANCHEZ, 31, Hispanic, gorgeous and deeply ambitious, is prepping a chicken. Jamal helps cutting vegetables. The apartment is oddly messy. For gay men they seem to have this part of it all wrong.

JAMAL
He'd never pick me anyway.

MICHAEL
Why do you think that?

JAMAL
Too much homophobia in the black community.

MICHAEL
It's 2014. Nobody gives a shit anymore.

JAMAL
They do, believe me. And I don't want it anyway.

Michael looks slightly frustrated with Jamal.

MICHAEL
So then what do you want?

JAMAL
What's that supposed to mean?

MICHAEL
You don't want to release an album. You won't tour. You don't want to take over your family's company. I've never met anyone so talented with so little ambition.

JAMAL
I just want to make music and I don't want anything else to get in the way. That entire business corrupts the purity of the sound man. I've seen it all my life. Look at my dad. He was a genius, now he wants to be Coca-Cola.

Michael smiles at him, kisses him.

MICHAEL
You're the last real artist on the planet.

JAMAL
I just want my shit to be good. That's all that matters to me.

Their intercom phone rings. Jamal answers it.

JAMAL (CONT'D)
Hello.

COOKIE V.O.
Let me in.

Jamal's confused. It can't be.

JAMAL
Who is this?

COOKIE V.O.
Look out your window. *

Jamal walks over to the floor to ceiling windows that face the cobble stone street. Outside he sees Cookie at the building's intercom in her mink. *

COOKIE V.O. (CONT'D)
Y'all better have a elevator in here. My feet hurt.

Jamal stares in shock. Never imagined this day would come.

CUT TO - FLASHBACK - 17 YEARS EARLIER:

INT. WAITING ROOM - PRISON - DAY

8-YEAR-OLD JAMAL and a much younger Lucious sit in silence in the waiting room. Both nervous, not the first time they've gone to visit Cookie. They both seem to know the routine here. After what seems an eternity, Lucious turns to Jamal:

LUCIOUS
Go see your mama without me today.

8 YEAR OLD JAMAL
Why?

LUCIOUS
Don't ask questions, boy, just go in there and tell her I love her. And don't come back here crying.

Little Jamal nods, trying not to cry.

INT. VISITOR'S ROOM - PRISON - DAY

Little Jamal sits across from Cookie, separated by a glass window. This is really hard for Cookie, but she's putting on a tough face. They speak into telephones.

8 YEAR OLD JAMAL
When you coming out, Ma?

COOKIE
I told you to stop asking me that. Where is your father?

Jamal points outside. Cookie looks at the metal door. Hurt that her husband has abandoned her.

COOKIE (CONT'D)
Yeah. Okay.
(Then)
How you doing in school?

JAMAL
My friends pick on me all the time. Bashir is stealing my lunch. I'm afraid to tell Dad. He'll tell me to fight him.

Cookie leans into the glass.

COOKIE
Listen to me, Mal. I got something to tell you. *
(Slight beat) *
You different. It's only something * mama knows, but you gonna know soon * enough and it's gonna make life hard sometimes. But I want you to always remember I got you. You hear me? I got you.

Jamal nods, deep down he knows what she's talking about.

CUT BACK TO - PRESENT DAY

Jamal snaps out of the memory, scans their messy apartment, starts picking up dirty boxer shorts and pizza debris.

JAMAL
She's out.

Michael seems to know exactly who "SHE" is. Lighting a cigarette, he follows en tow.

MICHAEL
How?

Annoyed, Jamal dumps an ash tray in a nearby waste can.

JAMAL
How what? How did she get out?
(Genuinely dumbfounded)
I don't know.

MICHAEL
Did you tell her about us?

JAMAL
No. And dude stop smoking. You promised.

There's a knock at the door, Jamal opens it revealing Cookie in heavy mascara, red lipstick and a too tight leopard dress. Michael has instantly fallen in love, a gay man's wet dream. * Cookie gives Jamal a bear hug. She's missed him terribly. *

COOKIE
My baby. My boy.

Then she heads straight for the kitchen chuckling to herself. Cookie is amused by her son's spectacular yet untidy place.

COOKIE (CONT'D)
You sure do keep a messy place for a faggot. What you need is a good maid up in here. Smells good. What you cooking, chicken?

She finally notices Michael standing there in complete awe.

COOKIE (CONT'D)
Who are you?

MICHAEL
(smiles)
Michael. Hi.

JAMAL
Cookie this is my friend * Michael. We're sorta' living * * together. * *

Giving Michael the once over, Cookie decides she likes him. *

COOKIE (CONT'D)
Honey you didn't tell me you were dating a wet back. Look at him. He's adorable...
(then sotto to Jamal)
You should get la cucaracha to tidy up in here a bit.

Jamal shoots a glance at Michael, praying that he hasn't heard her. Thank God not. His head is still reeling.

JAMAL
When did you get out? And why didn't you call me? I would have picked you up.

Cookie dips her long pink fingernails into the simmering stew on the stove. She pulls out a chicken leg and starts eating it. Michael watches mesmerized by her every move.

COOKIE
I just got out. Good behavior.

Many thoughts run through Jamal's head as he tries hard to hold his emotions in check.

Michael still stands in the doorway, mouth agape. Cookie sits at the kitchen table chewing her chicken leg. She's thinking hard.

COOKIE (CONT'D)
Tell your boyfriend to close his mouth.

JAMAL
What are you gonna do now?

Cookie ponders a bit. Her eyes turn serious, for the first time you can see this woman has served hard time in prison.

COOKIE
I'm here to get what's mine.

END OF ACT I

INT. LUXURY BOX - BARCLAY CENTER - NIGHT

Lucious, Andre and Bunkie are seated in a huge luxury box. On the court a Brooklyn Net DUNKS the ball causing the crowd to cheer! A WAITRESS brings over an array of elegant food.

WAITRESS
Shrimp cocktail and lobster tails. I'm sorry but we're out of crab.

LUCIOUS
You know I own 46% of this team?

She looks nervous, but he smiles, was just kidding around.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
It's all good.

The guys immediately start digging in as the game continues down on the court. Lucious turns to Bunkie.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
Can you give me and Dre a few minutes alone.

Bunkie is mid-bite into the lobster tail.

BUNKIE
Right now?

LUCIOUS
Yeah, you can take the lobster with you. We got some family business we need to discuss. *

BUNKIE
I'll be out in the hall.

Bunkie is annoyed, but covers it up as he leaves. Lucious turns to Andre, this is a little tough for him to say:

LUCIOUS
(smiles)
I'm proud of you boy.

Andre's immediately defensive. His dad doesn't talk like this.

ANDRE
Thanks, dad.

LUCIOUS
When you were 11 you wanted to be the boss. Always wanted to be the boss. You worked your little ass off running around helping people at the office. Answering phones. Sweeping them floors at night during high school...

An awkward silence now. Andre's not sure if he likes were this is all headed. He smiles, never showing a sign.

ANDRE
Even during my finals at Penn I was still coming back doing your accounting.

LUCIOUS
Was you stealing from me nigga?

Andre's not in the mood for his fathers sick humor.

ANDRE
Dad?!

LUCIOUS
(Laughs his ass off)
I'm just fuckin with you. Grown up boy.

Andre shakes his head at this warped man that he loves. Troubled that he's still laughing. Wonders if he'll ever understand him. Lucious calms down.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
You've put your blood and guts into Empire. Your whole life. Gone on and gone to grad school. Ain't nobody done that in this family.

Lucious is very serious. Almost proud.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
Your work ethic is incredible. You've even taught me some things.

Andre seizes the moment.

ANDRE
Which makes me the most qualified to run the company dad.

Lucious grins at him.

ANDRE (CONT'D)
I'll kill for this company. It's everything to me.

LUCIOUS
It's tricky. This is a celebrity driven brand. I'm the face of Empire. Don't you think that face should remain a celebrity? We're selling personality, not intellect.

ANDRE
No, I don't. You can stay the face forever, and I'll run it. I'm the only one that can do it, you know that. And you're not going anywhere anytime soon.

Lucious gives him a confident smile.

LUCIOUS
Nothing is more important to me than this company living on after I'm gone. Nothing.

ANDRE
Does this have anything to do with Cookie?

Lucious looks at him like he's crazy.

LUCIOUS
Cookie?! What the hell are you talking about?

ANDRE
I haven't spoken to her since she got out, but I figured you had.

Lucious' eyes slowly peel open in confusion. Shock even.

LUCIOUS
Cookie's out?

INT. HALLWAY - BARCLAY CENTER - NIGHT

A furious Lucious has Bunkie cornered in the hallway.

LUCIOUS
How'd you not know?! You're supposed to be my eyes and ears. *

BUNKIE
I'm sorry, Money, I didn't know. What's the problem? You knew she was going to get out eventually. * Don't worry, you got this. Cookie ain't nothing.

Lucious stares at Bunkie like he could kill him.

LUCIOUS
I want you to tell me everything she is up to. Everything. *

Bunkie nods. A pissed off Lucious starts to walk away.

BUNKIE
Hey, Money, I gotta talk to you.

Lucious slumps in frustration, knows what's coming.

LUCIOUS
How much?

BUNKIE
Twenty-five. That's it.

LUCIOUS
I told you if you don't have the cash, you can't make the bets.

BUNKIE
It's the last time.

LUCIOUS
It's always the last time. I'm sick * of it. *

He walks away, angry. Bunkie looks pissed too. *

INT. LUCIOUS OFFICE - EMPIRE ENT - DAY

Cookie walks around Lucious' massive office. Against the wall is a shelf full of music awards - Grammys, Billboard, MVA, AMA's, literally every award a musician can win. She looks out at the stunning view of Central Park, she stares in awe.

CUT TO - FLASHBACK - 21 YEARS EARLIER

EXT. NORTH PHILADELPHIA - DAY

A much younger and PREGNANT Cookie stands in front of connected row houses in a run down neighborhood. Younger Lucious stands behind her, his hands covering her eyes.

LUCIOUS
You ready?

She nods. He removes his hands and she sees her new home. It's a rundown house with chipped paint and cracks in the windows. Cookie tears up as she gives Lucious a huge hug.

COOKIE
It's beautiful.

CUT BACK TO - PRESENT DAY

Cookie smiles at the memory. She then sees a picture of Lucious and Anika on his desk causing her smile to fade.

LUCIOUS
When did you get out?

Cookie turns around and faces Lucious. They stare at each other for a long, painful beat. It's been so many years.

COOKIE
Two days ago.

He walks over and gives her a hug. She slowly hugs him back. It's awkward but they still have strong feelings. Then - she SLAPS him across the face! Hard! Lucious staggers back.

COOKIE (CONT'D)
You black bastard. The only one that came was Jamal. He's the only one. *

Cookie is so pained that she can hardly get the words out. *

COOKIE (CONT'D) *
How could you do that to me?

LUCIOUS
For awhile I thought about you everyday. But I couldn't take it. I had to try to forget about you. I'm sorry, Cookie, I really am, but it was too painful for me. I couldn't take it anymore.

Part of her understands, but it doesn't stop the hurt.

COOKIE
Yeah. I get it. But that doesn't mean I have to accept it.

She stares daggers at him, Lucious looks nervous.

LUCIOUS
So how'd you get out so early?

COOKIE
That's all you got to say to me!?

LUCIOUS
I don't know what else to say.

COOKIE
Then don't say anything. You forgot about me the second you divorced me in there. But that doesn't mean you don't owe me what's mine.

LUCIOUS
What are you talking about?

COOKIE
Half this company. It was my $400,000 that started this bitch. You know it and I know it. I did 17 hard years for that money, and I want half my company back.

Lucious is at a loss for words, not sure how to explain this:

LUCIOUS
Cookie...it doesn't work like that.

COOKIE
It doesn't work like what?

LUCIOUS
You wanna house? You want money? I'll get it for you. You'll be taken care of Cookie but I can't give you half the company. *

COOKIE
It's mine.

LUCIOUS
I only control 10% now. I've had investors come in over the years, it's why we're so big. I have a Board of Directors, a CFO, SEC filings. We're about to go public which will dilute my voting power even more.

COOKIE
Public?! What the hell is going public?

LUCIOUS
I can give you a huge salary, but I can't give you half the company. I can't give you any of it.

COOKIE
But it's mine. This is mine. I started this!
(COLD)
You need to stop playin with me.

LUCIOUS
Tell me what you want and you can have it.

She stares at him for a long beat. Then -

COOKIE
I want five million a year and I want to be head of A & R.

Slight beat.

LUCIOUS
The money is tricky. I'll figure something out.
(Then)
I can't do A & R. We have someone.

COOKIE
Fire them.

LUCIOUS
I can't.

Cookie nods toward the picture of Lucious and Anika.

COOKIE
Is it little Halle Berry over there?

Lucious stares at her, the answer clearly yes. Cookie sucks up what little dignity she has left as she walks out the door. Never looking back:

COOKIE (CONT'D)
You're not sweeping me under the carpet, Lucious.

Lucious watches her, concerned. She's the only person alive that makes him nervous. *

EXT. NYC - STREET - DAY

A furious Cookie hails a taxi on a crowded New York street and dives into the back seat.

INT. LIVING ROOM - HAKEEM'S PENTHOUSE APARTMENT - DAY

Expensive art hangs from the wall that Hakeem stares at while getting a hair cut. GOOSE, 25, his morbidly obese barber meticulously trims his sideburns. ScHoolboy Q blasts from invisible speakers as two Great Danes run around.

Cookie sits across the room on an uncomfortable German designed sofa. She watches it all as if it were a circus act.

HAKEEM
(loud over the music)
Mal said you wanted to see me. What's up?

Cookie walks over to Hakeem. She nods her head for Goose to disappear. Goose gets it, starts to pack up.

GOOSE
I'ma i'ma mmm a leeeet you aalone with the lady.

Hakeem is annoyed. Cookie comes close to his ear, very calm.

COOKIE
I'm not competing with this sound. Turn it off.

It's a clear order. Hakeem stares at her. A stand off moment. Finally relents. Rolling his eyes he grabs the remote. CLICK. CLICK. Just the sounds of Bud and June barking now.

HAKEEM
What do you want?

Cookie softens. The thought of not having seen her son since infancy is now showing. She looks her age as she weakens.

COOKIE
I just wanted to see you.

Hakeem continues his defiant stare, doesn't know his mother nor does he want to. He lets her get a good look. Then -

HAKEEM
OK. You done?

Cookie's hurting but you can barely tell.

COOKIE
Why didn't you accept any of my collect calls in all these years? Return a letter?

Awkward silence. Hakeem feels very little connection to her. He grabs a broom and starts sweeping his hair up off the hardwood floors, won't make eye contact. Is he ashamed?

COOKIE (CONT'D)
Listen boy, I'm not asking much from you. And from the looks of it, you don't need much from me. I just want you to know that everything I did was for you and your brothers. I ended up where I ended up for you and your brothers.

HAKEEM
What do you want a medal, bitch?

Cookie's eyes go dead. She SNATCHES the broom from Hakeem and violently BEATS him with it! With each blow we feel the years of Cookie's pent up anger. The broom SNAPS in half but Cookie keeps beating him with the broken half! *

COOKIE
I WANT SOME RESPECT YOU UNGRATEFUL BASTARD!!

Blood is drawn as Hakeem recoils into a fetal position screaming. * *

EXT. WASHINGTON STABLES - MADISON AVE - NIGHT *

Bunkie speaks into the intercom outside the gates of an ornate castle like building. *

BUNKIE *
Bunkie Johnson. *

There is a slight beat. Then the door buzzes open. Bunkie walks through the courtyard to a large building in the back that looks like horse stables. *

INT. STABLES - NIGHT *

He walks in to see an upscale CROWD, all holding 100 dollar bills, in a circle SCREAMING at two large PITBULLS on the ground barking at each other. A full fledged dog fight. *

A BROWN PITBULL finally rips half the neck off of A WHITE PITBULL causing blood to GUSH everywhere. Some on people. Half the crowd screams in triumph, the other half in anger. *

Bunkie sees a smiling SHYNE, late-30's, intimidating, collecting money from a few people. Shyne's smile drops as he sees Bunkie. He nods to him to follow him to another room. *

INT. TACKLE ROOM - STABLE - DAY

A pissed of Shyne talks to Bunkie in a tackle room.

SHYNE
No more, Bunkie, no more. You pay me the twenty-five you owe me, <u>then</u> I float you another twenty-five. You don't pay me the twenty-five, then you got a problem.

BUNKIE
But how can I pay you back if you don't float me another twenty-five?

Shyne looks so annoyed, hears this shit all the time.

SHYNE
What happened to your Sugar Daddy?

BUNKIE
Lucious won't give it to me, he's taking his company public. Worried this kinda shit could block it.

Shyne stares at him. Starting to get an idea.

SHYNE
Lucious scared of the Feds right now? How much money he gonna make when Empire goes public?

BUNKIE
Hundreds of millions.

SHYNE
And I bet you ain't got a penny in the game do you?

The irritated look on Bunkie's face tells Shyne he's correct. *

INT. TASHA'S APARTMENT - HOBOKEN, NJ - NIGHT *

Black eyed and busted lip, Hakeem lies in a bed in a plain apt with TASHA, late-40's, her enormous breasts are the only thing keeping her sexy. She wears a negligee ICING his face. *

HAKEEM *
You think Jamal is more talented then me? *

Tasha gently strokes his face. *

TASHA *
You should be more concerned about the crazy cow that did this do you. *

Hakeem winces. Still in pain. Then - *

TASHA (CONT'D) *
He had a hit when was 14 for God sake. We ain't heard nothing from him since. Why would you ask a stupid question like that? YOU are the one. *

Tasha hands him a BONG and lights it for him as he takes a huge hit and blows it out. *

TASHA (CONT'D) *
Feel better? *

He nods. Sort of. *

HAKEEM *
Let me see it. *

She grins, then LOWERS her strap. He stares at her tits for a beat, then starts to SUCK on them. She rubs his head. *

TASHA
You not gonna let that cow get in between us now, are you?

Sucking away, he shakes his head, no.

TASHA (CONT'D)
Good. Cuz I'm the only real momma you got.
(Then)
Tell me I'm your mama.

INT. LAVITICUS NIGHT CLUB - NIGHT

Intoxicating music glides us into the hottest club in Manhattan, raunchy yet terribly chic. Sexy girls dancing, people smoking bongs, a poker game in the corner.

From a balcony above, Lucious looks down on his latest creation. Pleased. Hakeem approaches from behind.

HAKEEM
You wanted to see me?

Lucious glances at Hakeem's busted lip and swollen black eye. He can't help but laugh.

LUCIOUS
I see you've met your mother.

HAKEEM
And I see why you kept me from her. She's a psychotic animal.

LUCIOUS
She's been locked up a long time.

HAKEEM
What I'm supposed to say to her? I don't know that woman.

Lucious ponders this. It's time to talk some ugly truths.

LUCIOUS
You remember Miss Dottie?

Hakeem nods. Vaguely remembering.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
When Cookie was sent away the judge told us thirty years. You were just a baby.
(Then)
(MORE)

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
I never cheated on your mother. Not once when we were together. We lost our virginity to each other. I was 16, she was 14. I must a slept with anything with a heartbeat after she was sent away.
(embarrassed now)
It was my way of acting out I guess. I didn't know nothing about raising y'all. She did all that.

Hakeem is uncomfortable. Why is he telling him this?

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
Anyway, I met Dottie along the way. She fell for me hard. Said she wanted to raise y'all. You weren't even one. Cookie didn't want y'all visiting her in jail. And that suited Dottie just fine. Cookie wasn't a bad woman. We was just in a bad situation, that's all.

Hakeem has seen a vulnerable side of his father that he's never seen before. He's not sure how he feels about it.

HAKEEM
Whatever happened to Miss Dottie?

Still pained by it all, Lucious waves him off. Enough of this story. He looks around his incredible club. Then -

LUCIOUS
Time you get your act together boy.

HAKEEM
My act is together, dad.

LUCIOUS
Like hell it is. You phoned in your first single.

HAKEEM
I'm working on new stuff now.

Lucious studies his son. He knows the monster he's created.

LUCIOUS
You're half steppin it, Keem. You never had to work a day in your life cuz you're spoiled. I'm taking you in the studio tomorrow. We gonna record some new stuff I wrote. It's time to get you going.

Hakeem thinks he understands where his father is going with all of this. He grins. Gives Lucious a cocky nod.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
And get that shit eating grin off of your face.

INT. LUCIOUS OFFICE - EMPIRE ENT - DAY

Jamal is seated on a plush couch in Lucious' office. Lucious struts into the room, sits across from Jamal. They are distant, awkward.

LUCIOUS
You look good. Real good. How's that room mate of yours? The one with the dreads?

JAMAL
We broke up two years ago. I'm dating Michael, dad, you met him twice.

LUCIOUS
Yeah, that's right. Sorry. He works for those bastards at Atlantic, right?

Jamal wants to get to the point fast.

JAMAL
So what's up? I was surprised to get your call.

LUCIOUS
Let's get right to the point. And this is the last time that I'm going to tell you this.

He looks Jamal straight in the eye.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
Your sexuality is a choice. You can choose to sleep with women Jamal. This company can be yours. If you just do it the right way. You're going to eventually release another album, and there's a lot of people in this country that don't understand people like you. It would hurt sales.

JAMAL
Because a sissy can't sell albums to black America?

Lucious cringes at the word SISSY. Cuts him off.

LUCIOUS
--or all those white kids that make up 75% of our business. And stop calling yourself that.

JAMAL
That's what I am dad. A sissy. A faggot.
(then)
You've done some pretty awful things to me. Telling all those lies to the magazines. And that fake wedding mess. I was a kid dad.

Jamal sees how uncomfortable Lucious is. He knows not to push him too far.

JAMAL (CONT'D)
What we need to do is spend some time together. Why don't you get to know me?

LUCIOUS
The second you're ready to release an album, you'll have my full attention.

Jamal explodes.

JAMAL
Why is everything always about business with you?

LUCIOUS
Take that damn bass out of your voice when you're talking to me.

JAMAL
I'm confused. One minute you want me with bass and the next you don't. Which is it?

Lucious stares at him, upset, this isn't how he wanted this conversation to go. Then, a perky Becky sticks her head in.

BECKY
We need to be wheels up in 15 if you're going to make it to Copenhagen on time.

Lucious nods, starts to get up. *

LUCIOUS
I'll call you later.

Jamal nods, knows it will never happen. *

JAMAL
Sure. *

Lucious watches Jamal leave his office. Deeply troubled.

CUT TO - FLASHBACK - 17 YEARS EARLIER

INT. LYON RESIDENCE - PHILADELPHIA - NIGHT

The Jackson Five's CHRISTMAS SONG blasts as a lively holiday party is going on with younger Lucious and Cookie hosting their NEIGHBORS. Bunkie and Vernon are there as well. 12 year-old Andre runs over to Vernon with his report card.

12 YEAR-OLD ANDRE
Uncle Vernon, I got straight A's. *

Vernon high-fives him!

VERNON
That's what I'm talking about! You keep getting damn A's and you're * gonna be as rich as the President. *

Cookie's sister, CAROL, 35, a heavier version of Cookie holds court in the room. She points to their shy neighbor DEE.

CAROL
This bitch leaves ACME with a damn ham under her mink coat. I mean she is walking down Broad street in the middle of the day with a stolen ham under her stolen mink. Is that a Merry Christmas for you?

Dee shakes her head embarrassed. The entire room laughs, then all of a sudden, everyone abruptly STOPS talking as they see -

8 year-old Jamal walk down the stairs in HIGH HEELS and his mother's SCARF. Lucious' face fills with disgust and humiliation. He barrels up toward a now scared Jamal...

EXT. ALLEYWAY - LYON'S RESIDENCE - NIGHT

In the alley behind their house, Lucious carries a crying Jamal over to a GARBAGE CAN and shoves him in it. He lifts the metal lid up in the air.

LUCIOUS
You're nothing but garbage.

He shuts the lid on Jamal whose CRYING can be heard through the alley as Lucious walks back to his house.

8 YEAR-OLD JAMAL
Please, daddy! Don't leave me here!

Cookie appears from nowhere.

COOKIE
Are you out of your GODDAMNED mind? Nigga you must be crazy!

She jumps on Lucious's back, scratching him. An ugly fight! He finally SHOVES her off. She heads straight to the trash can in tears and removes her traumatized son. Cradles his trembling body. Lucious looks away. His anger turns to sadness and then fear, he's truly scared for his son.

CUT BACK TO - PRESENT:

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Lucious lays on the bed of a large MRI machine, staring forward. Deeply saddened at the memory. DR. SHAHANI, 50's, Indian, kind, hovers above him, snaps Lucious out of it.

DR. SHAHANI
Try to relax, it'll help us get a more accurate read. And remember, nothing is conclusive yet.

Lucious nods as he GLIDES into the MRI contraption. His scared face disappears into this ominous white machine.

END OF ACT II

INT. SQUASH COURT - DAY

Andre and Vernon are playing squash, their Ivy League backgrounds showing. Andre HAMMERS the ball against the back wall, with each hit he looks angrier and angrier. There is a rage simmering inside him. Vernon looks at Andre, concerned.

VERNON
You okay?

Andre nods he's fine. He serves the ball, SMASHING it against the back wall with fury! Clearly not fine.

INT. BEDROOM - ANDRE'S APARTMENT - DAY

Andre is sprawled across his bed in his modern apartment. He looks severely depressed. Rhonda stands above him holding a glass of water and two white PILLS.

RHONDA
Come on, honey, take your pills.

ANDRE
They make me feel worse.

RHONDA
You always say that when you don't take them, then in two days you'll feel normal again. Now take your pills or I'll tell your dad your off your anti-depressants again.

This gets his attention. Bitter and angry, he reluctantly takes the pills. Rhonda sits next to him, starts gently running her nails on the back of his neck.

ANDRE
He's always loved them more than me, even Jamal who he hates.

RHONDA
My dad is the same way. He loves my fat, idiot brother more than me because they watch TV and smoke pot all day together. Deep down it's because they're jealous of us. They hate that we went to Ivy League schools. It makes them feel inferior, so they treat us like we're inferior to keep us down.

ANDRE
He loves them because they're talented like him. I think he's going to leave it all to Hakeem.

RHONDA
And I bet Jamal won't object, because he's too passive.

ANDRE
Nope.

RHONDA
But what if he did?

Andre turns to her, she has his attention.

RHONDA (CONT'D)
What if Jamal made a play for the company and your two brothers end up going to war against each other?

ANDRE
It would never happen. They're as tight as can be.

RHONDA
Money and power has torn apart a lot more than two brothers. And if they did go to war, they just might end up killing each other...

ANDRE
...and the talent-less brother is the last man standing.

Rhonda smiles at him.

RHONDA
Looks like those pills already started working.

Andre stares at her, intrigued, but unsure.

ANDRE
I don't know. That's some tricky shit.

RHONDA
Do you really want that company?

He looks at Rhonda with fire in his eyes.

ANDRE
What do think?

She grabs his face and passionately kisses him on the mouth.

RHONDA
Prove it.

INT. COOKIES' APARTMENT - MID-TOWN - NIGHT

Cookie sits on the floor in the empty large apartment she just moved into - boxes, a couch, a TV. The buildings of midtown are seen out the windows like a concrete jungle.

Unpacking boxes, Cookie comes across an old picture of her family from years ago. One of the last times they were all together. She looks devastated at the family she left behind.

Then - a knock at the door. A surprised Cookie takes out a small .22 PISTOL and leans against the door.

COOKIE
Who is it?

ANDRE V.O.
It's Andre.

She quickly hides the gun and opens the door. They stare at each other for a long beat, it's been many years.

ANDRE
Hey, Momma.

COOKIE
Hi, Andre. Come on in.

He walks into the apartment, looks around.

ANDRE
Dad set you up in a nice place.

COOKIE
I had this coming to me, and a hell of a lot more.

ANDRE
So I hear.

She stares at him for a long beat. Tries to be angry at him but can't. Instead, a mother filled with pride at her son.

COOKIE
I'm proud of you. Going to the Wharton and all. Jamal told me everything over the years. You really made something of yourself.

ANDRE
Thank you, Momma. I'm sorry I never came to visit. *

COOKIE *
(Fighting tears) *
I thought you'd come eventually. I never gave up hope.

ANDRE
I just couldn't do it.

COOKIE
Too ashamed of your dope selling Ma?

ANDRE
I'm sorry, I truly am.

This instantly melts her. She holds out her arms.

COOKIE
Give me a hug.

He hugs Cookie, she hugs him tight, moved to hold her son again. On his face we see complete indifference.

EXT. BALCONY - COOKIE'S APARTMENT - LATER

An hour later, Cookie and Andre sit on the balcony sharing a cigarette, both drink scotch. They look comfortable together.

ANDRE
Did you know Lucious is taking the company public?

COOKIE
Yeah, he mentioned it when he was trying to screw me out of my money.

ANDRE
As part of going public, he needs to pick a successor.

COOKIE
Let me guess. Hakeem. *

ANDRE *
I think so too. *

COOKIE *
Lucious loves his little ass. *

ANDRE
He's personally producing his debut album.
(MORE)

ANDRE (CONT'D)
He wants to turn him into a superstar so he can be the face of Empire.

COOKIE
Shouldn't be too hard, the boys got it. He's no Jamal, but he's good.

ANDRE
Have you ever thought about managing Jamal?

COOKIE
For years. I told Lucious I wanted to be head of A and R just so I could manage Jamal, but he's shutting me out.

ANDRE
He doesn't want Jamal to be a star--

COOKIE
--because it would position him to be the face of the company.

ANDRE
He wants it for Hakeem, Momma.

Cookie eyes him over for a beat. What is he getting at?

COOKIE
How do you feel about that?

ANDRE
I want Empire. I'd be lying if I told you I didn't. I know you've heard I've worked hard for this company. Momma I have. Real hard.
(then)
But I know I'm not an artist, and dad's right, it's a celebrity driven brand. It needs a star as the face of it.

Cookie nods. Saddened by the truth her son is telling.

ANDRE (CONT'D)
So I want Jamal to be the head of this company. He's the most talented, he's hard working and he's sensible. Hakeem's arrogant and could possibly destroy it all if he's in charge.

COOKIE
So what do you want from me?

ANDRE
I want you to manage Jamal. You can make him a star, just like you made dad a star.

COOKIE
But I got no leverage to force Lucious into giving me Jamal.

ANDRE
You have more than you realize.

Cookies leans in, intrigued.

COOKIE
And what's that?

Slight beat. Andre stares at her with pain in his eyes.

ANDRE
Do you really love me, ma?

Cookie takes his hand.

COOKIE
More than you'll ever love me.

INT. BOARDROOM - EMPIRE ENT - DAY

The entire BOARD OF DIRECTORS sit in the conference room with Vernon and Lucious at opposite ends of the table. Lucious stands up to make a speech.

LUCIOUS
Before we begin, I just want to say what an honor it is making history with you all. It is because of your dedication that we have made it to this historic moment.

As everyone applauds, Cookie BURSTS in like a tornado.

COOKIE
Don't forget me, baby! Don't forget to thank your Cookie on this historic occasion!

Vernon looks concerned, immediately jumps to his feet.

VERNON
Cookie, it's great to see you.

COOKIE
Kiss my black ass, Vernon.

She folds her arms and stares at Lucious with defiance.

COOKIE (CONT'D)
Now let's talk business.

INT. LUCIOUS OFFICE - EMPIRE ENT - DAY

Lucious is in his office with Cookie and Vernon.

LUCIOUS
What is wrong with you woman? What are you trying to do? I told you I was gonna hook you up. *

COOKIE
And I'm telling you that ain't enough. I want Jamal too.

LUCIOUS
You can't have him!

COOKIE
Lucious, you messing with the wrong bitch. I know shit.

LUCIOUS
Oh, yeah? What? *

COOKIE
If I were to disclose to the SEC I was the original investor with $400,000 in drug money, then according to the Dodd-Frank Wall Street Reform and Consumer Protection Act, your application for an IPO would effectively be denied, and an SEC investigation would be launched into the business dealings of Empire Entertainment.

Lucious looks at Vernon who nods.

VERNON
It would kill us on Wall Street. We couldn't even attempt to go public for at least 10 years.

Lucious looks horrified. He turns to Cookie, desperate.

LUCIOUS
Why are you doing this, baby?

COOKIE
Don't 'baby' me, you two faced bastard. I went away for this money and all you want is to throw me some scraps. We'll I've been living like a dog for 17 years and now I want what's mine.

VERNON
We'll give you thousands of shares when we go public.

COOKIE
I want Jamal.

LUCIOUS
You'd really sink this whole thing?

COOKIE
I want Jamal. *

Lucious stares at her for a long beat. Knows he's fucked.

LUCIOUS
You got him.

Cookie smirks satisfied, then turns to Vernon.

COOKIE
So nice to see you, Vernon.

As she walks toward the door to leave, we begin to hear the sounds of a soulful guitar being played...

LUCIOUS
Cookie.

She stops at the door. *

COOKIE
Yeah?

LUCIOUS
I never wanted him anyway.

COOKIE
I know.

She storms out of the room as the sounds of the guitar EXPLODE into...

INT. BASEMENT - COFFEE HOUSE - BUSHWICK - NIGHT

Jamal plays the guitar with a back up band in the basement of a coffee shop. He plays a soulful tune about a boy who wants to be loved. The packed room is enthralled with his music.

Cookie stands in the back, beaming with pride. The song ends with a big finish. Crazy applause! Jamal humbly nods, then sees Cookie in the back. He smiles at her, she smiles back.

EXT. BUSHWICK - NIGHT

Cookie and Jamal walk through the artsy, hipster neighborhood. Late at night, it's pretty empty. *

COOKIE
You got it, Mal, you got all of it and now we gotta show the world exactly what you got.

JAMAL
I'm showing people what I got. I showed a whole room tonight.

COOKIE
Look at that place? You shouldn't be selling muffins and coffee with your music, you should be selling out stadiums. And you will.

JAMAL
I just wanna play. If I tour or release an album, then it's gonna change me, it's gonna change the music. I've seen it. I've seen it first hand with Dad and the artists he signs. Right now my shit is pure, that's how I want to keep it.

COOKIE
Oh yeah, you pure. So pure only a couple thousand white kids in Brooklyn, Seattle and San Francisco even heard your stuff. Come on, * Mal, you gotta share what GOD gave you with the world. *

He stares at her for a long beat. She makes a great argument, but he still shakes his head. He points to the Coffee House.

JAMAL
This is who I am. This is what I want to be. I'm not Lucious.

He plants a big kiss on her cheek.

JAMAL (CONT'D)
I'm sorry, ma, I'm not that guy.
(then)
I love you. Call you later. *

COOKIE
You too.

He walks away. She watches him go, stunned.

COOKIE (CONT'D)
Stupid sissy. *

INT. TAXI - NIGHT

Still stunned, Cookie sits in the Taxi, not sure what to do. Then - she pulls out her cell phone and makes a call.

COOKIE
Carol, it's me. I'm out.

The Voice on the end screams in joy, Cookie smiles.

COOKIE (CONT'D)
Don't get all worked up. I'm gonna come home and see you tomorrow. Have me a cheese steak ready.

INT. BOOM BOOM ROOM - NIGHT

Jamal and Hakeem sit in a booth in a VIP section of the packed bar with hot girls, hipsters and jet setters. Hakeem's bruises have mostly cleared up. *

HAKEEM
You seen her yet?

JAMAL
Yeah. You?

HAKEEM
Oh, yeah. The bitch is crazy. She beat me with a broom.

Jamal starts to laugh.

HAKEEM (CONT'D)
I'm serious. It hurt.

Jamal laughs even harder. Hakeem starts to laugh too.

JAMAL
I read Dad was in the Illuminati.

This brings both boys practically to the floor howling. Then - *

HAKEEM
What's she gonna do now? Dad won't want her around.

JAMAL
She wants to manage my career.

HAKEEM
She does?

JAMAL
Yeah, but I told her no. I don't want to release an album. I'm still working through the sound. *

HAKEEM
Yeah, well, if you do end up working with her, and dad is handling me, they're gonna be using us to try to kill each other.

Jamal realizes he's right. Uneasy about it all. Then - *

JAMAL
Hey, no matter what happens with our music or with them we both know what time it is.

HAKEEM
I got you right back, Mal.

The two brothers clasp hands and then hug. They really love each other. Over Jamal's shoulder, Hakeem sees a HOT WHITE GIRL giving him the eye. He smiles back at her.

JAMAL
You wanna get out of here. *

Hakeem nods toward the Hot White Girl.

HAKEEM
I gotta talk to a friend of mine. *

JAMAL
Aren't you recording in the morning? You should get some sleep.

Hakeem gets up and winks at his brother.

HAKEEM
It's all part of my artistic process.

He saunters over to the Hot White Girl and throws his arm around her, she's immediately perceptive as she giggles. * Jamal shakes his head as he watches. *

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - EMPIRE ENT - DAY

Hakeem is recording in the studio, looks haggard, hung-over and his voice sounds raspy:

HAKEEM
'I got no fear in my soul/Cuz I know--'
(He stops)
Wait, I gotta start again.

In the booth, Lucious drops his head in frustration. Anika looks annoyed as well. Andre is trying not to smile.

ROGER
This is take 37.

He hits the instrumental track. Hakeem starts up again:

HAKEEM
'I got no fear in my soul/Cuz I know when I go people will--'

He looses his focus, forgetting the lyrics.

HAKEEM (CONT'D)
What's the word again?

Lucious can't take it anymore. He speaks into the microphone.

LUCIOUS
The word is you're a mess. The word is you're a disappointment. The word is you are wasting my time. Those are the words that are coming to mind.

Hakeem storms out of the studio, barrels past them into the green room, slamming the door. Lucious and Anika give each other solemn looks, Andre can barely hide his glee.

INT. GREEN ROOM - EMPIRE ENT - CONTINUOUS

Hakeem sits on the coach, stewing. He picks up a chair and SLAMS it into the ground until it SMASHES to pieces! He picks up another chair and throws it across the room!

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - EMPIRE ENT - CONTINUOUS

In the booth, they hear the noise of Hakeem trashing the room. Lucious starts to SMILE, clearly digs what he's hearing. Andre looks confused.

ANDRE
Why are you smiling?

LUCIOUS
He's scared.
(Then)
That means he wants it.

INT. GREEN ROOM - EMPIRE ENT - 15 MINUTES LATER

Hakeem sits on the ground in the trashed room, it's all fucked up. He stares forward in a haze, upset and scared.

Anika walks in holding a bottle of tequila. She looks so beautiful as she pours them shots. They down the shots. *

ANIKA
Do you want to be a Prince or do you want to be the King?

HAKEEM
I wanna be the King.

ANIKA
Then you come back next week and claim your throne.

She leans in and whispers in his ear.

ANIKA (CONT'D)
And don't ever forget, Kings get everything they want.

She saunters out, the most beautiful woman Hakeem has ever seen. He's stunned, can't believe Dad's girl just said that. *

EXT. COFFEE HOUSE - BUSHWICK - NIGHT

Jamal has finished off his set and is packing up his equipment by himself. Hakeem watches him from the back of the room, he starts to laugh. Jamal sees him.

JAMAL
What's so funny?

HAKEEM
That shit about Dad being in the Illuminati. Hilarious!

Jamal smiles. Hakeem's face suddenly fills with concern.

HAKEEM (CONT'D)
I need your help.

CUT TO - LATER. The brothers are seated at a table listening to one of Hakeem's recordings on his iPhone. Jamal digs it.

JAMAL
It's good, real good. But something is missing, it's not totally you. *
It doesn't have your fire.

HAKEEM
Ever since dad told me he wanted to cut this album, I've gotten scared, you know? I feel like I've lost my confidence.

JAMAL
Let me ask you, do you want this? Do you really want to be dad?

Hakeem stares at him with fire in his eyes. He nods, wants it more than anything. Jamal smiles at his brother.

JAMAL (CONT'D)
Then let's get this shit done.

Jamal starts tapping the table to a distinct rhythm that immediately captures Hakeem's attention.

JAMAL (CONT'D)
How about something like...
(Starts to rap)
'All the world gonna see/I'm the greatest they ever dreamed/Nothing can stop my fire/Cuz I live high up on that wire.

It sounds great and is very Hakeem.

HAKEEM
That's what's up! I love it!

JAMAL
It needs something primal to match
that raw shit you got going on.

He picks up his guitar and starts playing some music that's raw and visceral. Hakeem stares at his brother in awe. *

HAKEEM
You're a genius, you know that? *

JAMAL
(Smiles) *
You lay this down for dad and
you're gonna be just fine.

HAKEEM
Will you play on the track?

Jamal nods as he high fives his grateful brother.

INT. BEDROOM - LUCIOUS' MANSION - NIGHT

Lucious and Anika are asleep when Lucious' phone rings. Groggy, Lucious sees 'Bunkie' on the caller ID. He answers:

LUCIOUS
Somebody better be dead.

BUNKIE
We need to meet.

LUCIOUS
What?

BUNKIE
Now. The warehouses. *

Lucious looks concerned, knows it's serious.

EXT. WAREHOUSES - BRONX - NIGHT

Lucious stands in a dark alley surrounded by warehouses with busted windows and graffiti. It's eerily empty. From out of the shadows steps Bunkie, he looks nervous.

LUCIOUS
Last time I got this call your
brother had just been murdered.

BUNKIE
Nobody's dead. At least not yet.

Bunkie takes out a hand gun. Lucious looks stunned.

LUCIOUS
What are you doing?

BUNKIE
You forgot me. You left me behind.

LUCIOUS
I've been paying you a salary for the last 20 years.

BUNKIE
Peanuts. I've been with you since the beginning and you won't even give me a measly 25 large.

LUCIOUS
Because you won't stop losing it! I could give you a million dollars and you'd gamble it away.

BUNKIE
A million ain't enough. I want ten million.

LUCIOUS
(Laughs)
Go ahead and shoot me, because I ain't giving you ten dollars.

Bunkie points his gun right at Lucious.

BUNKIE
Stop laughing.

Lucious stops laughing, looks a little scared.

BUNKIE (CONT'D)
You need to pay me or this "so called" legacy of yours is dead.

LUCIOUS
What are you talking about?

BUNKIE
I got information, and if it got out, Empire could never public.

LUCIOUS
Seems like everyone I know wants to go to the Feds. So what do you got?

BUNKIE
You killed them four dealers for starters. I saw it with my own eyes. You're a murderer and there's gotta be a DA in Philly who'd love to make his name bringing you down.

Lucious stares at him, more hurt than surprised.

LUCIOUS
Why you doing this, Bunkie?

BUNKIE
I've been with you from the start nigga. I've seen what money has done to you. Our friendship means nothing to you anymore. Empire's gonna make everyone billions except for me and I want what's mine. You hear me, Lucious?

Lucious stares at him for a long beat, calculating.

END OF ACT III

EXT. JAMAL'S LOFT - SOHO - DAY

Jamal walks out of his loft and sees a large black SUV waiting for him. The window rolls down revealing Cookie sitting in the back seat wearing a NEW white fur.

INT. SUV - DAY

Cookie and Jamal ride through the Holland tunnel.

JAMAL
So where we going, Ma?

COOKIE
Visit your Aunty down in Philly. You got soft, Mal. Living in Soho, flying in jets, screwing that tamale boy toy. Shit, You need to see your roots, we're you come from.
(Then)
(MORE)

COOKIE (CONT'D)
And I don’t wanna meet my sister’s ugly kids alone.

Jamal laughs.

EXT. PROJECTS - PHILLY - DAY

Jamal and Cookie walk around a broken down neighborhood. Some buildings gutted, others with bullet holes. A war zone. On a street corner, YOUNG TEENAGERS are buying and selling drugs.

COOKIE
I met your daddy on that corner.

JAMAL
Was he selling?

She nods.

JAMAL (CONT’D)
You buying?

COOKIE
Nah, I never touched the stuff. I was a ride or die for his competitor. He wanted me to tell Lucious there was gonna be trouble.

JAMAL
So what happened?

Cookie gives a devilish grin.

COOKIE
Lucious got me in trouble.

CUT TO - ANOTHER BLOCK. They are walking up the street lined with row houses, they look the same as the flashback but a little bit more rundown. Cookie points to the homes.

COOKIE (CONT’D)
This is where you would’ve grown up if your daddy hadn’t hit it big.

She stops in her tracks and sees the house where they lived.

JAMAL
Didn’t we live here?

Cookie nods, it’s very painful for her. The front door opens and out comes Carol, Cookie’s sister. She looks almost the same as from the flashback. Carol couldn’t be happier.

CAROL
Cookie!

She runs over and gives her sister a huge hug.

JAMAL
Hey Aunt Carol.

CAROL
Hey Jamal. Don't just stand there, come on in.

INT. CAROL'S HOUSE - DAY

Cookie and Jamal look around their old house, it's different now, but in many ways it's still the same. Lounging on the couch are Carol's kids - KEISHA (14), LUTHER (11), AND TANYA (8). Watching TV, they don't seem too interested in Cookie or Jamal or anything really. Carol snaps at them:

CAROL
Turn off that damn TV and give your Aunt Cookie a hug!

LUTHER
I thought you was in jail.

COOKIE
I was. I'm out.

They come over and give her a half hearted hug.

CAROL
And this is your cousin Jamal.

They all stare at Jamal who feels guilty and ashamed that these kids, let alone family members, live like this.

JAMAL
Hey Y'all.

KEISHA
You Lucious Lyon's son?

JAMAL
Yeah.

KEISHA
I love his music.

TANYA
Me too. He's my favorite.

CAROL
They tell all their friends they're related to him.

JAMAL
So what do you study in school?

They look at him like he's fucking crazy. Cookie jumps in.

COOKIE
You know Jamal is a singer too. He's gonna be a star.

TANYA
Really?!

COOKIE
Oh yeah, a big one, as big as his daddy. You want him to play something for you?

The kids all start nodding, excited. Jamal is embarrassed.

LUTHER
Come on, Cuz, play us something.

TANYA
Please!

JAMAL
I don't have my guitar.

COOKIE
You know you don't need no guitar.

Jamal relents. He grabs a chair and starts pounding out a rhythm on it. He sings a fun, upbeat tune about following your dream. The kids are slayed. Carol whispers to Cookie:

CAROL
He's as good as his daddy.

Cookie nods. Carol leans in to her.

CAROL (CONT'D)
Times are kind of hard right now. We could use a little extra cash.

Cookie straightens her fur.

COOKIE
I hear that.

Carol stares at her, waiting for her to offer money, but Cookie just nods along to the music, not offering anything.

The kids start clapping along. Jamal gets more into it as he sees his cousins come to life before his eyes as he sings for them. The song continues into the next scene...

INT. SUV - NIGHT

Driving home from Philly, Jamal stares out the window, contemplative. Clearly the day had an effect on him. He then sees Cookie holding out a large gold RING to him.

JAMAL
What is that?

COOKIE
It belonged to James Brown.

JAMAL
The James Brown?

Cookie nods.

COOKIE
He was my Uncle.

Jamal looks stunned, had no idea.

JAMAL
James Brown was your Uncle?

COOKIE
I grew up in this. That's how I know it so well. Uncle James was the greatest there ever was and when he died there wasn't a penny left. His kids, brothers, sisters, nieces, nephews, no one got nothing. Lucious saw it all and made sure that was never going to happen to him. That's why he created Empire.
(Then)
Take the ring. It's for you.

JAMAL
Look, Ma, I know what you're tryin--

COOKIE
--if he's not going to love you because of who you are, then you gotta force him to love you.
(MORE)

COOKIE (CONT'D)
The only way to do that is to be a bigger star than he ever was. Let me manage you, I can take you all the way to the top the same way I took your daddy to the top. Take the ring, honey. *

Jamal stares at her, it's tempting.

COOKIE (CONT'D)
You need to inspire the world with your music the way you inspired your cousins in Philly.

Jamal then turns and looks out the window.

JAMAL
Keep the ring, ma.

Cookie stares at him, really frustrated.

INT. RECORDING STUDIO - EMPIRE ENT - DAY

Hakeem records the song Jamal had written with Jamal playing guitar as back up. The song is great and Hakeem sounds fantastic. He ends on a jaw dropping note. So talented.

As soon as it finishes, the door to the booth BURSTS open. A beaming LUCIOUS barrels into the room with his arms out.

LUCIOUS
I told you you had it! I told you!

Hakeem is beaming, he points to Jamal.

HAKEEM
Jamal came up with most of it--

JAMAL
--nah, it was all Hakeem. He came up with the whole thing.

Lucious beams at Hakeem.

LUCIOUS
That's cuz you're a genius. A GOD.

He gives Hakeem a huge hug, clearly so proud.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
You're gonna be a huge star, Keem. I'm so proud of you.

Jamal watches Lucious embrace his brother. He can't hide the bitterness his father won't treat him like this. We hear Hakeem's song play into the next scene...

INT. DOCTOR'S OFFICE - DAY

Lucious sits on an examining table wearing a patients robe. He looks nervous, scared. Dr. Shahani comes into the room, he looks solemn, clearly has bad news.

LUCIOUS
That good, huh?

DR. SHAHANI
I'm so sorry, but all of our follow ups have confirmed what we've always feared. You've got ALS. *

LUCIOUS
I've really got Lou Gehrig's disease? Really?

Dr. Shahani sadly nods.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
And there's no cure for it? I gotta lot of money, doc.

DR. SHAHANI
It's such a rare autoimmune disease there's been very little progress in treating it. Unfortunately they're no where near a cure.

LUCIOUS
So what happens next?

DR. SHAHANI
You may start feeling symptoms immediately which vary from person to person. Slurred speech, tripping on carpets or twitching in your fingers or toes. But slowly it will shutdown your entire body.

LUCIOUS
How long do I have left?

DR. SHAHANI
Three years, maybe more, but more likely less. I'm so sorry, Lucious.

Dr. Shahani starts to tear up.

DR. SHAHANI (CONT'D)
Your contributions to this hospital and country have been astounding. Please never forget that.

Lucious stares at him, he can't believe he's really dying.

EXT. BATTERY PARK - DAY

Hakeem's song continues as Lucious stands near the water staring off at the Statue of Liberty. He has an existential sadness, a man who knows his time on Earth is short.

EXT. LOWER EAST SIDE - DAY

Jamal wanders through the Lower East Side, hipster stores intermixed with turn of the century architecture. He looks pensive, unsure. The song comes to an end on his lost gaze.

INT. BEDROOM - JAMAL'S LOFT - SOHO - NIGHT

Jamal lies in bed next to Michael, staring up at the ceiling. He has that same lost look in his eyes. Michael notices.

MICHAEL
What's wrong?

Jamal looks at Michael, not sure he wants to say. Then -

JAMAL
People still think I'm straight Michael. If I release an album, I want to do it as myself. I want people to know who I really am.

MICHAEL
Good. Come out.

JAMAL
It'll distract from the music I think.

MICHAEL
This is bullshit. Your sounding schizophrenic. Either you want to come out or you don't. Which is it? Make up your mind.

Jamal closes his eyes. Can't deal. Michael leaves the bedroom disgusted.

MICHAEL (CONT'D) *
You're a tired queen. *

INT. COOKIES' APARTMENT - DAY

Cookie lounges in her apartment watching WENDY WILLIAMS when she hears a knock at the door.

JAMAL V.O.
It's Jamal.

She hurries over and opens the door, so pleased to see Jamal standing in her doorway. He stares at her, determined.

JAMAL
I'm not going to do this to get back at Dad or to inspire the world or for my poor cousins in Philly.
(Then)
But I'll do it for you.

She smiles. Deeply touched. *

JAMAL (CONT'D) *
But I want to do it as me. *

COOKIE *
Good. I love it. Lucious Lyon's son *
is not only a genius, but he's a *
faggot too. We'll make the gay *
angle all about Lucious not *
accepting you, and the talent all *
about you. That'll drive your *
father crazy. *

We see a tiny smile form on Jamal's face. He loves it. *

INT. LUCIOUS OFFICE - EMPIRE ENT - DAY *

Still pensive, Lucious sits across from Vernon. He stares off into space as Vernon takes out a manila envelope.

VERNON
So we were able to find out--
(Then)
You okay?

Lucious snaps out of his daze.

LUCIOUS
Yeah, I'm good. What do you got?

Vernon opens up the envelope and takes out photographs of Bunkie at a poker table in Shyne's club, drinking with Shyne, at a strip club, car shopping at a Range Rover dealership.

VERNON
It looks like Bunkie has gotten close with Shyne Johnson.

LUCIOUS
I know him. The Bronx.

VERNON
Card clubs, girls, drugs. And he's dangerous. This isn't a great time to get shaken down by a gangsta who has no problem taking people out.
(Then)
Suggestions?

Lucious looks at the photographs, then looks Vernon in the eye, unable to hide his rage.

LUCIOUS
I'll think of something.

Andre comes into the room, Lucious smoothly hides the photos.

ANDRE
We're ready.

INT. CONFERENCE ROOM - EMPIRE ENT - DAY

A beaming Cookie sits at the conference table surrounded by LAWYERS. Lucious sits across the table, more amused than angry at her. A LAWYER, 50's, explains to Cookie:

LAWYER
In exchange for the pre-negotiated salary, a stipend for housing and control over Jamal Lyon's career, you are signing away your rights to ever disclose you were the original investor in Empire Entertainment. If you violate the non-disclosure agreement, the deal is void.

COOKIE
I know, I know. You're paying me off to shut my fat ass up.

LUCIOUS
That's right, Cookie.

She smiles at Lucious, he smiles back. A trace of their old chemistry starting to come back.

INT. OFFICE - EMPIRE ENT - CONTINUOUS

In an office that's connected to the conference room, Andre and Vernon watch Cookie sign the documents through a window.

VERNON
You got one tough mother.

ANDRE
I know.

Vernon leans in and whispers to Andre...

VERNON
I know your dad wants it to be Hakeem, but you're the only one that can truly run this company.

Andre is surprised, but Vernon gives him a paternal smile.

VERNON (CONT'D)
I'm a firm believer intelligence and hard work are more important than being able to rap. You deserve to fly this plane.

Andre stares at him for a beat, processing. Then -

ANDRE
You're right, I do deserve it and I'm going to take it.

VERNON
And I'll do everything I can to help you. I hope you'll remember me when you're in the pilot seat.

Andre smiles at him with charm.

ANDRE
How could I forget you, Uncle Vernon?

EXT. WAREHOUSES - BRONX - NIGHT

An angry Lucious and Bunkie meet again in the warehouse district. Bunkie is looking at the surveillance photos of him with Shyne. He smirks, doesn't seem to care.

BUNKIE
You're a sell out, man. You've been selling out for years. You can fool the President you legit, but I know your punk ass.
(then)
You gonna give me my money?

LUCIOUS
No. But I am gonna give you what you got coming.

Bunkie's eyes go wide in fear, he quickly reaches for his gun, but Lucious is MUCH faster as he pulls out a gun and -

SHOOTS Bunkie right in the head! Bunkie falls to the ground. Lucious shoots him two more times, stares at him for a beat. * Then, he turns around and walks away, leaving Bunkie's dead body in a puddle of scum water.

EXT. YACHT - NEW YORK BAY - DAY

Another huge party is taking place on the yacht - hot girls, guys in tank tops, corporate types in suits. The partiers surrounds Lucious who holds a glass of champagne.

LUCIOUS
It is a great honor to announce the return of Cookie Lyon, the heart and soul of Empire Entertainment.

The crowd applauds. Cookie beams.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
I never would've left the streets of Philly if Cookie hadn't taught me everything I know.

The ship breaks out into applause. Cookie looks directly at Anika. Smiles. Anika smiles back clapping also. She'll never let Cookie see her upset. Cookie's won this round. For now.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
I also want to announce that in a year's time, my two sons, Hakeem and Jamal Lyon will both be releasing their debut albums.

There is more applause. Hakeem and Jamal give each other uncomfortable glances. Lucious holds up his glass of champagne and screams in triumph.

LUCIOUS (CONT'D)
To the Empire!

The crowd screams back:

CROWD
TO THE EMPIRE!

CUT TO - LATER - ANOTHER PART OF THE SHIP. Jamal is talking to a few people when Hakeem comes over to him.

HAKEEM
Can I talk to you for a sec.

They walk away to a private corner.

HAKEEM (CONT'D)
I didn't know you were gonna release an album.

JAMAL
It's news to me too. Cookie had dad announce it without telling me.

HAKEEM
So it's not true?

JAMAL
Maybe it's time.

Hakeem gives him a brotherly punch as he smiles.

HAKEEM
It is time. I'm here if you need anything.

JAMAL
(Matter of fact)
I'm good for now.

Hakeem stares at him, knows this is the start of the competition between them.

HAKEEM
Yeah, you always good. See you at the Grammys nigga.

He winks at his brother, then walks away with swagger. Jamal watches him go, a trace of competitiveness seeping into him.

Around the corner hiding from view is Rhonda. She heard the whole conversation and looks happier than a pig in shit.

INT. LUCIOUS ROOM - YACHT - DAY

Lucious and Cookie sit on a sofa in a palatial room on the yacht. They are laughing, looking like an old married couple.

COOKIE
And you know I ain't never believed in wearing all them damn weaves. Girls walking around with their scalps smelling and shit.

Lucious laughs even harder. He smiles at Cookie.

LUCIOUS
It's good to see you again.

She takes his hand.

COOKIE
It's good to see you too.

LUCIOUS
I'm sorry I didn't visit you. I am. I feel so ashamed.

COOKIE
Tell that shit to Anika or one of those other young girls you messing with.

Lucious smiles at her, laughs. She's just Cookie.

LUCIOUS
I wanna play something for you.

He takes out his iPhone and plays the song Jamal wrote for Hakeem. Fully mixed, it sounds perfect. Cookie nods her head.

COOKIE
You know what Uncle James would call that? A big fat hit.

LUCIOUS
There are five more just as good. No matter what you do with Jamal, he'll never be as big as Hakeem. His sound isn't mainstream enough.

COOKIE
Jamal is going to be huge and you know it.

LUCIOUS
It’s never gonna happen, Cookie. I won’t let it happen.

Cookie is mad and hurt by this. The fun has left the room.

COOKIE
Lucious why? He’s your son for God’s sake. *

Lucious is genuinely confused by her stand.

LUCIOUS
You’re really not ashamed of him, are you?

COOKIE
No, I’m not. I’m gonna make it happen and I will take down anything that gets in my way.

Lucious smiles at her. Knows she’s telling the truth.

LUCIOUS
Then I guess this is war.

COOKIE
War against a son looking for his father’s love.

She gets up and walks to the door.

LUCIOUS
Why are you doing this, Cookie?

COOKIE
So you can see a faggot really can run this company.

She walks out. Lucious watches her go. Then he notices -

His pinky finger is SHAKING uncontrollably. He stares at it as a sadness fills his soul. He knows he’s a dying man.

CUT TO - FLASHBACK - 17 YEARS EARLIER

EXT. PROJECTS - PHILLY - DAY

A much younger Lucious waits in a back alley, he looks nervous as he checks his watch. Then, he sees Cookie hurrying across the street with an envelope. She hands it to him.

LUCIOUS
This all of it?

COOKIE
Yeah. 10 large.

He counts the cash, then notices Cookie looks nervous.

LUCIOUS
You okay, baby?

COOKIE
I don't know. Something felt off.

LUCIOUS
What do you mean?

COOKIE
Panther was acting funny, like something was going down.

LUCIOUS
You think the room was bugged?

COOKIE
Maybe. Something just felt different about the drop.

LUCIOUS
I'm sure it was nothing.

But Cookie is genuinely scared.

COOKIE
Lucious, listen to me. If something were to happen to me, if for any reason I were to go down--

LUCIOUS
--you're not going down.

COOKIE
But if I had to go in, you gotta promise me you'll keep playing.

LUCIOUS
Nothing is gonna happe--

COOKIE
--promise you'll keep playing. This album is gonna be big, I can feel it. The first one got you some attention, but this one is the one.

He wraps his arms around his wife.

LUCIOUS
You gotta stop worrying. I'll never let anything happen to you, do you hear me?
(Then)
Nothing's gonna tear my family apart.

He gives his wife a kiss on the lips as we...

FADE TO BLACK.

END OF PILOT