



BLOOD AND BASKETBALL

QUICKREADS

JANICE GREENE



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

Bode. “Get on in here!” he said to his brother. “You hungry? Got lots of stuff to eat here!”

“Nah,” Bode said, as they walked inside. “I just want to be out of that car for a while.”

“I’m gonna get you a car!” Dale said excitedly. “Something real cool—with leather and everything.”

“That’d be real nice, Dale,” he said as he grinned at his brother. “Look at you—a *rich* guy! It’s like a dream, huh?”

“As long as I don’t wake up, it’s okay with me,” Dale agreed.

“Fine-looking place,” Bode said as he looked around the large living room. “That TV is as big as a fireplace! There’s nothing like that in the hole. We didn’t even get cable.”

Dale punched the remote until he found a basketball game. The New Jersey Nets were playing the Miami Heat. “I’ll get you a TV, too,” he said, “even bigger than this.”

Bode smiled. “You got a good heart, kid. Not like most people. But now that you’ve got money—watch out. People you’ve never even heard of, so-called friends—they’ll

all be calling.”

“They already have,” Dale said. “I changed my number yesterday.”

“That’s the smart thing!” Bode said. “Never trust anybody except your own flesh and blood.”

Dale turned back toward the TV screen. “Hey, good one!” he said as a player dropped a long shot into the hoop. He jacked up the sound.

“You could wipe that guy off the court,” Bode said as he flopped onto the couch.

“Oh, I don’t know,” Dale laughed.

“You’re *way* better!” Bode insisted. “You . . .” Then suddenly Bode was up on his feet.

Dale turned around to see Will coming in the door with a bag of groceries. Will was frozen in place, staring at Bode—who now had a thick, ugly knife in his hand!

“Bode, it’s okay!” Dale cried out. “It’s just Will, my roommate.”

“Don’t *ever* sneak up on me, man!” Bode growled. “You’re risking your life, man—I swear it!”



Ruby's
Terrible **Secret**

QUICKREADS

JANET LORIMER



This area hasn't changed at all, Melinda thought, as she slowed her car for a turn. It looks just as it did when I left seven years ago.

She turned off the highway and onto a narrow road that wound up the mountain. At first Melinda could see houses tucked away behind the trees. But the higher up the mountain she drove, the fewer houses she saw. Then there were no houses, and the road narrowed even more. Before long it was just a rutted dirt path.

At last Melinda spotted her grandmother's farmhouse just ahead. For a moment her breath caught in her throat. She wondered

if the old woman would welcome her, or—

Melinda parked under a big oak tree. She climbed out of the car and stretched. *I'm tired and hungry*, she thought. *I sure hope Ruby doesn't send me back down the hill.*

Suddenly the front door opened and Ruby stepped onto the porch. She gazed at her granddaughter as if she couldn't believe her eyes. "Melinda?"

"Ruby!" Melinda ran across the yard and up the wooden steps.

They grabbed each other in a big hug. Then Ruby held Melinda back at arms' length. "Let me look at you," she said. "Oh, Melinda, you're all grown up—and you're so beautiful!"

Melinda smiled. "I've missed you so much, Ruby," she said.

"And I've missed you, too," Ruby whispered, her eyes spilling tears. "Every day for the last seven years."

Melinda's smile disappeared. "You *have*? But you were the one who made me go! I was only 16 when you packed me off to live

with Aunt Kay and Uncle Jim. I hardly knew them then—and I didn't want to leave. Why did you send me away?"

Ruby grasped Melinda's arm. "I did it for *you*," she said, nervously pulling Melinda toward the front door. "I thought you'd have better opportunities if you lived in the city. And just what are you doing back here now, child?"

Melinda sighed. "I was in an automobile accident a couple of weeks ago. I'm okay, but the doctor told me to take some time off from work. I decided to come for a visit."

Ruby looked upset. "Oh, Melinda, honey, that was a bad idea," she groaned. "You can't stay here."

"Why not?" Melinda demanded. "What did I do to make you—"

"Oh, no, Melinda!" Ruby exclaimed. "It wasn't anything *you* did, child. It's —it's just the danger! As long as you stay here, you're not safe."



Melinda didn't know what to say. Her grandmother's words shocked her. She'd noticed how nervously Ruby had glanced around the yard. And she wondered why Ruby had grabbed her arm and so quickly hustled her into the house.

"I'll fix you something to eat," Ruby said quickly. "Then you have to get back down the mountain, honey. You can stay at that new motel on the highway. Tomorrow—"

"Hold on," Melinda said stubbornly. "I'm not going anywhere. What's this danger you're talking about?"

Ruby took a deep breath. "I'm not saying another word about it. There are some things you don't need to know. Just do what I tell you and—"

"No!" Melinda said firmly as she crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm not 16 anymore, Ruby. I'm an adult and I want you to tell me why—" Her voice trailed away as she thought about something. "Does this 'danger' have

anything to do with the reason my mother went away?”

Ruby groaned and her eyes filled with tears again. “I didn’t think you remembered anything about that.”

Melinda frowned. “I don’t really remember. I was so young when she left. How old was I?”

“Just a baby,” Ruby said.

Melinda followed the old woman into the kitchen. “Are you hungry, child?” Ruby asked.

Melinda nodded, but she wasn’t going to let Ruby change the subject that easily. “So if there’s danger here, why do *you* stay?”

Ruby glanced at her granddaughter in surprise. “Why, this is my home, Melinda. I can’t leave. Besides, there’s no danger to *me*—not anymore.”

Melinda was puzzled. She wanted to dig deeper into the mystery, but Ruby wouldn’t let her. “You go on and wash up now, honey,” Ruby said. “Then we’ll have our dinner.”



They talked over dinner. Ruby asked a lot of questions about her granddaughter's job in the city. But each time Melinda tried to ask her anything about the danger, the old woman changed the subject.

Their talk brought back memories of Melinda's childhood. "Ruby, did you give away that stuffed teddy bear I used to have?" Melinda asked.

Ruby laughed. "Oh, no. I knew he was your favorite. I figured that I'd send him to you someday."

Ruby led Melinda upstairs to her old bedroom. Everything there had been kept exactly as Melinda had left it so long ago.

Ruby opened a battered wooden chest at the foot of the bed. Melinda's favorite toys were still packed inside, along with special childhood clothes and a few books.

Melinda dropped to the rag rug on the floor and began to pull things out of the chest. Before long she realized it was getting dark.

She glanced up at Ruby, who was sitting on the bed. The old woman was watching her with eyes filled with love.

“Ruby, please let me stay with you,” Melinda said. “I swear I’ll be good. I’ll do whatever you tell me.”

Ruby sighed. Then she nodded. “I don’t have the heart to send you away again,” Ruby said, her voice breaking. “I’ve missed you so much, Melinda. But you have to promise me that you won’t go into the forest. Not even during the day.”

Melinda frowned. “Okay, I promise. Although I don’t know why—”

“It doesn’t matter why,” Ruby said crossly. “Just *don’t!*” She stood up and headed for the door. “I’m going downstairs to clean up the kitchen now. Don’t stay up too late, honey.”



As soon as Ruby left the room, Melinda began searching through the trunk again. She found her first doll, several broken crayons, and a handful of old photos that

were taken at a childhood birthday party.

I remember that party, Melinda thought. *That's me and there's Ruby. And there's—* She frowned, trying to remember the name of the other little girl in the photo. Then it came back to her: Ariana.

I'd forgotten all about Ariana, Melinda thought to herself. *I wonder whatever happened to her?*

Melinda hurried downstairs. She found Ruby drying the dishes.

“Ruby, do you remember Ariana?” Melinda asked. “She was the little—”

The dish slipped from Ruby's hands and smashed on the kitchen floor.

“Oh, look out!” Melinda exclaimed. “Don't cut yourself. I'll get the broom.”

Then she caught sight of Ruby's face. It had turned as white as the dishtowel she was holding!

“Sit down now, Ruby,” Melinda whispered. “What's wrong?”

“N-nothing,” the old woman stammered. “I guess I'm just kind of clumsy tonight.”

Melinda cleaned up the broken china and finished drying the dishes. Ruby sat at the table and watched. Melinda could tell that her grandmother was still badly shaken.

“I’m sorry about the dish,” Melinda said. “Was it one of your favorites?”

“Oh, no,” Ruby said with a shaky laugh. “It was just a cheap old thing I got at a secondhand store.”

“About Ariana—” Melinda started to say. She watched as again the color quickly disappeared from Ruby’s face.

“I don’t know what happened to her,” Ruby said sharply. “And I don’t care. I hope I never see her—” She stopped, embarrassed at her outburst. “I-I mean—” Her voice trailed away. “I don’t know what I mean,” Ruby said at last. “I’m just tired, and I’m not making sense. It’s time for me to go to bed, Melinda. You should, too.”

“I will,” Melinda said slowly. “You go on ahead, Ruby. I’ll be up soon.”