

## Braced

A troublesome teen and his cheerleader girlfriend must consider their future and free themselves after their braces get stuck together.

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD- DAY

FADE IN.

It's a bright, beautiful day, and the sun's rays gleam off of the metal bleachers beside a high school football field. A group of cheerleaders dressed in green and yellow uniforms wave similarly-colored pom poms as they practice their cheers while an older athletic woman in a green track suit looks on.

On the bleachers sits MARIA (late teens), dressed in the same uniform as the girls below, with "WGHS" emblazoned across the top. She holds a pocket mirror up to her face, picking at some morsel of food stuck in her BRACES.

The cheerleaders spin, twist, kick, and shout through their routines. One girl plants her hands onto another girl's shoulders, pushes down, and lifts herself up and over her on a crash mat.

CHEERLEADERS

GIMME AN F! GIMME AN I! GIMME AN S!

Maria smirks.

MARIA

Gimme a break.

ZACH (O.S.)

You know red's my favorite color,  
baby.

Maria gasps and brings her legs together, scooting to her side to look for the source of the voice.

Underneath the bleachers where she sat is ZACH (late teens), wearing a dark green bomber jacket, blue jeans, and a wide grin stretching from ear to ear, revealing a matching set of BRACES. Maria returns the grin and rolls her eyes.

MARIA

I didn't wear them for you, Zach.

Maria hops off the bleachers and ducks under them to join Zach.

EXT. UNDER THE BLEACHERS- DAY

Maria goes in for a hug, and Zach puts his arm around her. They kiss, but Maria quickly reels her head back.

MARIA

Ugh. You taste like cigarettes.

ZACH

I thought you liked that.

MARIA

Only sometimes.

Zach chuckles and goes in for some more action. After a few seconds of smooching, Maria pulls back.

MARIA

Did you bring it?

Zach holds his hand to his chest in mock disgust.

ZACH

Is that all I am to you, Maria? A plug and a boy-toy?

Maria puts a mock reassuring hand on Zach's shoulder.

MARIA

Of course not, babe, you're my mechanic for when daddy buys me a Mercedes.

ZACH

Ooh. You've got expensive taste, girl. In cars and in liquor.

Zach retrieves a STEEL FLASK from inside his jacket and hands it to Maria.

MARIA

But not in boys.

Zach groans in defeat, still grinning. Maria takes a sip from the flask, grimaces, and caps it. Zach watches her with hungry eyes. She hands the flask back to him.

MARIA

I can't be down here too long. I told Yvonne I was feeling lightheaded, and I can't go back to practice slurring my cheers.

Zach takes a drag from the flask and caps it.

(CONTINUED)

ZACH

Can I pick you up tonight?

MARIA

Tonight's the game, goofball.

Zach stuffs the flask back into his jacket. He jumps up and grabs onto the underside of the bleachers, dangling a few inches off the ground.

ZACH

How 'bout tomorrow?

MARIA

I have to study. Like, *study* study.

ZACH

Aw, you don't need school, babe, come on. Look at me. This is my last week in this hellhole.

The smile fades from Maria's face.

MARIA

You're... dropping out?

ZACH

Yeah, didn't I tell you?

MARIA

I--I thought you were joking.

Zach lets go and lands back on the grass.

ZACH

Nope. I told you, once my step-dad hires me at the shop, I'd ditch for good. Probably let the air out of Mullen's tires on my way out.

Maria turns away, playing with her hair.

MARIA

I don't know, I guess--I just thought we'd graduate together.

Zach walks to Maria and puts his arm around her, rocking her gently. Maria presses a hand into his chest gently.

ZACH

Hey. We'll talk about that later, alright? I don't wanna upset you. Alright?

(CONTINUED)

He turns her around and holds her waist. Maria's frown turns back into a gentle smile as she looks up at Zach's handsome, boyish face.

MARIA

Sure. I'll see you soon, 'kay?

Maria turns to go, but Zach holds onto her hand. He gently yanks her back into his arms. She giggles as her boyfriend goes back in for one last make out sesh. Their eyes are closed in bliss.

Maria pulls back after a couple seconds, but pulls Zach's head with her.

MARIA

Uh--

ZACH

Wha--

They both try to pull their faces apart, but can't seem to separate their heads from one another.

MARIA

"Thack"?

EXTREME CLOSEUP: Their braces are coupled together.

ZACH

"Thit."

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAYS- DAY

Maria and Zach walk sideways through the empty halls of the school, moving briskly but clumsily. They argue with clenched teeth, SUBTITLED:

ZACH

So this is my fault?

MARIA

If you weren't such a horndog, you could've waited!

ZACH

Whatever. I'm getting us out of this, aren't I?

MARIA

I can't believe I'm missing practice for this.

(CONTINUED)

They maneuver themselves to a door marked CUSTODIAN.

ZACH

Hold still.

Zach sharply reaches into his back pocket, the movement of his shoulder jerking Maria's face painfully.

MARIA

Ack- Watch it!

Zach slowly takes a wallet from his pocket and removes a crusty, cracked DEBIT CARD. He stuffs the wallet in his front pocket and jimmies the door with the card.

MARIA

Someone's coming!

A loud, boisterous voice can be heard coming around the corner, accompanied by several other footsteps.

MARIA

Hurry!

Zach frantically slides the card along the door's crevice as the voice and footsteps come closer.

MR. MULLEN (O.S)

But you heard about Barry, right?  
About what happened to that Harper  
girl?

Finally- SHUNK! The door creaks open. Maria and Zach shimmy inside, and Maria closes the door behind them, just as MR. MULLEN (50s), dressed in a brown suit and white button-up, turns the corner, leading two other faculty members.

A white plastic ID badge dangles from his shirt pocket, reading S. MULLEN - ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL - WINTER GREEN HIGH SCHOOL.

MR. MULLEN

I told Barry he had every right to  
discipline his students, any way he  
sees fit. I remember when we--

Mr. Mullen stops at the janitor's closet, falling silent and smelling the air.

TEACHER #1

You okay, Sean?

Mr. Mullen sniffs deeply, his eyes squinting.

MR. MULLEN  
Pall Malls.

TEACHER #1  
What?

MR. MULLEN  
There's only one delinquent I know  
who smokes Pall Malls.

INT. JANITOR'S CLOSET- DAY

Zach and Maria are positioned tightly beside a shelf in the cramped room. Zach is feeling around for a particular tool on the dust-laden shelf, a pack of PALL MALLS dangling precariously from within his jacket.

Maria pouts, SUBTITLED:

MARIA  
I hate this. This is stupid.

Zach, SUBTITLED:

ZACH  
I know.

Beat.

MARIA  
Zach, can we talk?

ZACH  
Barely.

MARIA  
I'm serious, Zachary.

Zach sighs. Maria shuts her eyes, reacting to the stale scent of tobacco on his breath.

ZACH  
Right now?

MARIA  
You're stupid for wanting to drop  
out.

ZACH  
Babe, I don't need school anymore,  
I've got a decent job now. I'm  
making money.

(CONTINUED)

MARIA

Still. You could at least finish.  
We're almost out.

Zach grabs hold of a pair of red-handled WIRE CUTTERS.

ZACH

Here! This should work.

MARIA

Are you listening to me?

ZACH

They don't want me here, babe.  
Especially not that prick Mullen.  
I'm just--school's not for me.

Maria looks at the tool fearfully.

ZACH

Hold still.

INT. SCHOOL HALLWAYS- DAY

Mr. Mullen is on the prowl, eyes narrowed and walking hurriedly. Behind him walks a JANITOR dressed in a blue work uniform, his keys jingling from his belt.

MR. MULLEN

It's always something with that punk. He's been trouble from day one, I swear.

JANITOR

What'd he do?

MR. MULLEN

Ohh, he's up to something, he always is. He's a stain on the honor of Winter Green High. No respect for its rich history. I bet he's smoking marijuana in there. Well sir, I'm not having it. Not today.

INT. JANITOR'S CLOSET- DAY

Zach brings in the wire cutters to the point of connection between the braces. He squeezes, gentle at first. Maria winces.

(CONTINUED)

MARIA

Ow-w!

Zach winces. He squeezes the tool harder, bringing tears to Maria's eyes.

MARIA

Zach!

Zach continues the squeeze, both eyes shut tight as the tool pulls on their teeth.

MARIA

Zach-please-it-hurts!

Zach lets go, letting the wire cutters fall to the ground. He holds Maria by the shoulders.

ZACH

I'm so sorry babe, I think I was close, but-- are you okay?

MARIA

Do you love me?

Beat.

ZACH

Babe, you know I--

MARIA

My name's not 'babe', Zach, it's Maria.

Beat. Zach frets his hands uncomfortably, moving them from Maria's shoulders to her arms and back to her shoulders.

ZACH

I--I love you, Maria.

MARIA

Then don't drop out. Graduate with me. I want you to have a diploma, Zach.

Zach looks into Maria's fierce-but-tearful eyes, thinking.

ZACH

...Okay. Okay, but can we please get un-stuck first before we kill each other?

(CONTINUED)

MARIA  
How?

ZACH  
Beats me.

Beat. Maria snuffles and wipes her eyes.

MARIA  
I had a thought.

ZACH  
Yeah?

MARIA  
Do you trust me?

ZACH  
...I do.

MARIA  
Then stand still. This might really  
suck.

Zach stands still, watching Maria nervously. Maria places her hands on Zach's shoulders and squares up her body in front of him. She exhales deeply.

ZACH  
Wait--

In one solid motion, she pushes Zach down and lifts herself up. A metallic TWANG is heard. The teens go sprawling back apart from each other, free at last. A box of toilet paper tumbles from the shelf Zach knocks into, obscuring his face.

Silence.

The sound of jingling keys breaks the silence. The door swings open, revealing a the janitor holding a set of keys and Mr. Mullen, who steps triumphantly into the room.

MR. MULLEN  
Zachary. I could smell you a mile  
away. What are we doing in here?  
Drugs?

Maria scrambles to her feet, metal wires dangling out of her mouth.

MARIA  
Mr. Mullen, please--

Mr. Mullen ignores her and walks slowly towards Zach's slumped body, straightening his suit and tie smugly, victoriously.

MR. MULLEN

Nothing to say for yourself? Not even a "screw you, Mullen"? Heh. Maybe you've finally learned to respect authority. Am I right, you lousy, good for nothing--

Mr. Mullen grabs the roll of toilet paper covering Zach's face and freezes.

Beat. Mr. Mullen breaks into a wheezing laugh, bending over with his hands on his knees.

After a lengthy chuckle, Mr. Mullen straightens his posture and wipes the tears from his eyes.

MR. MULLEN

Oh--Oh, this is too good.

Zach groans. Mr. Mullen turns to face Maria,

MR. MULLEN

You're in luck, Maria. I was just about to expel your boyfriend for--for, I don't know, I'm sure there's something, but I think *that's* punishment enough. God knows I needed the laugh.

Zach groans. Mr. Mullen exits the room, still giggling, leaving the janitor confused and annoyed.

MARIA

Zach?

ZACH

"Yeth?"

Maria rushes to him and gasps sharply, her hand covering her mouth.

MARIA

Oh my God...

JANITOR

You kids gonna get out of my closet, or h'what?

EXT. FOOTBALL FIELD- DAY

TITLE: 3 MONTHS LATER

The young couple lay together peacefully on the grass by the bleachers, looking up at the sky, silent. Maria is wearing a bright yellow gown; Zach's is emerald green.

Maria slowly lifts her phone up, then quickly maneuvers it over Zach's face.

MARIA  
Say cheese!

ZACH  
Wha-

Zach's open mouth reveals a set of MISSING FRONT TEETH.

CLICK- the camera flashes, taking a picture.

FREEZE FRAME

ZACH (V.O.)  
Hey!

Maria's laughter is heard, which is soon joined in by Zach's

ZACH (V.O.)  
Come on, delete that.

MARIA (V.O.)  
Aw, what? It's cute. You're gonna have new ones soon anyway.

ZACH (V.O.)  
That'th not the point.

MARIA (V.O.)  
Oh, you love me.

ZACH (V.O.)  
No, I hate you. Tho much.

They continue to laugh and bicker as we

FADE TO BLACK

END