



BLOOD AND BASKETBALL

QREADS

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Carl, the owner of the Jackson Eagles, punched a button on the remote control. “Just look at this,” he said.

Ed, the coach, turned to watch. On the screen, a player with floppy blond hair twisted away from a guard and scored. His moves were amazingly quick.

“Yeah, Dale Curtis,” Ed said. “I’ve seen him. I don’t want him.”

“Come on, man!” Carl said. “He could be the next Larry Bird!”

“He’s a problem waiting to happen,” Ed said. “The kid is only 18, just out of high school. And he’s on his own—no family. The word is he’s been living with a neighbor

or something.”

“But the *team*’s like a family,” Carl went on. “Once he’s on the team—”

“Once he’s on the team, he’s an instant millionaire,” Ed interrupted. “He’s instantly famous. It’s too much for most kids. Remember Reed Stevenson?”

Carl frowned. At first, young Stevenson had been a great player. Then he’d discovered gambling and drugs. It had been an ugly year-and-a-half for the Mississippi team.

“I’m not cleaning up after another kid like that,” Ed insisted.

Carl stared at the screen. Dale spun through the key and left the floor effortlessly. He seemed to float toward the basket. Below him, a guard’s mouth dropped open. The ball swished through the net, sweet and clean.

“Maybe Will Bishop would take him on as a roommate,” Carl suggested. “Bishop had it tough growing up, too. But he’s a real steady guy. He could be like an older brother.”

Ed disagreed. “Dale’s older brother, Bode, is the only family the kid has. And Bode can’t

stay out of trouble. He's doing 18 months in maximum security for stabbing some guy."

"So he's locked up," Carl said. "Nothing to worry about."

"Unless he blows it, he's out on parole next week," Ed went on.

Carl held up his hand. "Ed, look," he said. "I appreciate your concerns, but we need Curtis on the team."

"Whatever you say, *boss*," Ed said sarcastically.

Carl's face reddened. "If he messes up, I promise you that he's out—no matter how good he is, okay?"

"Let's see if he lasts a month," Ed muttered darkly.



Dale Curtis stepped into the Eagles' locker room. A smiling player with curly brown hair walked up to him. "Hey, you're Dale Curtis, aren't you? I'm Will Bishop." Will's voice was light and warm. "Come and meet the Eagles."

A group of players were getting dressed. “You’ve seen most of these guys on TV,” Will said, “so you know how they play. But I can tell you all their dark secrets.”

“I heard that,” a thick-set player said as he threw a shoe at Will. Will laughed and dodged. “This is Rick James,” Will said. “Rick knows every sick joke on the planet.”

Rick grinned and winked.

“And this,” Will said as he pointed to a towering African-American man with cornrows, “is Tyrone.”

“That’s *handsome* Tyrone to you, man,” Tyrone said with a smile.

“And this is Yuri,” Will said. “He’s got the grossest socks in the league.”

“Ha!” Yuri laughed. “Your socks could make a *pig* pass out, Bishop!”

And so it went. The players smiled and shook Dale’s hand. But Dale could see the question behind all their smiles: *Does this kid have what it takes to play for the Eagles?* Dale knew he’d have to prove himself.

To Dale, the practice gym was like another

world. The place was huge and perfectly equipped. Soft light came from windows high above. On the floor, assistants were passing balls to players. Others players lined up for shots. Dozens of shoes squeaked on the spotless floor.

Dale's chest was tight with wonder and excitement. *You're here! You made it!* a voice inside him cried out.

Will walked up beside him and said, "Looks good, doesn't it?"

"Sure does," said Dale. "I've never seen anything like it."

"Hey—it looks like we're gonna be roommates," Will went on.

"*What?*" Dale said. "Don't take this personally, buddy, but I'm getting my *own* place. I can afford it now."

"Sorry, man," Will said. "The coach wants you staying with me."

Dale was upset. "Well, that's just too bad!" he said. "I'm on my own."

Will nodded slowly. "Okay," he said. "Go ahead and tell the coach that he'll be taking

orders from *you* now.”

Dale gritted his teeth. “I’ve never heard of any pro being assigned a roommate. Why do *I* have to?”

“’Cause you’re the youngest guy the Eagles have ever signed,” Will explained. “If you stay out of trouble, you can get a place by yourself.”

“What makes them think I’m gonna get in trouble?” Dale grumbled.

Will gave him a long look. His voice was cool as he said, “Let’s just see if you last a week.”

“Hey, Curtis!” one of the assistants called out. “Come over here and shoot some foul shots.”

Dale sank one shot after another. As always, just the feel of the ball in his hands made him feel better.

The night his father had walked out, he’d headed straight for the gym. There, the comforting *pock . . . pock* sound of bouncing basketballs blotted out the memory of his father’s shouts and his mother’s tears. Some

time later, he came home exhausted and fell asleep in minutes. If his mother was still crying, he didn't hear her.



Dale peered out Will's front window. Still no Bode. He should have arrived hours ago.

Dale couldn't wait to move to his own place. Will had rules—a lot of them. Yet Will himself was generous and smart. He told Dale a lot about his teammates and how they played. And he seemed to know everything about the rival teams.

Dale was at the window again when a rental car pulled into the driveway. "Bode!" he yelled. He ran outside just as his brother opened the car door.

For a moment, the brothers just stared at each other. Bode was six-eight, an inch shorter and 40 pounds heavier than Dale. His arms were covered with tattoos. A thick scar encircled his wrist like a bracelet.

Dale smelled alcohol when he hugged