



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.



**D**ale 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